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TOWARDS AN ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNITY. WALTER BENJAMIN AND THE SHIFT FROM THE HUMAN DOMINATION OF NATURE TO THE DOMINATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP ITSELF

1. Introduction

Walter Benjamin's contributions, written between the 1910s and 1940, show one example of how certain issues of current interest already were present in the European intellectual debate a century ago. Notably, Benjamin's diverse work is considered particularly useful in reflecting on frame concepts such as progress and technology, yet his approach to the question of the relationship between humans and nature is no less relevant. These topics are not addressed in dedicated works, but rather appear throughout many of his writings, meaning they must be pieced together and partially reconstructed. For the same reasons, they sometimes do not reach full formulations and leave with unanswered questions. In short, though in a non-organic way, his work not only contributes to a history of thought that deals with the role of humans in the cosmos, but also offers valuable theoretical tools with which to interpret contemporary challenges related to the relationship between individuals and the environment, which revolves around a fundamental rethinking of this relationship.

Among contemporary scholars, Benjamin is renowned as a multifaceted thinker and, although he certainly cannot be considered an ecologist, his potential contributions to ecologism have occasionally been recognised (Löwy 2014; 2019). For example, in the collection *La révolution est le frein d'urgence*, where Michael Löwy, picks up on an article of his from 2016, which appeared moreover under the title *Walter Benjamin, précurseur de l'écosocialisme* (Löwy 2016). Here Löwy writes: «Walter Benjamin was one of the rare Marxists before 1945 to propose a radical critique of the concept of 'exploitation of nature', and of the 'murderous' relationship of capitalist civilisation with it» (Löwy 2019, 151, our translation). While this statement is fairly straightforward, there are even more radical comments that regard

Benjamin as an ‘anti-capitalist’ «forerunner of degrowth» (Mylondo 2019, 8, referring to Sinaï 2016). Now, we are of the idea that Benjamin’s conception and critique of progress and of technique are not quite compatible with the principles of degrowth. The degrowth hypothesis can be easily rejected due to Benjamin’s non-aprioristic anti-technological or regressive attitude. This stance is particularly evident and explicit in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility* (*Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner Reproduzierbarkeit*, from 1935), as it is more or less implied in many of his other texts. For what concerns the ecological matrix, this is certainly not the first interpretation to arise from reading Benjamin, nor is it therefore one of the explicit themes of his work. Nevertheless, we can speak of a propaedeutics that would be woven into the lines. Some commentators who have proposed this line of interpretation are great connoisseurs of Benjamin’s thought, and this new line of enquiry has already proven to be a fertile new lens.

2. A methodological frame

In general, we bear in mind that Benjamin is widely recognised for his contributions to aesthetics, particularly his analysis of the interdependent relationship between aesthetics and politics. When this bond is not explicit, the realm of aesthetics and arts becomes a reservoir offering Benjamin privileged viewpoints and material sources for his transversal and politically oriented analyses. This is partly due to the consideration, widely shared by Benjamin, of the ability of materiality and artistic forms to effectively express both the spirit of the time with an interesting reduced mediation, as well as the effect of changes, including of course the technological ones. They do so with an anticipatory character, which can be fruitfully exploited for the diagnostic, analytic, and critical reflection. This is the case, for instance, with the metonymic observations about «Glass before its time, premature iron» (quoted by Benjamin 1999a, *a°*, 1). On the other hand, as for one of his formulations, it should be reminded that: «It has always been one of the primary tasks of art to create a demand whose hour of full satisfaction has not yet come» (Benjamin 2006a, 118; now also in Benjamin 2008, 38). However, it is also true that «it is as though people, and ‘artists’ in particular, did not quite dare to acknowledge this new material, with all its possibilities» (Benjamin 1999a, *The Rings of Saturn*, 886), preferring to disguise it behind the forms and appearances of

traditional materials, in architecture, furnishings, and accessories. In all cases, this makes the material and aesthetic dimensions a privileged channel for analysis.

