

Should Benjamin Have Read Marx?

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First, apologies for my title. I realize it puts the question I have in mind somewhat glibly, not to say flippantly, as if scared to death of seeming too reverential in the face of the Benjamin phenomenon. I apologize, then, for the form of the question but not for the question itself—and not for posing it baldly. Doing so is meant as antidote to what seems to me to have been happening in the generality of Benjamin studies over the last decade or so—where I take the question very often to be put implicitly, and, as it were, with regret, and the answer given by the implicitness.

“Was it a good thing for Benjamin as a writer”—here is the question spelled out—“that he came to identify himself with the project called Marxism, and seems to have entertained the idea of turning his book on nineteenth-century Paris into a study, specifically, of culture shaped by commodity production, the latter elaborated in terms picked up from *Capital* and *The Critique of Political Economy*?” Posing the question implicitly, as, by and large, recent writing on Benjamin has done, seems to me a way of avoiding having to say something as vulgar and ahistorical as that it was a *bad* thing. Only very distinguished South African novelists are allowed to

produce that opinion out loud, with a positive cold war twang. But I take the drift of serious current scholarship to be reaching much the same conclusion sotto voce. Benjamin's Marxism was a period phenomenon, it tells us: a serious phenomenon, to an extent, and certainly not simply to be condescended to, but never a set of commitments and dreamed-of procedures that Benjamin properly reconciled with his deeper, and more original, religious and critical positions, and on the whole getting in the way of Benjamin's true upward trajectory as a thinker. In particular—and here is my topic—Marxism got in the way of the wonderful poetic-ethnological simplicity of *The Arcades Project* as first conceived in the later 1920s. It muddied, multiplied, and mechanized the project's original outlines; so that finally, essentially, Marxism can only be seen as a cancer on Benjamin's work—on what should have become the last and greatest of surrealist grapplings with the nineteenth century, a settling of accounts with all the mad dreams of Grandpa and Grandville and Victor Hugo. But is it necessary for us to say this? Doing so will only give pain. Does not true originality regularly come with its measure of dross? Is not talking at length about Benjamin's Marxism the equivalent of harping on Newton's obsession with alchemy or James Merrill's nights at the Ouija board?

Obviously I do not think so. But I almost think so; I understand the recent scholars' squeamishness, and I think much of the case they make (or intimate) is reasonable and well meaning. I want to suggest in what follows why I think in the end it will not do. This will necessitate my discussing *The Arcades Project* very broadly and synoptically—stating the obvious at some moments, and at others hacking my way crudely through what I know to be difficult thickets of interpretation. I have to do this, because my subject is the overall plan and direction of Benjamin's later work, and what the engagement with Marxism meant for it. I need to totalize, and to think about the nature of Benjamin's changing totalizations. And therefore I need—very much in the spirit of Benjamin's own view of history and philology—to present a Benjamin who is deeply, constitutively, out of date. A dusty, unfashionable, left-wing Benjamin, discovered in the backroom of a 1960s antique store. In the Passage Debord or Galerie Wiesengrund. Much like the Benjamin I remember coming across—with what mixture of excitement and disbelief one can imagine—in the British Museum reading room in 1965, in the pages of a small militant periodical called *Studies on the Left*. (Ah, nostalgia, nostalgia—that most realistic of interpretative tropes.)

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Let me start from the question, then, of what guiding ideas seem to have got Benjamin started with *The Arcades Project* in the late 1920s, and of how near or far from the world of Marxism those first ideas may have been.¹ I am thinking in particular of Benjamin's sense of what *The Arcades Project* was for—what the point of historical reconstruction was, in his view, and specifically the reconstruction of something as negligible as these odd, down-at-heel, petit bourgeois remnants (Figures 1 and 2). Partly, the answer to this—the general, overall answer, I mean—is familiar. Bourgeois society, Benjamin thought, was slowly, over the generations, waking up—waking to the reality of its own productive powers, and maybe, if helped along by its wild child, the proletariat, to the use of those powers to foster a new collective life. And always, however stertorous and philistine the previous century's slumber may have been, it was dreaming most deeply of that future life and throwing up premonitions and travesties of it. Once upon a time, what we call “education” consisted essentially of interpreting shared dreams of this sort—telling the children about tradition, or the deeds of fools and heroes, or the coming of the Messiah, or simply having them learn and recite the tales of the tribe. In the bright classroom of the twentieth century, this could not happen, and so the peculiar discipline named “history” has had to take over the task. It will tell us what the bourgeoisie once dreamed of, and interpret the dreams—poetically, tendentiously—in the hope that when we dead awaken, we shall know what to do with the tools (the “information”) our slaves have forged for us.

