

**REFLECTION FROM THE AMERICAS ON WALTER BENJAMIN'S CRITICAL
THEORY: WORKING AND MEANING IN THE ANTI-FASCIST RESISTANCE
1933–1945**

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BENJAMIN: TRABALHAR E SIGNIFICAR NA RESISTÊNCIA ANTIFASCISTA
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WALTER BENJAMIN TRABAJAR Y SIGNIFICAR EN LA RESISTENCIA
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ABSTRACT

Eighty years after the arrival of the Red Army troops — whose doctors treated the very few prisoners who had not yet been murdered — at the Auschwitz extermination camp, it is necessary to reflect on the role of a mistaken historical theory of the German, European, and ultimately global left, which made it impossible to resist with the necessary strength against National Socialism and the extermination of European Jews.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin. Critical Theory. Concept of Progress. Fetishism. Karl Marx. Anti-Fascist Resistance.

RESUMO

Oitenta anos após a chegada das tropas do Exército Vermelho — cujos médicos atenderam os poucos prisioneiros que ainda não haviam sido assassinados — ao campo de extermínio de Auschwitz, é necessário refletir sobre o papel de uma teoria histórica equivocada da esquerda alemã, europeia e, em última instância, mundial, que tornou impossível resistir com a força necessária ao nacional-socialismo e ao extermínio dos judeus europeus.

Palavras-chave: Walter Benjamin. Teoria Crítica. Conceito de Progresso. Fetichismo. Karl Marx. Resistência Antifascista.

RESUMEN

A los ochenta años de la llegada de la tropas del ejército rojo —cuyos médicos atendieron los muy pocos presos que todavía no habían sido asesinados— al campo de exterminio de Auschwitz, hay que reflexionar sobre el papel de una teoría histórica equivocada de la izquierda alemana, europea y, al fin de cuentas, mundial que hizo imposible que se resistiera con la fuerza necesaria al nacionalsocialismo y al exterminio de los judíos europeos.

Palabras clave: Walter Benjamin. Teoría Crítica. Concepto de Progreso. Fetichismo. Karl Marx. Resistencia Antifascista.

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1 INTRODUCTION

In 1945, Allied troops liberated German and Austrian cities that were still under the yoke of Nazi forces. During the last two weeks of the war, between April and May, the Nazis still murdered 250,000 people, in the famous death marches. At a time when Germany's defeat was imminent, the Nazis killed a quarter of a million people in their almost countless "secondary" camps that existed in addition to the large camps and centers of immediate extermination such as Auschwitz, Treblinka or Sobibor, among others.

In addition to the best-known extermination centers, there was a vast system of minor camps, at least forty thousand in Germany and in the occupied countries. Of the latter, the prisoners were sent to death marches; in part so that the genocide would not be so obvious. They were killed little by little, those who walked the slowest were killed by the SS guards and stayed there, spread over miles and miles across Europe.

The aim of this text is to question how Critical Theory in general and Walter Benjamin in particular reacted intellectually to the genocide, which Claude Lanzmann calls *the Shoah*, and Raul Hilberg calls *The Destruction of the European Jews*, in his famous book that bears this title, undoubtedly the most important study on the subject.²

The question posed by Critical Theory is not: why was this possible? Well, this is a very difficult question; Lanzmann, for example, recommends not formulating it, since he considers that it diverts us from *seeing* the fact itself.³ Therefore, we do not pose this question, but emphasize what Benjamin and the whole of Critical Theory investigate: why did the German and European left not know how to react to the fact of fascism in general and Nazism in particular? This question is more concrete than inquiring directly about the genocide because, following Lanzmann, this diverts attention from the fact that few or none have been able to see, in the face of the terror and complexity of the historical and social event itself.

2 THE THEORETICAL ERROR OF THE LEFT AND ITS RESISTANCE

What Benjamin formulated was: why did the left not know how to react? Here it is worth commenting on something important: there is a myth that there was resistance; but at least in the case of Germany and Austria, this is not true. In France there was some resistance, but much more limited than what was usually said later.