Another core element to consider as a methodological basis is his critique of the modern ideology of progress, whereby progress is associated with capitalist production and the concept of unlimited growth. This emphasises the Benjaminian leitmotif, clear in the second half of the 1930s, for which material progress without corresponding social progress is not true progress. This element, which is central to his transversal approach to reading modernity and contemporaneity, remains extremely relevant today, responding to the need to consider political, moral and aesthetic values as indissolubly linked to our awareness of nature – understood broadly.

More specifically, there are a few main ideas that form the backbone of Benjamin's contribution to the topic of the relationship between humans and nature. To understand this, it is useful to examine works such as *The Arcades Project* (*Das Passagen-Werk*, from 1927), also known as *Passagen-Werk* and *Passagenarbeit*, which revolves around the claim of Paris being the *Capital of the 19th Century*. Alongside this project that occupied Benjamin from 1927 onwards, remained unfinished and never achieved an organic form or a completion, the second core text is the aforementioned essay on *The Work of Art*, first written in 1935. It is confirmed there, as a seemingly secondary thread, that Benjamin develops a vision in which the production of knowledge is not the outcome of a hierarchical exchange, but of a reciprocal and synergistic one. At the same time, it is there that his approach to technique and technology gain a more structured form.

Benjamin has nothing intrinsically against technology, technology is not seen as negative in itself. Rather, in the same text he warns about the different ways in which politics appropriate it. By focusing on the context of technical innovation in the realm of art, where one can witness both the regressive aestheticisation of politics as well as the emancipatory politicisation of art. This is stated as follows in the second version of *The Work of Art*: «Humankind [...]. Its self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure. *Such is the aestheticizing of politics, as practiced by fascism. Communism replies by politicizing art*» (Benjamin 2006a, 122). The specificity of such a stance comes from the historical and

political context in which Benjamin's reflection develops. The fact that some phenomena are recurrent both in modern and contemporary times makes it a useful insight that can be applied beyond a narrow historical moment. In Benjaminian terms, this can be translated as it follows: the features of industrial and advanced capitalism have enough in common to share a same ontology. Here, what comes later is the exacerbation of existing characteristics, and the extension of the critique to late capitalism as well seems consistent. The precise historical moment (from which to extend the analysis) is when fascism and communism were about to fight and started fighting each other openly in the Second World War, while developing and applying technical newness to the ordinary and extraordinary practices of life, in a dramatic synergetic loop. It is true that the urgency and the danger he perceived in his time contributed to the formulation of such thoughts, but his categorisations result in a less contingent form.

The meaning in the quotation opposing aesthetisation and politicisation is twofold. Firstly, there is the consideration of two ways in which art can be used. There is also the problem of a developed technical capacity that can now overcome the human in terms of destructive capacity. As evidence of this, beauty is not a topic when it comes to survival, and the continuation of life, or conservation, is menaced, most likely because of the perceived dangerous times. During such moments, art better becomes a political instrument, serving both as a means of evasion or sublimation, as well as in parties' hands, in militance and resistance.

Beyond this initial reflection, we must consider that, according to Benjamin, there is a knowing subject who has to take a step back, in order to foster a non-hierarchical exchange between subject and object, between human and nature. Other texts offer this standpoint and implicitly contribute to a critique, to a criticism of anthropocentrism, albeit without the specific label. A radical shift in knowledge is suggested: an epistemological leap whereby nature is no longer viewed as an object of modern human domination, but as an integral part of a collective and inclusive cognitive and creative process, then also of an environment, in this case, of knowledge. As for *One-Way Street*, namely in the paragraph (*Denkbild*) entitled *To the Planetarium*, which is the last of the book, the way forward is that of a significant revision of the typically modern process of gaining knowledge and adaptation. «[T]he

