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Frank Voigt

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## Walter Benjamin, Antonio Gramsci and the Problem of Elitist Traditions

### Abstract

The article sheds light on Walter Benjamin's and Antonio Gramsci's treatments of elitist traditions. It provides a historical contextualization and brief comparison of the theoretical and political developments of the two contemporaries under this aspect. In the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* (1924/25), Benjamin's historical-philosophical aesthetics are enriched by a history of concepts which increasingly takes up socio-historical aspects. This approach goes beyond Benjamin's programmatic formulations at the beginning of the 1920s, in which he regarded the work of art as a privileged medium of historical insight that, in theory and method, had to be isolated from history. As for Gramsci, the article elaborates an increasing mediation between social and literary history. This is done, on the one hand, by comparing Gramsci's statements on Italian Futurism between 1913 and 1922 and, on the other hand, by tracing and examining Gramsci's criticism of Benedetto Croce's assessment of the reasons leading to World War I in his *History of Europe in the Nineteenth Century* (1932) in the *Prison Notebooks* (Quaderno 10). Despite their differences, the examination of these developments in Benjamin and Gramsci shows three common features in their works of the 1930s: Firstly, both of them change their relation to radical democratic, Jacobin traditions. Secondly, they both display an increasingly historical understanding of concepts of literary intelligence under the aspect of their relationship to the reading public. Thirdly, this understanding led both of them to analyze the rise of fascism in Italy and Germany with regard also to 'elitist traditions' in which intellectuals distance themselves from the public for various reasons and motives, but with the consequence that an understanding of their participation in discourses and traditions becomes impossible.

### Keywords

Literary criticism, Jacobinism, public, education, elitism, World War I, Benedetto Croce, Futurism, Antonio Gramsci, Walter Benjamin

## ***On Walter Benjamin, Antonio Gramsci and the Problem of Elitist Traditions***

Frank Voigt

A comparison of when and how Walter Benjamin and Antonio Gramsci treated elitist traditions as a problem must consider the different starting conditions of the two contemporaries. Benjamin grew up in the west of Berlin in a Jewish family of the haute bourgeoisie. In the stately family home, several domestic workers, including a French governess, looked after the three children: Dora (1901–1946), who would become a social scientist and psychologist; Georg (1895–1942), who would become a politically engaged pediatrician in Berlin and a member of Germany’s communist party; and the oldest child, the later philosopher, literary scholar, translator, critic and historian Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), who at age 40 could still not make his own coffee (Eiland and Jennings 2014, p. 18). Benjamin attended the Kaiser-Friedrich-Schule in Berlin-Charlottenburg, received private tuition and spent two years at the Haubinda “Landerziehungsheim” in Thuringia. Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) was born as the fourth of seven children in Ales, Sardinia. Due to the several years that his father spent in prison, the family was impoverished. Despite his hump and small stature, Gramsci had to work in a cadastral office in Ghilarza before he could go to a small secondary school (*ginnasio*) in Santu Lussurgiu and, after his father had been released from prison, attended a lyceum (*liceo*) in Cagliari starting in 1908. There, Gramsci wrote an essay on the oppressed and “unfortunate peoples in the colonies,” stating that “[w]ars are waged for trade, not for civilization: how many cities of China did the English bombard, when the Chinese would not buy their opium? Some civilization!” (quoted in Fiori 1970/1990, pp. 67-8).<sup>1</sup> Unlike Benjamin, Gramsci had been confronted with unequal social conditions from an early age. Malaria, trachoma, tuberculosis and hunger were widespread in

<sup>1</sup> “... e allora la vecchia Europa inorridita impreca contro i barbari, contro gli incivili, e una nuova crociata viene bandita contro quei popoli infelici... Le guerre sono fatte per il commercio, non per la civiltà: gli Inglesi hanno bombardato chissà quante città della Cina per i Cinesi che non volevano sapere del loro oppio. Altro che civiltà!” (Fiori 1966/1991, p. 78).

Sardinia. Although the overall illiteracy rate had declined over the course of the nineteenth century, the relative North-South literacy gap had grown in its first half (cf. Ciccarelli/Weisdorf 2018).<sup>2</sup>

### 1. *The early Gramsci and Benjamin on education*

Gramsci wrote about educational issues and the problem of illiteracy<sup>3</sup> on a social scale from an early age on. The bourgeoisie, he stated in “The Problem of the School” [“Il problema della scuola”], had no interest at all in these issues because it did not develop and impose a real educational program.<sup>4</sup> It is likely that an opposition between bourgeois education as something mechanical and a concept of culture as self-discipline, a “higher awareness” of “one’s own historical value, one’s own function in life, one’s own rights and obligations,” contributed to this assessment (Gramsci 2000, p. 57). In his article “Men or Machines?” [“Uomini o macchine?”], published on 24 December 1916 in *Avanti!*, the newspaper of the Italian Socialist Party, Gramsci addressed education as a question of class. Children from the working class were “excluded from the middle and high schools as a result of the present social conditions” and received little support, even if they deserved it and wished to study. According to Gramsci, the proletariat needed an education system that was open to all (Gramsci 2000, pp. 63-4). Gramsci, for whom communism was an “integral humanism” (Losurdo 2000, pp. 33-7), advocated a humanist education in reference to the Renaissance. He called for “[a] school of freedom and free initiative, not a school of slavery and mechanical precision” (Gramsci 2000, pp. 63-4). Proletarian children should all be given opportunities to develop their own individuality in an optimal way, for themselves and society. The technical and vocational schools, Gramsci said, should not be “incubators of little monsters aridly trained for a job,” but should also provide “general ideas,” “culture” and “intellectual stimulation” (Gramsci 2000, p. 64). Gramsci criticized the popular universities, some of which were

<sup>2</sup> In 1911, in Calabria the illiteracy rate for adult men was about 50% and for women 78%, and in Sardinia about 50% among men and over 60% among women; in Piedmont, on the other hand, less than 5% were still illiterate, and in Liguria and Lombardy about 10%, almost in equal measure among men and women (Ciccarelli/Weisdorf 2018, p. 345).