² Hilberg, Raul. (2005): *The Destruction of European Jews*, trans. Cristina Pina Aldao. Madrid, Akal.

³ Lanzmann, Claude. (1990): "Hier ist kein Warum" in Bernard Cuau and Michel Deguy et al., *Au sujet de Shoah*. Paris, Belin. p. 279.



In Poland there was strong resistance, but it was mostly not left-wing, but nationalist, made up of mostly conservative Poles and/or Catholics. The most famous of the left-wing resistance in Poland has been the significant resistance in the Warsaw ghetto, which was organized mainly by Jewish young socialists, whose armed wing was not much more than a dozen *ghetto fighters*.⁴ There was also a very important anti-fascist resistance and resistance against the German occupation of the Soviet Union. In this regard, it is known that Stalin, when he tried to call for resistance, did so with the argument of defending the motherland, rather than with the argument of defending communism, socialism or revolution. The Stalinists agreed that this was the best way to organize resistance. Although I do not share this idea, it is true that under the given conditions it was the strategy that was used with some success.

Thus, left-wing resistance, specifically against Nazism and fascism in general, existed in Spain during the Civil War, this is undeniable; there was also a more left-wing definition of resistance in Yugoslavia; even, isolated cases in other countries; but, in general and mass terms, it was not something that existed, much less in Austria and Germany. For this reason, we return to the question of Critical Theory and Benjamin, why was it not possible to organize a massive resistance of anti-fascist leftists? The contradiction lies in the fact that the European left was stronger than ever in the 1920s; neither before nor since has it been as intense as then. This left was well organized, and also armed; The German communists, for example, had hundreds of thousands of rifles hidden to prepare the resistance, which they did not use: not a single one was directed against the genocide.

Why? What Benjamin answers is that the lack of resistance was not so much a mistake, although obviously it is a political error, but it was not due to cowardice, or the inability to organize, nor to Nazi repression, which of course was strong; rather, this philosopher would say, reason was a *theoretical* error.

There were one or more very serious errors in the theory of the German-Austrian and European left that, in some way, led them to commit very wrong acts and this provoked non-resistance or almost non-existent resistance against the Nazis from the left. This question is still important today, eighty years after the end of military Nazism, because this error has not ceased to exist. Benjamin died in 1940: he was arrested during his flight from France to Spain, and he committed suicide because he concluded that he would not reach the United States,

⁴ This resistance was reduced both in terms of the number of participants and because of the little support received from the non-Jewish Polish resistance or other groups.



but a Nazi death camp. I think with almost absolute certainty that he would agree with me: this theoretical problem is still valid.

Today we live the same theoretical error on the left, and I speak in the plural on purpose, because I consider myself part of it. In reality, there are several errors; the central thing, Benjamin emphasizes, are two elements: one, how history is conceived and, the other, how the popular support that can be given to a struggle is conceived. I would like to begin by analyzing the second.

During Benjamin's time and until the fall of the Soviet Union and its allied countries in the 1980s, a cult of the proletariat predominated. There was the idea that the proletariat, by definition, was left-wing; It was also thought that *it would de facto* fight against capitalist social relations and that it would be anti-fascist. Practically the entire left was convinced of this.

I believe that this error persists, although almost no one uses the term proletariat as such anymore. The cult of the proletariat has been transformed into a cult of democracy; Deep down it is practically the same: it is believed that the majorities are right, that they are anti-fascists; unless they are deceived or someone sees their faces, such as the mass media or governments; that there is electoral fraud, and so on. If something like that doesn't happen, then the populations —whether they are the proletariat or the population in general— are right, in terms of an anti-fascist reason. Despite the disappearance of the dogmatic left of the Soviet Union, these political-theoretical errors still exist. There has never been a real discussion about it.

The exception was precisely Benjamin and other authors of Critical Theory, but their contributions have been largely ignored or turned into something else. Nowadays Benjamin is mentioned a lot, but the core part of his thought is not addressed.