exclusive emphasis on an optical connection to the universe, to which astronomy very quickly led», represented, also in symbolic terms, a move away from a relationship with the earth that was previously characterised by a physical, immersive, and communal experience. The anthropocentric way of living is very well indicated through the effective quotation of the eye-centred relation to the world – «the exclusive emphasis on an optical connection to the universe, to which astronomy very quickly led» (Benjamin 2016, 94) – where technique allows human beings to approach anything, even the most distant objects. Here, of course, astronomy functions as one of the examples of the technical development and approach of the knowing subject to a nature considered as an object and, specifically, as an object to master. In such an anti-auratic movement, where anti-auratic – as drawn in negative from Benjamin's own definition of aura (*Little History of Photography/Kleine Geschichte der Photographie*, 1931, in Benjamin 2005b, 519, now also in Benjamin 2008, 285) – means eliminating distance and becoming able to grasp and control things, thanks to a science that improves the degree of domination of the humankind upon the rest of the nature and cosmos, sanctioning a qualitative leap in terms of domination itself. In other words, «nothing distinguishes the ancient from the modern man so much as the former's absorption in a cosmic experience, scarcely known to later periods» (Benjamin 2016, 93-94). This does not mean a negative consideration of the 'ancient' experience enhancing the cosmic, that is, an aesthetic experience. Rather, to some extent it looks like Benjamin invites to get back to that ancient cosmic way of relating, which is a way of experiencing through feeling. What he seems to be promoting here is a relational experience that is capable of taking into account and «gaining a certain knowledge of what is nearest to us and what is remotest from us, and *never one without the other*» (Benjamin 2016, 94, our emphasis).

Such an invitation to return to an ancient model of the relationship with nature is connected to a «Copernican revolution» – a concept that has been interpreted in various way by philosophers – in which humas are just one part of a broader community, with no greater value or power than other entities, being them plants, animals, or even stones. Following this new cosmology, the 'planet human' is no longer the sun, and the necessity to shift from the idea of dominating nature to that of dominating the relationship between humans and nature becomes

evident. If we posit that human agency has to be kept under control, we are before a revision that is ethical, and which resizes humans' role in interactions. This is based on political considerations, does not include an aesthetic nor aesthetising attention to nature that determines what to do *of* nature, but it does include an aesthetic dimension. Broadly speaking, aesthetics here goes back to the originary semantics, and puts corporeity and senses at the centre, aiming at redefining the relationship *with* nature, as a kinaesthetic experience. This is not to be confused with mystical experiences, although these are indeed a topic in Benjamin's reflection, for it they provide another way of gaining knowledge that overpass reasoning habits and power dynamics – as for the epistemic role of both «profane illuminations» and «intoxication» (Benjamin 2005a, 216). In this sense, another marginal concept named by Benjamin is also recalled: the «third freedom», which consist, after a first freedom (negative freedom), and a second one (what is freedom for), in the «freedom *with whom*» (Benjamin 1991, 174, emphasis in the original).

Furthermore, Benjamin's considerations develop in such a direction that the understanding of his proposals necessarily involves the application and actualisation of the concept of limit and, especially of irreversible limit. He identifies this concept in both the political field and in the field of technique – just as the question of the human-nature relationship is articulated in terms of both technique and politics. This resonates with contextual elements once again, but transcends them too, and not just thanks to a linguistic and thought allure that indeed focuses on the detail, on specific, tiny, and usually neglected things, but without lingering on their contingent components. Benjamin's intention is always trans-historical as well, here in the sense that he is interested in the connections between different epochs and the way they reciprocally inform. For our purposes here, this means structures, patters and focal points, points of anchorage and leverage, from which to blow up the given, as a crystallised reality, imprisoned by its immanent narratives: ideology, phantasmagoria.

