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Source: *History and Theory*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (October 2010), pp. 361-383

Published by: Wiley for Wesleyan University

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40864498>

Accessed: 08-08-2017 02:26 UTC

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THE USES OF WALTER: WALTER BENJAMIN AND THE COUNTERFACTUAL IMAGINATION

BENJAMIN ALDES WURGAFT¹

ABSTRACT

Many authors, both scholarly and otherwise, have asked what might have happened had Walter Benjamin survived his 1940 attempt to escape Nazi-occupied Europe. This essay examines several implicitly or explicitly “counterfactual” thought experiments regarding Benjamin’s “survival,” including Hannah Arendt’s influential “Walter Benjamin: 1892–1940,” and asks why our attachment to Benjamin’s story has prompted so much counterfactual inquiry. It also explores the larger question of why few intellectual historians ask explicitly counterfactual questions in their work. While counterfactuals have proven invaluable for scholars in diplomatic, military, and economic history, those writing about the history of ideas often seem less concerned with chains of events and contingency than some of their colleagues are—or they attend to contingency in a selective fashion. Thus this essay attends to the ambivalence about the category of contingency that runs through much work in intellectual history. Returning to the case of Walter Benjamin, this essay explores his own tendency to pose “what if?” questions, and then concludes with an attempt to ask a serious counterfactual question about his story. The effort to ask this question reveals one methodological advantage of counterfactual inquiry: the effort to ask such questions often serves as an excellent guide to the prejudices and interests of the historian asking them. By engaging in counterfactual thought experiments, intellectual historians could restore an awareness of sheer contingency to the stories we tell about the major texts and debates of intellectual history.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, counterfactuals, “What if?,” backshadowing, narrative

From this one moves easily to the realization that an artist’s seriousness, the measure of his talent and gauge of his achievement . . . is what seems to him to be impossible, undoable, unavailable, forbidden, barred, banned, denied. An artist should be assessed by what he doesn’t do: a painter by his abandoned and unattempted canvases, a composer by his refusal to publish or indeed to inscribe.

—John Lanchester, *The Debt to Pleasure*²

Time is a blind guide.

—Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*³

1. The author wishes to thank Peter Eli Gordon, Thomas Laqueur, Catherine Gallagher, Deborah Poskanzer, and Lewis Wurgaft, as well as the readers assigned by *History and Theory*, for their advice and guidance in the revision of this essay.

2. John Lanchester, *The Debt to Pleasure* (London: Henry Holt and Company, 1996), 72.

3. Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1997), 1.

To historians who wish to relive an era, Fustel de Coulanges recommends that they blot out everything they know about the later course of history.
—Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”⁴

I. INTRODUCTION

Why can't we let Walter Benjamin rest in peace? The “Benjamin phenomenon,” the ever-increasing growth of interest in Benjamin's works and life since the 1960s, has reached a critical point of self-reflexivity. Critics and commentators now not only explore Benjamin's texts themselves but also the political and intellectual concerns that shape our interest in those texts.⁵ It has become clear that many enthusiastic readers of Benjamin have been attached not only to his essays and aphoristic fragments but also to his hapless, brilliant persona—to the troubled life and tragic death of the man behind the work. The world of Benjaminiana is filled not only with academic studies, but also with novels, comic books, rock albums, works of visual art, and even an opera devoted to the critic.⁶

The forces driving our attachment to Benjamin are either already well-known or relatively easy to ascertain: just as Bertolt Brecht referred to Benjamin's death as Hitler's first blow to German literature, many critics and historians have implicitly viewed Benjamin's passing as a poignant symbol of the Shoah's enormous cultural and intellectual destruction—perhaps all the more poignant because Benjamin died by his own hand, despairing of crossing the border from France into Spain. Whereas many of Benjamin's generational colleagues did survive, often crossing the Atlantic and pursuing their careers in the United States, he himself turned down more than one opportunity to escape. Thus it has become possible to view Benjamin's refusal to leave Europe until it was too late as the act of a martyr who still believed (as Benjamin once told Adorno he believed) that there were “still positions in Europe to defend.” This is, of course, the opposite of another potentially attractive reading of Benjamin, according to which he is appealing precisely because of his refusal to “commit” to one political cause or another. As Vanessa Schwartz remarks, Benjamin's tragic fate may paradoxically contain attractions for some of his intellectual descendants:

4. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968), 256.

5. See, for example, T. J. Clark, “Should Benjamin Have Read Marx?,” *Boundary 2* 30, no. 1 (2003), 31-49; Vanessa Schwartz, “Walter Benjamin for Historians,” *American Historical Review*, 106, no. 5 (2001), 1721-1743. The trends in the Benjamin literature to which Clark and Schwartz respond are largely developments of the 1980s and 1990s. For an earlier bibliography that reflects the state of the field in the late 1970s, see Gary Smith, “Walter Benjamin: A Bibliography of Secondary Literature,” *New German Critique*, “Special Walter Benjamin Issue” (Spring 1977), 75-82.

6. For a catalogue of the recent productions of the Walter Benjamin “culture industry,” see Udi E. Greenberg, “The Politics of the Walter Benjamin Industry,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, no. 3 (2008), 53-70. Greenberg's catalogue includes Laurie Anderson's 1989 album *Strange Angels*, which Anderson dedicated to Benjamin; Jewlia Eisenberg's 2001 album *Trilectic*, which tells the story of Benjamin's 1927 trip to Moscow and his relationship with Ana Lacia; and Charles Bernstein and Brian Ferneyhough's opera *Shadowtime*, which premiered in 2004 and 2005. Greenberg also discusses at length the monument to Benjamin established at Portbou on the French-Spanish border. Jay Parini's *Benjamin's Crossing* (New York: Owl Books, 1997) represents one attempt to treat Benjamin's life from within the world of high literature, but as Greenberg points out it has been more savaged than praised by critics.

The circumstances of Benjamin's escape from France are dramatic and perhaps particularly resonant for academics, who might well fantasize of themselves as the Walter Benjamin character fleeing the Nazis: out of shape, suffering from a heart condition, and burdened by dragging around a briefcase containing a manuscript that he said was more important than his life.⁷

T. J. Clark's assessment of this interpretive tendency is even more damning. There is, he writes, an unbearable tendency to view Benjamin as a romantic, "sad hero of the age of fascism" figure—and this view helps us to understand him and his writings not one bit, no matter how sad or heroic Benjamin may have been.⁸ And as Udi Greenberg has pointed out, it is of enormous significance that those wishing to commemorate Benjamin established a monument not in Berlin, or Paris, but rather at Portbou, the site of his suicide. The gesture seems to place Benjamin "under the sign of suicide," in the phrase Benjamin himself used to describe Charles Baudelaire: it suggests a life lived under the sign of its own negative potential, what Freud would call its death-drive.

Our affective rather than purely intellectual attachment to Benjamin is easy enough to understand, and requires no forgiveness; after all, Benjamin himself drew no strict lines between his personal experience and his literary-critical projects, and scholars have made much of the boundary-crossing between these realms he accomplished by means of "concrete philosophy." Given that Benjamin was an indirect victim of the Nazis, it would be surprising were we *not* compelled by his story as well as by his ideas. However, our attachment to Benjamin's person as well as to his critical thought has produced one of the most curious by-products of the "Benjamin Industry," namely a tendency for certain scholars and artists to write about their subject from a self-consciously counterfactual perspective, asking "what if" Benjamin had survived his crossing instead of committing suicide in 1940. In the 1990s, celebrants of Benjamin such as the novelist Larry McMurtry and the urban historian Norman Klein composed fictions in which Benjamin is either literally or figuratively transported to present-day America, imagining what Benjamin might have thought of late twentieth-century American culture in all its glory and shame.⁹ Decades earlier, Benjamin's friend Hannah Arendt was perhaps the first to write about him under the sign of the counterfactual, although she made no effort to imagine him surviving the war. When she wrote her influential essay "Walter Benjamin: 1892–1940," which serves as the introduction to the collection *Illuminations*, Arendt explored the radically contingent nature of Benjamin's life, as though his Weimar-era Berlin had been a garden of forking paths in which all the more promising ones were either blocked or deliberately avoided.¹⁰ Arendt's essay laid the groundwork for an assessment of Benjamin's suicide as an event that came about purely through unhappy circumstance—and thus an ideal subject for counterfactual speculation. In 1978 Frank Kermode entertained the same course of thought in *The New York Times Book Review*, saying, "It is curious to

7. Schwartz, "Walter Benjamin for Historians," 1725.

8. See Clark, "Should Benjamin Have Read Marx?," 45.

9. Larry McMurtry, *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999); Norman Klein, *The History of Forgetting* (New York: Verso, 1997).