There is, then, a naïve belief of the party leaders deposited in the popular mass that follows them, and vice versa; also a naïve belief in leaders. Benjamin argued that deep down it is the same; It looks different, but it is a single construction: the mass leader and the masses, together, supposedly guarantee that a resistance against the fascists will work.

3 THE DEMOCRATIC IMPOSSIBILITY OF AN ANTI-NATIONAL SOCIALIST RESISTANCE

The German left insistently defends *democracy*, and it must be clarified that with this argument, anti-National Socialist resistance would have been impossible, because the Nazis came to power democratically in 1933. That vote was not falsified, there was no electoral



fraud, so that, by way of democracy, anti-Nazi resistance would have been a falsehood, even before the time of repression. Indeed, in the following years they falsified the elections to always obtain 99.5% of the votes. In any case, many people thought that the Nazi policy was correct, including extermination, in it there was something close to a social agreement.

Today, it is said that in Germany and other countries the populations did not know that the genocide was happening, which is false. Hitler tirelessly repeated the phrase of the *final solution of the Jewish question* [*Endlösung der Judenfrage*], he mentioned it on any occasion and everyone understood what he meant. Everyone saw their neighbors disappear and knew that they would never return, they were aware that they were going "to the East" and that there was no food there; they saw trains full of people leaving empty. To claim that no one knew what was happening is a "white" lie to sleep peacefully.

People, for the most part, agreed with these actions. Herein lies the big problem. The left did not resist, in part, because if they did, they were against democracy, the proletariat and, at least in part, against the convictions of the population.

The Vatican protested once: when the Nazis began exterminating the so-called disabled. After the claim by the highest Catholic institution, the reaction of the Nazis was to change the regulations that provided that all people with certain disabilities, defined in a long list, had to be exterminated. After this criticism, it was modified to the fact that only if the family agreed, it would be carried out – but the families, in a large percentage of cases, were. There were few cases in which the family said "we don't want to"; There were even those who took their children, parents or siblings directly to euthanasia centers to suffer a violent death. At first these centers were hospitals, then they became *more sophisticated*. Thus, in many cases the relatives not only did not wait for permission to be asked, but they themselves took the initiative to provoke the euthanasia of their "disabled" relatives; In the same way, they did not hesitate to denounce their Jewish neighbors.

A large part of the Jews imprisoned in Germany were found by the Nazis, not thanks to their methods of finding them, which at that historical moment were not yet as sophisticated as they are today in terms of digitized databases. The German state was not yet so organized, it needed the denunciation of the population and this worked "very well". Many building dwellers, for example, systematically flagged suspicious people. If the neighbors rested on Saturdays, but not on Sundays, they called the police to warn of such a terrible action. In many cases, they concluded that this neighbor had a grandfather, up to two or more, Jews; then that person was exterminated. There was a "democratic" agreement in this sense, which



made it difficult for the left to resist; They didn't know how to deal with it, how to commit the "undemocratic" act of going against the popular will, they couldn't say, "We, even though we are a minority, oppose genocide."

Today we blindly and unconditionally believe in "democracy". Moreover, the concept has been reduced to a simple system of elections held every four or six years. There is not even a complete definition of democracy and, even if the concept were more complete, the first step would be to question it. Herbert Marcuse, also a member of Critical Theory, presented a very good formulation on this subject in *Reason and Revolution*,⁵ his book on Hegel and the Theory of Bourgeois Society. He points out that democracy would only really work if each member of society had the will to take care of the good of all; if each one, at the time of voting, proposing, leading, etc., had this in mind. But, Marcuse points out, living immersed in capitalist social relations, this is impossible. The social formation that reigns today educates us, from birth, from the moment we have the first consciousness, to take care only of our individual and selfish interests; If we are very open, perhaps we could worry about two or three more people; or if we are very radical, perhaps by a group of up to a hundred people, but almost no one gets more.