Benjamin's contribution can therefore be expanded further: in relation to limits, as seen in *One-Way Street* (*Einbahnstraße*, from 1923), as well as the theses *On the Concept of History* (*Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, written in 1940), he directly warns against the significant dangers inherent in technology and politics as experienced in the 20th century. When misdirected, their potential

can lead to environmental destruction but also to anti-democratic conformism, thus eliminating the possibility of diversity in general, and in particular of plurality of voices (and living species), political pluralism and opposition. The coupling of material and political dimensions strongly expresses the value ascribed to plurality and variety. In this vein, Benjamin's critical reflection on technology and political limits, though not explicitly labelled as such, resonates with concerns that belong to our times too, likely by anticipating now widespread considerations. He already articulates such issues in terms of what we now call sustainability, though – again – without using such labels, which will become common later.

3. A new fulcrum for mastery

Moreover, when the concept of domination is involved in Benjamin's work, it should really be considered in a broad sense in terms, given the wide semantic realm it encompasses: from human relations to those with the environment, in the political, technical, merely material, relational and linguistic spheres, to the point of significantly influencing the philosophical proposal at multiple levels. So, in *To the planetarium*, in the second half of the paragraph, we read:

The mastery of nature (so the imperialists teach) is the purpose of all technology. But who would trust a cane wielder who proclaimed the mastery of children by adults to be the purpose of education? Is not education, above all, the indispensable ordering of the relationship between generations and therefore mastery (if we are to use this term) of that relationship and not of children? And likewise technology is the mastery of not nature but of the relation between nature and man. (Benjamin 2016, 95)

This quotation gets to the heart of the matter. The translation in 'mastery' – of *Beherrschung* (Benjamin 2009, 76) – could have also employed terms such as 'to rule', 'to dominate', 'to command', or 'to control'. In any case, relevant is the shift in the locus of domination: moving it in order to dominate something related to the former dominant subject, the human. Moreover, children are representative of all subjected entities, who have been educated by a superior power. But this power is the same power that can decide for their own good or bad, as an absolute power would, and in all cases in a heteronormative way. The quoted paragraph and the excerpt from it open up many important issues, however, the focus here must be precisely on the shift from domination of something

(in particular, by humans over nature) to mastering the relationship between parts. From this perspective, the only acceptable form of domination is a guiding principle that keeps prevaricating forms of domination under control.

Benjamin has, of course, his sources. Of all the studies, the one on the German writer Paul Scheerbart seems closest to the final question quoted from *One-Way Street*. Benjamin intermittently worked on Scheerbart between 1919 and 1939, extensively writing of it only twice during that twenty-year period, according to the available sources. The few differences between the two texts seem to testify to a continuity of thought. In the 1919 text *Paul Scheerbart: Lesabéndio*, Benjamin, provides a detailed commentary on the novel *Lesabéndio*, its eponymous protagonist (Lesabéndio) and its author (Scheerbart). While doing so, he raises the issue of the harmonious relationship between humans and their environment for the first time. Here, the term 'environment' is to be understood literally as the physical, material and, above all, cosmic environment. Forgiving the somewhat esoteric, metaphorical, aspecific language. In the fusion of Lesabéndio with the community's good and, in fact, in the physical dissolution of his body into astral matter, an aesthetic and architectural, as well as a political task is accomplished.

It is in this context that Benjamin begins the investigation into how political subjects – those who actively work for a common good – should be. From scattered material we can reconstruct that he goes so far as to say that they should fulfil their role through a mandate, thus beginning to construct the profile of what he calls the true politician. The 1919 text on Lesabéndio was no coincidence as part of Benjamin's project for a '*Politik*', and it is not by chance that the protagonist and the novel represent for Benjamin the emblem of this «true politician» (Gentili in Gentili, Ponzi, Stimilli 2014, 68), whose main characteristic is acting for the sole sake of the community and not out of individual interest.