<sup>3</sup> See Gramsci’s article “Illiteracy” [“Analfabetismo”] published on 11 February 1917 in the socialist youth magazine *La Città futura* (Gramsci 2000, pp. 67-8).

<sup>4</sup> See Gramsci’s article “The Problem of the School” in *L’Ordine Nuovo* of 27 June 1919 (Gramsci 2000, pp. 68-70, here p. 69).

supported by the Italian Socialist Party, in the article “The Popular University” [“L’Università popolare”], published on 29 December 1916 in *Avanti!*. “In Turin,” where Gramsci had gone to study in 1911, “the Popular University is a cold flame. It is neither a university, nor popular. Its directors are amateurs in matters of cultural organization. What causes them to act is a mild and insipid spirit of charity, not a live and fecund desire to contribute to the spiritual raising of the multitude through teaching” (Gramsci 2000, p. 65).

Benjamin’s early consideration of education took its point of departure from the reform pedagogue Gustav Wyneken (1875–1964), who had been Benjamin’s teacher in the “Landerziehungsheim” in Haubinda. In a conservative interpretation of Hegel, Wyneken focused on the subordination of the individual to an objective spirit developing in youth as a ‘generation’ (Sagriotis 2019, pp. 128-9). For Wyneken, youth represented “a spiritual attitude” and an empirical phase of human development, at the same time an elite group that ‘serves’ that spirit in confrontation with a society imagined as senseless and abysmal. In this way, a utopian path out was to be found within society through this elite (Hillach 1999, p. 879). Very different from Gramsci, Benjamin, who in 1914 became chairperson of the *Freie Studentenschaft* in Berlin, negotiated humanistic traditions at that time. In the journal *Der Anfang*, edited by Siegfried Bernfeld, Georges Barbizon and Fritz Schoengarth, Benjamin published the short text “On the Classical Secondary School” [“Über das humanistische Gymnasium”] (EW, pp. 94-100; GS II, pp. 39-42) as part of the larger article “Teaching and Valuation” [“Unterricht und Wertung”]. In this text, Benjamin demanded a school that “would necessarily be hostile to the present day, undemocratic, high-spirited, and would allow no easy compromises with the modern secondary school, or the technical school, or other non-classical institutions” (EW, p. 96; cf. Witte 1976, pp. 16-8). With the ‘we’ of a ‘generation’ understood as ‘youth,’ Benjamin opposed a ‘generation of fathers’ and the ‘rest of society.’ He harbored “at bottom great sympathy for the classical education” as an “educational vision that has preserved in itself a noble serenity and remained immune to the frenzied Darwinian utilitarianism of the rest of our pedagogy” (EW, p. 95). Benjamin demanded, “But no more of this desiccated humanism!” (p. 96). As ‘desiccated,’ he understood a humanism representing a “fabulous

realm of ‘harmonies’ and ‘ideals’” (ibid.). Against such a concept of humanism, he set the “woman-despising and man-loving Greece of Pericles, aristocratic, with slavery, with the dark myths of Aeschylus” (ibid.). It is conceivable that Benjamin would insist on a kind of historical realism against the abstract humanistic ideal here. However, this interpretation is challenged by the emphasis with which Benjamin conjured a metaphysical conception of the spirit of youth following Wyneken in this period, setting it against the empirical as a whole and rejecting the latter. From this perspective, it is more likely that the humanism that Benjamin had in mind was ultimately an ‘educational aristocratic anti-humanism’ (Cancik 2012, p. 139) inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche – or the ‘humanism’ of an elite whose ‘leadership’ the young Benjamin claimed for himself as Gustav Wyneken’s eager pupil.

Even so, Benjamin broke with Wyneken when the latter put the ‘spirit of youth’ at the service of war; Benjamin held on to the purity of the ideal against his former teacher. Benjamin therefore did not break immediately with his metaphysical horizon. His retreat was rather the “ultimate consequence of the orientation of his thinking towards the ideal” (Steizinger 2013, p. 55, trans. FV). In Benjamin’s critical evaluation of his time in the youth movement in “The Life of Students” (1915) [“Das Leben der Studenten”], criticism is given a central position. It would be the “historical task [...] to disclose [*gestalten*] this immanent state of perfection and make it absolute, to make it visible and dominant in the present” (SW 1, p. 37). Nevertheless, this “task” is “to grasp its metaphysical structure, as with the messianic domain or the idea of the French Revolution” (ibid.). How stark the contrast was to Gramsci’s social thought at this time can be seen in Benjamin’s reserve toward “the socially relevant achievement of the,” as he put it, “average person” [*Durchschnittsmenschen*]. For Benjamin, there was “no internal or authentic connection between the spiritual existence of a student and, say, his concern for the welfare of workers’ children or even for other students” (SW 1, p. 40).

## 2. *The public and the authority of the critic for Benjamin*

Against this backdrop, it is understandable why it took Benjamin until his trip to Moscow in 1926/27 to write about a problem like illiteracy (cf. GS IV, pp. 337-8). Even though Benjamin wanted to

overcome state and law by means of a general strike serving as “divine violence” (SW 1, pp. 249-50) in his “Critique of Violence” [“Zur Kritik der Gewalt”] in 1921, it was only then that questions of education also appeared to him as social questions in a broader understanding and not as a privileged topic for a social ‘elite.’ This late interest was also due to the relation between Benjamin’s philosophy of history and aesthetics at the time. At any rate, the concept of the ‘creature’ in the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* (1924/25) [*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*] formed a kind of egalitarian, theological-anthropological objection to elitism insofar as it encompassed all people. Even the absolutist sovereign, tyrant and martyr at the same time, “as highly enthroned as he is over his subjects and his state” and despite his position as “lord of creatures,” “remains a creature” (OGT, p. 72) and is therefore not excluded from melancholy and self-doubt. In his dissertation *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism* [*Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*], Benjamin distanced himself from history as an “event” [*Geschehen*] in order to gain a deeper insight into history “as content” [*Gehalt*] as a philosopher of art. In his dissertation, Benjamin quoted from Charlotte Pingoud’s *Grundlinien der ästhetischen Doktrin Friedrich Schlegels*: “Art, bestowing shape from the impulse of striving spirituality, binds the latter in ever new forms with the occurrence of the entire life of the present and the past. Art fastens not on particular events of history but on its totality; from the viewpoint of eternally self-perfecting mankind, it draws the complex of events together, rendering them unified and manifest” (SW 1, p. 138). While Pingoud was skeptical of the high demands on art in Schlegel’s theory (Pingoud 1914, p. 63), Benjamin insisted that the conception of the ‘absolute’ in Schlegel should not be replaced by education, harmony, genius, religion, organization or history; rather, it should be reserved for art only (SW 1, pp. 137-8). This had an important consequence. Friedrich Schlegel’s focus on the potential of the *individual* work of art, in addition to its ‘unfolding’ through criticism and translation, was given a special emphasis by Benjamin as a privileged medium of historical insight. At this time, and also in his well-known letter to Rang in December 1923,<sup>5</sup> Benjamin assumed that history wandered