In the form of capitalist reproduction it is impossible, by definition, for anyone to think of the good of all; this problem necessarily exists. The democracy we have today, for example, does not have a systematic structure to protect minorities. If decisions are made on the basis of democracy, it is very easy to see what is happening now in Europe, where it was democratically decided not to send ships to the Mediterranean, where thousands of expatriates drown every year. One of the ideas of European governments is to send ships and planes to destroy the boats where refugees could later be transferred. For this reason, it has become the most dangerous sea in the world despite being calmer and with less strong storms than the Atlantic or the Pacific; because nowhere else do so many people die.

There are no majorities that raise their voices, no one says: "we are no longer going to vote for our government if it acts in this way against Africans and Asians". This is how the left failed in the face of Nazism. We must say it: there was a resounding failure of the European left, perhaps with the exceptions mentioned; the Spanish and the Yugoslav, the only ones that more or less stood out. Another would be Holland, where on the day the

⁵ Marcuse, Herbert. (1971): *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Emergence of Social Critical Theory*, trans. Julieta Fombona de Sucre. Madrid, Alianza. (The paperback book. Humanidades, 292) (1st ed. in Col. Area of knowledge: Humanities, 2003. 462 pp.)



deportations of Jews began in Amsterdam, a general strike was organized. There are other small cases that are significant in historical terms, but unfortunately, in numerical terms they are almost irrelevant. We then return to the initial question: Why is there this naïve faith in the majority? And why does the left submit to it knowing that it is false? He submits to the wrong argument of the majorities and then justifies it theoretically.

There were long debates after Nazism focused on how that could happen, how the majority of the populations could agree. The communist justification, and also that of some socialists, is that they were all deceived: the populations themselves are not so revanchist and pro-war, so racist, so anti-Semitic; but they were deceived by the Nazis. This explanation persists in many countries today, especially on the left; However, it is a dangerous explanation and is based on a very simple theory of manipulation.

For Georg Lukács, deception and manipulation exist, but the central problem lies in objectification. This occurs in capitalist relations and is reflected in consciousness. Reification means that things dominate the world, we are their annexes; what decides, Marx would say, is the automatic subject, the value that valorizes itself, we are only its helpers. Even we become things. Adorno formulates a similar idea: reality itself, materiality itself, is already ideology. From the material there is an ideological presence. The current ideological instances are not the television stations or the newspapers managed or the manipulated or manipulative teachers, all that exists, but it is not the central point. The central point is the materiality socially reproduced on a daily basis; that is why it must be changed.

Horkheimer, Adorno and Benjamin argue that this is the reason why the left acts this way. The problem is this: although the left is aware of a certain tendency of many people to manifest a wrong consciousness due to capitalist relations of coexistence, it nevertheless submits to the decisions of the majority. It is at first glance strange, since it implies that people with anti-capitalist political positions accept the pro-capitalist consciousness with the argument that it is about "modernity".

It is difficult to understand why this comes to this. Benjamin would argue that it is due to a naïve faith in the masses of people and that they are automatically heading towards a revolution, or at least a better society. This simplifying view is the result of limited and mistaken interpretations of Karl Marx.

Marx may suddenly, in certain places in his extensive work, have statements of this kind, yet they appear in his writings on few occasions. Marx's main work never mentions it like this, in the main construction that is expressed in the famous chapter "The Commodity"

in section four of *Capital* says the following: "The fetishism of the commodity and its secret", Marx expresses how the very consciousness in our society is systematically wrong. However, hardly any Marxists at the time took these critical statements of Marx seriously. For this reason, Benjamin would affirm that they have a progressive and naïve interpretation of this author. *Progressive* in the sense of assuming a naïve faith in progress; part of this progress would be that the population, which will be increasingly intelligent, more lucid, will have a greater desire for democracy. In today's Mexico, this ideology that dates back to the 1980s persists. Why is it thought that Mexico is more democratic now than ever?

