

Notes on Benjamin's Concept of the Dialectical Image

The theory comes out of Benjamin's *Arcades Project* (AP), his magnum opus, based on his study of the Paris arcades of the 19th century. He never completed this project, and all we have is his 1935 *Expose*, i.e. fragments of his manuscript, along with his earlier published writings. There is a thematic relationship between the AP and some of his key essays; e.g. his discussion of the relationship between art and technology in his famous Art essay of 1936. (As for my own response to Benjamin's complex ideas, where appropriate, I cite the work of other marxists. This includes an addendum: Benjamin and Lenin.)

For me, the selection from the AP in Gary Smith's (ed.) *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, pp 48-54, reveals two motifs in Benjamin's work: a return to a youthful romantic anarchism, combined with a the theological anarchism of the *Kabbala* (the notion of a quasi-messianic intervention to stop the catastrophic flow of evolutionary time; albeit in metaphorical form). This appears to be a necessary antidote to a rising melancholia; also to counter the historicism of the reformist SDP and the KPD (now subsumed under the Stalinised comintern), both of which in their respective ways, see the victory of socialism as an objective and inevitable process of history. Hence we find the following statement: '[This is] The epoch in which humanity, rubbing its eyes, suddenly recognises the dream image as such. It is at this point that the historian takes on the task of dream interpretation.' (N 4, 1, p 52.) This idea is restated with greater emphasis in a later work: 'The struggling oppressed class itself is the repository of historical knowledge...that last enslaved

class, the avenger that completes the task of liberation, in the name of generations of the downtrodden.’ (*Thesis XII, Theses on the Philosophy of History*, 1940.)

In the age of the photographic magazines, films, etc., Benjamin focuses on the ‘picture’. But he does not mean directly mechanically reproduced pictures or photographic images as such (see below). He first introduced the model of the picture in his initial sketch for the AP, written in 1928, which was ‘discussed extensively between Benjamin, Adorno and other members of the Institute for Social research. [Based on the ideas of Klage and the George Circle, the ‘picture’ is linked] firmly with the world of dreams and the phantasmagoria which structured consciousness in capitalist 19th century France. Benjamin’s counter to this was the principle of awakening, a process that recollected the preceding dreams, but transformed them into elements of conscious action. The people who lived among the ‘pictures’ received them in ‘anamnesic intoxication’ (V 1053). On awakening, this would be catalysed by conscious reflection. [Hence we have the modality of dream-wakefulness] a displacement of contemplative history by practical politics. ‘Politics receives primacy over history (V 1057)’ (Julian Roberts, *German Philosophy, An Introduction*, p 280.)

Susan Buck-Morss has a similar view of Benjamin: Always the humanist, he recognises an unconscious utopian desire among the collective - a ‘collective desire for social utopia. These ‘pictures’ are not photographic images, but are conjured up by commodities themselves, although one could include the ,mechanical reproduction of these by the development of industrial

photography in the 20th century; i.e. by the advertising industry. Rather they are 'ur images', a fairy-tale scarcity that is the inevitable result of class society, based on exploitative labour.' (Here she means Fourier's 19th century utopia: fish swim in rivers of lemonade!)

These 'anticipatory wish symbols' are unconscious; the collective is not aware that it is dreaming; the symbol, the commodity, turns to fetish. The technology which should be the means of releasing these dreams, is mistaken for its realisation.

Benjamin sees a fusing of commodity fetishism and the dream fetish. (N.B. This was grotesquely distorted by the Italian Futurists, who succumbed to fascism; they therefore glorified the destructive uses of technology; hence Marinetti's self-alienating slogan: 'war is beautiful'. (Benjamin refers to the latter in the epilogue to his Art essay). But he seeks to negate this fusion, to give the 'picture' or the image a positive role. (See below.)

The primary motivation of Benjamin's humanist search for his own instrumentality of liberation - the dialectical image - is conception of the nature of the epoch. For him, this was posed sharply by the 'Midnight of the century', i.e. the Stalinist bureaucracy, on the one side and fascism, on the other. (N.B. In this regard, he shares the same conception as Trotsky. See the introduction to his *Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International*, written a few years later.)

