



Recordando a

Walter Benjamin

Justicia, Historia y Verdad. *Escrituras de la Memoria.*

III SEMINARIO INTERNACIONAL
POLITICAS DE LA MEMORIA

CENTRO CULTURAL DE LA MEMORIA HAROLDO CONTI
Buenos Aires - Argentina

The revolution is man-made

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Abstract

Walter Benjamin's political account of revolutions reminds us of a very banal fact: that of the role of human beings in a revolution.

A revolution is only won or lost in the collectivity of human beings. It takes place on a specific street such as the "Boulevard de Bonnes Nouvelles" filled with the masses, running and shooting.

Benjamin calls it a "*Leibraum*". This factor brings a dimension to the revolution, which is not conceived of in a vulgar translation of Marxism such as that pursued by the social democrats.

The paper wishes to analyse the human side in past and potential revolutions, along Benjamin's lines. What is the dimension of the human being in a revolution? In his "thesis on history" Benjamin detects in essence a different relation to time than that perceived of by concepts such as Karl Kautsky's belief in an evolutionary mechanistic development towards revolution that transcends human intervention. The human relation to time instead introduces ruptures into the continuity of the ticking clock and is rooted in an emotional and affective relation to moments in time. The memory of an injustice causes feelings of revenge, scorn and hatred and thus can provoke action that seems to stop time or interrupt the mechanical time, ticking away in an endless empty space.

But the human dimension goes "deeper": re-connecting these writings with his text on language and especially human language can provide a deeper understanding of the human dimension in revolution as well as Benjamin's understanding of anthropology as such. It shows that the dimension of the human being is always a messianic one. It includes the fiction of the human origin. The paper tries to illuminate the implications of this thesis and to link them back to the original question of the human dimension in a revolution.

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The revolution is man-made

Walter Benjamin's political account of revolutions reminds us of a very banal fact: that of the role of human beings in a revolution.

A revolution is only won or lost in the presence of human beings, their collaboration and confrontation. It takes place on a specific street such as the "Boulevard de Bonnes Nouvelles" in the 19th century or giving a more recent example Teheran's streets and squares in 2009 filled with masses of people, calling for change while running and shooting (being shot), dying and killing (being killed).

The events in Teheran in June 2009 brought these truths once again close to our eyes and into the presence. The revolution is made of people risking their life for political change and a transformation of their every day life. The killing of a young woman on Teheran's streets became a symbol of the commitment of a rebellion or uprising: A 40-second "YouTube" video shows her suddenly falling to sidewalk, shot in the heart. Her eyes turn to what must be a cell-phone camera, wide and shocked, dying as we stare at her. Men rush to her side and try to stanch the wound, but blood trickles from her mouth. By the end of the day, people on "Twitter" had given her a name: "Neda", which means voice or call in Farsi.

Benjamin calls the event of a revolution a *Leibraum*, a *corporal space*, which means a space in its temporal actuality filled with the physical presence of a collectivity of human beings.

It might seem obvious that a revolution has a human dimension, but this was not conceived of in a vulgar translation of Marxism such as that pursued by the Social Democrats in the beginning of 20th century. They had proposed a rather scientific and rationalised process towards revolution: the collapse of the capitalist system by its own mechanism, the accumulation of capital.

So what is the dimension of the human being in past and potential revolutions, along Benjamin's lines?

In his theses "On the Concept of History (1940)" Benjamin detects in essence a different relation to time than that perceived of by the tradition of the Social Democrats who believed in an evolutionary mechanistic development towards revolution that transcends human



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intervention. Karl Kautski, a very influential leader of the Social Democrats in Germany at the end of the 19th and in the beginning of the 20th century, declared that it was located outside of their range of power to initiate a revolution. In his book “Der Weg zur Macht”, first published in 1909, he writes:

We know that our goals can only be reached through a revolution, but we know as well that it does not stand in our range of power to make this revolution as well as it does not stand in the power of our enemies to prevent it. Thus it does not cross our mind to ignite or prepare a revolution. And as the revolution cannot be made arbitrarily we cannot say anything about its conditions and the form it will take (*translation by the author*).²

Benjamin proposes instead that the human relation to time introduces ruptures into the continuity of the ticking clock and is rooted in an affective relation to moments in time. The memory of an injustice causes feelings of revenge, scorn and hatred and thus can provoke action that seems to stop or interrupt the mechanical time, ticking away in an endless empty space.