4. For the community's sake

Both *Lesabéndio* and *To the planetarium* confirm the key role played by the community. In the two examples, a cosmic community emerges in which humans and the environment form a whole free from hierarchical relations. The desirable so called cosmic community of 1928 is a recuperation of the cosmic experience that characterised the attitude of ancient and

premodern humans. Historically, this experience was halted by scientific evolution, in which men – now modern – became protagonists in a process of estrangement from nature, both concrete and prospective, as soon as nature ceased to be a companion of experience and turned into an object of study (Benjamin 2016, 94-95). Moreover, alongside analysing Scheerbart's world, Benjamin emphasises the importance of a politics that addresses the needs of the community, including in this community people, nature, and the environment. A community that should be guided by shared interests and goals, rather than domination, in whatever form it may take. It is this what we call an 'environmental community'.

In turn, the 1939 essay *On Scheerbart* focuses on an image that also resonates with another central theme of the artwork essay:

This poet's work is imbued with an idea which could not have been more foreign to the notions then widespread. This idea – or rather, this image – was of a humanity which had deployed the full range of its technology and put it to humane use. To achieve this state of affairs, Scheerbart believed that two conditions were essential: first, people should discard the base and primitive belief that their task was to 'exploit' the forces of nature; second, they should be true to the conviction that technology, by liberating human beings, would fraternally liberate the whole of creation. (Benjamin 2006a, 386)

In addition to literally adopting some passages from the 1919 text, the 1939 commentary confirms both the themes of 1919 and some of the main themes of Benjamin's thought, by directly reaffirming the idea of overcoming of the logic of domination between humans and nature. The issue of language is also addressed; the quotation indirectly recalls the same theme at the level of the denominative ('Adamic') language, raising reasonable doubts about the sustainability of the idea of a human (this time indeed a man) giving voice to things (cf. *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*, originally *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen*, 1916). In the context of the risk of slippery slope immanent to the asymmetrical power attribution, isn't this too dangerous? On a positive note, we are presented with the reduction of men (Adam) to nature's spokespersons, insofar as they do give names to natural objects, but are supposed to do so by listening to them without deciding anything in their place.

5. Against a so-called progress

In the 1939 essay, a little more intensity is likely to be added by recalling – in continuity with the *Passagen-Werk* – that the earth is just one star. By confronting the immensity of the universe, Benjamin attacks anthropocentrism on the side. The connection with another key figure in his writings is easy to establish: Louis-Auguste Blanqui, who is particularly prominent in the *Passagenarbeit*. The French revolutionary is the author of a (pseudo)scientific text – *L'éternité par les astres*, 1872 – which, according to Benjamin, would demonstrate the resignation inherent in the idea of an eternal cosmological return, and offers Benjamin the opportunity to show, by another way, the little significance of human life when considered on the scale of the universe. In fact, humanity, despite all its struggles, would be merely a temporary scratch on the surface of a cosmos that has been discovered as infinite both in space and time (cf. Abensour 2013 and Migliorini 2019). Blanqui's figure represents a fundamental connection with the macro-theme of progress, which Benjamin addresses in its dialectical relationship with an eternal return that offer neither true novelty, nor the potential positivity of a return to natural, seasonal, circular rhythms (Benjamin 2002, D10a, 5).

The question of progress emerges first among the main theoretical premises, in no chronological but conceptual order, and is addressed above all in the incredible amount of material that makes up the book on *passages*. The most frequently extracted argument from this body of work, is the idea – which underlies virtually all of Benjamin's thought – that modernity is haunted by a phantasmagoria of linear and infinite progress, which, in reality, is at best eternal repetition of material novelty. Indeed:

In the course of the nineteenth century, as the bourgeoisie consolidated its position of power, the concept of progress would increasingly have forfeited the critical functions it originally possessed. (In this process, the doctrine of natural selection had a decisive role to play: it popularized the notion that *progress was automatic*. The extension of the concept of progress to the whole of human activity was furthered as a result.) With Turgot, the concept of progress still had its critical functions. In particular, the concept made it possible to direct people's attention to retrograde tendencies in history. Turgot saw progress, characteristically, as guaranteed above all in the realm of mathematical research. (Benjamin 2002, N11a, 1, our emphasis)