It is strange that the left, to this day, legitimizes this discourse and believes that it works. For Benjamin, it has to do with the illusory faith we have in progress – this is the theoretically most profound point – a faith that history advances automatically. This had already been formulated by social democratic thinkers and the entire German reformist left; Benjamin critically quotes Josef Dietzgen, who stated that every day the population is wiser and the workers are more intelligent because they go to work punctually.⁶ That is why the greatest contribution we can make to the socialist revolution is to go to the factory every day, without delay, to carry out as few strikes as possible, not to miss work even if we are sick: this is how we achieve a more productive system. This is the real "anti-capitalist" attitude, according to Dietzgen.

These ideas were preached not only by the communists, but also by German social democracy. The Communists on this point were slightly less dogmatic, which is strange, since the Stalinists were dogmatic, but sometimes the Social Democrats, the reformist left, beat them to the punch in dogmatism. On this point the most dogmatic were the reformists. Dietzgen was one of the *great* social democratic intellectuals, one of the pioneers of the first line of thought; he insisted on efficiency, discipline and submission. I insist: dogmatism is not specifically Stalinist, but of the entire reformist left.

Benjamin's critique of faith in *progress*, as something that necessarily improves people's lives, is based on the observation that this blind belief is wrong *in its entirety and in all perspectives*. Today, the critics of progress reduce it to certain aspects or certain perspectives, they criticize that only the technical, quantitative, productivity aspect is considered; while human progress, that of democracy, of human rights, is stagnant.

Today, this argument is shared by several thinkers: the critique of progress has gained strength since the 1980s, but practically no one develops it with Benjamin's radicalism. He

⁶ Cf. Dietzgen, Josef. (1906): *Sozialdemokratische Philosophie*. Berlin, Vorwärts.



did not think that there was a need to redefine progress or to broaden the concept beyond the technical and organizational; he believed that progress is a misconception for the left. He postulated that the idea is merely bourgeois: in making the French Revolution and others like it, the bourgeoisie needed this concept; He turned out to be the strongest against classes, political and economic relations, as well as medieval ideologies.

In this context, the idea of progress was brilliant and managed to crush a large part of the medieval heritage. From the bourgeois point of view, progress is undoubtedly the best thing there is. Many theories were based on this: the German idealists and many bourgeois theoreticians, the positivists themselves, who at first glance were very different from the idealists, but on this subject they have common ground; so are the empiricists and pragmatists. All the more or less bourgeois theories are almost identical in interpreting progress, they have, of course, their variants, but between them the difference on this subject is not really that important.

Benjamin would point out to the left the error of thinking, as the bourgeoisie often do, in terms of progress. As is known, in our time there is a worldwide deindustrialization, present for several years, clear examples are Detroit in the United States and Ciudad Juárez in Mexico, where many factories remain empty. The only thing that politicians mention in this regard is that there has been *negative growth*.

However, the criticism cannot be reduced to the fact that progress is not carried out in a broader way, that transcends the technological and economic to reach a social progress of inclusion. Benjamin would argue that the very idea of progress does not serve the left; it only works for the bourgeoisie, originally more revolutionary and determined. When Benjamin refers to the bourgeoisie, he does not do so derogatorily, but rather in terms of a social class that at one time was revolutionary, which organized the revolution against the feudal class. The bourgeois developed and used the concept with remarkable sophistication.

But on the left, specifically on the anti-capitalist left, this concept does not work at all. It is a serious mistake to think that we must radicalize the concept of progress. The left generally assures: "You make progress halfway; we, on the other hand, do it for real" and it is proposed that progress will now go well, which before had only been a promise or a half-fact, but now it will be complete.

For Benjamin, it is necessary, during revolutions or radical political, economic or ideological changes, to attack the ideological center of the era that one wants to overcome. However, this has not been done by those who were and are on the European and world left;



They have failed to detect that the ideological and economic center of the capitalist form of reproduction, of the bourgeoisie and its philosophers, is precisely the idea —and even a certain reality— of progress; that is the center from which everything starts. If it is not attacked, the bourgeois tendencies will always be victorious, both ideologically and politically and militarily.