Near the beginning of this selection from Benjamin's notes, he makes a direct attack on the reformist concept of progress, 'Overcoming the concept of 'progress' and the concept of the 'period of decline' are two sides of the same thing.' (p 48.)

Viz. progress is not one-sided; within the technological progress of the modern world, under commodity capitalism, are enormous destructive tendencies, which are capable of incorporating the proletarian masses, who are also, historically, the agency of the social revolution; therefore we have a tendency within modernity towards the decline of civilisation; thus it is imperative that we arrest this decline. But how?

Benjamin concentrates increasingly on the superstructure, on the one hand, as the site of false consciousness, such as bourgeois art, characterised by aura and ritual', fetishism now exploited by the mass media (photography and film); also the commodity itself; on the other, as the site of redemption, i.e. true consciousness. Therefore he rejects Marx's notion of the unity of base/superstructure. But Marx gives much greater emphasis to the process of mediation with regard to his theory of consciousness and knowledge:

'Social consciousness is not 'primary', but secondary, derived from social being; i.e. the system of material and economic relations between people.' (Ilyenkov, Leninist *Dialectics and the Metaphysics of Positivism*, p 29. See also Marx's 1859 Preface.) Here Marx implies that mediation is a highly complex, contradictory process; not something which occurs spontaneously. Marx's position is further developed by classical marxism and Lenin. The latter emphasises the necessity to create an organisational form that is able to unite theory and practice; thus providing a bridge between base/ superstructure; viz the concept of the revolutionary vanguard party, as the 'conscious head of an unconscious movement'. Therefore the party becomes the key mechanism whereby the

‘unconscious movement’ of the proletariat must transform itself from a ‘class within itself into a class for itself’.

However we must try to understand Benjamin’s position; hence his own strategy of cultural vanguardism. It is hardly surprising that he should seek another instrumentality in the face of the betrayal of the revolution in Germany, which was the most advanced capitalist state in Europe; firstly by German social Democracy (the SPD); secondly by the the comintern (the Moscow party and the KPD). he would go on to make explicit criticisms of both these political forms in his later essays; such as the *Fuchs* essay (1928), and his last work, the *Theses* (See above.) His response to the Stalinist show trials of 1938, followed by the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939, was as follows: Under the leadership of the Stalinist-dominated parties, ‘The working class has been corrupted by the notion that it was swimming with the stream of history, which manifest[s] itself in the advance of technological production.’ (Once again, for Benjamin, at the end of the day, technology is a two-edged sword.) In the *Theses*, Benjamin goes on to give us the beautiful, but terrible image of the Angelus Novus: It seeks to warn humanity of its capacity for self-destruction; but humanity refuses to see the debris it has created piling up at the angel’s feet, as it flies backwards into a darkening future.

Consider also the *Epilogue* to his *Art Essay* (N.B. written in 1936-7(?), which is probably based on the notes I referred to earlier, pp 48-54, etc.). Here Benjamin gives a more concrete analysis: Fascism arises as an excrescence of imperialism. Hence he writes, ‘The logical result of fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into

political life. The violation of the masses, whom fascism, with its Fuhrer cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of the apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values. [All this culminates in] War and war can only set a goal for mass movements on the largest scale while respecting the property system....War mobilises all of today's technical resources while maintaining the property system.'