I take it most commentators on Benjamin agree that some such view of the task of history is what brought *The Arcades Project* into being. Where agreement breaks down is over how to interpret Benjamin's choice of the spaces I illustrate (the Passage des Panoramas, photographed, I would guess, at much the same time Benjamin started writing about it; and the Passage Choiseul, shot, by the look of the costumes, maybe a decade or so earlier) as his central objects of study. Many ingenious pages have been written on the subject, but it still seems to me to slip through readers' fingers. It is Benjamin's great riddle, built into the structure of his book. Here is my answer to it, which can only be tentative.

Of course Benjamin was aware that the passages made sense only if they were seen as belonging to a whole family of nineteenth-century inven-

1. This essay borrows elements from my “Reservations of the Marvelous,” *London Review of Books*, 22 June 2000, 3–9.



Figure 1. Unknown photographer. "Le Passage des Panoramas."



Figure 2. Unknown photographer. “Le Passage Choiseul.”

tions, many incomparably more strange and beautiful than they. The epoch had been rich, almost prodigal, in its production of “dream houses of the collective.” At one point in *Convolute L*, Benjamin draws up a list of “winter gardens, panoramas, factories, wax museums, casinos, railway stations,”² and one could easily add to this from other sections of the compendium: the Crystal Palace (ground zero of the bourgeois imagination), the Eiffel Tower, Labrouste’s exquisite reading rooms, maybe Guimard’s Metro entrances, certainly the lost *Galerie des Machines*. But the arcades are the key to this wider history for him, because only in them were the true silliness and sublimity of the new (old) society expressed to the full.

2. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. and trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), L1,3. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *AP* and by convolute.

The arcades were utter failures and abiding triumphs. They were old-fashioned almost as soon as they declared themselves the latest thing. As early as the 1830s, commentators could be found declaring them hopelessly passé. Their use of iron and glass was premature, naïve, a mixture of the pompous and fantastic. They were stuffy and dingy and monotonous; dead dioramas; phantasmagoria of the dull, the flat, and the cluttered; *perspectives étouffées* (a subject-heading from early in the convolutes, which seems to me to sum up much of Benjamin's thinking).

The word *phantasmagoria* in this connection is perhaps best understood technically: The arcades were perspectives where near and far, and large and small, could be endlessly subject to tricks of the light. But the tricks were lugubrious and always easily seen through: This, too, was part of the places' appeal. "The light that fell from above, through the panes . . . was dirty and sad" (*AP*, F1,2). "Only here," said de Chirico, "is it possible to paint. The streets have such gradations of gray" (*AP*, D1a,7). Arcades were unfailingly "close" (to recall a word that seemed to dominate my childhood)—there was sure to be thunder by the end of the afternoon. Drizzle was their natural element. They did not keep out the rain so much as allow the spleetic consumer to wallow in rain publicly, his breath condensing drearily on the one-way glass. "Nothing is more characteristic than that precisely this most intimate and most mysterious affair, the working of the weather on humans, should have become the theme of their emptiest chatter. Nothing bores the ordinary man more than the cosmos" (*AP*, D1,3). Rain guaranteed boredom, thank God, since it meant that one could not "go out." The arcades allowed a whole century to be housebound and at loose ends in the company of strangers. They were eternal waiting rooms, caves containing fossils of the first consumers, mirror worlds in which gadgets exchanged winks, mephitic front parlors on endless Sunday afternoons with dust motes circulating in the half-light. Odilon Redon was their painter—his very name sounded like a ringlet on a cheap wig in the back of the shop. They were waxworks of the New—Arcs de Triomphe (commemorating victories in the class struggle).

And for all these reasons they were wonderful. They were a dream and a travesty of dreaming—in the golden age of capital, all worthwhile utopias were both at the same time. Or perhaps we could say that they were pieces of nonsense architecture, in which the city negated and celebrated its new potential, rather in the way that those other distinctive nineteenth-century creations, nonsense verse and nonsense novels (*Alice* or Edward Lear or *Un Autre Monde*) negated and exalted mind, logic, innocence,

and imagination. What the arcades released above all as a possibility—a botched and absurd possibility, but for all that intoxicating—was the idea of a city turned inside out by the operation of the market. “The domestic interior moves outside”—this is Convolute L—but, even more, the street, the exterior, becomes where we live most fully, which is to say most vacantly, lingering all day on a permanent, generalized threshold between public and private spheres, “neither on the inside nor truly in the open” (*AP*, C3,4), in a space belonging to everyone and no one. We linger, we drift, we finger the goods. “Something sacral, a vestige of the nave, still attaches to this row of commodities” (*AP*, F4,5). “Existence in these spaces flows . . . without accent, like the events in dreams. Flânerie is the rhythm of this slumber” (*AP*, D2a,1). The proper inhabitant of the arcade is the stroller. For only the stroller is wordless and thoughtless enough to become the means by which the passages dream their dream—of intimacy, equality, homelessness, return to a deep prehistory. “For the flaneur, every street is precipitous. It leads downward . . .—into a past that can be all the more spellbinding because it is not private, not his own” (*AP*, M1,2).