The bourgeois class would never have won over the feudal class if it had not attacked religious concepts. If someone fights for an anti-feudal stance, but accepts that God himself created the king and queen, he will certainly lose. First it will be necessary to demonstrate that one is not a king by divine decree and that there is no God, that this king imposed himself violently and militarily. This is what the bourgeois politicians and thinkers of the *siècle des Lumières* did.

The left has never reached this level of argumentation, Benjamin would affirm, it has not achieved a radicalism comparable to the bourgeoisie in its break with the dominant thinking of its time. It has never gone as far in ideological struggles as the bourgeoisie, which did succeed in a certain way in destroying the existing theology, which supposedly put the old upper class in its place. With this rupture, the bourgeoisie was able to justify, analyze and promote its struggle, and also convince the people to participate in it. The left is nowhere near anything like it.

Marx tried, of course, but the problem is that Marx has been systematically misunderstood. His most boring and repetitive phrases of the dominant ideology of his time have always been taken up, the most "progressive", where he demonstrates a naïve belief in progress. These ideas exist in Marx, undeniably, they are the quasi-bourgeois moments in which he copied with a certain naivety the dominant model of the moment. The problem is that these concepts have been repeated ad nauseam while the most critical and profound part of his thought, precisely his criticism of progress, has been denied, or at least ignored and minimized. For example, he speaks of the need for him to give up "the human progress of resembling that horrible pagan idol that only wanted to drink the nectar in the skull of the sacrificed."⁷ This is the way Marx, in his best moments, refers to progress; the one by which more and more people died every day from diseases that could be cured, and even more so if they were working-class children or war refugees.

⁷ Cf. Marx and Engels (1973), "Future Results of British Domination in India", in: *On Colonialism*, Buenos Aires: Pasado y Presente, pp. 83-84.



In the subchapter "The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret" Marx also refers to the development of consciousness. He distances himself from the bourgeois (revolutionaries), who claim that every day, every generation, we are more aware and, above all, that we owe to the great break with feudalism an explosion of consciousness – at least according to bourgeois epistemological theory in its many variants. All bourgeois thinkers agree on this point, Marx, on the other hand, compared in this passage of his magnum opus four or five historically existing economic forms and their degree of economic consciousness, and concluded that the degree of this consciousness has been decreasing.

According to him, the so-called *primitive men* knew perfectly well how their economy worked; the slaves were also very clear about their slavery and exploitation. In the Middle Ages, the forms of exploitation and the servant-master relationship became more sophisticated and complicated, but people were still clear about their exploited, subordinated, violated condition.

In the form of capitalist reproduction, on the contrary, Marx affirms, economic consciousness tends to disappear, it almost no longer exists, because practically no one understands—sometimes not even specialists—what is really going on. Marx asserts that there is a fall in the level of economic consciousness, but hardly any dogmatic Marxist has cited this Marxian observation.

Benjamin notes that Marx began to develop a critique of progress and naïve progressivism, but most of his readers did not perceive it, much less other leftists: such as the German social democratic reformist left. As this party distanced itself over the years from Marx's theory, it further increased its naïve faith in progress because they do not understand the historical, social, and economic contradictions that Marx analyzes. We must return to Benjamin's argument to understand what is happening in the process of contemporary history, and the first thing we must do is leave behind the naïve idea of *progress*, as something that necessarily improves the life and coexistence of humans.

Now, returning to the subject of Nazism: the German left, and the European left in a certain way thought, mistakenly, that the Nazis were fighting against progress and that since this was considered something automatic, like a river that advances and only by its own weight it would drag the Nazis because according to this mistaken imagination, the fascists swam against the current and would not persist for long. That was the conviction of almost the entire German left: the Social Democrats and the Communists, although they had great differences between them, were in complete agreement on this point. They were convinced



that Nazism would not last long and, in large part, for this reason they did not fight in an armed way against National Socialism and against genocide. Why fight, why risk your life, why get involved in armed military fights, if Nazism would soon fall under its own weight anyway? And, by the way, at first glance they were right, the *Behemoth* (Neumann, 1943) of National Socialism only remained in power for twelve years.