10. In Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Arendt. Arendt's essay originally appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1968.

reflect that had it not been for an uncharacteristic misinterpretation [Benjamin's belief that the road into Spain was permanently blocked] he might now, at 86, be a distinguished American professor emeritus."¹¹ Kermode went on to speculate on the counterfactually plausible fate of Benjamin's dissertation, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*: "The faculty of Frankfurt University turned it down, surprisingly but also not absurdly. Nowadays it would probably be accepted, and Benjamin installed in a Chair, where he would sit and be very unhappy."¹²

It is one aim of this essay to explore a small collection of "Benjamin counterfactuals," including those of Arendt, McMurtry, and Klein, in order to ask just what lessons they might teach us about our investments (both theoretical and affective) in Benjamin's life and works. In contrast to Arendt, McMurtry, and Klein, whose works all either implicitly or explicitly undo Benjamin's suicide, the journalist Stephen Schwartz re-reads the factual record of Benjamin's death in order to suggest that, contrary to popular belief, Benjamin did not commit suicide but was in fact murdered by Soviet agents.¹³ Schwartz's is a politically motivated counterfactual, but it is nevertheless worth examining because it reveals much about how our political investments in Benjamin's thought have shaped our reception of his story.

In conjunction with this examination of "Benjamin counterfactuals," this essay explores the possible uses and abuses of counterfactual inquiry for intellectual historians. If Benjamin's story has sparked a counterfactual imagination, the counter-stories that have been spun prompt an important question about counterfactual history as a methodological approach: what kinds of lessons can we learn about philosophers, social theorists, and others by placing them in counterfactual scenarios, by asking "what if" questions? It is important to remember that such inquiry may run against the normal methods of intellectual historians. While political, economic, and military historians have been asking "what if" questions for hundreds of years (some name Herodotus as the first counterfactual historian), the historians who are usually most interested in Benjamin are intellectual and cultural historians, who seldom ask "what if" questions in a formal or explicit fashion.

There may be very good reasons for this inattention to the formal counterfactual method. As Johannes Bulhof says of counterfactual questions, they "help identify causes, and hence help explain events in history. They are used to defend judgments about people, and to highlight the importance of particular events."¹⁴ The usefulness of such questions for some types of historical research is clear. When we examine an economic disaster or a military defeat, counterfactuals can help us to understand what went wrong, and when we study the origins of an empire or the rise of a particular subculture, counterfactuals can help us to understand why they took *this* particular shape and not *that* one: in other words, coun-

11. Frank Kermode, "Every Kind of Intelligence," *New York Times Book Review* (July 20, 1978).

12. *Ibid.*

13. Stephen Schwartz, "The Mysterious Death of Walter Benjamin," *The Weekly Standard* (June 11, 2001).

14. Johannes Bulhof, "What if? Modality and History" in *History and Theory* 38, no. 2 (1999), 145.

terfactuals can help us to understand relationships of causality. A few examples of such counterfactual inquiries include: what if, instead of the West rising to global dominance, an East dominated by the Chinese had become geopolitically preeminent? What if England had experienced an Industrial Revolution fifty years later than it did? What if computing machines had taken their modern form not in the mid-twentieth century, but rather a century earlier?¹⁵ However, intellectual historians often seem less preoccupied than their colleagues with the causes behind events. The counterfactual imagination that Walter Benjamin's story inspires is interesting precisely because it invites us to ask the following question: just what do we gain, either in historical understanding or otherwise, by asking what might have happened if Benjamin had survived? And if we learn nothing by engaging in this speculation, are there other "what-if" questions to ask about Benjamin's life filled with uncompleted projects and missed opportunities, from his "failure to habilitate" (in Richard Wolin's phrase) to his never-finished book on hashish to the *Arcades Project* itself?¹⁶ And what about that famous missing briefcase that Benjamin carried with him over the Pyrenees? Some think it held a copy of Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," but what if it held other riches?

In addition to their general lack of interest in the kinds of causal chains that drive military, economic, or political counterfactuals, intellectual historians are often simply less interested in specific events and more interested in interpreting texts and debates and deducing their significance, sometimes on the most abstract level. Despite the dimension of causality inherent in the grand narratives of intellectual history—without Kant, we would have no Hegel, and without Hegel no Marx, and so on—we see precious few formal exercises on the order of "what would Western intellectual life look like without Plato?" Indeed, there may be deeper reasons for this inattention, reasons that have to do with the types of stories intellectual historians tell. Intellectual historians may be cagey about causation because of their desire to view their subjects as motivated by "reasons" (and sometimes "philosophical influences") rather than by "causes." We want to emphasize the agentic sides of our protagonists, never reducing their ideas to mere reflexes of social and cultural conditions, and this may be because we frequently write about a select group of figures with whom we sympathize intellectually, politically, or both. Indeed, some practitioners of intellectual history invoke social and cultural conditions only in a "deflationary" manner, using them to explain only the mistakes of their protagonists (or villains), never the triumphs. The result is that the *events* of our protagonists' (or villains') lives, about which

15. All but the last example are taken from *Unmaking the West: Scenarios that Rewrite World History*, ed. Philip E. Tetlock, Richard Ned Lebow, and Geoffrey Parker (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006). This volume represents one of the most strident and effective recent defenses of counterfactual inquiry. William Gibson and Bruce Sterling entertain the last scenario in their novel of alternate history, *The Difference Engine* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991). For another investigation of the counterfactual method in a different milieu—that of international politics—see Philip E. Tetlock and Aaron Belkin, *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics: Logical, Methodological, and Psychological Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), and see also Robert Cowley's *What If?* series of books, *What If?* and *What if? 2* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1999 and 2001).

16. See *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

we might ask counterfactual questions, are subordinated to their *thoughts* in an uneven fashion, creating a pattern of contextualization and de-contextualization in which there is little room for counterfactual inquiry.

In addition to the specific reasons intellectual historians may have for neglecting formal counterfactual inquiry, we must also consider the more general criticisms of counterfactual methods that historians have made over the years. E. H. Carr issued one of the most widely read modern broadsides against counterfactual inquiry in his 1961 *What is History?*: "One can always play a parlour-game with the might-have-beens of history. But they have nothing . . . to do with history."¹⁷ More recently, Richard J. Evans has complained that the "counterworlds" produced by counterfactual inquiry are always linked to the ideological predispositions of the inquiring scholar.¹⁸ Of course, against Evans's complaint one might ask if "counterworlds" are any *less* inflected by ideology than the normal kinds of "worlds" that historians construct. In fact, counterfactuals may help us to gain insight into the historical trajectories we are ideologically committed to believe in: for example, the Whiggish view that the West was bound for global dominance. Though superficially simpler than that of Evans, Carr's complaint may actually be harder to "counter." In order to justify counterfactual inquiry we need to show that asking "what if" questions *can*, in fact, tell us something new about what actually did happen, rather than terminating in a banal indulgence of fantasy life.¹⁹

Fortunately for those trying to incorporate counterfactual methods into intellectual-historical study, the economic historian Joel Mokyr has demonstrated the usefulness of counterfactual inquiry for a field that borders and sometimes overlaps with intellectual history, namely the history of technology.²⁰ Mokyr concedes that this usefulness is somewhat counterintuitive, for we often think of technological developments as inherently multi-factorial and thus harder to trace back to underlying causes than, say, the outcome of a battle or a diplomatic negotiation. As Mokyr says of technological great leaps forward, "We tend to think of the inventors as 'accidental' given that society possesses the knowledge necessary to formulate the question and find the answer."²¹ In other words our default assumption is that individual agents play a less important role in the history of technology than do generals or politicians in the history of international conflict. However, we are entitled to ask whether this assumption is accurate. Taking the position that technological innovations are every bit as contingent as other his-

17. E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 127. Interestingly, Carr's negative verdict on counterfactual history was actually anticipated by the title of an earlier collection of speculative essays: Sir John Collings Squire's *If It Had Happened Otherwise: Lapses into Imaginary History*, to which Winston Churchill was one of the contributors (London: Longman, Greens and Co., 1931).