<sup>5</sup> “The attempt to insert the work of art into historical life does not open new perspectives into its inner existence, as is the case with the life of nations, where the same procedure points to

into the works and became interpretable through later criticism, while works of art themselves – similar to Croce’s distinction between history of art and history of culture (cf. Forgacs in Gramsci 2012, p. 89) – should never be understood as an immanent part of a cultural history. This view had both the condition and the consequence that it is inadequate to study history through the works of historians and fruitless to approach works of art with a historicizing method. For Benjamin before 1924, history could best be studied in works of art if they were isolated from it.

This focus on a “content” [*Gehalt*] of history in the work of art while at the same time distancing it from history and society was favored by Theodor W. Adorno up to his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* [*Ästhetische Theorie*] (1970).<sup>6</sup> Though this corresponds to Benjamin’s self-descriptions of his own method in the first half of the 1920s up to the “Epistemo-Critical Foreword” [“Erkenntnis-kritische Vorrede”] of *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* [*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*] or the above-mentioned letter to Rang, it does not capture other aspects of the method he ultimately used throughout the “Trauerspielbuch.” It seems rather that Benjamin, while working on the book, began to combine his philosophical aesthetics of history with a history of concepts. While in his dissertation Benjamin contextualized Schlegel’s theory of critique through Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s concept of reflection (SW 1, pp. 120-35; cf. Fetscher 2006/2011, pp. 154-5), he now used this method not only for theory but for art as well, so that the Baroque dramas necessarily had to be historically contextualized. Therefore, Benjamin had turned against the view of “the tragic myth” in Nietzsche’s theory of tragedy as “a purely aesthetic construct” (OGT, p. 94) and integrated individual social aspects into his analysis. Indeed, in some passages of the “Trauerspielbuch”

the role of the different generations and other essential factors. The current preoccupations of art history all amount to no more than the history of contents [Stoff-Geschichte] or forms [Form-Geschichte], for which works of art seem to provide merely examples or models; a history of the works of art themselves is not considered” (Benjamin to Rang, letter of 9 December 1923, SW 1, p. 388).

<sup>6</sup> In his aesthetics and epistemology, Adorno sought to establish a primacy between the relationships of art *in history* on the one hand and history *in art* on the other – in favor of the latter: “The immanence of society in the artwork is *the essential* social relation of art, not the immanence of art in society. Because the social content of art is not located externally to its principium individuationis but rather inheres in individuation, which is itself a social reality, art’s social character is concealed and can only be grasped by its interpretation” (Adorno 2002, p. 232).

Benjamin wrote that the “content” of the work of art does not show itself in the isolated artwork itself, but rather through historical reconstructions of the artwork’s *relationship to* history, which cannot be found in the work of art alone (OGT, p. 91). For instance, he argued that it was only in the light of the Baroque concept of sovereignty and the by no means aesthetic, absolutist legal relations that the interrelationship of Baroque martyr and tyrant dramas became apparent. The drama of the tyrant and the drama of the martyr, Benjamin wrote, “retain their curious parallelism only so long as one overlooks the juristic aspect of Baroque monarchy” (OGT, p. 54). If we stick to Benjamin’s methodological self-descriptions, one could say that Benjamin studied art and literature at least until about 1923 to avoid getting too involved with political history, or only and insofar as it can be found inside the artwork alone.

In the first half of the 1920s, the distance of the educationally privileged philosopher and critic Benjamin from the public opinion corresponded to a concept of the ‘passive-consuming public’ that he retained for several years, even after his turn to communism in 1924. In his literary-critical practice until 1926, the negative judgment of the public [*Publikum*] implied a claim to leadership for the critic in the interpretation of art and history vis-à-vis the ‘public.’ It was not until 1927 that Benjamin began to see a real challenge in the task of presenting a difficult book or author to the wider public, like in his review “Three Frenchmen” [“Drei Franzosen”] of three books by Paul Souday on Marcel Proust, Paul Valéry and André Gide from October 1927 (WuN 13.1, p. 86; GS III, p. 80). Still, in *One-Way Street* [*Einbahnstraße*], published one year later, Benjamin stated in “The Critic’s Technique in Thirteen Theses” that his “higher authority” was “his colleagues,” “[n]ot the public. Still less, posterity” (SW 1, p. 460). The “strategist in the literary struggle” with the commandment “He who cannot take sides must keep silent” (*ibid.*) implied an ambivalent, if not authoritarian, form of relationship between the ‘public’ and critic. In the final thesis, Benjamin maintained the elitist demarcation of the critic from his readers, but strategically camouflaged as an apparent mandate of the public by the critic: “The public must always be proved wrong, yet always feel represented by the critic” (*ibid.*). This corresponded to the formulation in thesis XI, which

considered the critic to be ‘above’ the public, the eminent ‘spirit,’ who, as such, according to thesis XII, should “coin slogans,” “without betraying ideas” (ibid.).