This is a first step: the disempowerment of the emancipatory forces of the previous epoch pairs with a diffusion of the equivalence between material and general improvement. *De facto*, this deactivates critical and emancipatory possibilities at the social level and, moreover, gives an ideological and cultural imprint to the concepts of growth and exploitation as logical, necessary and natural means. In political terms, as read through Benjamin's category of class struggle, the settled bourgeoisie becomes conservative and, thereby and all the more so, he confirms the role of emancipation to the proletarian class. It is no coincidence that, in line with Karl Marx assertions, the proletarian class is referred to as the 'avenger' class (Benjamin 2006b, 394). This should be understood in a broad, non-reductive sense, for it 'avenger' includes a historical significance, i.e. a programmatic task, insofar as the working class has so far failed to bring to light and win over demands that differ from those put forward by the bourgeoisie. In short, the battle is once again against the ideology of linear, superficial progress.

This ideology, based on purely material novelty and permanent growth, not only determines the productive and material structure, but it is also the theoretical and practical enemy to contrast in order to break free from a philosophy of history that has only perpetrated the barbarism summed up by the concept of the history of winners, of the dominant class, which held the narrative of history (Benjamin 2006b, 392-394). In this scenario too, domination by humans over humans is the cause of a detrimental distance from other ways of living, in this case from another tradition, historical narrative, and other possibilities for political action and shared social life.

6. Through an epistemological shift

It is still the *Passagen-Werk* that proposes a way to solve this political problem, with the so-called Copernican revolution, which appears as several times in the book (Benjamin 2002, K1, 1-2-3; $\langle F^\circ, 7 \rangle$; $\langle h^\circ, 2 \rangle$; $\langle h^\circ, 4 \rangle$). It is now intended as a methodological element, rather than an historical one, which simultaneously reaches and modifies structures in the philosophy of knowledge and history. This opens up the possibility of actual change, starting with a shift regarding the objects of knowledge. The latter is not attained by basing upon a hierarchical relationship, but by a reciprocal one. In this process, participants are situated on an equivalent level of

influence, which becomes – or restores – reciprocal and horizontal interactions among humans and matter. Moreover, on the historical-political level, Benjamin summarised:

The Copernican turning point in the historical view is as follows[: one considered 'what has been' as a fixed point and assigned to the present the effort to tentatively bring knowledge closer to this fixed point.] Now this relation is to be overturned, [and politics takes primacy over history]. (Benjamin 2002, K1, 2, translation modified)

This politics takes roots in the intention to bring the tradition of the oppressed back to the surface of memory, as a form of compensation for the long-standing domination perpetrated by the winners. The form of this new knowability moves away from Kant and closer to Copernicus, so to speak, above all in terms of a drastic downsizing of anthropocentrism. This finds confirmation, and indeed a precedent, in the theory of knowledge that includes the methodology applied in *Origin of the German Tragic Drama* (*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, 1916-1927). Conceived and written throughout the decade between 1916 and 1926, it is worth emphasising that, in its last gestational phase, it is contemporary, distant, yet very close, in conceptual and critical terms, to the reflections that lead to *One-Way Street*.

From the complex *Epistemo-critical prologue* (*Vorrede*) to the study of Baroque and *Trauerspiel*, sufficient for our purposes here is to recall the concept of truth as «death of intention» (Benjamin 2003, 36). According to an initial, non-exhaustive understanding of it, the structure of truth demands a being that, by virtue of a lack or reduction of intention, is equal to the simple existence of things, yet superior in consistency, and always relating to the mode of appearance of truth through its phenomenal manifestations. «Truth is not an intent which realizes itself in empirical reality; it is the power which determines the essence of this empirical reality. The state of being, beyond all phenomenality, to which alone this power belongs, is that of the name» (Benjamin 2003, 36). Bringing this concept in this context enables us to convey another pathway towards relationships that transcend the scheme of human dominance and supremacy over any 'object', in this case including those of study.