18. See Richard J. Evans, "Telling it Like it Wasn't," *Historically Speaking* 5, no. 4 (2004).

19. For one attempt to defend the counterfactual mode against both Carr's and Evans's criticisms, see Tetlock *et al.*, eds., *Unmaking the West*, 4, and see also *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*, ed. Niall Ferguson (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

20. See Mokyr, "King Kong and Cold Fusion: Counterfactual Analysis and the History of Technology," in Tetlock *et al.*, eds., *Unmaking the West*. See also Daniel Headrick, *The Tools of Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), and *The Tentacles of Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

21. Mokyr, "King Kong and Cold Fusion," 280.

torical events, Mokyr proposes what he calls an “evolutionary” view of the history of technology in which different technologies are adaptive responses based upon a background level of knowledge about the natural world and a given set of changing cultural and economic conditions. As Mokyr also points out, whereas in evolutionary biology the metaphor of “natural selection” is always nothing more than a metaphor—for there is no agent doing any actual “selecting”—in the process of scientific or technological development there are always agents who make choices. There is always a Newton or a Curie choosing to do this experiment or that one, to pursue or abandon a given hypothesis. If we know a great deal about their training, colleagues, and procedures, we can gain some insight into which projects or results they *might* have developed.²²

It is true that, in contrast to historians of technology, intellectual historians tend to think less about potential discoveries and more about the meaning of what *was* discovered, and of course what was published or recorded—they tend to be as much interpreters of texts as chroniclers of their development. Furthermore, there is an important tradition in intellectual history—the “history of ideas,” of which Arthur Lovejoy was the best-known proponent—in which individual agents are far less important than the “unit-ideas” with which they engage, such as Lovejoy’s famous “Great Chain of Being.”²³ Ideas, for Lovejoy and his latter-day followers, have an existence that is practically independent from their individual articulations. Even intellectual historians not affiliated with the “history of ideas” tradition often ask about the deep history of the concepts or themes on which they work, implicitly establishing a link between contemporary thinkers and their ancient Chinese, Greek, or Indian forebears.²⁴ In a historiography dominated by such links, there is understandably less room for contingency and individual action, and thus less need for counterfactual inquiry. Nevertheless, the parallels between Mokyr’s version of the history of science and technology and intellectual history seem clear, and they suggest that counterfactual speculation may be as useful for historians of philosophy, social science, or literature as it is for historians of natural science, engineering, or computing. Clearly, intellectual historians also have their causal agents and can ask questions about what developments a given “epistemic base” of knowledge makes possible at any particular point on the timeline; what developments are possible given the philosophical, social-scientific, or literary currents in any given period? One of the most important payoffs of this inquiry would be an increased sense of the as-yet unexplored potentials in

22. However, Mokyr acknowledges that the evolutionary model fails us in one important respect when applied to technological developments. This is because there is no such thing as a fixed meaning for “fitness” in the sphere of technology as there is in reproduction. If this is true of technology, which after all *does* help us to survive and thus can be understood to improve our “fitness” in some sense—it must be even more true of those forms of intellectual life (that is, almost all of them) that seem to afford no clear reproductive or survival advantage. See Mokyr, “King Kong and Cold Fusion,” 298.

23. See Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study in the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936).

24. One prominent example is Martin Jay, whose work often self-consciously gestures at the pre-modern origins of concepts that have substantial modern histories. See especially Jay’s *Marxism and Totality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); and *Songs of Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

different intellectual traditions. The field of intellectual history could benefit from the great virtue of counterfactual history, namely its ability to show us possibilities beyond the horizons of teleology. A further benefit of counterfactual inquiry would be an appreciation of the sheer contingency, and hence the fragility, of the skein of contemporary intellectual life.

However, the Benjamin counterfactuals I examine in this essay are not themselves rigorous historiographical exercises that explore unrealized possibilities through careful extrapolation from evidence. Indeed, the authors who attempt to save Benjamin from his misfortune and mistakes do so for their own, essentially ahistorical, reasons, and their use of counterfactuals usually says more about their own personal motivations than about Benjamin himself.²⁵ The remainder of this essay is devoted to exploring those motivations and asking how and why they give rise to counterfactual exercises. I suggest that this might be a necessary step on the way to identifying useful counterfactual methods; it is crucial to explore the counterfactuals that we *do* use, in order to achieve some clarity about which ones we *should* use.

II. HANNAH ARENDT'S COUNTERFACTUAL OF MOURNING

Hannah Arendt's biographical introduction to *Illuminations* does not announce itself as a counterfactual study of Benjamin's life but rather as a work of mourning for his untimely passing. Nevertheless, from start to finish the essay seems haunted by missed opportunities and mistakes, by possibilities that never came to pass. Discussing her friend's posthumous fame, Arendt employs a phrase from Cicero to express her regret: "*si vivi vicissent qui morte vicerunt*—how different everything would be 'if they had been victorious in life who have won victory in death.'"²⁶ Although Arendt never asks what Benjamin might have done had he survived his crossing into Spain, she does shine a light onto the twists and turns of Benjamin's literary career, revealing it to have been a sequence of mishandled decisions. She focuses especially on Benjamin's apparently willful tendency to ignore the practical, professional, and political demands of his life in Berlin, effectively living "against the facts."²⁷

25. The issue of whether counterfactual questions are essentially "subjective" or "objective" is raised in Tetlock *et al.*, eds., *Unmaking the West*. Eager to defend the counterfactual method against critics who would denounce it as a banal attempt, by social scientists, to become novelists, they attempt to establish what they call "quality-control questions" that might shore up their claims to objectivity. See Tetlock *et al.*, eds., *Unmaking the West*, 9. It is my view that such quality-control questions are necessary, but that responding to the "novelistic" criticism of counterfactuals may in fact be a dead end. It leads us to ignore the very real insights that counterfactuals can provide into our own, necessarily subjective, reasons for *becoming* interested in a particular period or event in the first place. That is, by using quality-control questions to ensure that their historiographical experiments are as objective as possible, we attempt to negate the investigator as a presence in the investigation, and in the process we lose track of some of the most important insights that counterfactuals can provide.

26. Benjamin, ed. Arendt, *Illuminations*, 2.

27. It is striking that Peter Demetz's introduction to the later Benjamin collection *Reflections* is little concerned with counterfactuals (*Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz [New York: Schocken, 1978]). The one counterfactual case presented is just a sigh of relief that a tragedy was once averted, early in Benjamin's life. Writing on Benjamin's potential induction into service in the Great War, Demetz writes, "Fortunately, however, his induction was postponed, and when his number came up later he

Although Arendt begins her essay by commenting on Benjamin's posthumous fame, it is Fortuna rather than Fama who quickly comes to serve as her guiding muse. Arendt's Benjamin is a man who resisted the entirely commonsensical idea that the events of one's life possess the quality of contingency—that they depend upon one's circumstances, on sheer accident, and of course upon one's responsible actions. One has only to think of Benjamin's love of *flânerie*, the art of strolling and looking about without a specific goal in mind: "botanizing on the asphalt," as he called it. Naturally, the most tragically "contingent" event in Benjamin's life was his death itself. Arendt describes the circumstances of that death as follows: "One day earlier Benjamin would have got through without any trouble, one day later the people in Marseilles would have known that for the time being it was impossible to pass through Spain. Only on that particular day was the catastrophe possible."²⁸ This was, of course, hardly the first blow dealt by Fortuna. The goddess had once led Benjamin into poverty when he chose to attack the influential scholar Friedrich Gundolf's book on Goethe, permanently damaging his own academic career before it had even begun.²⁹ And Fortuna kept him from securing a stipend to support his studies, although Arendt discusses in detail the ways Benjamin might have secured material support.³⁰ Benjamin's inability to handle the practical dimensions of life was matched by his refusal to conduct his professional affairs more in harmony with the conventions of his day. To write in a more recognizable scholarly mode, or to entice his Marxist or Zionist friends to aid him by doing work more in harmony with their ideological interests; all these would have been reasonable, practical choices.³¹ Instead, Benjamin sought to ensure that the only logic guiding his texts would be their own internal logic, or as Arendt said, "The trouble with everything Benjamin wrote was that it always turned out to be *sui generis*."³²

Though she did not mean to produce a formal work of counterfactual analysis, Arendt's rendering of Benjamin's life as a series of mistakes (albeit ones she forgives her friend) inadvertently benefits from one of the important functions of counterfactual history: it can help us to avoid that pitfall of historical analysis that Michael André Bernstein and Gary Saul Morson call "backshadowing."³³ Back-

prepared for the physical examination by drinking innumerable cups of coffee and was . . . promptly rejected on medical grounds." This counterfactual, if it can be so called, really only serves to underscore, even foreshadow, the tragedy of what actually happened. Coffee saves Benjamin once but a different drug kills him later.