Time is not universal, but filled with singular experiences, with specific moments in history that have been torn out of the progressive timeline because they mean something special to us. Benjamin calls these moments *Now-time*. Moments that make the watches come to a standstill and as such can possibly trigger a new beginning from scratch. Benjamin illustrates his conception of time by an episode of the French Revolution in which people were literally shooting at clocks in order to stop the time.

² Karl Kautsky, *Der Weg zur Macht. Politische Betrachtungen über das Hineinwachsen in die Revolution*, Buchhandlung Vorwärts, Berlin, 1909, p. 57, “Wir wissen, daß unsere Ziele nur durch eine Revolution erreicht werden können, wir wissen aber auch, daß es ebensowenig in unserer Macht steht, diese Revolution zu machen, als in der unserer Gegner, sie zu verhindern. Es fällt uns daher auch gar nicht ein, eine Revolution anstiften oder vorbereiten zu wollen. Und da die Revolution von uns nicht willkürlich gemacht werden kann, können wir auch nicht das mindeste darüber sagen, wann und unter welchen Bedingungen und in welchen Formen die eintreten wird.”



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It is not the time that touches historical events but the other way round historical events touch the time. Calendars are an indicator of the fact that history is constructed because they are more likely to reflect historical ruptures than watches. They have been rewritten several times in the past. The French Revolution was not the first important historical break to start a new Calendar. History is one story among others to tell, only, that the dominant version of history won the battles of domination against the unheard stories of the past and as such appears to be the only true history.

The return to the sources

Besides the interruption of a linear, empty time flow, Benjamin refers in the “Arcades Project (1927-1940)” to a different kind of time dimension embedded in something that he calls the *apocatastic will*, generally meaning the salvation and redemption of humanity in an original moment of paradise. The time dimension of the apocatastic will brings something like the “right moment” to the fore – the right moment for the revolution – and with it, moments before the right moment and after the right moment, a too early and a too late, a first starting and a last collapse and decay inscribed in revolutionary acts.³

It unfolds the mystery of the very moment in which a revolution is happening: Why did the Iranians defy the elections of June 12, 2009? Why did the previous elections in Iran go unheard? Why did the revolution not happen? Why did the protests not succeed? No objective factors alone can give us an explanation. Such a data misses to take into account what is happening between people at some moments and not at others. Ryszard Kapuscinski writes in his famous book on the revolution of Khomeini in 1979 “Shah of Shahs (1982)” that books on revolutions in general begin with a chapter on the corrupt power or on the misery and suffering of the people, yet the first chapter should speak of the psychology of the insurgents, of how it comes that a humiliated and terrified man suddenly breaks the circle of fear.⁴

³ Benjamin, *Passagenwerk*, GS V, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1982, p. 852.

⁴ Ryszard Kapuscinski, *Le Shah* (Szachinszach), transl. Véronique Patte, Flammarion, Paris, 1982/2010, p. 194, “Tous les livres sur toutes les révolutions commencent par un chapitre sur la corruption du pouvoir chancelant ou sur la misère et les souffrances du peuple, alors que le



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Narrowing the reasons of the outbreak of an upheaval down to overcoming fear might be too restrictive, but the thought of Kapuscinski sheds light on the importance of incalculable factors within the interactions of people. Other questions would be for example, how at a certain moment of time the masses begin to form a collectivity that can be characterized by solidarity? And what triggers an interruption of the daily routine? Maybe the moments themselves can shed light on the essence of the right moment, the moment of the *apocatastic will*.

Comparing two initial moments of rebellion, both show that at a certain moment something is different than it used to be, an unexpected break is happening that gives hope or rage to the people as a collective. Ryszard Kapuscinski interprets a seemingly unimportant and anecdotic scene to be the decisive moment for the destiny of the country, of the shah and the revolution of 1979 in Iran: A policeman approaches a man in the crowd, instructing him with a sonorous voice to go home. Both the police officer and the man of the crowd are ordinary, anonymous people, but their encounter shall – according to Kapuscinski – have a historic signification because in this moment things are happening contrary to what we expect and to what we are used to. The policeman shouts, but the man does not move. He remains upright and looks straight at the policeman. Finally the policeman resigns and returns to his previous position.⁵ The “Time Magazine” describes a similar moment, unfortunately with a very different outcome on the day after the elections in Iran in 2009:

premier chapitre devrait parler de la psychologie des insurgés, de la manière dont un homme humilié, terrifié brise soudain le cercle de la peur, dire comment il cesse d’avoir peur.”