In the age of industrial culture the historical memory is repressed in a mythic dream state; especially under the regime of fascism. It is the job of leftwing intellectuals - and the cultural producer - to effect the awakening of this memory - for historical knowledge is the only antidote to capitalist decay and impending destruction. Here we have another vital component of Benjamin's theory of instrumentality: his hopes for the intelligentsia's 'direct participation in leftwing political praxis'. (Cf. his contemporaries, Marcuse and Adorno's quasi-Kantian theory of the 'disinterestedness of art'; e.g. their defence of beauty in art, which, according to Benjamin, has both a narcotic effect and the power to 'pierce the veil of commodity fetishism for the individual'; i.e. 'to negate affirmative culture [in all its destructiveness] in order to achieve socialism'. (Maynard Solomon). Then there is Lukacs' aesthetics, which is strongly influenced by Schiller: Firstly, art can only be the handmaiden of the revolution, which requires the leadership of the vanguard party. Secondly, the goal of art is 'to show things as they really are'; but this is to be achieved by means of a particular form (for which the 19th century bourgeois novel is the model); i.e. a form which constructs the viewpoint of totality to counteract the fragmented, reified consciousness of the masses.

Benjamin follows his own path. He tries to use the marxist notion of the dialectic in relation to his concept of myth and image (above) in order to arrive at a positive outcome: Thus in these notes he constructs the formula, thesis: dream, antithesis: consciousness, synthesis: awakening. (N 3a, 3, pp 51-2.) The dialectic comes to a halt in the image. The historically new, e.g. the machine-produced commodity, cites long forgotten myths (the collective wish for social utopia, ur images, 'anti-diluvian fossils').

These myths have the same function as allegory. here Benjamin draws on an earlier concept, previously used in his study of Baroque literature: 'the allegorist pulls one element out of the totality of the life context, isolating it, depriving it of its function. Allegory is [] essentially fragment [] the opposite of the organic symbol. 'In the field of allegorical intuition, the false appearance of totality is extinguished.' [Benjamin] the allegorist, joins the isolated reality fragments and thereby creates meaning. This is posited meaning.' (Peter Burger, Theory of the Avant Garde', p 69.) Therefore Benjamin addresses the important question of reception of the work of the allegorist/ dialectical image, which is also, therefore, consciously produced and received. To return to his own notes, we find that, 'In allegory the facies hippocratica [death mask] of history lies before the viewer's eyes like a frozen primordial landscape.' (N 2, 7, p 48.) The vital function of allegory/dialectical image is to warn the masses.

A further source of this concept is to be found in the early existential philosopher, Kierkegaard (1813-55). For the latter, 'Genuine change, if it happen[s] would explode out of history; changes that establish a constructed and continuous history were a mere illusion, the self-defeating shibboleth of progress.' (Julian Roberts, p 289.) Two observations could be made here: Firstly, Kierkegaard is elucidating a concept of historical dialectics, albeit in an idealist framework. Secondly, this concept is in direct opposition to the historicism of the reformist SDP, and later the Stalinised KPD; both see history as a continuous process, arising out of an objectivist method; i.e. a one-sided view of the development of the productive forces. At the same time, historicism absolves the role of the subject; in this case the leadership of the proletariat. Whereas Benjamin firmly establishes the role of the subject; albeit in his own terms.

Benjamin puts his faith in the conscious efforts of the intelligentsia (including his own critical theory) to produce a particular kind of historical knowledge - dialectics at a standstill - in order to unmask the real world of capitalist production relations, and therefore to free the present from myth. Elsewhere he calls this a 'Copernican revolution' in the practice of history writing. Therefore the new technologies of mass reproducibility (photography, film, etc.) and the corresponding new techniques (montage), have the power to redeem the cultural commodities of industrial capitalism; whence the latter become transformed as a source of critical knowledge; commodities in this context can also play an important part in calling the 'bad present' into question. The new art is to merge with popular culture. Finally he implies an equal faith in the capacity of the masses

to receive such knowledge. N.B. in these notes, he reiterates the utmost urgency of this task. See his quotation from Aragon: ‘...in the face of primordial and very simplistic facts: the police are facing the workers with cannon; that war is threatening and fascism already reigns.’ (N 3a, 4, p 52.)