28. Benjamin, ed. Arendt, *Illuminations*, 18.

29. See *ibid.*, 9.

30. "The only material security which this first public breakthrough could have led to was the *Habilitation*, the first step in the university career for which Benjamin was then preparing himself. This, to be sure, would not yet have enabled him to make a living—the so-called *Privatdozent* received no salary—but it would probably have induced his father to support him until he received a full professorship, since this was a common practice in those days." *Ibid.*, 8.

31. In his essay "Walter Benjamin" Gershom Scholem notes, "On May 25, 1925, shortly after the world of Marxist dialectic had first appeared in his field of vision, he said in a letter that two crucial experiences lay still ahead of him: contact with Marxist politics (he still thought little of the theory of Marxism at the time) and with Hebrew." See Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis* (New York: Schocken, 1976), 191.

32. Benjamin, ed. Arendt, *Illuminations*, 3.

33. See Michael André Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* (Berkeley:

shadowing, in their terms, is the tendency to see historical events only in light of their eventual denouement, carried to the degree that a moment's primary significance is simply its contribution to a later, more "critical" moment: every story is dominated by one such *telos*, just as Benjamin's story is potentially "backshadowed" by his eventual suicide. Importantly, the phenomenon of backshadowing is one of which Benjamin himself was keenly aware. As he described in "The Storyteller," his 1936 essay on the writer Nikolai Leskov, once we know the outcome of a chain of events it is almost impossible to keep that outcome from shading our view of the entire chain. Paraphrasing the critic Moritz Heimann, Benjamin commented that a man who dies at the age of thirty-five will appear, to those who remember him, at every point in his life a man who died at the age of thirty-five: "In other words, the statement that makes no sense for real life becomes indisputable for remembered life."³⁴

Although there is undoubtedly an element of backshadowing in Arendt's work of mourning, there is also an element of a different kind of historical reading, "sideshadowing," which Bernstein and Morson recommend as a countermeasure to backshadowing. To sideshadow, the narrator or historian foregrounds a specific event by emphasizing the possible trajectories that extend from it. As Morson puts it, "Alternatives always abound, and, more often than not, what exists need not have existed. *Something else was possible*, and sideshadowing is used to create a sense of that 'something else.'"³⁵ Sideshadowing restores a sense of possibility even to a story whose outcome we already know. Just so, Arendt's essay can be understood as an attempt to rescue the fragmentary moments of Benjamin's life from the symbolic dominance of his death. She resists the inevitability of Benjamin's story ending in disaster, much as he developed his concept of "Messianic Time" in order to resist teleological versions of history. Arendt was never as explicitly critical of historicism as was Benjamin, but her counterfactual gesture seems motivated by a desire she and Benjamin shared: for the historian to free individual moments of history from a timeline and by that effort enliven them.

Thus Arendt writes against tragedy, working from the understanding that, as Bernstein puts it, "the tragic is a mode of comprehending and giving form to events as a narrative" and that this tragic form-giving may be unhelpful for historians seeking a nuanced view of their subject.³⁶ Arendt is willing to abandon the interpretive purchase that the tragic mode can grant, for she cannot bear to set the events of Benjamin's life by the compass of his death. In this gesture we can see the same insistence on the absolute contingency of events that characterizes Arendt's philosophy itself, her rejection of ideology and of any philosophy or

University of California Press, 1994); and Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

34. "The Storyteller," in Benjamin, ed. Arendt, *Illuminations*, 109. Ironically, in this essay Benjamin was concerned about precisely the interpretive dominance of death that would later cloud his own reception. He also suggested, in this same essay, that all storytellers only borrow their authority from death, meaning that when we tell the story of a life and conclude with any point *other* than death, we are performing an evasive action, and a futile one because our authority is never more than "borrowed." *Ibid.*, 94.

35. Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, 118.

36. Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions*, 10.

political theory that relies on a metaphysical groundwork. Arendt referred to her goal as “*denken ohne Geländer*” or “thinking without banisters.” Arendt wrote her essay on Benjamin in 1968, years after she had announced, in such works as *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1948) and *The Human Condition* (1958), her intention to offer a new understanding of politics as an antidote to the over-determining effects of teleological and ideological thinking. Her emphasis on the absolute contingency of Benjamin’s life certainly reflects that same anti-teleological bias.

Arendt can be understood as writing against tragedy in another important sense. Her essay on Benjamin is classically counterfactual in its expression of her pure regret at Benjamin’s “needless” passing, and as such an expression it might be read as a therapeutic attempt to shift from a passive state of melancholy into the activity of mourning. Indeed, it is appropriate that in reflecting on Benjamin’s disappointed life and posthumous fame Arendt quoted Cicero as well as Seneca, for she was writing in the elegiac mode much as they had once done, a mode in which the move from private melancholy to public mourning is aided by the expressive externalization of grief in language. Despite Arendt’s failure to ask explicit “what if” questions, they nevertheless play a central role in her essay when it is understood as a therapeutic work.

III. INVOKING BENJAMIN IN WEST TEXAS AND LOS ANGELES

The urban historian and critic Norman Klein and the novelist Larry McMurtry have written counterfactual narratives in which Walter Benjamin either literally or figuratively survives the crossing from Europe to the United States. More concretely counterfactual than Arendt’s biographical essay, their stories nevertheless seem motivated less by a desire to explore the contingent, forking-path quality of Benjamin’s life and more by a desire to invoke Benjamin’s thought for their own intellectual projects. For McMurtry, the author of the *Lonesome Dove* series, among many other novels, screenplays, and memoirs, Benjamin (especially the Benjamin of the 1936 essay “The Storyteller”) is a taxonomist of personal and communal types of memory that were once disappearing from modern Europe and now are disappearing from the postmodern American scene. McMurtry especially values Benjamin’s insights about the decline of the art of storytelling within modernity, insights that he considers as relevant to his own late-twentieth-century West Texas context as they were to Benjamin’s early-twentieth-century Berlin. Klein, on the other hand, imagines a Benjamin who comes to Los Angeles and sows the seeds for subsequent critical histories of that city, written by Klein himself and by his colleague in left urban history, Mike Davis. For Klein, positing a counterfactual narrative in which Benjamin survives and moves to Los Angeles with Adorno and Horkheimer is a tool that enables him to ask just what Benjamin might have thought of Los Angeles’s potentially alienating sprawl.

