

The Angel of History: Walter Benjamin's Vision of Hope and Despair

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"A Klee drawing named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe that keeps piling ruin upon ruin and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of

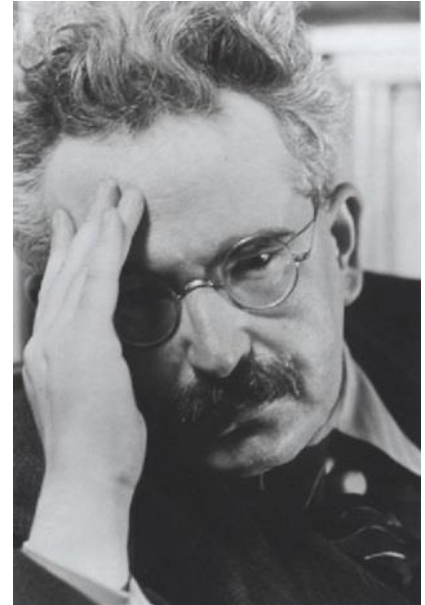
debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress."

— *Walter Benjamin,*
"Ninth Thesis on the Philosophy of History"

Walter Benjamin, a German Jewish literary critic and philosopher, had purchased Klee's water-color of an angel in Munich for the equivalent of about thirty dollars. His interpretation of the image is not an optimistic one: so-called "historical progress" is a foolish illusion. At the age of forty-eight, he had lived through World War I and its aftermath. Now, in the second year of yet another war, the course of history had been commandeered by fascism, a "catastrophe that keeps piling ruin upon ruin."

This bleak sense of inevitability is contradicted, however, elsewhere in Benjamin's commentary, where he speaks of "fanning the spark of hope" and a "leap in the open air of history." And there is a tension that animates the image itself: the eyes of the angel point to one side, while the rest of the body twists just a bit in the opposite direction (or so it seems to me), suggesting arrested motion. Hope is not extinguished, there remains at least the possibility of movement toward a better future.

Benjamin's own life, though, did not go in that direction. Several months after he penned his "Ninth Thesis," he himself became one more lifeless body tossed upon the heap. Seized by authorities at the Spanish border and fearing that he would be handed over to the Nazis, he committed suicide. But Benjamin probably did not take his own life for that reason only. Years earlier he had described himself as brooding and melancholic, and had considered killing himself.



"Melancholy" is no longer the most common way of describing those who conclude that life is no longer worth living. The favored term today is "depression," regarded as a physiological condition for which a standard remedy has become a tablet designed to elevate neurotransmitter activity in the brain. According to the World Health Organization, about 5% of adults worldwide suffer from depression, which is commonly treated with medication. Here in the United States, nearly 25 million adults have been taking antidepressants for at least two years.

To some extent depression is biologically rooted, possibly handed down from one generation to the next via genetic inheritance. But DNA is not the only way in which our lives are interwoven, for despondency and despair correlate with what goes on in the social world. When the rate of unemployment rises even a fraction of a point, the suicide rate typically turns upward as well. Historical circumstance can shape our lives as powerfully as the biologically given bodies through which we live.

Pandemic disease, climate change, economic hardship, racism, and war are current conditions that contribute to a loss of hope. Discouragement today bears a resemblance to the sense of a foreclosed future that afflicted Benjamin's generation in Weimar Germany. Ours too is a time of accession to power of an authoritarian regime that threatens to fetter democracy and put it out of reach forever, shutting

down the very possibility of opposition. Yet, at the same time that I am writing this article (at the end of 2022), there are strong cross-currents. Ukraine's fight for freedom is a striking example. Elsewhere too, including in the United States, people are fighting for free and fair elections, workers' rights and dignity – for all the causes that cry out for attention.

The Weimar Republic. To be sure, melancholy can impel the human spirit in various directions. It may strangle one's interest in the world and one's willingness even to get out of bed in the morning. But it can also incite rebellion against an intolerable social order and outreach to find an alternative. Yes, Walter Benjamin and many of his contemporaries experienced the First World War as immensely destructive and horrible. Yet the revolutionary upheaval that occurred in its wake, in Germany, Russia, and elsewhere in Eastern Europe, seemed to be a powerful and promising turn toward freedom. Europe's social democratic movements at this time represented one of the best chances humankind had during the 20th century of forestalling the conquest of the world by the forces of wealth and militarism.



Weimar Republic, 1919: The posters urge women to vote social democratic and to support universal access to free, non-religious public education.