⁵ Kapuscinski, *Le Shah*, (Szachinszach), transl. Véronique Patte, Flammarion, Paris, 1982/2010, p. 192, “L’instant où un policier quitte son poste pour aborder un homme dans la foule et, d’une voix sonore, le sommer de rentrer chez lui est décisif ; il va sceller le destin du pays, du shah et de la révolution. Le policier et l’homme de la foule sont tous les deux des êtres ordinaires, anonymes, mais leur rencontre revêt une signification historique.... Cette fois-ci... tout se passe autrement [que comme d’habitude]. Le policier crie, mais l’homme ne prend pas la fuite. Il reste debout et regarde le policier.... [Le policier] finit par se taire.... fait demi-tour et se dirige d’un pas lourd vers son poste.”



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At about 5 p.m., two crowds of several hundred people — both Mousavi and Ahmadinejad supporters — gathered in front of the Ministry of the Interior, just off Jihad Square in central Tehran. They were separated by police lines, but chanting back and forth as they had done all week (during the election campaigns). Suddenly, the police charged into the Mousavi supporters. There were two ranks of police on motorcycles, two policemen per bike, dressed in body armor that made them look like starship troopers. They charged into the crowd, brandishing billy clubs, followed by police on foot, with clubs and shields.⁶

These two recounts of the very moment show how a moment becomes filled with meaning. In the first recount a sign of hope is disseminated, in the second a sign of facing visually collective suppression seeding feelings of revenge and the eagerness to fight back. Both moments have nothing in common with the right or wrong moment to initiate a revolution in the understanding of Karl Kautsky. They are not embedded in an accumulation of objective factors of the reproductive forces that is to be expected in an evolutionary development. Instead they transcend time if you think of time in the sense of a time line or chronology. However locating moments of change in a revival of a past collective moment does not transfer the level of change from the external material relations to a change of attitude (*Gesinnung*) as condition of revolution. Benjamin himself asks: Where are the conditions of a revolution located, in the change of attitude or in exterior relations?⁷ With his sentence, proletarian poets exist only after the revolution⁸, he gives us a hint how he would answer his own question: Instead of passing from a materialistic to an idealistic conception as condition of a revolution, he extends historical materialism by an anthropological dimension and creates a specific notion of anthropological materialism.

⁶ Nahid Siamdoust, in: Time, Teheran, Saturday, June 13, 2009.

⁷ Benjamin, “Der Surrealismus”, in: GS II-1, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1977, p. 309, “Wo liegen die Vorraussetzungen der Revolution? In der Änderung der Gesinnung oder der äußeren Verhältnisse?”

⁸ Benjamin, “Der Surrealismus”, in: GS II-1, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1977, p. 309, “Proletarische Dichter gibt es nur nach der Revolution”.



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So what is the right moment to begin a revolution in the perspective of an anthropological materialist? Benjamin's *apocatastic will* teaches us that the right moment is the moment in which a crowd becomes a collectivity as it touches at the bottom of time and feels a common source of origin. Such a moment is not mythical, but made of a juxtaposition of memory and utopia mixing history and hope.

As such the moment opens up a deepness of time, a profoundness that cuts vertically into the linear time. Benjamin reminds us for example how the French Revolution produced a tigers-leap into the past:

Die französische Revolution verstand sich als ein wieder gekehrtes Rom. Sie zitierte das alte Rom genauso wie die Mode eine vergangene Tracht zitiert. Die Mode hat die Witterung für das Aktuelle, wo immer es sich im Dickicht des Einst bewegt. Sie ist der Tigersprung ins Vergangene.⁹

Although the point of reference is not as past as the ancient Rome, the uprisings in the Iran resurrect as well a past historical moment, the revolution of 1979. In the blog of the Irano-Brit Mehrdad Aref-Adib it reads: "Today's events in Iran remind me of the early days of the Iranian Revolution of 1979."¹⁰ And Slavoj Zizek interprets the happenings in Teheran, in the same spirit, as a comeback to the sources of the revolution of 1979:¹¹

The green colour adopted by the partisans of Moussavi, the screaming "Allah akbar", which were reverberating from the roofs of Teheran in the evening show that they [the Iranians] consider their action as a repetition of the revolution of Khomeini, in 1979,

⁹ Benjamin, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte", Thèse XIV, in: GS I-2, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, p. 701.

¹⁰ Mehrdad Aref-Adib (weblog), June 15, 2009, posted at 11.14 pm, <http://www.aref-adib.com/about.html>

¹¹ Slavoj Zizek, "Teheran en Crise, ou le retour aux sources de la revolution de 1979", in: Le Monde, June 28, 2009.