McMurtry opens his memoir *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen* (a title that perhaps aims to jolt the reader into a state of attentiveness through its own *Verfremdungseffekt*) with an invocation to Benjamin, not only identifying him as McMurtry’s inspiration but also establishing a connection between McMurtry’s authorial persona and that of the German Jewish literary critic. McMurtry ex-

plains that his experiences at a local diner are best understood through the lens of Benjamin's essay on the social function of narrative and narration, "The Storyteller." McMurtry introduces the essay in terms heavy with meaning: as he says, it "had been published in a journal called *Orient und Okzident* in the year of my birth (1936)."³⁷

On [one] morning in 1980, Benjamin's tremendous elegy to the storyteller as a figure of critical importance in the human community prompted me to look around the room, at that hour of the morning lightly peopled with scattered groups of coffee drinkers, to see whether I could spot a loquacious villager who—even at that late cultural hour—might be telling a story.³⁸

Tellingly, McMurtry's Benjamin is—unlike Arendt's—strictly an observer, and has no power to take action himself. He exists in order to have insights, and (of course) in order to serve as the object of the author's hero-worship. In the second section of *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen* McMurtry takes his inquiry further, asking not only what a Benjaminian lens can reveal about West Texas, but what Benjamin himself would think of Archer County, Texas and its late twentieth-century transformation:

And what, I wonder, would contemplation of the emptiness, geographical and social, that my grandparents faced when they came to Archer County have suggested to Walter Benjamin? They came to nowhere and nothing at about the same time that Benjamin's well-to-do parents were moving to an even more affluent, more upscale Berlin suburb. . . . What experiences would he have expected to hear exchanged in Archer county, in those first years?³⁹

McMurtry continues in this vein as he reflects on the state of communal memory in small-town America. "My question to Walter Benjamin would be, what kind of stories arise in a place where nothing has ever happened except, of course, the vagaries and vicissitudes of individual life?"⁴⁰ McMurtry is not positing full-fledged counterfactuals here, but is instead driven by the desire to get something—and something beyond "mere" theoretical insight—from Benjamin by invoking his presence in contemporary Texas.

It remains to ask whether McMurtry is doing anything more than employing a rhetorical and illustrative device when he asks what Benjamin might have thought about West Texas: in other words, is McMurtry's "what if?" anything more than an aesthetically satisfying way to announce that he has adopted a Benjaminian lens? Certainly, McMurtry's is not a counterfactual posited with an explicitly historiographical agenda in mind; it seems to tell us nothing new about the contingencies of Benjamin's own life, and certainly nothing about those of the American scene of which Benjamin might have become a part. However, there is still an important counterfactual dimension to McMurtry's gambit. He would like to stand in Benjamin's shoes for a moment in order to get a radically different perspective on a territory he himself knows all too well. This imaginative counterfactual itself mirrors Benjamin's own idea that, by juxtaposing two different images, a critic can gain otherwise unobtainable insights into a problem, see otherwise invisible

37. McMurtry, *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen*, 15.

38. *Ibid.*, 14.

39. *Ibid.*, 19.

40. *Ibid.*, 25.

relations between social practices and texts. Comparing West Texas with Weimar Berlin is meant to produce an estrangement that gives us a new perspective on our own period. In other words, McMurtry is using Benjamin in order to jolt his readers out of their preconceptions about the late-twentieth-century American scene. His counterfactual adds Benjamin to America, rather than the other way around.

In *The History of Forgetting*, a study of the erasure of Los Angeles neighborhoods through gentrification and city planning, Norman Klein embraces the fantasy at which McMurtry merely gestures, offering a fully developed counterfactual exercise premised upon Benjamin's survival and escape to America. Klein's narrative is, however, a dismal one, as he resists the temptation to "complete" Benjamin's professional life by granting him postwar success. Klein's counterfactual Benjamin is no more personally or professionally contented—no less a "sad hero of the age of fascism—for having survived his crossing, traveling to the land where so many émigré German Jewish scholars thrived. Instead he struggles to survive on a small stipend garnered from the Institute for Social Research, dwelling in a book-filled little apartment while collecting quotations, newspaper scraps, and visual images for a Los Angeles *Arcades Project* that remains every bit as unfinished as its Parisian predecessor. Klein imagines his Benjamin having "[a] somewhat tortured version of a power lunch with Bertholt Brecht,"⁴¹ and engaging in a series of studies appropriate to his new home near Hollywood, including an examination of irony in B-grade *films noir*, an essay on Flash Gordon serials, and writings on Los Angeles itself that (in this counterfactual world) ultimately influence Sartre's (real) essay "American Cities." Sartre reads Benjamin's work on Los Angeles, and this fuels his conclusion that American streets are a no-where; these essentially utilitarian elements of infrastructure lack the sense of place their European counterparts offer.

Speculating about the contents of Benjamin's hypothetical Los Angeles *Arcades Project*, Klein imagines him selecting the following quotation from his own *Berlin Chronicle* as a coda: "Language clearly shows that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theater. It is the medium of past experience, as the ground is the medium in which dead cities lay interred."⁴² Entirely un-coincidentally, this is the same quotation that the urban historian Mike Davis uses to introduce his now-classic study of Los Angeles, *City of Quartz*, and by this selection Klein implicitly links himself and Davis to Benjamin in a line of intellectual descent. The concern for lineage is acute: Klein sees Benjamin as the intellectual patron saint of the school of urban history and cultural studies in which he works, and his counterfactual Benjamin, though as much a professional failure as the real Benjamin was, endures in Los Angeles so that he can sow the seeds for much of what is later said about the city. The surviving Benjamin, however, ends up contributing to the same intellectual tradition that his actual counterpart inspired.

It subtracts nothing from the inherent interest of their accounts to say that precious little of real historical value is learned from either McMurtry or Klein's exercises. Whereas Arendt's aim is to assess Benjamin's actual career, McMurtry and Klein want to make Benjamin into a talisman, to use his presence to lend

41. See Klein, *The History of Forgetting*, 234.

42. Benjamin, "Berliner Chronik," in *Reflections*, ed. Demetz, 25.

both pathos and intellectual legitimacy to their projects. Their counterfactuals are ultimately anti-historical, for they nullify Benjamin as a historical presence and reduce him to an abstraction: a set of eyes and a typewriter who can be transported from one period and location to another—“what would he have thought of *this*?” However, McMurtry’s and Klein’s accounts do resemble Arendt’s in that they take seriously the possibility that Benjamin could have survived, that his suicide was entirely contingent and, indeed, could easily have been averted. By tapping into the possibilities effectively blocked by Benjamin’s suicide, they remind us of the enormous importance of that suicide for our reception of Benjamin’s thought. Other critical theorists whose deaths were less extraordinary have attracted no such attention, but we read Benjamin’s death as an accident that we must conjecturally “undo.” Although his friend and colleague Adorno never completed what he saw as his own potential *Hauptwerk* (masterwork), his study of “late style” in Beethoven, relatively few readers of Adorno have fixated on the unfinished nature of that project, despite the fact that Beethoven was a nearly lifelong preoccupation for him.⁴³ Unlike Beethoven, and unlike Adorno himself, Benjamin never had the opportunity to find his own “late style.”

IV. BENJAMIN THE SPY: A COUNTERHISTORY

As the examples of Arendt, McMurtry, and Klein show, counterfactuals from admirers and interpreters can move in the modes of mourning and invocation. Benjamin’s story has also been reinterpreted by the journalist Stephen Schwartz to further the very different projects of implicating the Soviet Union in the war-time deaths of its intellectual opponents, and in the process questioning the appropriateness of Benjamin’s canonization by academics on the left. In 2001 the conservative political magazine *The Weekly Standard* published Schwartz’s essay “The Mysterious Death of Walter Benjamin,” which attempted to demonstrate not only that Walter Benjamin did not really commit suicide but also that the revelation of the real cause of death would radically alter Benjamin’s scholarly reception. The essay was immediately criticized by Edward Rothstein of the *New York Times* because of its reliance on inconclusive evidence: Schwartz presented nothing to prove his case but instead cast aspersions on all existing evidence of Benjamin’s suicide.⁴⁴ However, the inherent interest of Schwartz’s essay lies not in its argumentative shortcomings but rather in the way Schwartz rereads Benjamin’s story in order to oppose his putative reception among those whom Schwartz calls “Leftist” academics.

Benjamin himself might have called Schwartz’s essay a “counterhistory,” a reading of established facts against the grain of their established interpretation. For all that Schwartz’s essay is motivated not by curiosity about Benjamin’s

43. On Adorno’s efforts to understand Beethoven and late style, see Peter Eli Gordon, “The Artwork beyond Itself: Adorno, Beethoven, and Late Style,” in *The Modernist Imagination: Intellectual History and Critical Theory: Essays in Honor of Martin Jay*, ed. Warren Breckman, Peter E. Gordon, A. Dirk Moses, Samuel Moyn, and Elliot Neaman (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009).