In terms of time, twelve years is not that long and in that sense they were apparently right; the point is that in those years they killed, in the concentration and extermination camps, six million people – not to mention the dead of the Second World War – they destroyed the European Jews and with them, to a whole way of life. They changed the continent, I'm afraid forever, although I hope I'm wrong. At least until there is an interruption of this social form, until there is a radical rupture, we have to observe that they changed – in an apparently permanent way – Europe.

If we think that it was a continent with a very strong Jewish presence, important in every way, and that the Nazis managed to almost disappear this Jewish imprint in Europe, the change was almost total. There is still some Jewish manifestation, in France perhaps a little more than in other countries; in Germany, for example, it is minimal, almost non-existent, there are almost no synagogues, compared above all to the previous situation.

The Nazis succeeded: they managed to change the planet; not only did they murder many people, but they changed the European social structure. The German government is so cynical about this that a few years ago, when the European Union was founded, they suggested that it be written in its constitution, at the beginning of the founding text: "Europe is by definition a Christian continent." Not only did they kill people, but they pretend to deny their existence before they were killed. As if to say: "European Jews have never existed deep down."

Implicitly, these negationist statements convey the idea that the National Socialists fulfilled the *de facto* advance of progress and in this readjustment it was necessary to homogenize. One of the great goals of capitalist modernity and progress as we know it is to homogenize, and part of this process is precisely to make people equal. Within models of progress that are less openly violent and aggressive than the National Socialist, it is thought that members of minorities should be convinced of the need for this homogenization. But if they are not allowed, what is done with them? Today, since the Nazis no longer exist, European governments deport new minorities to arrive, or leave them to fend for themselves in the Mediterranean. The Nazis had a more efficient plan: it was not enough for them to wait



for them to die by de *facto* banning rescue on the high seas; they took more drastic measures and developed the death camps.

The logic implicit in this type of politics was *progressive*, in the eagerness to create a homogenized society it would be necessary to eliminate everything that made it complicated, contradictory, tangled, too complex. Since each one believes in different things, totally homogenized coexistence becomes a highly difficult matter; The Nazi option was extermination in order to achieve, not a society with happy members, but what they imagined as a "*healthy*" organism-people.

As is known, Hitler and his people often referred to what they called *the body of the German people and the German people* had to be "healthy"; so those persecuted groups: Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals – of which the largest group was the Jews – were perceived as a "disease"; the *healthy body* had to be cured of this supposed *disease*. The idea was to "work better", in that sense this position had something democratic about it, if we understand democracy as it is erroneously done today: that the majority imposes itself and does what it pleases.

The problem is that in this sense the National Socialists were "progressive", they made progress not only in their policy of extermination, but also in their cultural policy. For example, German is a highly diversified language to this day. If you are in northern Germany, it is very difficult to understand the dialect, sometimes, as absurd as it may seem, it is easier to speak English. It is also the other way around, going from Frankfurt to the region of Innsbruck, to a small mountain village in Austria, there are Germans who think: "What are these people talking about?" This was something that the Nazis also tried to homogenize, and to a large extent succeeded.

Many Austrian conservatives did not like the Nazis just because of their progressive tendencies. The conservatives in Austria were the ones who detested them the most; One of them was my grandfather. Conservative, middle-class, he had a more or less good position in the Austrian Post Office and did not like the Nazis because of their line of *progress*, advance, homogenization, their intention to leave behind the specific way of speaking in Austria or in Innsbruck.

The Nazis imposed the so-called "Hochdeutsch" [High German] in schools and on the radio, a dialect from a specific area in the north of the country. In the schools of Austria, a German quite different from that of the Germans was spoken, and in certain Austrian areas, the National Socialists also managed to homogenize it. In this line and following Walter

Benjamin, the Nazis were a modernizing movement, a modern movement that imposed progress and radicalized, in some way, bourgeois ideology. This is not to say that the bourgeoisie would have done the same as the Nazis; although many did ally with them and changed, they renounced and betrayed their own ideology, which was originally humanist.