3. *Study projects on elitist traditions since the second half of the 1920s by Gramsci and Benjamin*

Even though Gramsci was quite far away from such a concept of criticism, it is precisely for this reason that a common feature that characterizes his and Benjamin’s works in the second half of the 1920s is astonishing: the confrontation with the literary and philosophical traditions of their countries in relation to the problem of the public sphere and the rise of fascism. Gramsci first wrote about it in a four-part study plan in his letter of 19 March 1927 to Tatiana Schucht. It was not even half a year after his arrest, the suspension of freedom of the press, and the ban on most parties. Gramsci planned “a study of the formation of the public spirit in Italy during the last century; in other words, a study of Italian intellectuals, their origins, their groupings in accordance with cultural currents, and their various modes of thinking” [“una ricerca sulla formazione dello spirito pubblico in Italia nel secolo scorso; in altre parole, una ricerca sugli intellettuali italiani, le loro origini, i loro raggruppamenti secondo le correnti della cultura, i loro diversi modi di pensare”]. What is astonishing is that for Gramsci a study on intellectuals, “their origins, their groupings according to cultural currents,” is the flip side [“in altre parole”] of an investigation of the “formation of public spirit in Italy in the last century.”<sup>7</sup>

Gramsci’s path to this approach can be better understood from his changing statements on Futurism. In the early article “The Futurists” [“I futuristi”], published in the *Corriere Universitario* in 1913, Gramsci defended the Futurists, who as “newcomers have too much vitality to be forced to withdraw by the whispers and murmurs of the gossipers” (Gramsci 2012, p. 49). Gramsci could overlook a cult of masculinity and the fact that Futurists like Marinetti celebrated “militarism” and “war” as “the only hygiene of the world” (Marinetti 1909 / 2009, p. 51). He was, moreover, obviously attracted by Marinetti’s call to create an art on the basis of a historical ‘tabula rasa’ and the rejection of every bourgeois

<sup>7</sup> Gramsci to Tania Schucht, letter of 19 March 1927 (Gramsci 1996, p. 86; trans. taken from Gramsci 1994b; cf. also Gramsci 2012, p. 2).

tradition: “We intend to destroy museums, libraries, academies of every sort, and to fight against moralism, feminism, and every utilitarian or opportunistic cowardice” (ibid.). In “Is Marinetti a Revolutionary?,” published in *L’Ordine Nuovo* on 5 January 1921, Gramsci continued to defend the Futurists under the assumption of a “proletarian culture” that would be “totally different from the bourgeois one” (Gramsci 2000, p. 74), which is why the destruction of bourgeois culture was the commandment that the Futurists followed. For Gramsci, this meant “destroy[ing] spiritual hierarchies, prejudices, idols and ossified traditions. It means not to be afraid of innovations and audacities, not to be afraid of monsters, not to believe that the world will collapse if a worker makes grammatical mistakes” (ibid.). Even in the field of politics and economics, Gramsci stated, the socialists did not have as precise a conception as the thoroughly “revolutionary” and “Marxist” conception of the Futurists had “in the field of culture” (ibid.). Gramsci’s sympathy for the perspective of creating a new culture of workers *ex nihilo* went hand in hand with a firm statement for the Futurists. It was at the same time a conception of a purely proletarian revolution in which alliance issues were of little consideration – a position that Gramsci would later criticize.

In Gramsci’s letter to Trotsky on Futurism from 8 September 1922, published in Trotsky’s collection of essays *Literature and Revolution* (1924), which Benjamin also read – a month and a half before the fascist “March on Rome,” a changed position emerged. Gramsci now argued for a more social-historical approach and evaluated the Futurist statements on the First World War. In his eyes, they hardly offered any arguments for the Futurist movement. Within the dissolving Futurist movement, he now distinguished between different political currents: “The participants in the movement at the present moment include monarchists, communists, republicans and Fascists” (Gramsci 1994a, p. 244). This more austere assessment was influenced by the war and the statements of the Futurists regarding it, because with the exception of Giovanni Papini, according to Gramsci, “the most important exponents of Futurism” became “the most resolute supporters of ‘war to the bitter end’ and imperialism” (ibid.). Gramsci thereby drew on an argument from the perspective of the reception. The popularity of the Futurists among workers had been high before

the war. A full 80% of the total circulation of their magazine *Lacerba* (20,000 copies) had been read by workers (cf. Gramsci 1994a, p. 245). This had now changed: “The workers, who saw in Futurism the elements of a struggle against the old Italian culture – academic, dried-up, alien from the people – are now in the midst of an armed struggle for freedom and have little interest in the old debates. In the major industrial cities, the Proletkult programme, which aims to awaken workers’ literary and artistic creativity, absorbs the energy of those who still have the time and the inclination to worry about this sort of thing” (p. 246).

Gramsci’s temporary interest in *Proletkult* positions cannot be found in Benjamin’s work.<sup>8</sup> Gramsci’s position developed further after the fascists’ “March on Rome” at the end of October 1922. Previously, together with Amadeo Bordiga, he had rejected the United Front policy of the Comintern (cf. Adamson 1980 / 2002, pp. 359-60), which initially lasted until 1928. Now, he criticized Bordiga’s ‘sectarian politics,’ which Lenin had made the object of criticism in his *Left-Wing Communism* (cf. LCW 31, p. 113), and concluded that the conditions for a revolution in Western Europe were different from those in Russia. In Western Europe, cultural preparatory work was necessary; in Russia, on the other hand, a revolution had succeeded in a country in which bourgeois society had never been able to gain a solid foothold. In Gramsci’s anti-fascist theory of literature, literary and philosophical traditions now played a decisive role in the later elaboration of the concept of hegemony. Therefore, after his return to Italy on 12 May 1924, Gramsci sought to strengthen the influence of the Communist Party by building bridges to the southern Italian peasants (Adamson 1980 / 2002, p. 360). In this way, for Gramsci, the history of “cultural currents” in relation to the “formation of public spirit” became a problem to be historically examined.