44. Edward Rothstein, “A Daring Theory that Stalin had Walter Benjamin Murdered,” *The New York Times* (June 30, 2001).

thought or life, but by a banal desire to shame contemporary leftists with stories about Soviet inquisitions, it does raise an interesting point regarding Benjamin's reception. As Schwartz puts it, Benjamin's suicide is "central to his cult."⁴⁵ In other words, Benjamin's status as a victim of National Socialist barbarism has earned him a type of secular canonization, as though he were a martyr to the cause of Resistance against the Nazis or the Vichy government. Continuing this trend of mocking the (allegedly) religious quality of Benjamin's reception, Schwartz later claims that, "although his *acolytes* have chosen to ignore it," [my emphasis] "he was eminently qualified to appear on a Soviet hit list."⁴⁶

Schwartz's Benjamin was a staunch critic of Stalin, miles apart from his friends Adorno and Brecht, who (as Schwartz has it) were unflinching apologists for Stalin's regime; this is an injustice at least where Adorno is concerned. Schwartz takes Benjamin's 1940 "Theses on the Philosophy of History" to represent "One of the most insightful analyses of the failure of Marxism ever produced," and we are led to assume that the Theses attracted Stalin's ire precisely because they constituted an attack on Marxist theory *from the left*.⁴⁷ It was not theory that earned Benjamin his putative death sentence, however, but his acquaintance with Rudolf Roessler, who published the works Benjamin wrote under the pseudonym Detlef Holz. Schwartz describes Roessler as a secret agent for the Soviets, transmitting information about German movements at a time when the Hitler–Stalin pact was still secure. Not only could Roessler have transmitted information about Benjamin to his masters; it was also possible that Benjamin's knowledge of Roessler's life and activities could have made Roessler a compromising acquaintance indeed, particularly given that such knowledge was combined with Benjamin's anti-totalitarian views.

It was this connection with Roessler, claims Schwartz, that marked Benjamin as a target for assassination during his attempted flight through southern France to the Spanish border. Schwartz writes: "Unquestionably, the Soviet secret police was operating a chokepoint in southern France—sifting through the wave of fleeing exiles for targets of liquidation. These included open anti-Stalinists as well as individuals associated with dissident positions by more tenuous, personal ties."⁴⁸ While the paranoia that characterizes Schwartz's Soviets is widely accepted as characteristic of the Stalin period, Schwartz's argument for Benjamin as an execution-worthy threat seems thin. To accept it, we would first need to see greater evidence that Roessler feared Benjamin: we might also want to know more about Benjamin's associations with the Communist party, which he never formally joined nor criticized in print. Indeed, it is unclear how Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," which were published only posthumously and shared with only a few friends, would have reached the Soviets. Schwartz seems to be writing his Benjamin into a political struggle from which the real Benjamin remained aloof.

45. Schwartz, "The Mysterious Death of Walter Benjamin," 1.

46. *Ibid.*, 5.

47. *Ibid.*, 1.

48. *Ibid.*, 4.

There seem to be two larger objectives behind this. The first is to challenge existing receptions of Benjamin on the academic left, since many academics (Schwartz presumes) would find Benjamin harder to accept if he were repositioned as an opponent of the Soviets. This forms a part of Schwartz's larger project of reassessing the connections between left intellectuals and the Soviet Union, in the wake of that state's fall. He means to show that Communism was as bad for its supporters on the left as it was for its political opponents on the right. The second objective resembles that of Klein and McMurtry: co-opting Benjamin for a project of one's own. Here Benjamin becomes one of a legion killed by a regime too insecure to allow dissidents to survive. Schwartz's essay ends with a celebration of freedom: the author describes himself exiting the library where he pursued his Benjamin research, glad to be a post-Cold War American intellectual rather than a European "leftist" during wartime. The world of the latter was, according to Schwartz, a criminal subculture full of espionage and danger.

In such a subculture, of course, the possibilities for disinterested intellectual work are at least limited if not completely blocked. But Schwartz is not interested in questions about the working conditions that enable academic objectivity but rather in the inevitability of political entanglement. For Schwartz, "leftists" were unquestionably intertwined with Soviet Communists, as though the split between Western and Soviet Marxism had never taken place. His essay can, in fact, be read as an attempt to refute Benjamin's claim that political critique could function even through disinterested intellectual work, a claim Benjamin shared with Adorno. If even the critical theorists who advocate political resistance through the *vita contemplativa* were tangled up in politics, who could remain untouched? There seems, then, to be a Nietzschean turn to Schwartz's argument, a way in which it brings the past up against the present in order to critique the latter through the comparison. Those on the academic left—those who have made Benjamin into a martyr—are all potential "Benjamins," potential victims of the very regimes they might want to support. Indeed, the dream of Adorno and Benjamin, that disinterested research can itself be a form of political critique, is always subverted by the political entanglements of their descendants. Its historical shortcomings notwithstanding, this "counterhistory" about Benjamin is actually more useful as a spur to counterfactual thinking than the fantasies spun by Klein and McMurtry, who are far more engaged by Benjamin's thought itself. This is because rather than simply transporting Benjamin to a new time and place in order to ask what he might have thought of it, Klein's counterhistory forces us to ask how our reception of Benjamin's thought would shift, were his story slightly but crucially different.

Clearly Arendt's, Klein's, and McMurtry's counterfactuals, and Schwartz's counterhistory, are far from the kind of careful counterfactual exercises advocated by some historians. Simply put, they lack a rigorous orientation toward existing evidence, and they are not centrally concerned with reaching new insights about the relationship between the varied causal factors in a specific historical case.⁴⁹ Nor do they examine Benjamin's own knowledge base, social connections, and unfinished projects with an eye toward asking what untapped potential died with him

49. See Tetlock *et al.*, eds., *Unmaking the West*, for one account of the rules that a "rigorous" counterfactual might follow.

(a procedure that would approximate Joel Mokyr's recommendation to historians of technology). Even less do they ask how late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century intellectual life might have been changed by Benjamin's survival; conceivably, our understanding of the Frankfurt School and of critical theory could have been very different, even given one additional essay. However, despite their lack of historiographical traction, these counterfactuals nevertheless reveal other valuable functions that "what if?" questions can perform, and, perhaps as importantly, they help us to address the question of how we *do* use counterfactual reasoning—a very different question, to be sure, from that of how we *should* use it.

Furthermore, the fact that Benjamin has inspired a counterfactual imagination tells us something significant about his reception. Importantly, the counterfactuals I have surveyed here all show that our reception of Benjamin is definitively shaped by the circumstances of his death. If Schwartz is correct—and I think he is, on this point—our interest in Benjamin's thought is, if only in some weak sense, affected by the pathos of his passing, and by the potential that died with him. However, Benjamin's suicide has had other effects. Notably, Benjamin's death spared him many of the political entanglements that complicate our reception of other canonical critical theorists: unlike Adorno, he did not live long enough to have a fraught relationship with the student movement (nor did he become an icon for it, like Marcuse), and unlike the Merleau-Ponty of *Humanism and Terror*, he produced no apology for abuses of power carried out in the name of a better socialist future. And unlike not only Adorno but also Arendt, Benjamin's elitist tendencies never ran aground on the rocks of American egalitarian sentiment. In other words, we have been able to read Benjamin's work without confronting any missteps or mistakes he might have made had he lived longer.

The reasons for Benjamin to become the subject of counterfactual inquiry, then, seem clear. It does not seem too presumptuous to suggest that much of the critical writing that applies Benjamin's insights to film, to urban landscapes, to literature has an implied counterfactual at work within it: *what would he have thought of this?* To say nothing of a somewhat more banal point: given the opacity of much of Benjamin's work, it is understandable that we wish we had the author here to explain it all to us. However, as I have suggested throughout this essay, such questions are not really about Benjamin himself considered as a historical subject. An important task remains: determining what kind of counterfactual questions about Benjamin would help us to reach a better understanding of his biography and writings.