What I have done in the previous paragraphs, you will realize, is sew together clues, images and half-embedded arguments that are scattered through many different convolutes in *The Arcades Project* itself. I know the procedure is risky. Making a set of connected propositions out of Benjamin’s card catalog inevitably takes liberties with what Benjamin had to say, or how he thought he had to say it. But then, we do not know how he would have chosen to say it in the end. And I am confident my sketch is true to the bare logic of his imagery in the key dossiers, which is strong and consistent—and urgent, for all the writer’s *Through the Looking-Glass* tricks.

The passages sum up the golden age of bourgeois society as Benjamin conceived it because they were a vision of the city as one great threshold—between public and private, outside and inside, past and present, stultifying dreariness (the reign of the commodity) and final Dionysian rout (Paris as fun house, Paris as Commune, Paris as diorama burning down). Already in the early twentieth century this vision had become old-fashioned. “We have grown very poor in threshold experiences,” says Convolute O. The arcades were, once again, irremediably in decline—victims of the cult of fresh air and exercise, streets with a care for pedestrians (it was only when Tarmac replaced cobblestones that loungers in cafés could hear themselves speak), electric light, and vice squads with a sense of mission as opposed to a taste for the on-the-spot deal. Dickens, we could say, was giving way to Kafka. I do not have to tell you how much Benjamin hated this turn of

events. Bourgeois society would only become bearable, he believed, if it had the courage to be stuffy, overcrowded, bored, and erotic again—to sleep, to dream, to see its own tawdriness and absurdity, and therefore to wake to its infinite power.

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So much for the Passage des Panoramas. I expect that any reader of the convolutes will find points to make against the emphases and links in my montage, and that some will feel that I have left crucial questions and images to one side. But I have the feeling, or hope, that the arguments will not immediately spin out of control—there will be a measure of agreement among us about where the arcades fit in Benjamin's vision of bourgeois society, and even where exploring them might have led. The same cannot be said of the other main topic of the book, Charles Baudelaire; and even less so of the way the ever expanding and metastasizing study of Baudelaire began to intersect, in the 1930s, with new dossiers and kinds of reading on Benjamin's part—with Marx, and the fetishism of commodities, and socialism and class. Reading the whole last half of *The Arcades Project*, which is clearly less exhilarating than the first, involves constantly wondering where the new material (and the new theory) is going and whether Benjamin himself really knew. The famous prospectus of 1935 is beautiful, plausible; but going back to the dossiers that ought by rights to put flesh on the bones of the new argument, the feeling grows (for this reader) that whole sections of the prospectus were more window dressing than promissory note.

This is depressing, and complicated. Textual problems occur, which I am not competent to deal with. Maybe, in any case, the best way to approach the "fate of *The Arcades*" issue is simply to take Convolute J, the one on Baudelaire, for what it is, and ask why it got so large—why it took over.

The center of gravity at the very beginning of the Baudelaire note cards, as you would expect if some of them date from Benjamin's first campaign in the late 1920s, is the poet as a character, an actual inhabitant of the dream world of arcade and interior. "His voice is . . . muffled like the nighttime rumble of carriages filtering into bedrooms upholstered with plush" (*AP*, J13,7): One can imagine Benjamin's excitement at coming across this in Maurice Barrès. There are good moments, but essentially the convolutes are on a false trail. They are fitting the poet too literally into a frame. It takes many, many folios before the collage of quotations begins to secrete a genuine sequence of thought. At last, after almost a hundred pages of the

present edition, you can see it dawning on Benjamin that his subject ought to be “Baudelaire” as a production in Baudelaire’s poetry—that is, a peculiar kind of hero with no interior life. Paul Claudel once argued that Baudelaire’s true subject was remorse, that being “the only inner experience left to people of the nineteenth century.” This was not just too Catholic a verdict for Benjamin, it was too optimistic. “Remorse in Baudelaire is merely a souvenir, like repentance, virtue, hope, and even anguish, which . . . relinquished its place to *morne incuriosité*” (AP, J53,1).