7. With a key role in technique

It will be *The Work of Art* that takes up the concepts raised by *One-Way Street*, namely the question of the domination of nature within

the context of the effective distinction in technique, specifically the differentiation between the 'first' and the 'second' techniques, which is already perceptible in other texts. In the language of the essay's analysis of technical reproducibility, «[t]he first [technique] really sought to master nature, whereas the second aims rather at an *interplay* between nature and humanity. The primary social function of art today is to rehearse that interplay» (Benjamin 2006a, 107-108, translation modified, our emphasis). The second version of this text clearly illustrates the relationship between two sides of the question – material and political – insofar as «[t]his second [technique] is a system in which the mastering of elementary social forces is a precondition for playing [*Das Spiel*] with natural forces» (Benjamin 2006a, 124, now also in Benjamin 2008, 26, translation modified; cf. footnotes). The role of 'play' in Benjamin is central, diffused and multifaceted, involves other concepts and develop on several spheres, from theatre to toys; here it is central for the type of exchange between involved entities: 'interplay' involves an interaction that is different from asymmetry and domination.

Another famous text can be recalled again as a more than useful complement. In his essay on *Surrealism* (1929), Benjamin immerses himself in the concrete materiality of contingency. Readers correctly perceived the manner in which he speaks of the «limitless trust only in IG Farben and the peaceful perfecting of the air force [*Luftwaffe*]» (Benjamin 2005a, 217): as ironic. He refers to no less than two of the future major perpetrators of mass deaths on the German side in the Second World War, and while naming them, he already points the finger at some extremely problematic limits towards which trans-historical dominant and progressive technique is propelled.

The blindness in the a priori consideration of the dangers inherent in the indiscriminate application of technology ties in well with the already mentioned claim that material progress without social progress is not actual progress. This implicit leitmotif of the *Passagen-Werk* will be explicitly reiterated both in the essay on *Eduard Fuchs* (1934-1937) and in the theses *On the Concept of History* (1940). In the first, it is defined as the fundamental error «to see only the progress of natural science, not the concomitant retrogression of society». In the latter, a few but crucial years later, this error is precisely described as «recognis[ing] only the progress

in *mastering nature*, not the retrogression of society» (Benjamin 2006b, 393, our emphasis).

For instance, Benjamin's general remarks focus at times on the technical development of the First World War and its consequences upon populations, which resulted in a definitive drastic change in the concept of experience. They are the fruits of technological development – 'material progress' – but, at the same time, by accelerating environmental and social modifications, they effectively cut off the ways for the transmission of experiential knowledge, thereby impoverishing the social domain and the one of tradition.

8. Conclusion

Thus, in terms of the question of domination, Benjamin essentially offers two answers. By highlighting the limits of technology and politics, which entail significant risks for humanity and the environment – namely the potentiality for material and political destruction – he did not have in mind the anthropological disproportion inherent, for instance, in the atomic bomb, but already had in view the drifts of Nazism. Furthermore, although he did not address the issue of climate change, he did consider the survival of the earth system already under threat because of the technological disproportion.

To conclude and further open the question, a few more quotations might be helpful, if not illuminating. On the one hand, in the paragraph *Imperial Panorama, One-Way Street* says that «the [expectation] that things cannot go on like this will one day confront the fact that for the suffering of individuals, as of communities, there is only one limit beyond which things cannot go: annihilation» (Benjamin 2016, 34). Nonetheless, it should be noted how the denunciation implied in Benjamin's critical discourse does not simply announce catastrophe. It is not just him who considers that that things going on as they are – in an illusory progressive way, where, at best, it is a matter of eternal return of empty material novelty – is a catastrophe. By pointing out negative conditions in the present, through the observation of extreme cases as emblematic and revealing phenomena, he makes the interpretative effort to project them into the future and to question their urgency and significance in the present on the basis of the problematic limits they might encounter in their development, in more or less distant times. The limit becomes a methodological

principle: thinking about the limit and with it, but also working with extremes – a theme, the political and epistemic value of the extreme that also opens the body of the text of the *Trauerspielbuch* (Benjamin 2003, 57). On the other hand, we deploy an excerpt taken from the thesis: «*In every age* we must try to wrest tradition from the conformism that is in the process of overpowering it» (Benjamin 2006b, 391, translation modified, our emphasis). Lastly, back to *One-Way Street*, now in the paragraph *Fire Alarm*:

