

## ***Working with Walter Benjamin: Everyday life, Media and the City***

A symposium, part of the 'working with key thinkers series' hosted by the Department of Sociology and the Centre for Modern Studies

30 March 2011, The Tree House, Berrick Saul Building, University of York

Convenors: Dr David Beer and Josine Opmeer

There has been a good deal written about Walter Benjamin and his work in the 70 years since his death, he remains one of the most cited writers of the last half century. Indeed, Udi E. Greenberg has even written of the presence of what he describes as a 'Walter Benjamin Industry'. Walter Benjamin's work has endured well beyond what would appear to have been its original shelf-life, his concepts and ideas have found new uses and new forms of synthesis with other theories and perspectives. Benjamin's ideas have apparently remained plausible and credible where others have fallen away; there is clearly something in his work that affords this level of applicability despite the type of social change we have experienced since his death. As a consequence there is now a significant accumulation of writings on Benjamin that is virtually unfathomable in its scope, covering a wide variety of topics that reflect Benjamin's own eclectic tastes and writing styles. In this context this symposium has a very clear set of objectives. It aims to locate ways in which Benjamin's writings might be used to think creatively about the contemporary world. The event will not be about Walter Benjamin as such, the focus will instead be upon how we might use his work, his concepts and ideas, to do things, to explore and illuminate particular phenomena. In other words, we hope that this event will be used to revisit and mine Benjamin's work for concepts and ideas that might help us to regenerate and energise our engagement with contemporary culture. The symposium will focus on the central topics of everyday life, media and the city, but these are broadly conceived and the presentations will engage with Benjamin's work from a variety of perspectives to explore a range of topics.

### **Registration**

The event is free of charge, but we would like to know if you are planning to attend so we can estimate the numbers for the catering. To register please contact [josine.opmeer@york.ac.uk](mailto:josine.opmeer@york.ac.uk), if you have any dietary requirements please let us know.

### **Programme**

10.30-11.00 Arrival and coffee

11.00-12.30 Session 1 - **Sound, Space and the Urban Metaphor**

Chair: David Beer, University of York

***Klangfiguren: Benjamin's Phonographic Thinking***

Barbara Engh, University of Leeds

***Orpheus in Paris: Walter Benjamin and Marc Augé Going Underground***

Graeme Gilloch, University of Lancaster

12.30-13.15 Lunch

13.15-14.45 Session 2 - **Capitalism, Rationality and Concepts of Change**

Chair: Jane Elliott, University of York

***On Naming: Towards a Transdisciplinary Concept of History***

Matthew Charles, Middlesex University

***Capitalism as Cultic Religion? From Max Weber to Walter Benjamin***

Nick Gane, University of York

14.45-15.00 Refreshments

15.00-16.30 Session 3 - **Uncertainty and Violence in the Everyday**

Chair: TBC

***What Future for the Angel of History? On Walter Benjamin's Notions of Violence, Redemption, and Uncertainty***

Werner Bonefeld, University of York

***A Critique of Roma Violence in Europe: A Benjamin Reading***

Anca M. Pusca, Goldsmiths, University of London

16.30-17.00 Closing remarks

## **Abstracts**

***What Future for the Angel of History? On Walter Benjamin's Notions of Violence, Redemption, and Uncertainty***

Werner Bonefeld, Politics, University of York

In his last finished piece of work, the Thesis on History, Benjamin offers a radical critical of existing notions of social change, of revolution, that portray history as progression into the future. His Angel of History looks backwards into the past and gives the future its cold shoulder. There is, he declares, no automatic progression, no lineality of time, no telos inscribed in history. The time of history is the Now-time. This is the time that for some is the best of all times, for others it is the time of misery and violence, which might appear either in the civilised form of the rule of law or in the constitutive force of law, the force of law-making violence that, he says, has become the rule for the oppressed. The Angel of History looks at this misery but does not look forward into a future as a certain promise of misery redeemed. The paper asks why this is so, what raises the implications of his stance for a critical conception of history as Man made, and thus uncertain.