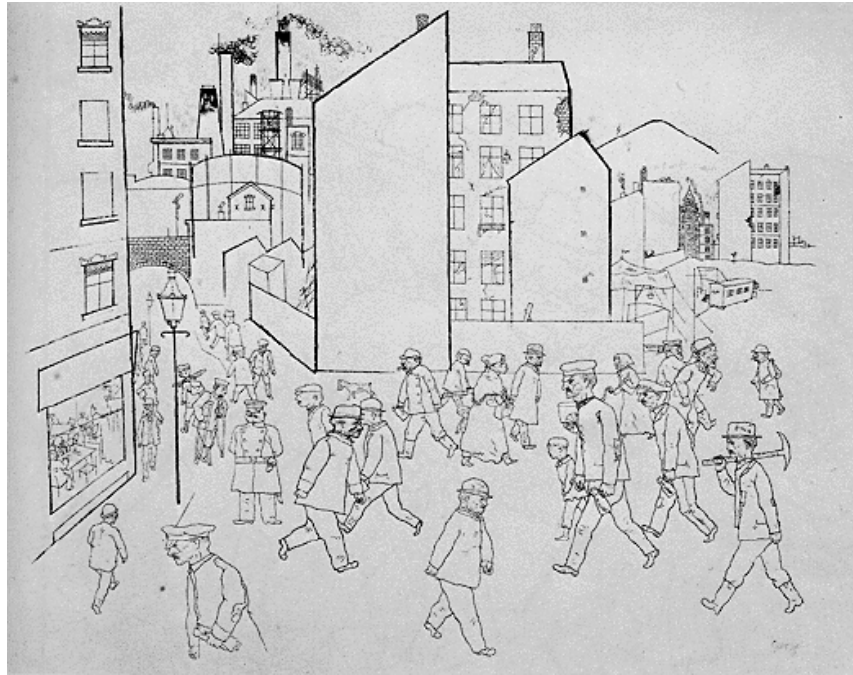
German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg flanked by portraits of Karl Marx and Ferdinand Lassalle, speaks at a socialist rally.

If

the Weimar Republic that came to power in Germany at the end of the First World War had been able to survive the aggression unleashed against it, by the right and by the extreme left also, it might have inaugurated a liberating historical journey. For in spite of its dire circumstances, including the punitive Versailles Treaty, the Weimar Republic's initiatives were phenomenal: legally required collective bargaining agreements and unemployment compensation, free public education, a constitution establishing parliamentary democracy and affirming basic human rights. The Republic built railways, bridges, and roads, along with houses for over three million Germans. The Works Councils Act enacted in 1920 gave workers a voice in determining the conditions of their own labor.

But the government lacked the resources to hold on to these reforms. The Weimar Republic's policies were undermined by political opposition and, above all, by extreme economic poverty that increased homelessness, despair, and crime.

In Germany following the War, there occurred a kind of social disintegration. Artists like George Grosz and Otto Dix satirized an urban existence consisting of a jumble of separate paths pursued by isolated individuals.



George Grosz, "People in the Street," 1923

This was the situation of the "Lost Generation" in Germany in the 1920s, disillusioned not only with the traditional creeds of nationalism and religion, but also with collective affiliation of any kind. Several of Benjamin's close friends had taken their own lives, as had his Aunt Friederike Josephy, who was like a second mother to Benjamin, intervening in his disputes with his father and introducing him to the mysteries of art, literature, and science. Benjamin was deeply shaken by these deaths.

Among those affected by the travails of the Weimar Republic in the 1920s were my mother and her brother Ralph Zucker, a Jewish student of medicine in Leipzig. They were born in the first decade of this century into an upper middle-class, assimilated Jewish family in Dresden. My grandfather was a successful chemist who had fought in the army for the Kaiser during World War I and returned home decorated with medals. Although the family was affluent, and the children well provided for materially, my uncle Ralph became despondent and killed himself in 1927.



Friederike Josephy

In 1940, a month before Benjamin took his own life in the Old World, I was born into the New one. My Jewish mother and father were of the same generation as Benjamin but had emigrated to the United States in 1938. They had left many family members and friends behind in Europe who died in the Holocaust. (I've written about this [here](#).)

Like many European Jews who narrowly escaped the genocide, my parents deliberately wanted to put all of that behind them. What had happened in Europe was never mentioned in our household. At my birth, my mother had wanted to name me "Ralph," in memory of her lost brother. My father objected, and "Ray" was chosen as a compromise. Was their idea that the less we children knew, the better?