This is the reason why the organizing mode of Baudelaire’s verse is allegory—because only allegory can enact the final disappearance of “experience” in the Second Empire and its replacement by glum indifference, stupefied brooding, fixation on the endless outsides of things. “The allegorical experience was primary for [Baudelaire]” (AP, J53a,1). His actual, everyday apprehension of his surroundings was as a flow of enigmatic fragments. Quite abruptly, as I noted before, the quotations in the convolute become less random and respectful, and start to take on a horrifying momentum—hit after hit of petrification, freezing laughter, useless galvanized gaping. “Baroque allegory sees the corpse only from the outside; Baudelaire evokes it from within” (AP, J56,2).

This train of imagery—and here I return to my main topic—begins at last to interact with what Benjamin was reading at the same time in Marx and Karl Korsch. So the Baudelaire question rapidly transmutes into the following (the great question of *The Arcades Project* in its second phase): How could it possibly have happened that something as null and repulsive as the life of the commodity in the nineteenth century—the life it provided consumers, but above all *its* life, its incessant, flesh-crawling vivacity—gave birth to poetry? To a poetry we cannot stop reading, and which seems to speak to generation after generation about the real meaning of the New? How did the commodity take on form and attain a measure of (cackling, pseudo-Satanic) aesthetic dignity? (A comparable question for us would be asked of the “digital,” or the image of information. But they await their poets.)

The answer to the question, roughly, is that it did so in Baudelaire by means of the retreat (or ascension) to allegory I have been pointing to. Allegory is the commodity’s death’s head. “The allegories stand for that which the commodity makes of the experiences people have in this century” (AP, J55,13).

Around the middle of the century, the conditions of artistic production underwent a change. The change consisted in the fact that for

the first time the form of the commodity imposed itself decisively on the work of art, and the form of the masses on its public. Particularly vulnerable to these developments . . . was the lyric. It is the unique distinction of *Les Fleurs du mal* that Baudelaire responded to precisely these altered conditions with a book of poems. It is the best example of heroic conduct to be found in his life. (AP, J60,6)

But this on its own will not quite do as diagnosis. As in the case of the arcades and collective dreaming, it is important that Baudelaire botches and travesties the great work he takes on. His version of allegory is in many ways ludicrous—deliberately strained, tendentious, and “shocking.” More like pastiche than the real thing. (But is there a real thing to allegory? Do not all “allegories become dated because it is part of their nature to shock”?) In any case, an allegory of capitalism is obliged to take the very form of the market—novelty, stereotype, flash self-advertisement, cheap repeatable motif—deep into its bones. “Baudelaire wanted to create a *poncif*, a cliché. Lemaître assures him that he has succeeded” (AP, J59a,1).

So that finally, after what seems like a long wandering away from the world of the arcades, we begin to see that Baudelaire, at the level of syntax, diction, and mode, belongs precisely there—breathing the gassy air, looking sullenly through the clouded glass. “It is the same with the human material on the inside of the arcades as with the materials of their construction. The pimps are the iron uprights of this street, and its glass breakables are the whores” (AP, F3,2). “No one ever felt less at home in Paris than Baudelaire. *Every* intimacy with things is alien to the allegorical intention” (AP, J59a,4). The arcades are the epitome and generalization of homelessness—the dream of a society with no room of one’s own to go back to.

Does it need saying that in contemplating Baudelaire Benjamin is contemplating—allegorizing, idealizing—himself? At times the reflections on Baudelaire’s loneliness and impotence hardly pretend to be verdicts on somebody else. And more and more, as the notion emerges of a poetry made out of stupefied fragments, frozen constellations, advertisements, trademarks, and death rattles—a poetry of capital that could truly take on the commodity’s chattering liveliness and lifelessness—it is the convolutes themselves one sees, dancing attendance on *Le Spleen de Paris*.

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I mentioned earlier that during the 1930s *Les Fleurs du mal* kept company with *Capital* in Benjamin’s reading, and that recent scholarship has

tended to treat this fact somewhat gingerly, with what looks like embarrassment or distaste. Rolf Tiedemann's essay "Dialectics at a Standstill," where the trace of both affects is unmistakable, is brilliant, and helpful; but I do not see why it has so decisively set the tone for the study of *The Arcades Project* since 1982. And I bridle at its presence, yet again, as the sole piece of criticism included in the English translation. This makes it difficult to keep a sense of proportion in replying. No doubt the de-Marxification of Benjamin is annoying. But it would be playing into the hygienists' hands simply to reverse their emphases and exclusions, and replace one cardboard cutout with another. A "Red Benjamin" to fight it out with "Benjamin, Prophet of the Holocaust" or "Benjamin, the Father of Cultural Studies"? God forbid. I believe the fairest verdict on Marxism as a mode of thought in the Paris book is that it is pervasive, vital, and superficial.