***On Naming: Towards a Transdisciplinary Concept of History***

Matthew Charles, Philosophy, Middlesex University

With each failure of the world to transform itself "rationally", a (postmodern) scepticism and (modernist) response to the need for a metaphysics of history resurfaces. At the turn of the twenty-first century, whilst postmodern objections towards any project of historical totalization have

collapsed with an awareness of their complicity with the totalizing conditions of capitalist modernity (foregoing the possibility of critical scrutiny) and the internal contradictions of their own status (as a *meta*-“metanarrative”), contemporary reformulations of the neo-Hegelian and neo-Kantian response to this problem rehearse the equally problematic tendency either to eternalize the present moment or to transform the “new” into an infinitely deferred Idea, purified of empirical and historical content.

My interest in Walter Benjamin’s philosophy arises from the belief that (1) a critical cultural, sociological or historical investigation of the recent past requires an adequately metaphysical philosophy of history, (2) that the central problem for a metaphysics of history is theorizing a speculative concept of historical experience, and (3) that Benjamin’s work continues to provide the best resource for developing such a concept. Within this context of the metaphysics of history, this discussion will focus on the importance of two concepts developed from Benjamin’s philosophy: a speculative theory of signification grounded in the “Name” and an imperative towards “transdisciplinarity” that results from this. My argument is that, far from being merely the vestige of Benjamin’s outmoded theological interests, his account of “Naming” represents an ontology of signification that remains pertinent for historical experience, and that its theological formulation itself represents an important gesture beyond the problems of disciplinarity in the social sciences.

***Klangfiguren: Benjamin's Phonographic Thinking***

Barbara Engh, Cultural Studies, University of Leeds

TBC

***Capitalism as Cultic Religion? From Max Weber to Walter Benjamin***

Nick Gane, Sociology, University of York

Max Weber is well known for his so-called ‘Protestant Ethic’ thesis, which posits a connection between the rise of Western capitalism and an underlying set of Protestant values and practices. In the conclusion the Protestant Ethic, Weber argues that ‘victorious capitalism, since it rests on mechanical foundations’ will no longer need such values. However, in his economic sociology he observes that religious values are still likely to be found ‘even in cases where there is a high degree of rationalization of action’. This tension lies at the heart of his analysis of capitalism, for while in theory capitalist culture should in theory be an increasingly disenchanted and secular form, in practice this is often far from the case. Walter Benjamin gives us one way for thinking through this puzzle. He responds directly to Weber’s writings by giving the Protestant ethic thesis a novel twist: that capitalism itself becomes a ‘cultic religion’. This argument can be found in a little-known fragment entitled ‘Capitalism and Religion’. This paper will address the core ideas of this fragment, and will use it to consider more recent writings on capitalism and its connections to religion.

***Orpheus in Paris: Walter Benjamin and Marc Augé Going Underground***

Graeme Gilloch, Sociology, University of Lancaster

This paper draws on Walter Benjamin's imagining of the mapping of memory in order to explore the reflections of the French cultural anthropologist Marc Augé in his 1986 'Un Ethnologue dans le Metro' ('In the Metro,' 2002).

Augé's study is read through the lens of a number of Benjamin's key themes such as the interplay of time, space and memory; remembering adult, remembered child; the resonance of names and naming; correspondences; mimetic reading; patterns and constellations.

The paper takes account too of Auge's reassessment of his metro study twenty years later in the light of the city's changing social, cultural, and ethnic topographies in terms of new itineraries and trajectories.

I conclude with a consideration of the possibilities of tracing the individual past through points, lines and fleeting figures.

***A Critique of Roma Violence in Europe: A Benjamin Reading***

Anca M. Pusca, International Studies, Goldsmiths, University of London

This paper will look at expressions of violence against (and by) Roma communities in Europe through a unique legal framework borrowed from Benjamin's Critique of Violence. It will attempt to directly connect EU and national legislation affecting Roma communities to everyday practices of migration, nomadism and settlement as well as to discuss different expressions (public and private) of law-making and law-preserving violence affecting these communities. This will include a discussion of the Roma informal system of justice and its interactions with formal mechanisms of justice, as well as a discussion of the implications this has for a changing Roma identity and experience of the everyday. The paper will focus largely on Romanian Roma communities within Romania as well as abroad