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as a comeback to its sources of origin, elimination of corruption that followed the revolution (*translation by the author*).¹²

This comeback to the sources is not only programmatic, i.e. based on the agency of an intentional political subject. Benjamin claims that the *corporal space* organises itself in an unpredictable way, in a dialectics between the conscious and the unconscious. He claims that proceedings can also be based on misunderstandings and errors rather than exclusively on political rationality:

Denn auch im Witz, in der Beschimpfung, im Mißverständnis, überall, wo ein Handeln selber das Bild aus sich herausstellt und ist, in sich hineinreißt und frißt, und wo die Nähe sich selbst aus den Augen sieht, tut dieser genannte Bildraum sich auf, die Welt allseitiger und integraler Aktualität, in der die "gute Stube" ausfällt.¹³

His position is mirrored by Zizek's description:

The comeback to the sources is not only programmatic, it is more related to the mode of activity of the crowd: The incontestable unity of the people, the general solidarity, clever self-organisation, the improvisation of the forms of expressing protest, the unique mix of spontaneity and discipline, like the threatening march of thousands in silence. We are concerned with an authentic popular upheaval of the disappointed partisans of the revolution (*translation by the author*).¹⁴

¹² Slavoj Zizek, "Teheran en Crise, ou le retour aux sources de la revolution de 1979", in: *Le Monde*, June 28, 2009, "La couleur verte adoptée par les partisans de Moussavi, les cris "Allah akbar" qui retentissent depuis les toits de Téhéran le soir montrent qu'ils voient leur activité comme la répétition de la révolution de Khomeyni, en 1979, comme un retour à ses sources, l'effacement de la corruption ultérieure de la révolution."

¹³ Benjamin, "Der Sürrealismus", in: *GS II-1*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1977, p. 309.

¹⁴ Slavoj Zizek, "Teheran en Crise, ou le retour aux sources de la revolution de 1979", in: *Le Monde*, June 28, 2009, "Ce retour aux sources n'est pas seulement programmatique; il se rapporte davantage au mode d'activité des foules : l'unité incontestable du peuple, la solidarité générale, l'auto-organisation ingénieuse, l'improvisation de moyens pour exprimer la



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Taking the mind set and emotions of the people into account means to illuminate the dialectical relation of the attitude of the people with the external relations of production. In this dialectical relation the *corporal space (Leibraum)* comes in its deeper dimension to the fore: Benjamin describes a dialectical destruction between the forces of political materialism and the physical body. The corporal space in its actuality transgresses and destroys dialectically the boundaries of a classical political subject, represented in categories such as the individual, and its separation between body and psyche. The dialectics destroy equally the confrontation between Marxist rationality and forces of inebriation, between rationalism and romanticism¹⁵, as they dissolve the contradiction between political action and physical needs, between risk taking and survival seeking. It destroys the contradiction between the political and the bourgeois life such as represented by the “*gute Stube*”, the best living or front room. Benjamin writes:

...das dialektische Denken [ist] das Organ des geschichtlichen Aufwachens. Jede Epoche träumt ja nicht nur die nächste, sondern träumend drängt sie auf das Erwachen hin. Sie trägt ihr Ende in sich und entfaltet es.¹⁶

It is a dialectics that is much more ample in its effects than a classical Marxist dialectics between productive forces. Benjamin replaces the abstract materiality of the metaphysical materialism with the body (*Leib*) of the collectivity. The corporal space extends the battlefield from the street to the psyche (and thus destroys the psyche as separate entity), from the psyche to the street, from dream world to wake-up, from outside to inside, from inside to outside:

..., der Raum mit einem Wort, in welchem der politische Materialismus und die physische Kreatur den inneren Menschen, die Psyche, das Individuum, oder was sonst

protestation, le mélange singulier de spontanéité et de discipline, comme la marche menaçante de milliers de personnes dans le silence. Nous avons affaire à un soulèvement populaire authentique des partisans déçus de la révolution.”

¹⁵ Löwy, *Rédemption et Utopie*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1988, p. 124.

¹⁶ Benjamin, *Passagenwerk*, GS V, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1977, p. 59.