The fact that the convolutes become, in the mid-1930s, less and less sketches for essays that seem already to exist in embryo in Benjamin's mind, and more and more raw theoretical and empirical material for a whole whose outlines are only dimly felt, means that we sometimes get a glimpse of the actual mechanics of Benjamin's new engagement in ways he might not have wanted. More than once in the notes from this time one comes across him copying out a hoary passage from Marxist scripture—the "theological niceties" paragraph, the sentences from the 1844 manuscripts on the "sense of having"—and then a few pages (months, years?) later copying it out again, like a slow learner kept after school. Both times the passages are taken from introductions or anthologies. Things get more serious later, but even in the beginning the Shakespeare's Holinshed rule applies. Benjamin learned more about the logic of capitalism from a skim of Hugo Fischer and Otto Rühle than most of us ever shall from months in the Marx-Engels archive. And given the surrounding circumstances of Marxism in the 1930s, there is a way the very flimsiness of Benjamin's materialism was an asset. It meant that he never seems to have felt the appeal of high Stalinism, nor even of that of its Dance-of-Death partner, the Frankfurt School. "Marxist method" never got under his skin. Not for him a lifetime spent like Adorno's, building ever more elaborate conceptual trenches to outflank the Third International. One has the impression that Benjamin hardly knew where the enemy, within dialectical materialism, had dug itself in. He is Fabrice del Dongo at Marxism's Waterloo.

But none of this means that Benjamin's Marxism, such as it was, did not feed and enliven the project he had in hand. His reading grew deeper as the decade wore on. *Capital* was dreamed over, clearly for weeks on end.

Many of the quotes taken from the 1844 manuscripts (again, copied from a book of extracts published in Leipzig in 1932) are far from standard—admittedly, it is hard to be dull when choosing aphorisms from this source—and the brief headings he gives his fragments speak already to his sense of how Marx might work for him. “On the doctrine of revolutions as innervations of the collective,” reads one (*AP*, X1a,2). (Miriam Hansen has taught us how central and productive the concept of innervation became for Benjamin’s work in the period of the “artwork” essay,³ so it is salutary to see that it had its roots in the Young-Hegelian Marx as much as in Freud.) “A derivation of class hatred that draws on Hegel,” reads another (*AP*, X1a,5). The way is beginning to open, I think, toward the searing first pages of the Baudelaire book. “When we read Baudelaire we are given a course of historical lessons by bourgeois society. . . . From the outset it seems more promising to investigate his machinations where he undoubtedly is at home—in the enemy camp [that is, the bourgeoisie]. . . . Baudelaire was a secret agent—an agent of the secret discontent of his class with its own rule.”⁴

“The way is beginning to open”—I claim no more than that. And readers are fully entitled to wonder if even the Baudelaire book delivered, or could have delivered, on the promise in the sentences quoted. Working out how Marxism came to function in Benjamin’s imagination, then, and how it might have figured in *The Arcades Project’s* final form, will involve an extraordinary interpretative balancing act. Best-case reconstruction will have to go hand in hand with a refusal to let the accidental present state of Benjamin’s remains be fetishized as his “method”—the book-made-out-of-nothing-but-citations, the de-totalized totality, montage, *Trauerspiel*, the dialectical image. I shall do no more here than point to one or two ways in which Marx’s thought begins really to be a generative force in Benjamin’s inquiry rather than a set of surface tropes or citations. This is, to repeat, only part of the story. Nothing is going to cancel the impression of muddle and turgidity that shadows many of the later dossiers. Work is in progress. The challenge to criticism is to decide whether there are signs of the work’s giving rise to a new constellation.

The first sign is obvious. Only the most dogged de-Marxifier will fail to see, at the end of the 1930s, a real convergence between Marx’s understanding of capitalism’s key representational logic—the logic of com-

3. See Miriam Hansen, “Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street,” *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (winter 1999): 313–23.

4. Walter Benjamin, “Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: New Left Books, 1973), 104.

modity exchange—and Benjamin’s sense not just of what Baudelaire was doing (which is more and more the book’s main conundrum), but the flâneur, the automaton, the photographer, the prostitute, the *feuilletoniste*. “Abstract labor power” becomes Benjamin’s subject. Forced equivalence of the unequal. He sees the nineteenth century more and more as a society with abstraction as its doppelgänger, haunting and deranging its great panoply of inventions. “Whereby the sensuous-concrete counts only as a phenomenal form of the abstract-general” (*AP*, X4a,1): This Young-Hegelian turn from chapter 1 of *Capital* is what *The Arcades Project* will show actually happening.