But I think there is an obvious problem with Benjamin’s dialectical image of ‘dialectics at a standstill’; now triggered by the commodity, thus transformed in the brains of millions of workers; spontaneously presumably (since he eschews the question of organisation, the vanguard party, which both Lenin and Trotsky regarded as the key instrumentality of liberation). By the same token, Benjamin appears to turn Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism - and its effects on consciousness - on its head. He posits the fanciful notion of the materiality of his dialectical image/commodity, complete with its unmasking effect; albeit elsewhere, he gives equal importance to the role of the leftwing intellectual/avant garde (e.g. in his Author Essay of 1934). On the other hand, Marx argues that it is precisely commodity fetishism which deepens alienation - qualitatively: prior to the rise of commodity capitalism, alienation occurred in the realm of consciousness, of man’s inner life; whereas under the commodity form, it is derived from man’s economic estrangement, and therefore occurs in real life. (See Istvan Meszaros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation*, p 126.) Thus under commodity capitalism, ‘fetishism is not only a phenomenon of social consciousness, but of social being.’ (I.I. Rubin, *Marx’s Theory of Value*, p 59.)

Therefore we must look for a historical materialist answer to the question of resistance: This does not reside in the superstructure separated from the economic base; it has its basis in the material contradictions of the social relations of production; 'in real praxis, in labour', as Lukacs later admitted. The contradictory sight for the masses' resistance is the material contradictions at the base of society as a whole; not the commodity form itself.

We can find the answer in Marx's early writings: the *Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. For it is here that he stresses the contradiction between forced labour, which dehumanises the humanity of the worker; man is dehumanised through his most human of activities (social labour), and finds what it is to be human only in his animal nature (eating, drinking, procreating, etc.) marxism is a science of nature, not just of human society, which is part of nature. Hence the need to maintain the unity of base/superstructure in theoretical work, etc.

To be fair, Benjamin does give some consideration to the importance of mediation in the development of consciousness and knowledge. He must do this, of course, if he is to maintain the classical marxists approach to this as a dialectical - rather than a mechanical - process. But he does this in a way which borders on idealism. This explains his attempt to create a synthesis between the historiography (of Kierkegaard), on the one hand, and the teleology of the Kabbalah, on the other) and marxism.

What, then is Benjamin's schema for the achievement of adequate consciousness - on a mass scale - as opposed to the proletariat's actual consciousness? As usual, his schema is complex and difficult to explain. In order to achieve this, I shall break it down into three points:

One: Like Lenin, Benjamin understands that the necessary mediation between the actual consciousness of the proletariat and adequate consciousness has to be introduced to the latter 'from the outside'; at least initially; i.e. by sections of the intelligentsia, Lenin himself describes as 'the educated representatives of the propertied classes'; albeit intellectuals, artists, etc., who not only see the necessity for a fundamental change in society; they also see the proletariat as a universal, revolutionary class. But, as we shall see later, Benjamin's idea of mediation 'from the outside' is a misinterpretation of Lenin's famous injunction in *What Is To Be Done?* (1903). This is not because the injunction is wrong. Rather it is because Benjamin's dialectical model is based on an idealist method, not a materialist one. Therefore his form of mediation has no chance of success in reality.

The problem for Benjamin is that, whilst theoretical consciousness comes from leftwing intellectuals like himself, it is unable to readily connect with the existing unconscious practice of the proletariat. Although he places great emphasis on the importance of the new technologies of mass reproducibility, he knows that the latter can be turned against the proletariat, if leftwing intellectuals are unable to take control of this section of the productive forces. (As he himself says, 'the author must become producer', and so forth.) Hence the relationship between the

existing conscious practice of the proletariat and leftwing intellectuals is conceived in Kantian dualist terms; not dialectically. Thus Benjamin has to fall back on a spontaneous coalescence of theoretical consciousness and the day-to-day struggle of the masses. This problem is also made worse by the fact that this has to take place during a period of economic and political crisis.