"Standing behind the curtain." Benjamin experienced the condition from which the Angel of History cannot escape as a personal as well as a political impasse. Although he did not go to prison or suffer any other severe repression, his outlook on life is inseparable from the defeat of progressive forces in Germany in the 1920s, leading up to the seizure of power by the Fascists. For Benjamin, it as if the boundaries between private and public, between individual experience and the social world, exist only in order to be trespassed.

In autobiographical remarks dedicated to his son Stefan, Benjamin reminisces about a childhood in which the boundaries of the self easily form and dissolve, as the child joyfully merges with surrounding objects: a moist cloud in a watercolor painting, a soap bubble, a curtain, or even dining room furniture:

Standing behind the curtain, the child [who is hiding] becomes himself something floating and white, a ghost. The dining table under which he is crouching turns him into a wooden idol in a temple whose four pillars are the carved legs.... Anyone who discovers him can petrify him...under the table, weave him forever as a ghost into the curtain.... And so, at the seeker's touch, with a loud cry he drives out the demon who has so transformed him – indeed without waiting for the moment of discovery, he grabs the hunter with a shout of self-deliverance.

A child's imaginative engagement with the world – playing with life and death, escaping from the hold of the curtain but then returning to abandon oneself behind it again – resembles Benjamin's approach to a literary text, an architectural monument, or a metropolis like Berlin or Paris. Benjamin's love of literature,

ranging from academic treatises to mystery novels, is prefigured in his description of what happens when a child picks up a storybook:

The hero's adventures can still be read in the swirling letters like figures and messages in drifting snowflakes. [The child's] breath is part of the air of the events narrated, and all the participants breathe it. He mingles with the characters far more closely than grown-ups. He is unspeakably touched by the deeds, by the words that are exchanged, and when he gets up, he is covered over and over by the snow of his reading.

The child's mimetic imagination that Benjamin celebrates here proved to be no portal to happiness in his adult life; on the contrary it made him more responsive to "the homeland's sadness," as he called it – the world in ruins around him that he witnessed. Like Klee's Angel, Benjamin felt caught in history's tangle – propelled forward, yet incapable of disengaging from the past.

There was a second angel that also interested Benjamin, depicted in an engraving by the 16th-century artist Albrecht Dürer and entitled "Melancholia I." Benjamin perceived in this work "an intense degree of sadness." The compass, hour-glass, scale and other instruments of mathematics and craft are of no use to the disconsolate angel (although, through the window of her study, the heavens illuminate a transcendent seascape).



Whereas Sigmund Freud, in his essay "Mourning and Melancholia," had viewed extreme sadness as a pathology of the individual psyche, Benjamin regarded it as a relationship with a fractured world that does not look away from the casualties of history. And it is a relationship with the world, he believed, that can lead to impassioned political activism:

The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply.... even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he triumphs.

Notwithstanding this call to resistance, Benjamin did not join any social movement or political party. He could not reconcile his apocalyptic sense of what would be needed to redeem the world with any form of gradualist politics. The distance between the ideal and the real proved to be unbridgeable for Benjamin and for others sharing his commitment to radical transformation. The consequence was that those seeking revolutionary change and those willing to work within the system for reform failed to find common ground. This tragic factionalism on the left contributed to the triumph of fascism.

Economic hardship contributed to the sense of despair and futility prevalent in Germany following the First World War. The worldwide financial crisis that began in the late 1920's was even more devastating in Germany than it was in the United States. Then as now, affluence coexisted more or less comfortably with homelessness.



George Grosz, "Inflation," 1929

Then and Now. Although the Weimar Republic came to an end in 1933, its social democratic ideals refused to die! Progressive policies found new advocates following World War II when forces on the left regrouped and were elected to power in Germany, Austria, Nordic countries, and elsewhere. And although these governments certainly didn't put an end to inequities and oppression, they did take steps in the right direction.

At the heart of social democracy has always been the aim to unite people of diverse interests and backgrounds behind a shared vision of the common good. The path has never been easy. During the 20th century, human ideals of democracy and justice suffered defeat upon catastrophic defeat. To be sure, history is not marching us to the peaceable kingdom. Yet, despite the failures and irreparable losses, doesn't the past also demonstrate a lot of human goodness and cooperation? History is waiting for us to create the relationships—across the generations, across boundaries of every kind—that will permit Benjamin's angel at last to take wing.