“Show actually happening” is the issue. For of course Benjamin is deeply dissatisfied with the un-sensuousness of most Marxist demonstrations of the same truth. “Must the Marxist understanding of history”—this is the famous question from Convolute N—“necessarily be acquired at the expense of history’s perceptibility? . . . In what way is it possible to conjoin a heightened vividness [*Anschaulichkeit*] to the realization of Marxist method?” (*AP*, N2,6). Or again: “Marx lays bare the causal connection between economy and culture. For us, what matters is the thread of expression. It is not the economic origins of culture that will be presented, but the expression of the economy in its culture. At issue, in other words, is the attempt to grasp an economic process as perceptible *Ur*-phenomenon, from out of which proceed all manifestations of life” (*AP*, N1a,6).

One way of saying this (which we have heard repeatedly since Benjamin’s death) is that we need, as counterweight to the theory of the commodity as a form of alienated social relations, a parallel one of its evocation of endless desire. A theory of consumption, that is, as well as exchange. But late Benjamin cannot really be enlisted to support this comforting either-or, or one plus the other. His thinking in the 1930s is headed not toward clean alternative theories of capitalism’s power but toward a theory of the nesting of consumption *in* exchange (that is, in the cruelty and force of relations of production). Near the beginning of the dossier on Marx, he jots down the following verdict: “It would be an error to deduce the psychology of the bourgeoisie from the attitude of the consumer. . . . It is only the class of snobs that adopts the consumer’s standpoint. [For “snobs” nowadays we could substitute “symbol managers” and a certain type of postmodern intellectual.]”

5. Compare “Baudelaire had the good fortune to be the contemporary of a bourgeoisie that could not yet employ, as accomplice of its domination, such an asocial type as he represented. The incorporation of a nihilism into its hegemonic apparatus was reserved for the bourgeoisie of the twentieth century” (*AP*, J91,5).

The foundations for a psychology of the bourgeois class are much sooner to be found in the following sentence from Marx, which makes it possible, in particular, to describe the influence which this class exerts, as model and as customer, on art" (*AP*, X2,2). I shall not quote the heavy sentence itself, which is from *Capital*, chapter 11, "The Rate and Mass of Surplus Value." But, believe me, it has to do with capitalism not just as a whirl of exchange value but as a system of appropriation and control of the labor of the proletariat.

This coming to consciousness of capital as always a form of specific domination over labor is, in my view, fundamental to Benjamin—it is the great problem he struggles with in the last three years of his life. For of course it puts his initial, wonderful idea of the "dreaming collective" at risk. Which collective? is now the question. Whose collective? At the expense of who else's dream of community? It is not that Benjamin was ever in two minds about the arcades being a fantasy of togetherness strictly on the bourgeoisie's terms. But it was hard (the way through Convolute U, V, and W is laborious, and in a sense deeply obtuse) for him truly to *use* his knowledge that the dream houses were redoubts, armed camps with guns pointing in the direction of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine. Only slowly do contrary dreamings appear. Only slowly (against massive resistance) does he come to see his own 1928 dreaming in the Passage des Panoramas as not just class-specific but actively *on the side* of the commodity. You will have noticed, and I hope shuddered at, the casual inclusion of "factories" in his initial list of Wonderlands. The verdict on Baudelaire as secret agent in the enemy camp (as with so many of Benjamin's verdicts on his hero) is a verdict, hard won, on himself.

This does not lead the secret agent to the hair shirt and act of self-denunciation (that is, it does not turn Benjamin into a Stalinist) but, rather, I think, to a sketch of a truly *dark* history of the working class—a history without consolation. The clues to this are preliminary, but for me they make up one of *The Arcades Project's* most terrible legacies. "It may be considered one of the methodological objectives of this work," Benjamin writes in Convolute N, "to show what a historical materialism would be like which has annihilated within itself the idea of progress. Just here, historical materialism has every reason to distinguish itself from bourgeois habits of mind" (*AP*, N2,2). Nothing could demonstrate the hold of those habits better than the way the history of the urban proletariat has usually been written—under the sign of redemption, with the Party or the revolution or the "socialization of the means of production" as always the Messiah who will give suffering a meaning, a destiny. It is one sign of how far Benjamin came in the end

from his theological origins that, in the appalling montage of working-class poverty, exploitation, nihilism, and suicide he puts together in *Convolute A*, truly no redeemer liveth. At one moment in 1939, he extracted from the convolute an image of sharpshooters all over Paris in 1830, on day two of an uprising already running into the sand, aiming their guns at the clocks on the towers. In the context he found for it in 1939, the “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” the story takes on a certain chiliastic glamour. I prefer the tonality given it by the place it had originally, almost at the end of this relentless dossier—we might call the whole forty or so pages *Les Misérables* (in preference to Tiedemann’s somewhat po-faced *Social Movement*). There the bullets slamming into the clock face are a form of dreaming, for sure, but a dream that Benjamin has speak to us from the last circle of hell.