Enter his conception of the Then (das Gewesene) and the Now (das Jetzt) which come into place (constellation), 'like a flash of lightning: This is not temporal time, which is continuous; it is in a dialectical relationship - a flash that is frozen - not development; it is an image 'leaping forth'. Later in his notes, Benjamin cites Ernst Bloch, who uses the metaphor of splitting the atom, which 'releases the enormous energy of history that lies bonded in the 'Once upon a time' of classical historical narrative. [Whereas] The history that showed things 'as they really were' was the strongest narcotic of the century'. (N 3a, 2, p 51.) Moreover, these dialectical images are not archaic (simply dredged up from the past); they are genuine, i.e. sublated images; 'and the place one happens upon them is language. *Waking*' (N 2a, 3, p 49.) Benjamin reiterates this point later, when he says that the past doesn't merely cast its light on the present, and vice versa; he repeats this idea that the image is the Then and Now come together like a flash of light.

Two: The Now is determined by images that are synchronic to it. (= events which are occurring simultaneously, juxtaposed together). This opens the way to direct participation by leftwing intellectuals/the avant garde in political praxis. This involves them in adopting the same technique of the allegorist, ' who joins isolated

reality fragments' and thereby 'posits meaning' for the necessary recipients, who must discuss this and act accordingly. (N.B. He is well aware that language also must play a role; hence when writing about the photograph, he insists that it include a caption, in order to actor the image; in order to give it the meaning that is intended. But the best example of the use of image/text must surely be the political photomontage works of John Heartfield, which he used as revolutionary posters, as well as for the cover of the pro-communist magazine, *AIZ: Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung*.)

There is also a similarity here between Benjamin's idea of 'dialectical images' and his friend, Brecht's, Epic theatre - based on his theory of estrangement, e.g. *sangspiel*, whereby the audience is constantly reminded that they are watching a play; that after it is finished, they should leave the theatre, go home and try to put these ideas into practice, in the interest of the proletarian revolution. Neither Brecht or Benjamin saw any problem with receptivity, vis-a-vis the masses; despite the fact that most of the audience who went to see Brecht's plays were middle class! As long as the exploitative essence of capitalist social relations was unmasked, it was then up to the masses to go out and change the world. (Yet it was on this very point that Benjamin's other friend, Adorno, criticised what he perceived to be an uncritical view of the potentiality of art, albeit a new kind of mass art based on the new technologies of mass culture. The implication here is that Benjamin had abandoned dialectical materialism; i.e. that he errs on the side of historicism, an objectivist view of historical progress, which he castigated in others.)

Three: Benjamin also takes up the question of the necessary link between art and technology. In this regard his ideas prefigure the situation today: He refers to the child's curiosity for discovery, concentrated, as it is in the modern world, by machinery; but the child ties this curiosity to the 'old symbol worlds'. The problem is that the new mechanical forms: 'film, machine construction...the new physics' have 'overpowered' us without our being aware of it.' Therefore commodity fetishism is fused with dream fetish. Whereas - as with the child - they should '[o]pen themselves up to us as natural forms', not as fetishes. (CF. the current obsession - among adults as well as children - with video games, which are often based on gratuitous, violent images.) The barrier between art and technology - imposed by the bourgeois epoch - must be overthrown. (Buck-Morss.)

Next Benjamin refers to Marx's famous comment about the art of ancient Greece (in *Grundrisse*). Thanks to the renaissance, Greek art has acquired a normative character, but in an abstract form. For each epoch has to establish its own norm. He quotes Marx's point about the epic as a literary form, which is only acceptable, as an artistic expression in its original form, at an early stage of artistic development. But '[t]he same holds true for relations between the whole artistic realm and the general development of the society.' (N 4a, 1, p 53.); i.e. in the age of commodity capitalism and the mass consumerist/mass media society.

Benjamin cites Marx's own reference to the job of the historical materialist (in the afterword of the second edition of *Capital*). It would appear that he sees a direct correlation between the historical materialist, the leftwing intellectual and the

productivist artist (e.g. Brecht, Heartfield), who stand for non-autonomous, utilitarian art, which is a means-to-an-end, not an end in itself: 'Research must appropriate the material in detail, analyse its various forms of development, and work out their inner connection. Only when this work is done can the true movement be presented accordingly.' (N 4a, 5, p 54.) Therefore we come back to the question of the 'dialectical image', for which a necessary precondition is the conscious effort of the artist, who now lives in the age of mechanical reproduction (including the mass media), to change his own means of production. Thus, for Benjamin, it becomes possible to redeem the commodity itself from its fetishistic function, and transform it into the liberating form of the dialectical image.