Interestingly, there is a deep resonance between taking a counterfactual view of Benjamin's life and the view he himself entertained in his *Moscow Diary*, *One-Way Street*, and *A Berlin Childhood around 1900*. In these texts Benjamin suggested that one could use a city map rather than a timeline as a model for biography, "as though space rather than time were its primary organizing structure," as Rebecca Solnit eloquently describes the technique.⁵⁰ The city map is certainly a more appropriate model for the flaneur's life than the timeline, for the map lacks the timeline's tendency to enforce at least the appearance of a trajectory.

50. Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: a History of Walking* (New York: Viking, 2000), 197.

Benjamin's map does more than merely shatter the complacency of hindsight, however—it eliminates the possibility of hindsight itself, as it makes history, like memory, into a theater of images rather than a chronological progression. The Benjamin of *A Berlin Childhood around 1900* was much like the Benjamin of “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” who articulated a historical materialist theory of history in which the crucial thing was to preserve individual *moments* from the stultifying march of the chronicle. The “spark” of the past that Benjamin enjoined the historian to capture and keep alive, in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” can be interpreted either as a sense of the possibilities inherent in the past, or as the perception that the concerns of the past are also the concerns of the present.⁵¹ It was Benjamin who understood the task of the historian not to be “[telling] the sequence of events like [counting] the beads of a rosary,” but instead to understand the present as a *now* that exists in a particular constellation with a previous time.⁵² It is precisely such a relationship between past and present that counterfactual history can help us to cultivate. As many critics have noted, the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” opposed the tradition of German historicism, with its tendency to justify past suffering as necessary for present comfort and hopes of future progress.⁵³ Benjamin hoped to restore a condition of “now-ness,” of “jetz-zeit,” to all moments of the past, acknowledging their equal nobility. For Benjamin, such a restoration would reveal the way the present is likewise “shot through with chips of Messianic time.”⁵⁴ The present could thus be redeemed, rather than submitted to the homogenization of simple chronology and the tyranny of potentially false notions of progress.

Indeed, there are a number of important senses in which the Benjamin of the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” can be read as an advocate of counterfactual history. Benjamin's interest in causality can be seen clearly in the second Thesis, where he quotes Hermann Lotze's remark that it is remarkable that “the present” displays no envy toward the future. Expanding on this by noting that we only envy the past (“the air we have breathed, among people we could have talked to, women who could have given themselves to us”⁵⁵), Benjamin suggests that we always articulate our desire for redemption by desiring to remain within past experiences rather than moving toward possible future experience—for indeed, it is unclear what “future experience” might mean. This Thesis sets the tone for the remaining Theses, preoccupied as they are by the question of how the present might redeem the past without enfolded it into a misleading myth of progress. One of the ways in which the past is redeemed, Benjamin suggests in Thesis seven, is by rejecting the victor's justice whereby all past moments are read in light of the later moments they ultimately yield. Benjamin's famous notion of “brushing history against the grain,” introduced in this Thesis, is thus very close to Bernstein's idea of “sideshadowing,” of refusing the alienation that may inevitably develop in the

51. See Benjamin, ed. Arendt, *Illuminations*, 255.

52. *Ibid.*, 263.

53. See, in particular, Peter Eli Gordon's review of David Myers, *Resisting History: Historicism and its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005) in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 95, no. 4 (Fall 2005), 756-762.

54. See Benjamin, ed. Arendt, *Illuminations*, 263.

55. *Ibid.*, 254.

process of historicization. Arendt's employment of a mild form of Bernstein and Morson's "sideshadowing" in her essay on Benjamin may well have been inspired by his "Theses" themselves.

The Angel of History described in the ninth Thesis can be understood as a counterfactualist of a sort, a point that is best demonstrated through a brief discussion of this famous passage:

A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His faced is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage, and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.⁵⁶

"His face is turned toward the past," as Benjamin writes, indeed—for the angel inhabits the post-facto melancholic moment of wanting to repair the mistakes and tragedies of the past.⁵⁷ The fact that the storm-wind blowing from Paradise is too strong for the angel to complete the task is likewise significant: Benjamin's angel understands that counterfactuals are always posed with a certain attitude of mourning, an understanding of what cannot be undone. Not only can we not change the past, we also cannot adopt a stance of agnosticism about past events. The process of redemption may begin with encountering the past "as a monad" (Thesis seventeen), but this is an interpretive encounter rather than one we enter into in hopes of changing the past—just as the Angel of History is a divine but passive spectator of past events, effectively a "recording angel."

Indeed, there is a strong resonance between Benjamin's presentation of a "Messianic" historical materialism in the "Theses on the Philosophy of History" and the method of counterfactual investigation itself. Although Benjamin never explicitly raises the issue of "what if?" inquiry in the "Theses on the Philosophy of History," he nevertheless promotes the idea of "arresting" the flow of historical time, much as a counterfactualist might. The theological image which Benjamin invokes most frequently in the "Theses on the Philosophy of History" is actually not the Angel of History, but rather that of the Messiah, who comes to redeem the past as much as the present.⁵⁸ Benjamin furthermore claims that only after this messianic redemption has taken place will we "receive the fullness of [our] past," or as he says, "only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments."⁵⁹ However, Benjamin does not hypothesize the coming of a single Messiah who arrives in person, but rather distributes Messianic work to all of humanity, granting that "every generation" is "endowed with a *weak* Messianic

56. *Ibid.*, 258.

57. *Ibid.*, 257.

58. See especially Thesis six, *ibid.*, 255: "The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins."

59. Thesis three, in *ibid.*, 254.

power, a power to which the past has a claim.”⁶⁰ We all have access, then, to a form of historical materialist inquiry that can redeem individual moments of the past so that they are not lost. We can struggle against the historicist tendency to reduce all events to a single stream flowing toward some projected *telos*.

Toward the end of the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” Benjamin makes it clear that the work of historical materialism is to break those “causal connections” that historicism establishes between different historical moments.⁶¹ Those causal connections, and indeed the principle of causality itself, create the string on which events become “beads” like the beads of a rosary; Benjamin’s injunction to historians is to stop counting those beads and to instead “grasp the constellation” which their own historical moments forms with the past one. It is this process of “grasping” that redeems both the past and the present by infusing them with what Benjamin calls *jetzzeit*, “time of the now,” which he says is “shot through with chips of Messianic time.”⁶² In the slightly earlier Thesis sixteen Benjamin provides clues as to why *jetzzeit* is so important: “A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present,” he writes, “which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop.”⁶³ Benjamin seems to mean that one can appreciate the “present-ness” of a moment when one examines that moment on its own terms, perhaps sympathizing with those who inhabited that moment without benefit of foreknowledge of the future. His criticism of the historicist alternative to this method could scarcely be harsher: “The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called ‘Once upon a time,’ in historicism’s bordello.”⁶⁴ The present-ness of a moment, its detachment from its past and its future, makes it into what Benjamin calls a “monad,” a moment that bears its own meanings within it and is properly interpreted not in light of causal ties to past or future, but by reference to only two horizons of meaning: the horizon of that moment alone, and the horizon of the interpreting historian.

Clearly, Benjamin intends for historical materialist practice to involve rejecting causality, and the Messianic function of that practice can be fulfilled only through the total suspension of causal considerations. While this would seem, at least on its face, to sit poorly with the pursuit of counterfactual history (which is after all a tool for learning *more* about causal relations), Benjamin’s description of historical materialism as the opposite of historicism licenses a different reading. Historical materialism does not deny that different moments of history are causally linked, or that historians will always be on some level interested in causes—just as the Angel of History cannot be agnostic about the facts of history—but rather it rejects the *interpretation* of each moment in terms of a set of foregone conclusions. The resulting arrest of the flow of events permits reconsideration both of the meaning of a particular moment (as it might have been experienced by those who received it “afresh”) and of our relation to that moment. One version of this pausing of the flow of events is, I would suggest, counterfactual inquiry itself: in

60. *Ibid.*

61. Thesis eighteen, part A, in *ibid.*, 263.

62. *Ibid.*

63. Thesis sixteen, in *ibid.*, 262.

64. *Ibid.*

order to ask a counterfactual question one must be willing to isolate a moment after which everything changed, after which events took a different course than the one our chronicles record. Then, in order to conduct a counterfactual thought experiment, the historian must consider all of the potential outcomes radiating out from that specific moment. Of course in addition to this “arresting” of time, counterfactual inquiry has something else in common with Benjamin’s historical materialism. Because counterfactual history can potentially make us more aware of our own investments in the past, it provides us not only with a sense of the “constellation” we form with that past, but with a sense of agency to change that constellation and read the past differently.