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The Arcades Project is not a book to be read deferentially, and I hope my praise of it has none of the “sad hero of the age of Fascism” flavor that makes so much of the Benjamin literature unbearable. The book is cranky, preposterous, disorganized. It leaves one dissatisfied, as surely the building blocks of a Marxist history of capitalism’s inner life should. Finally, then, let me turn briefly to some of the things I feel it leaves out or gets wrong.

First, the matter of dreaming and waking. One aim of *The Arcades Project*, at least in its later stages, was to plot the relation between the true (unconscious) collective dreaming of the nineteenth century, encoded in the constellation of forms, materials, novelties, commodities, advertisements, and literary detritus that Benjamin made his own, and the conscious utopias of Saint-Simon and Fourier. (Marx believed himself to have surpassed such utopia building, but did he? That is another of *The Arcades Project’s* questions.) I do not believe this cluster of issues ever comes into focus. Saint-Simonianism, which is the epitome of a kind of technocratic dreaming of the future familiar to us digital scribes, slips dully through Benjamin’s fingers. Yet the point at which socialism and machinolatry intersect is vital to an understanding of the last two hundred years. Benjamin never, in my view, gets on terms with Saint-Simon, and even his treatment of Fourier is ultimately too picturesque, too much an item in a cabinet of socialist curiosities. Nor do I think his note cards do much to clarify the relation of these forms of dreaming to the one going on in the Passage Choiseul. And does not the failure of Benjamin to do so—or really to show us even a glimpse of how such a clarification might be managed, within his structure—point to the limits of his

notion of history? For the nineteenth-century “collective” dreamed many of its futures while it was wide awake. It dreamed different futures, according to its changing sense of which collective (within the dream totality of collectives) counted. And it acted on its dreams; it acted them out.

Benjamin would reply, if I understand him, that these waking acts of the imagination (these strange discourses, these rushes to the barricade) were too flimsy and technical to lead us to the heart of things. But were they? The Commune awaits a truly Benjaminian treatment. Fourier’s madness is deeper than we know. There is a cryptic entry in *Convolute W* where revolutions are described as “an innervation [we could almost say a jerking into life, a galvanizing] of the technical organs of the collective,” like “the child who learns to grasp by trying to get hold of the moon” (*AP*, W7,4). We have already glimpsed the idea cropping up in the dossier on Marx. Reference is made to the “cracking open of natural teleology” (*AP*, W8a,5). Both are described as “articles of my politics”—as if such a politics were being actively aired and developed elsewhere. Maybe the book itself would have faced these questions head on. Maybe they would have intertwined with the dark, inconsolable history of the proletariat I have said can be seen in the making. Dream versus revolution, then. Collective versus class. Utopia versus allegorical stifling and dispersal. One shivers at the presence of the ghost of a further, wider dialectic in the scattered notes. But making the ghost palpable would have meant throwing almost everything back in the melting pot.

Then, finally, we come to the question of Parisian art—and beyond it, Paris seeing. There is a lovely phrase for the arcades in one of Benjamin’s first sketches—“the city in a bottle”—which he drops when he moves the sketch into *Convolute Q*. The phrase was surely not lacking in poetry, but maybe the poetry was of the wrong kind. Benjamin wanted his arcade windows always to be dusty, not opening onto the outside world. Visual art for him equaled Grandville, Eiffel, Daguerre, and Nadar, the panorama painters, Daumier (but how quickly the Daumier dossier peters out!), Redon, the Metro entrances. Manet is mentioned only once in passing—notable in a book where Baudelaire is the main guide. Impressionism does not get a look in; Ingres (painter of the horror of bourgeois subjectivity) barely figures; Seurat not at all. Benjamin’s Paris is all interior, all gas lit or twilit. It has no true outside—no edges, no *plein air*, no Argenteuil or Robinson. No place, that is, where Nature itself is put through the sieve of exchange value and laid on in the form of day trips and *villégiatures*; and no answering dream of

pure visibility and outwardness, or the endless strangeness of earthbound life. No *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* or *Grande Jatte*.

"Whereby the sensuous-concrete counts only as a phenomenal form of the abstract-general." In my view, you either see that Manet was the visual artist who was able to show us the abstract-general and sensuous-concrete becoming moments of one another, or you don't. And if you don't, I am not convinced your version of Marxism will ever attain to the measure of vividness (*Anschaulichkeit*) it so much wishes for. Not if your chosen subject is Paris in the nineteenth century.