And if the abolition of the bourgeoisie is not completed by an almost calculable moment point of economic and technical development [...] inflation and poison-gas warfare [signal it], then] all is lost. Before the spark reaches the dynamite, the lighted fuse must be cut. [Interventions, danger, and tempo of the politician] are technical, not chivalrous. (Benjamin 2016, 66, translation modified)

Today, the accusation against the bourgeoisie may correspond to demanding accountability from capitalism, for all its darkest responsibilities, for its dramatically negative impact on the environment, as well as for the acritical adherence and dissemination of anthropocentric, progressive, quantitative elements that makes up its ideological, rather than scientifical, model.

The permeability between the material and political domains is evidently continuous, with different texts in different contexts facilitating this transition between the two. Whilst it is now clear what the inherent limits of domination are, what remains to be clarified is what is the endpoint of such exploitative and subjugating dynamics. Through the Copernican deviation that prioritise the primacy of the political, and imagining the future implications of such domination techniques in the form of war and massive destruction – a feat that requires little imagination – one could foresee not only the catastrophes of the Second World War, but also problems more close to our own time, and related to the survival of humanity and the earth system. In other words, it is indeed a sustainability issue, although, on the one hand, this term is not used. On the other hand, in the ‘cosmic’ community, and in the desired model of the relationship that demands a step back from subjectivity, it also appears that humanity is certainly not the reason for the survival of the world. These and other more or less central points in Benjamin’s thinking deserve further study in relation to current keywords such as sustainability,

anthropocentrism, community-based action, play, and the shift in epistemology itself. They originate from what Benjamin in the essay on *Surrealism* defines as the idea of an «anthropological materialism», whose key elements are the body, the impersonal collectivity, the technique as a collective body (Benjamin 2005a, 217), and operate in the revolutionary form of attempts to implement a new stage of the history of humanity, to 'innervate' an historically unprecedented collectivity, «which has its organs in the new [technique]» (*The Work of Art*, notes to the second version, in Benjamin 2006a, 124).

In an era where environmental transformations require and benefit from new definitions of moral and aesthetic values, Benjamin's thought offers significant and deeply rooted insights that are still relevant, and capable of helping us to rethink our relationship with the environment, as well as the dimension and positioning of human-centeredness. This does not happen by applying axiological criteria of beauty to the environment as decision-making parameters, nor by approaching the environment as an object of conquest, conservation, or protection, neither by simply adjusting human centrality. Rather, it is by considering problems and solutions as emerging from the egalitarian interactions of the spheres, both organic and inorganic, that inhabit the earth. At the same time, amid the intertwining with the political dimension, Benjamin already suggests some practical ways to solve the problem. The claims are: that responsibility has to be considered as political and in a non-economic or quantitative sense, whereas the clear manifestation of economics as leading principle represents all what is wrong with modernity: the 'quantification' of all social relations, the fragmentation of experience, the loss of landscapes as a consequence of rapid changes enabled by material development and the reduction of diversity, and the fact that technology is not driven by community interests. Here, community – far from any connection with any fascist *Volksgemeinschaft* – can be understood as a non-hierarchical set composed by humans, animals, plants and matter. Benjamin's approach therefore can represent a consistent attempt to bypass anthropocentrism and the dialectic of domination. To some extent it appears utopian, when not vaguely metaphorical, but has the advantage of being analysable today with our own categories and sense of urgency, to give it new vigour through actualisation.

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