In the history of philosophy there are two famous cases, one more than the other: Martin Heidegger, who joined the National Socialists; he worked for them as rector of the University of Freiburg [Freiburg] and developed his philosophy as an increasingly racist and anti-Semitic one. On the other hand, there is the similar, and at the same time different, case of Hans-Georg Gadamer; His story is less well known and although he did not speak of it later, there are twelve of his texts on what he called at that time Platonic *violence*, where he justifies National Socialist violence. In fact, in May 1941, he presented the lecture "The *Volk* and History in Herder's Thought" at the German Institute in occupied France. Over the years he tried to forget those texts – and especially their openly pro-Nazi passages.

Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer are two representatives of that part of the German (and European) bourgeoisie that betrayed its own ideals. Why? Because they were convinced that the bourgeoisie was not proactive, but too lukewarm. I refer to them because they both represent two minds that formulated their ideas with sophisticated intelligence and clarity, many people thought – and continue to do so – the same as them, although they cannot raise it with the same skill.

The basic idea is that the bourgeoisie does not develop progress with the necessary intensity due to its "kitsch" on issues such as human rights and respect for minorities. It should not be forgotten that the bourgeoisie of the old school tried to give certain guarantees to minorities in their first constitutions. However, this represented a contradiction with his progressive model and would cause his project not to be carried out with the desired speed. This was where the criticism of philosophers such as Heidegger or Gadamer came in, since they affirmed that the bourgeoisie should leave behind the *corniness* of humanism. This generated conflicts for several bourgeoisie, because it implied leaving behind their old theory; and in this context Gadamer acquires greater importance, who "explained" to the bourgeoisie who doubted, in his texts of the nation-to-socialist period, that the violent acts of the National Socialists were basically something "platonic".⁸

⁸ See: Orozco, Teresa (1995). *Platonische Gewalt. Gadamers politische Hermeneutik der NS-Zeit*. Hamburg/Berlin, Argument.



4 FINAL THOUGHTS

Benjamin would argue that in order to criticize the concept of *progress*, it would be necessary to go a step further and analyze the now dominant concept of *time*, as something linear, uninterrupted, directed, and homogeneous, clearly directed towards a definite direction called *the future*. This idea of *time* is necessary for the idea of progress to work in turn. Benjamin's critique is radical towards the concept of time as it is established today, in which each second is equal to the previous one. These three aspects of the current concept of time: homogeneity, uninterruptedness, and clear direction, Benjamin would say, would have to be forgotten in order to leave behind the naïve imagination of *progress*.⁹

This is a very close point between Marx and Benjamin – I insist on this closeness, because there are several Marxists who reject Benjamin, falsely thinking that he distances himself from Marx because of his criticism of progress, and in reality Benjamin is the one who understands it best. Karl Marx argues on several occasions in *Capital* that the center of capitalist economic construction is the *time measured in hours*, obviously, of labor. This defines value: that of each commodity is determined by the labour-power time expended in them; and this quantity of labour-power is measured in hours. Thus, for Marx, the form of capitalist reproduction needs a central concept: time, precisely the homogeneous, uninterrupted and clearly directed one; without it, this social form does not function, its economic form would cease to exist.

Benjamin is a little more explicit than Marx, but the two agree: without *time* —as we perceive it today— the currently reigning social form would not function. Marx refers by this above all to the economic; Benjamin to the political and philosophical. Without these concepts of *time* and *progress*, the society we have would not exist. As the left, what we must do is to radically break with it. Only if we do could we really resist. Obviously it is too late to oppose National Socialism, but we can fight against other similar movements, but for this it is imperative to separate ourselves from bourgeois ideology and to conceive our own way, now, of understanding the world, history and *time*.

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⁹ See: Gandler, Stefan (2009). *Fragments of Frankfurt. Essays on Critical Theory*. Mexico, Siglo XXI Editores/UAQ, especially the chapter: "Interruption of the *historical continuum* in Walter Benjamin." pp. 37-84.



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