But Benjamin doesn't see that the creation of a new realist form also creates a problem of reception for the masses. On the one hand, John Heartfield's brilliant political photomontages still need a suitable caption, so that their true meaning can be understood. On the other, they are hardly likely to be reproduced in the daily tabloids which are read by the masses. Therefore I think Benjamin fails to strengthen his case for avant garde art as a form of knowledge, which inspires action. Nevertheless, quoting Michelet, he says the masses ('barbarians' as they might be) would understand, because they love giving themselves 'to a detail that doesn't really hide the artifice'.. That this is merely an expression of the 'abundance of sap', which they have (?) (N 5, 1, p 54.) Yet in the same note he implies that the masses would, for all the above reasons, be receptive to the complex imagery (albeit every-day objects) of the surrealists (which he later describes, somewhat desperately, as 'the last snapshot of the European

intelligentsia'!) He reaffirms his conviction: 'Then the movement of awakening would be identical with the 'Now of recognisability.' in which things put on their true - surrealistic - face.' (n 3a, 3, p 52.)

Thus Benjamin's theory of the dialectical image is only plausible if one can accept his somewhat unique theory of consciousness and cognition, which is ultimately to be constituted 'like a flash of lightning' - the dialectical image, dialectics at a standstill - which must then be translated into action, the revolution itself. This, along with his *Theses*, as it turns out, would appear to be the last snapshot of Benjamin's humanism; on the one hand, his rejection of historicism (the notion that history is on 'our' side); on the other, his utopian desire for fascism to be defeated and the revolution to be back on track. Unfortunately, this is not an adequate contribution to Marx's own understanding of the process of mediation. As Lenin pointed out, this is much more complex and contradictory; albeit there are still 'gaps in Marx'. Hence Lenin tries to develop his own form of material mediation.

Addendum: Benjamin and Lenin

Benjamin's unique take on the question of mediation - in order to bridge the gap between the actual consciousness of the proletariat and the theoretical or socialist consciousness which it requires - viz. his theory of the dialectical image, is his own unique alternative to Lenin's earlier attempt to provide a material mediation: viz. his theory of the vanguard party, as outlined in *What Is To Be Done* (1903):

Given the inherent contradictions of capitalism, that there will be revolutionary periods and situations, is inevitable. But the victory of the revolution, which will lay the foundations of a new, socialist society, is not. For Lenin, a particular type of revolutionary party is required. On the one hand, its members have to have the correct understanding of the revolutionary process; on the other it has to have the correct form of organisation. (As far as the latter is concerned, in the situation of Tsarist Russia, which was under the yoke of an autocratic regime, whose secret police were out to destroy all opposition by means of ruthless repression, a highly organised, underground party was required; albeit one which was ready and able to come out in the open, when conditions allowed. Whereas under a more democratic parliamentary system, such as the situation in western Europe, e.g. Germany and Britain, a more open party was required; i.e. one which participates in elections, whilst at the same time, it maintains its own independent organisation and programme.)

To return to the question of what constitutes a correct understanding of the revolutionary process, Lenin raises two important points, which are also linked: Firstly, he introduces his famous injunction that revolutionary consciousness must be introduced to the proletariat 'from the outside'. Secondly, he deals with the question of the bourgeois social division of labour and its 'mind-crippling' effects for the proletariat; albeit by implication, not directly. This is precisely why Lenin's injunction is necessary! I shall deal with this latter point first:

In chapter one of *What Is To Be Done?*, Lenin attacks the movement which he describes as 'legal marxism', associated with the ideas of Bernstein, a German social democrat; better known as 'economism': Bernstein's 'vulgar marxism' had 'the absurd idea of social revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat', based on 'restricting the labour movement and the class struggle to narrow trade unionism and to a 'realistic' struggle for trivial, gradual reforms. This was tantamount to a denial by the bourgeois democrats of socialism's right to independence and, ...in practice, ...an attempt to transform the nascent labour movement into an appendage of the liberals.' On the one hand, the workers were restricted to 'the wage and economic struggle', whilst 'the marxist intelligentsia merge with the liberals for the political 'struggle'.' Such opportunism can only lead to defeat whenever the masses are forced into a direct struggle with the bourgeoisie and its state. (WITBD, pp 67, 68.)