A similar question can be found for Benjamin in his notes “Program for Literary Criticism” [“Programm der literarischen Kritik”], which he wrote around 1930 (cf. SW 2, pp. 289-96). Benjamin intended to bring them into the form of a programmatic essay, “The Task of the Critic” [“Die Aufgabe des Kritikers”], which was conceived as an introductory part of a book project approved by

<sup>8</sup> But see his acknowledgments of it during his trip to Moscow in the *Moscow Diary* (GS 4, p. 387) and in “Piscator and Russland” (GS 4, p. 544).

the Rowohlt publishing house at the beginning of 1930. The book was supposed to contain the larger essays “Der Surrealismus” and “Karl Kraus” (Kaulen 1990, pp. 318-9). When the publishing house ran into difficulties in 1931 due to the economic crisis, the project failed. Nevertheless, central segments of the text found their way into texts written at the same time, such as the review of Siegfried Kracauer’s *Die Angestellten*, “Left-Wing Melancholy” or the essay “Karl Kraus”. The collection of theses and reflections also contained work instructions and study projects. Thus, Benjamin formulated in the 5<sup>th</sup> thesis of his ‘program,’ “the following critical work of enlightenment should be deployed” (SW 2, p. 289). “Germany’s reading public [*Leserkreis*] has a highly peculiar structure. It can be divided into two roughly equal parts: ‘the public’ [*das Publikum*] and ‘the literary circles’ [*die Zirkel*]. There is scarcely any overlap between the two. The public regards literature as an instrument of entertainment, animation, or the deepening of sociability – a pastime in a higher or lower sense. The literary circles regard books as books of life, as sources of wisdom, as the statutes of their small groups – groups that alone bring bliss” (ibid.). The theses point to the virulent significance that Benjamin attributed to this comparison of literary relations, presumably set against France.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, they bear witness to efforts to attain a historical understanding, since the distance-marking quotation marks<sup>10</sup> used for ‘public’ and ‘literary circle’ indicate two things. First, Benjamin abandoned the normative concept of the passive-consuming public, which was maintained up until his *One-Way Street*, as outlined earlier in this article. Second, however, he regarded the split into ‘circles’ and ‘the public’ not only as something historically generated but also as something specifically German, at the latest from this point on, since the assessment referred to ‘a highly peculiar structure’ of “Germany’s reading public.” He described the

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Benjamin’s formulation in the context of an interview with the French right-wing journalist and politician Georges Valois, who at the time tried to organize a fascist movement in France. The text appeared in *Die Literarische Welt* in the series “The Great Contradictions of our Time. A Series of Articles and Interviews in Antithetical Order” [“Die großen Gegensätze unserer Zeit. Eine Reihe Artikel und Interviews in antithetischer Anordnung”]. In France, according to Benjamin, “the space for sects is narrow,” and the French public understands as hardly any other “on political wit” (GS IV, p. 489).

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin consistently used quotation marks for the terms ‘audience’ and ‘circle’ in the 5<sup>th</sup> thesis (GS VI, pp. 161-2). In the English translation, the quotation marks are understandably only used at the beginning.

action of tracing back the literature of the ‘circles’ as a “by no means risk-free job of enlightenment,” at the same time, “a preliminary study for the history of sectarianism in Germany in the twentieth century” (SW 2, p. 290). It is remarkable how close Benjamin’s and Gramsci’s analyses of their respective countries of origin are, where fascism could come to power and which forced Benjamin into exile and Gramsci into prison.

. In the 21<sup>st</sup> of the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci wrote about the “very restricted meaning” of the “national” in Italy, which “does not in any case coincide with ‘popular’ because in Italy the intellectuals are distant from the people,” [“in Italia gli intellettuali sono lontani dal popolo”]; they are “tied instead to a caste tradition [“legati a una tradizione di casta”] that has never been broken by a strong popular or national political movement from below” (Gramsci 2012, p. 208; Gramsci 1975, Q21§5, p. 2116). The intellectuals, according to Gramsci, “do not know and sense their [the people’s] needs, aspirations and feelings”; they are “something detached, without foundation, a caste and not an articulation with organic functions of the people themselves” (p. 209). For Benjamin, in turn, it was obviously not yet clear what this “highly potent and rapid development of sectarianism” reached back to (SW 2, p. 290). But like Gramsci, he estimated its political significance to be quite high: “We can only predict that it will be the authentic form of the barbarism to which Germany will succumb if Communism fails to conquer.” (ibid.) Benjamin’s critique of the ‘circles’ was given the characteristic “of the absence of any relationship to collective activity” (ibid.).

This strong judgment by Benjamin may be surprising. However, it was the time of the political rise of German fascism, which had become all too visible after the apparently sudden success of the NSDAP in the September 1930 elections. In these elections, the Nazi party was able to increase its results from 2.6% in 1928 to 18.3%, and was now the second-strongest faction in the Reichstag. During this period, the democratic forms in the Weimar Republic quickly disintegrated. At the end of March 1930, the governing coalition of the SPD, Zentrum, Deutsche Volkspartei (DVP) and Deutsche Demokratische Partei (DDP) broke down over the question of how to deal with the unemployment insurance, which had only been introduced in July 1927, and the granting of loans

for the construction of battle cruisers. After previous compromises, a majority within the SPD was not willing to make further concessions to their coalition partners. It was not until December 1929, after the outbreak of the crisis, that the SPD Reichstag faction decided to increase unemployment insurance contributions, and an opposition within the Social Democratic Party began to grow. This opposition referred to the SPD election program of May 1928 (“Apartments instead of armored cruisers – vote SPD!”) and founded the Socialist Workers’ Party in Autumn 1931 around the left-wing party organ *Der Klassenkampf* [*The Class Struggle*], against armament and further cuts to social services. Within the German KPD, the course of the ultra-left wing that had already prevailed between April 1924 and the end of 1925 was resumed in 1928, and in June 1929 it was programmatically established at the Wedding Party Congress. The ‘social fascism’ theory adopted at the 6<sup>th</sup> World Congress of the Comintern in July and August 1928 meant the turning away of the communist parties from the social democratic ones as allies, at the level of Communist International. This strategy, which ultimately isolated the KPD, was based on the assessment that the working class would automatically join the communist parties in a crisis. Against the KPD leadership, an opposition within the KPD insisted on a United Front strategy (such as Heinrich Brandler, Jakob Walcher, August Thalheimer and Eduard Fuchs), members of which were expelled from the KPD or resigned. They founded the Platform Communist Party Opposition (KPO) in December 1928, with the weekly magazine *Gegen den Strom* [*Against the Current*].