V. SHOULD BENJAMIN HAVE READ MARX, OR MOSES?
A (METHODOLOGICALLY CONSERVATIVE) COUNTERFACTUAL

In his essay “Should Benjamin Have Read Marx?” the art historian T. J. Clark introduces a serious question sideways, by means of a tongue-in-cheek title: was it somehow *good* for Benjamin to read Marx’s works and be influenced by them? This is, Clark suggests, a question asked by many contemporary Benjamin scholars who view Marxism as a foreign element in Benjamin’s thought, a distraction from the more “authentic” aesthetic and philosophical pursuits with which Benjamin began his career. For such scholars, it was a shame that *The Arcades Project* ultimately became a history of capitalism rather than a history of aesthetic modernism, *Das Kapital* diluting *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Clark does not actually pursue the counterfactual exercise of asking what Benjamin’s thought would have looked like without Marxism—indeed, he asks his playful question only in order to challenge scholars who would, *sotto voce*, remove the Marxist elements from Benjamin’s thought. Referring with an autobiographical directness to his own first encounters with Benjamin’s essays in the 1960s, Clark hopes to return to the explicitly Marxist thinker he once knew, long before Benjamin was remade as the comparatively depoliticized father of cultural studies. Although Clark has no real counterfactual reading of Benjamin in mind—indeed, he suggests that the existing “cultural studies” Benjamin is the product of a mistaken and thus literally “counterfactual” reading—the exercise toward which he gestures is a potentially useful one. Does subtracting one or the other element from Benjamin’s intellectual itinerary tell us something useful about the other aspects of that itinerary? Or, how would we read Benjamin differently if he had been a different kind of reader? By pursuing this course we may be able to take up the challenge posed by Arendt’s Introduction to *Illuminations*, a challenge from which other Benjamin counterfactuals seem to fall short: to find what-if questions to ask about Benjamin that reveal something new about his actual life and work, rather than merely indulging our (understandable) curiosity about what might have been.

A critical step in launching such an inquiry is the identification of causal factors. Do we identify (as Clark does) Benjamin’s readings in Marx as critical? His friendship with Theodor Adorno, or with Gershom Scholem, or perhaps his romance with Ana Lacjís? On some accounts, Benjamin’s friendship with Bertholt Brecht (initiated in 1929) drew him further into the Marxist fold than he might

otherwise have gone, leading him from what Richard Wolin calls the “theological” period that produced essays like the biblically tinged “On Language as Such and the Language of Man” (1916) and into a “materialist” phase.⁶⁵ Without that friendship, it is reasonable to suppose that Gershom Scholem might have become a greater influence, and that Benjamin might have given more attention to Jewish thought—and perhaps given more serious consideration to joining Scholem in Jerusalem.

A reader intrigued by Benjamin’s typical reluctance to adopt strong political stances might ask different questions: for example, what if Benjamin had been able to either identify more fully with the program of the Communist Party, or to align himself more fully with Zionism and make *aliyah* to what was then called Palestine? What would a politically committed Benjamin have looked like, and how would we read him today? Clearly one of the issues with which this latter question tries to grapple is whether our readings of Benjamin depend on a perception of him as either cripplingly or heroically disengaged from political life. As Udi Greenberg observes, a series of readings of Benjamin’s life and work conducted in the 1980s produced a laudatory interpretation of the critic, according to which his refusal to “commit” either to Zionism or to Marxism was a courageous position to take.⁶⁶ Benjamin, who wrote so much on Messianism, becomes important to us because he refused two of the twentieth century’s most famous “messianic” narratives. His very lack of commitment makes him a convenient and attractive object of personal identification, even as his affirmation of the liberating potential of mass culture makes him seem like a Marxist thinker who is not “dangerously” Marxist.⁶⁷

Perhaps this exercise reveals something essential about the biographical mode, namely that the writing (*graphos*) of any life (*bios*) involves the consideration of causality, and demands that we consider which factors and circumstances produced the version of a figure that we have come to recognize. How much about Benjamin can we change without producing a radically different thinker? It goes without saying that a non-Marxist Benjamin or one without Jewish intellectual influences would be very different; could we still call this hypothetical person “Benjamin?” In asking such questions, we quickly come to see that asking explicit counterfactual questions is only a caricatured or extreme form of the kind of inquiry we engage in during any historical analysis. In other words, we are

65. See Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*.

66. Interestingly, this attraction to an uncommitted Benjamin is sometimes reflected in an attraction to an “interdisciplinary” Benjamin. Laura Marcus and Lynda Nead, in their edited volume *The Actuality of Walter Benjamin*, claim that Benjamin’s contemporary relevance (his “actuality”) can be found “in his quietly determined failure to belong to a specialty, to an institution, to an easily specifiable tradition of thought. It is this indeterminacy and refusal to remain within boundaries which signifies Benjamin’s contemporaneity, his rich place within a cultural epoch in which belonging and abiding have come to seem so philosophically troubling.” *The Actuality of Walter Benjamin*, ed. Laura Marcus and Lynda Nead (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1998), 9.

67. As Vanessa Schwartz points out, part of the attraction of Benjamin’s work for cultural studies may well lie in the fact that, of all the thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School, he understood that consumption might have positive and even liberatory valences as well as negative and constraining ones—he understood mass culture to contain something worth celebrating where Adorno and Horkheimer generally found only trash to condemn. See Schwartz, “Walter Benjamin for Historians.”

constantly asking under what circumstances our stories took the shape that they did, and we are constantly posing subconscious counterfactuals. To put this point in a more extreme form, there is no history (biographical or otherwise) without counterfactual history.

Although it is tempting to identify counterfactual questions about Benjamin that are “objective” in the sense proposed by Philip Tetlock, Joel Mokyr, and other defenders of the counterfactual approach, it also seems crucial to me to endorse the subjective dimensions of counterfactual analysis, especially for intellectual or cultural as opposed to political, military, and economic historians. This is a point that must be stated with some care: counterfactuals, I think, help us to understand a great deal about our own investments in history. Just as Clark’s implied counterfactual concerns Benjamin’s status as a Marxist, another counterfactual (closely related to Clark’s) concerns Benjamin’s degree of political commitment. It speaks to the fact that my own interest in Benjamin is driven largely by his problem with commitment, his difficulty with political engagement in either a socialist or Zionist project, and his way of writing a political, cultural criticism that does not prescribe political content. My counterfactual speculations about Benjamin are thus also reflections upon my own reading of Benjamin, attempts to become a more (productively, one hopes) self-conscious reader.

Indeed, counterfactuals may simply present us with the most explicit illustrations of an affective and selective relation to the past that suffuses all historical writing. They help us to realize that (because we are not, after all, faithful Benjaminian historical materialists) we are almost always trying somehow to get traction on the causal dimensions of history, to determine what factors shaped the story we are trying to tell. Thus, in addition to the benefits of the counterfactual mode that I examined earlier—a resistance to hindsight determinism and a greater sense of the possibilities of history—I would add the benefit of learning more about the conditions driving our own interest in the subjects we read or research. Like the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips in his essay “The Interested Party,” I want to consider “in what sense or under what conditions interest is made, and how we manage, or plot, to lose it. And I want to suggest that the very fact that we are interested at all—and our preconditions for being interested—are every bit as telling as what we happen to be interested in.”⁶⁸ If the counterfactual has helped me to better understand the preconditions of my interest in Benjamin, then perhaps it deserves a place among the methodologies used by intellectual historians. Nor does such self-reflexive inquiry detract from the more empirical uses of the method for intellectual historians. As we know, every idea, like every event, almost took a different turn.

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68. Adam Phillips, “The Interested Party” in *The Beast in the Nursery* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 7.