As far as Lenin is concerned, this is an abdication of the revolutionary intellectual's responsibility to bring adequate consciousness to the workers 'from outside' the social relations of production. He goes on to discuss the reasons why this is necessary: History shows that, on its own, the working class can only 'work out merely trade union consciousness'. Although he does not spell this out, this is a consequence of the division of labour (first discussed by marx in his EPM of 1844; i.e. the separation of intellectual from practical labour along class lines, in order to make the productive forces more efficient and profitable; regardless of the human cost.) That is why socialism's 'philosophical, historical and economic theories' had to be 'worked out by the educated representatives of the propertied classes - the

intelligentsia' (e.g. Marx, Engels...Lenin himself!) But then he makes a further important point, which is forgotten by his opponents: 'This does not mean that the workers do not participate in working it out. But they participate not as workers, but as theorists of socialism', which leads to 'a raising of the consciousness of the workers in general'.

The working class, of course, does not sit back passively waiting for the intelligentsia to come to them. Rather they 'are spontaneously attracted towards socialism' (or were!) This is anticipated by revolutionary socialist theory itself, which is able to 'define the causes of the miseries of the working class, and therefore the workers for their part absorb it so easily, provided that this theory itself does not give in to spontaneity itself'. (Footnotes, pp 89, 91.)

Of course, Lenin's famous injunction (above) has been a major cause of argument and division within the marxist movement, right down to this day. For some, eg. the advocates of council marxism, the idea that revolutionary intellectuals must play a leading role is the root cause of the degeneration of the Russian revolution: the dictatorship of the proletariat quickly led to the dictatorship of the party.

They point to the way in which the Bolshevik party resorted to a more authoritarian, centralised, top-down form of decision making during the civil war. Whether this was intended as a temporary measure, dictated by necessity, or not, this laid the foundation for the rise of Stalinism, even before Lenin's death in 1924. At the same time, the anti-Leninists tend to underestimate the desperate situation

which the Bolsheviks found themselves in. (But that is another story.)

This brings us back again to Benjamin: In the 1930s, of course, as an independent leftwing intellectual, it is not surprising that he distrusted organisations.

He was also aware that all was not well in the Soviet Union, the world's first workers state. In a letter to Brecht in 1938, he refers to Trotsky's criticisms of Stalin's Russia: On the one hand, he agrees that leftwing intellectuals, such as themselves, should express 'suspicion' about what is happening there.

On the other, 'should the suspicion prove correct one day, then it will become necessary to fight the regime, and *publicly*'. But not yet! (Aesthetics and Politics, Benjamin and Brecht, p 96.) We don't know if he attributed the defeat of 1933 to the Stalinised comintern or not. But following the Nazi victory in Germany, as a Jew and erstwhile marxist, he is forced into exile in France.

At the end of the day, we have to try and see things from Benjamin's own position: He is a leftwing humanist; but his suspicious of all political parties; he has a predisposition towards utopian ideas, on the one hand; albeit he is strongly opposed to historicism on the other. Then he finds himself living through 'the midnight of the century', which threatens him personally, Thus Benjamin tries to develop his own version of Lenin's injunction - that revolutionary consciousness must be brought to the working class 'from the outside', by leftwing intellectuals; albeit through 'direct participation in political praxis', helped by the mechanised

arts. Somehow cultural vanguardism could become the equivalent of the vanguard party, whereby the masses move from actual consciousness to adequate (revolutionary) consciousness. Such was his attempt to provide an alternative material mediation to Leninism. Unfortunately this is based on subjective idealism.