In 1932, Benjamin mentioned only in passing that a left united front was desirable.<sup>11</sup> His interest in the policies of individual parties cannot be compared to that of Gramsci. But an interest became apparent in his studies of the educational and cultural politics of the SPD journal *Die Neue Zeit* (1883–1923) in Danish exile at Brecht’s in 1934.<sup>12</sup> More strongly, on the other hand, he

<sup>11</sup> See Benjamin’s review “Der Irrtum des Aktivismus. Zu Kurt Hillers ‘Der Sprung ins Helle’” (WuN 13.1, p. 380 or GS III, p. 350).

<sup>12</sup> See Benjamin’s excerpts from the journal *Die Neue Zeit* (1883–1923), the theoretical organ of the Social Democratic Party (Walter Benjamin Archive, Berlin, Ms 1394-1707). In 1934, in Bertolt Brecht’s home in Svendborg, Benjamin excerpted over 220 essays and made bibliographical notes of over 50 others from the journal in order to gain access to the educational and cultural policy orientation of the SPD and its theoretical premises. He took the material with him to Paris in October 1934. Ernest Belfort Bax, Friedrich Engels, Henriette

stressed the need for intellectuals to concern themselves with the labor movement. In “Left-Wing Melancholy” (1931), he criticized writers Erich Kästner, Walter Mehring and Kurt Tucholsky for their lack of interest in the labor movement (SW 2, p. 424) and continued: “Left-radical publicists of the stamp of Kästner, Mehring, and Tucholsky are the decayed bourgeoisie’s mimicry of the proletariat. Their function is to give rise, politically speaking, not to parties but to cliques; literarily speaking, not to schools but to fashions; economically speaking, not to producers but to agents” (ibid.). Even though Benjamin never became a member of a political party, this passage published in the main theoretical organ of the SPD, *Die Gesellschaft*, shows how much Benjamin’s political positioning had changed between 1928 and 1931. It is not too easily compatible with the public image of Benjamin as a constantly ‘nonconformist’ intellectual. This is all the more the case as for Benjamin the necessary correspondence to political practice in 1931 became a literary-critical yardstick: “In short, this left-wing radicalism is precisely the attitude to which there is no longer, in general, any corresponding political action. It is not to the left of this or that tendency, but simply to the left of what is in general possible” (SW 1, p. 425).

To situate Benjamin’s positioning here within his own development, a short sketch of Benjamin’s intellectual self-understanding and his publication practice at the beginning of the 1920s would help to make the changes Benjamin underwent up to 1931 clearer. Benjamin’s publication of his essay on Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* or the treatise “Fate and Character” [“Schicksal und Charakter”] in the literary monthly *Die Argonauten* (1914–1921), published by Richard Weißbach, was characteristic of the publication strategy of his non-academic works of the early 1920s. After Benjamin had refused Weißbach’s offer to take over the journal from the editor Ernst Blass, Weißbach suggested Benjamin found his own newspaper to replace *Die Argonauten*. This led to the conception of the journal *Angelus Novus*, which Benjamin planned together with Scholem without being able to actualize it. With a small circulation of 300 copies, it was to be published in four issues per year with 120 pages

Roland-Holst, Paul Lafargue, Rosa Luxemburg, Oda Olberg, Anton Pannekoek, David Rjazanov, Leo Trotsky, Emil Vandervelde and Clara Zetkin were among those who wrote for the journal and whose articles Benjamin excerpted (Cf. Voigt 2015).

each and could be subscribed to for a subscription fee of 150 marks per annum. Benjamin also agreed in the contract that Weißbach would produce “a smaller number of copies in luxury editions at increased prices.”<sup>13</sup> According to Benjamin’s plan, in order to make it possible to publish free copies marked as sample copies to the “real, non-paying public,” the subscription should be understood as a “sponsored institution so that the journal does not have to cater to the public’s every whim” (Benjamin to Scholem, 8.8.1921, GB 2, p. 183). The contributions for the first issue would be poems by Christoph Friedrich Heinle, dramatic poems by his brother Wolf, essays by Florens Christian Rang and Scholem, and Benjamin’s essay “The Task of the Translator” [“Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers”].<sup>14</sup> Benjamin’s publication practice at this time is characterized by the calculation on wealthy patrons and the distancing attitude towards the public in favor of selected friends and intellectuals, a “real, non-paying public.” This corresponded to the ‘uniqueness’ of the chosen historical “model,” as Benjamin wrote in the “Announcement of the Journal *Angelus Novus*” (cf. SW 1, pp. 292-3).

With some differences, Benjamin had oriented his conceptual ideas towards Friedrich Schlegel’s journal *Athenaeum*, founded in 1798. The journal went hand in hand with Schlegel’s elaboration of ‘progressive universal poetry’ and marked a retreat to the small circle as the mode of its realization. One year earlier, Schlegel had defended the Jacobin Georg Forster, who died in exile in Paris in 1794, against attacks by Friedrich Schiller and Johann Wolfgang Goethe in their *Xenien*. In his “Fragment on a Characteristic of the German Classic” [“Georg Forster. Fragment einer Charakteristik der deutschen Klassiker”] of 1797, Schlegel reviewed Forster as a ‘societal writer’ in a relation to the public opinion.<sup>15</sup> The exclusive association of selected intellectuals in Benjamin’s conception of the magazine tolerated the productive dissent between the contributors and, in this respect, differed from the school-forming community concept in the George Circle and the *Blätter für die Kunst* (1892–

<sup>13</sup> See the contract with Richard Weißbach, which Benjamin attached to his letter to Scholem of 8 August 1921 (GB II, p. 184).

<sup>14</sup> For the journal project *Angelus Novus*, see Kaulen 1999, pp. 921-8 and Steiner 2006/2011, pp. 301-8.

<sup>15</sup> Schlegel 1967, pp. 79-80. In his own dissertation, *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*, Benjamin in contrast to Pingoud (Pingoud 1914, p. 38-9) had not dealt with Schlegel’s Forster review.

1919),<sup>16</sup> which was bound by authority. But, with its “antithetics towards the bourgeois public, its elitist programmatic and its cult for individual persons,” the project, according to Heinrich Kaulen, had “numerous points of contact” with the “*Blätter*” (Kaulen 1999, p. 926).