Paris for Benjamin is a city of signs, words, and gesticulations, not scenes and sights. He is a flaneur, not a tourist. Nowhere in the convolutes is there an entry from Murray or Baedeker. I do not believe Benjamin was deeply (meaning blankly) receptive to the look of things. He was at home in the Passage des Panoramas, with the indoor machinery of visualization working full tilt; one senses that if he had ever found himself on Manet's Butte de Chaillot, or at Caillebotte's great intersection of the rue de Saint Pétersbourg and rue de Turin, he would not have allowed himself the true frisson of loss of bearings and entry into the realm of the eye. Agoraphobia was not his thing. Somewhere he tells the story of Mallarmé every day crossing the Pont de l'Europe and being "gripped by the temptation to throw himself from the height of the bridge onto the rails, under the trains, so as finally to escape the mediocrity which imprisoned him" (*AP*, M15,2). But he does not build on the anecdote, and I feel he does not quite see its point. Benjamin's Paris is not frightening enough—not empty enough, disenchanting enough. I do not think the Paris book is sufficiently aware that its passages were pathetic enclaves of dreaming—reservations of the marvelous—in a great desert of the smart. Benjamin wanted the wonderful too much.

One way of putting this (it has the air of a formula, but it gets matters clear) is to say that Benjamin's Paris is all dream and no spectacle: The apparatus of spectacle is not understood by him to invade the dream life and hold even unconscious imagining in its grip. Not to put one's full stress on the city as more and more, even in the time of the arcades, a regime of false openness seems to me to miss something essential about bourgeois society—something dreadful and spellbinding. If you leave out Mallarmé swaying by the railings, you leave out part of modernity's pain. Equally, if you leave out the line of painting from Delacroix to Matisse (which Benjamin does, essentially), you leave out too much of what made the pain endurable—meaning bourgeois hedonism, bourgeois positivism and lucidity. This

is not a matter of pitting high art against photography and caricature, incidentally—of course we need histories of all three—but of asking what this particular high art has to tell us about the culture that spawned it.

These matters lead finally to Benjamin's deepest presuppositions as a historian. The presuppositions are written into his choice of objects. Roughly speaking, Benjamin seems to have believed that the true history of the recent past could be put together from its high and low literature, its phantasmagoria, and its kitsch. Painting is barely part of his archive, but neither are science and medicine and most other forms of bourgeois inquiry into the world, nor the whole panoply of philosophical and artistic positivism. There is no place for Littré in the arcades, or Pasteur, or Larousse, or Reclus, or Chevreul (he gets a passing mention as the object of Nadar's first photographic interview in 1886), or Monet, or Cézanne. Benjamin is interested always in the utopian moment to be found in the negative—in the dinginess and clutter of the arcades, in Grandville's whimsy, in Fashion swapping aphorisms with Death, in the cheap patter of the *feuilletoniste*, in Baudelaire's "Hélas! tout est abîmé." No one would deny that these are part of the story. All honor to Benjamin for bringing them to light. But perhaps we have come to a moment, oddly, when the other side of the nineteenth-century dialectic needs to be reasserted: not only the wishes and potentialities threaded improbably through the negative, but, even more, what the century's proudest forms (its actual achievements) of lucidity and positivity went on disclosing of terror—of true *abîme*—built into the bourgeoisie's dream of freedom. Mallarmé swaying by the railings, yes; but also Seurat looking through the bright screen of unique sensations to the standardization and atomization that the screen (the new screening and de-differentiating of everything) made possible. Hedonism and positivism—and the whole project of radical secularization that attended them—were just as integral to our grandfathers' dream-life as magic lanterns and *The Hunting of the Snark*. And just as frightening, just as absurd.

Benjamin famously believed that the modern was the time of hell. But it seems to me he never realized that what was most hellish about modernity was pleasure in its highest bourgeois form—the moment of sheer appropriation and instrumentality in the face of experience, of disabused belonging to the world and turning it immediately to one's purposes. It is hellish, and it is heavenly. Aby Warburg once, toward the end of his life, dictated some notes about Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, in which he described the painting, touchingly, as "the image of a liberated humanity that moves with assurance in the sunlight [*die Prägung freien Menschentums, das sich im*

Lichte selbstlicher empfindet].”⁶ No doubt the verdict is naïve. But maybe, after Benjamin—after a half-century of the hermeneutics of suspicion—what needs to be recaptured *is* the sunlight, the full illusion of assurance and transparency. For this illusion was the nineteenth century’s chief utopia. And out there, beyond the academy, it still holds the majority in its grip.

6. Aby Warburg, *Manet* (unpublished manuscript, 1927), A, 3, quoted in Ernst Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography* (London: The Warburg Institute, 1970), 277.