It was not until about 1926 that changes in Benjamin’s literary criticism became apparent, most clearly in the distancing described above, which Benjamin had carried out since that time, starting with the concept of the consuming public. This development continued. Precisely because Benjamin, like Gramsci, saw the rise of the political right in connection with the problem of elitist, socially detached intellectuals, further developments occurred, which can be regarded as a confrontation with Nietzsche’s and Wyneken’s legacies. In 1929, Benjamin evaluated the French literary movement of surrealism, among other things, with regard to two tasks of the “revolutionary intelligentsia”: “to overthrow the intellectual predominance of the bourgeoisie and to make contact with the proletarian masses” (SW 2, p. 217). From this, Benjamin developed the concept of a writing strategy around 1930 that addressed the left bourgeois intelligentsia.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, Benjamin began to deal with radical democratic traditions, like the young Karl Marx, in his essay on Karl Kraus (SW 2, pp. 454-5) and the Jacobin Georg Forster in his anthological works such as the series of *German Letters* [*Deutsche Briefe*], published in 1931 in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* (SW 2, pp. 465-7) and *German Men and Women* [*Deutsche Menschen*] published in 1936 as a book by the Swiss publisher Vita-Nova (SW 3, pp. 173-4; for Benjamin’s reception of Forster, see Peitsch 2001, pp. 115-22). The extent to which Benjamin’s intellectual self-understanding had changed from that of *One-Way Street* can be seen in his confrontation with the concept of a ‘free-floating intelligence’ as advocated by Karl Mannheim in his book *Ideology and Utopia* in 1929 (Voigt 2018, pp. 226-38). Writers and critics, Benjamin claimed now in “Left-Wing Melancholy,” must separate themselves from neither the public nor the labor movement; they must not withdraw in leftist melancholy and “negativistic quiet” (SW 2, p. 425). Instead, they had to relate their own work to the “political” and “ideological” forces in society

<sup>16</sup> This difference has been ignored by Gert Mattenklott, possibly due to the unquestioned concept of a rather homogeneous “*Gemeinschaft*” that Mattenklott adopted (Mattenklott 2005, p. 284).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Matthias Schmidt’s article in this volume.

(SW 2, p. 424). In the discussions surrounding the preparation of the journal project *Crisis and Criticism* [*Krisis und Kritik*], Benjamin insisted in September 1930: “No intellectual today should go to a platform and make a claim, instead we work under the control of public opinion, we do not lead (Benjamin quotes from: Wizisla 2009, p. 203). In relation to the concept of intellectual leadership of *One-Way Street*, this meant quite a change.

This shift paved the way for an interest in reception theory (cf. Garber 1987, pp. 16-9, pp. 37-44; Kaulen 1987, pp. 91-197; Kaulen 1990, p. 333) and therefore in the literary historical works by Franz Mehring, an interest which, despite their differences, Benjamin<sup>18</sup> shared with Leo Löwenthal and Georg Lukács. The interest stemmed from a double and combined perspective. On the one hand, the study of historical changes and their possible causes in the reception of literature allowed a more critical look at current literary historiographies and the literary canon. In this way, Mehring had attacked the nationalistic and conservative image of Lessing held by the literary historians and professors of German literature at the Friedrich-Wilhelm Universität in Berlin, Wilhelm Scherer and Erich Schmidt in *The Lessing Legend* (1893) [*Die Lessing-Legende*]. Scherer and Schmidt had turned Lessing into an admirer of Frederick II, and a liberal literary historian like Werner Mahrholz, whom Benjamin read, had acknowledged Mehring’s “pertinent” criticism in 1923 (Mahrholz 1923, p. 86). On the other hand, instead of distancing art from the consuming public, reception theory gave access to socially shared traditions of a certain time. This challenged Benjamin’s method of interpreting history through the art work alone and, in this respect, corresponded to Gramsci’s interest in popular literature.

<sup>18</sup> See Benjamin’s essay “Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian” [“Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und der Historiker”] (SW 3, pp. 262-3). Franz Mehring was one of the frequently quoted authors in Benjamin’s excerpts from the journal *Die Neue Zeit*. Benjamin’s aesthetic philosophy of history during the early 1920s programmatically refrained from studying the reception of works of art, as Benjamin formulated it in his introductory essay “The Task of the Translator”: “In the appreciation of a work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful. Not only is any reference to a particular public or its representatives misleading, but even the concept of an ‘ideal’ receiver is detrimental in the theoretical consideration of art, since all it posits is the existence and nature of man as such. Art, in the same way, posits man’s physical and spiritual existence, but in none of its works is it concerned with his attentiveness. No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the audience” (SW 1, p. 253).

4. *On Gramsci's preoccupation with Benedetto Croce's view on World War I*

In his "Notes on the Russian Revolution" of 29 April 1917, Gramsci had identified Jacobinism with the purely bourgeois of the French Revolution (cf. Bianchi and Mussi 2017). His view changed during the 1920s. The lack of a living Jacobin tradition in both Italy and Germany now played an important role for Benjamin and Gramsci in terms of the possible emergence of fascist movements and their attainment of governmental power. Just as Gramsci was skeptical about the assumption of pure spontaneity in the mass movement (cf. Sotiris 2019, p. 17), so Benjamin in the 1930s admitted that questions of workers' education played a decisive role in their social emancipation. Since about 1930, he had been guided by the assumption that the absence of radical democratic traditions in Germany was of great significance for the country's reactionary developments.

This idea forms part of the background to Gramsci's preoccupation with liberalism in Italy and one of its main representatives, the Hegelian Benedetto Croce. Gramsci owed much to Croce. He, along with Antonio Labriola, was one of his most important teachers. And, last but not least, the recognition of the impact of philosophical and literary traditions throughout history was an element shared by Gramsci and Croce. At the same time, Gramsci criticized the specific nature of the 'ethico-political' synthesis in Croce's conception of history, in which the influence of political debates and struggles throughout history hardly mattered (Gramsci 2012, p. 105 and 1995, p. 344; Q10I§7, p. 1223).

According to Gramsci, Croce could not become aware of the tradition of liberalism in which he operated because he had not dealt with the socio-historical context in which liberalism originated in Italy. In a comparison of the Risorgimento with the French Jacobins, who Gramsci now assessed positively, he emphasized an essential condition of Italian unity since 1861 in the Risorgimento: it had been a unity 'from above,' which even the democrats around Giuseppe Mazzini (1805–1872) had not succeeded in achieving with a liberation program for and together with the peasants (Bellamy 1992 / 2002, p. 140). Instead, the democrats had agreed to compromises with the owners of large farmlands. The liberal democrats, Gramsci said, were afraid of both the Jacobins in France and the peasants, because they feared uprisings. According

to Gramsci, Croce had a share in this development through an elitist lack of interest in a broad-based enlightenment that could have allowed large segments of the population to participate in it. He had dismissed the weakness of liberal traditions as something insignificant and abstracted it from the fact that the dominant cultural currents in Italy separated themselves from the population, hung in the air, so to speak, and formed a caste (Bellamy 1992 / 2002, p. 138). Croce's view of history, therefore, formed an instance of what Gramsci noted in Notebook 21 under "Connections of Problems": "7) the unpopularity of the Risorgimento or the indifference of the masses towards the struggle for independence and national unity; 8) the political non-involvement of the Italian people, expressed in the phrases 'rebellionism', 'subversivism' and a primitive and elementary 'anti-statism'" (Gramsci 2012, pp. 200-1, Q21§1, pp. 2108). Because Gramsci criticized Croce for drawing lines between disciplines and the Crocean synthesis of an "ethico-political history" (Gramsci 2012, p. 104 and 1995, p. 343; Q10I §7, p. 1222) in his "Reference Points for an Essay on B. Croce" ("Punti di riferimento per un saggio su B. Croce"), Gramsci wanted to focus on Croce's attitude during World War I as the "the guideline for understanding the reasons underlying his subsequent activity as a philosopher and leader of European culture."<sup>19</sup> According to Gramsci, this "attitude" pointed out "what intellectual and moral (and, thus, also social) interests prevail even today in his literary and philosophical activity."<sup>20</sup> Croce never accepted that the war between Italy and Germany was one of 'civilization' against 'barbarism' or 'morality' vs. 'immorality.' In his opinion, however, intellectuals should not bring themselves down to the 'level' of the masses but rather realize that the masses would never reach the level of intellectuals (Finocchiaro 1979/2002, p. 145). Gramsci, therefore, saw in Croce's historical works a fear of mass movements as a factor in political progress, which is also expressed by the fact that Croce was not at all interested in the activities of parties in his historiography (Gramsci 2012, p. 105 and 1995, p. 344; Q10I§7, p. 1223).

<sup>19</sup> "L'atteggiamento del Croce durante la guerra mondiale come punto di orientamento per comprendere i motivi della sua attività posteriore di filosofo e di leader della cultura europea" (Gramsci 1975, Q10I <Summary>, p. 1207; Gramsci 1995, p. 328).

<sup>20</sup> "L'atteggiamento del Croce durante la neutralità e la guerra indica quali interessi intellettuali e morali (e quindi sociali) predominano anche oggi nella sua attività letteraria e filosofica" (Gramsci 1995; p. 333; 1975, Q10I§1, pp. 1211-2).

Gramsci's remarks prove to be appropriate. In his *History of Europe in the Nineteenth Century* [*Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono*], published in Italian in 1932 and translated into English in 1933, Croce attributed the outbreak of World War I to an 'activist' state of mind. For Croce, it was less an "imperialism" or even a "nationalism" that had led to the war but rather an "activism" which arose when the Hegelian principle of "liberty is deprived of its moral soul" (Croce 1933, p. 342). This activism, said Croce, "leads to the domination of the individual over individuals, to the enslavement of others and therefore of itself, to the depression of personality" (p. 343). The outline of this history of ideas in Croce's account was not only abstracted from the efforts of left-wing groups in the European social democratic parties to prevent a world war. Rather, he blamed them for 'activism' (cf. pp. 340-1).

##### 5. Conclusion

As different as Benjamin's and Gramsci's theoretical and political developments may be, they overlap in similar analyses and interests in relation to the problem of elitist traditions. Some results may seem less relevant today, such as the question of 'national unity' in Gramsci. However, even though the two are connected, it is important to distinguish between the results and questions of the time on the one hand and the methods of their treatment on the other. The virulence with which Gramsci and Benjamin returned to developments far back in time when fascism was currently emerging shows that emphasis was placed on the inheritance of traditions, their context of origin and their relation to the present. Gramsci's positions could also be understood as an objection to the assumption made by Gustave Le Bon and José Ortega y Gasset, which continues to be encountered today,<sup>21</sup> namely that the intellectual is 'intelligent' while the masses are 'emotional,' easily influenced or 'average.' Gramsci and especially early Benjamin also have tendencies in this direction. However, these tendencies are counteracted by the fact that, as Gramsci had written, people judge their social relations with the terms and words available to them. In his 1918 essay "The Russian Utopia," ["Utopia"] Gramsci wrote: "It is not the economic structure that directly determines political action, but rather the interpretation given to it and to the so-called

<sup>21</sup> See Fontana for such a reading of Gramsci (2015, p. 58 and 68).

laws that govern its development” (SW 1, p. 46). In their discussions of (the rise of) fascism in Italy and Germany, Gramsci and Benjamin arrive at positions that emphasize the connection between social and cultural history, which is not always evident in cultural studies today. They shared the view that elitist traditions were at least helpless against a political development to the right, or even played a part in it. In April 1942, Ernst Bloch published an article entitled “The Nazi Stews in his Own Juice” [“Der Nazi kocht im eigenen Saft”] in the Mexican exile journal *Freies Deutschland*, in which he argued that Nazis did not need any philosophy or literature from the past but created “bloodhounds of capital” from “millions of dull anti-capitalists” without any philosophical or literary tradition (Bloch 1942, p. 17). In this way, Bloch separated the rise of fascism in Germany from any cultural tradition whatsoever. His friend Walter Benjamin had argued against such an assumption in the essay “Eduard Fuchs, Collector and the Historian” five years earlier, believing that the isolation of a concept of culture from social history was a ‘problematic unity’ (SW 3, p. 267). It cannot only be accompanied by the illusion of a pure, good ‘culture’ but also by the illusion of an abstract progress within it.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See SW 3, pp. 261 and 291, fn. 25 for this critique.

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