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wir ihnen vorwerfen wollen nach dialektischer Gerechtigkeit, so dass kein Glied ihm unzerissen bleibt, miteinander teilen. Dennoch aber – ja gerade nach dialektischer Vernichtung – wird dieser Raum noch Bildraum, und konkreter: Leibraum sein.¹⁷

However rational organisation did not disappear in this horizon of a revolution, but it forms one pole of anthropological materialism dialectically connected to its other pole the *corporal space*. Like in his concept of profane illumination Benjamin searches to replace the forces of inebriation by a technology of the forces of inebriation in order to render intelligible what seems mystical.¹⁸

To start from zero

The perception of the right moment referring to the *apocatastic will* has directed us to a time dimension that connects the future to the past. In the attempt to remake a paradise on earth – which is not necessarily to be understood in theological categories, Michael Löwy suggests that Benjamin has a secularized paradise in mind: such as the primitive classless society¹⁹ – revolutions, uprisings, upheavals and political activism in general bind the future to a past moment that represents a collective source of origin. Thus the human dimension of a revolution is embedded in a messianic time structure. Re-connecting Benjamin's writings on history, time and the apocatastic will with his text "On Language as such and on the Language of Man (1916)" we will see that in doing so it moves beyond time and humanity.

The moment in the past that the insurgents refer to is not only a past historical moment, such as we have seen above, it can transcend the limits of historical time and resurrect a past that cannot be reached by going backwards in a time-machine as it touches at an event that did not happen in a moment before something else happened, chronologically, but in a completely different time dimension. Or, more precisely by referring to a past historical moment the collectivity transcends this past moment and touches at a moment beyond historical time.

¹⁷ Benjamin, "Der Sürrealismus", in: GS II-1, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1977, p. 309.

¹⁸ Norbert Bolz, Willem von Reijen, *Walter Benjamin*, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, New York, 1991, p. 91.

¹⁹ Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's "On the concept of History"*, transl. Chris Turner, Verso, New York, 2006, p. 63.



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Benjamin in particular recounts the story of the genesis and the story of the fall of mankind in order to illustrate the meaning of such a common reference. The story of the fall of mankind in particular not only binds the future to the past but the beginning to an end: History of mankind sets off with the end of paradise. Humanity as we know it beginning with the expulsion from paradise is revealed in its limits.

So how does Benjamin interpret the story of the fall of mankind? It marks according to Benjamin the loss of the “Adamic” language. More precisely, it is the loss of the “Adamic” language that led to the expulsion from paradise.

Adamic language is language based on an exchange between the human being and the thing. The human being transfers the essence of the thing in the name it gives the thing. This name is neither arbitrary nor creative, but a symbol of understanding the essence of the thing. The fall of mankind, now, was a consequence of human ambition. Instead of just receiving the message of the things and giving them names corresponding to the message human beings started creating their own message, they tried to transcend language over its purely symbolic character in the attempt to give a message beyond the spiritual essence of the being. Thus the moment carries the ambition of human beings to create something with the human language beyond the human language, beyond its mediating role of transferring the essence of the being. By this they started to instrumentalise language for purposes such as propaganda. Benjamin interprets this development as a decline of language and thus of humanity, because the loss of the Adamic language goes along with the loss of the understanding of the essence of the being as such. The story of the genesis takes us to the decay of humanity as it existed in paradise. However at the same time it marks the beginning of the creation of humanity in historical time.

The story of the origin of humanity serves as a utopian promise of paradise, a reference point for revolutionary drive, but not in the banal sense of a better future for the children. The reference to the genesis unfolds an ambivalent setting: The story of the genesis goes along with a loss, a decline or downfall of paradisiac humanity by striving towards creation and thus towards the creation of humanity in historical time. So what was lost was found in the fall of mankind. Referring to paradisiac humanity therefore puts humanity at risk, a revolution touches at the bottom of humanity, its ambitions, its struggles and sufferings, living, dying, killing etc. The promise of paradise and the last decay become aligned.



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Does Benjamin fall back into a re-actualisation of myth here – something that he would oppose strongly? Myth and utopia are two very different poles that find themselves very often side by side, but they point at a cleavage between the utopian element and the cynical.²⁰ Therefore the impulse to build a paradise on earth is not to be confused with pretending paradise is already realised.

The *apocatastic will* opens towards a dimension unheard-of, a new origin, with which it has to start from scratch, from zero, without possibilities of giving ready-made mythical explanations. The apocatastic will contrasts myth with liberty. The time of liberty is structured completely different than the time of myth defined as eternal recurrence by Benjamin.²¹ Rather than providing a circular time, it creates a rupture with everything that has ever been. Revolutionary time realises a hundred per cent image space in its actuality and not a phantasmagoric imagery of the collectivity. And as Irving Wohlfahrt reminds us the image space is the corporal space: It is a battlefield, a space not only of images, but of bodies and collective action (*Leibraum*), jerking and devouring the image.²²

Conclusion

The human dimension of the revolution is of course manifold. But the two mentioned concepts of Benjamin, the *Leibraum* and the *apocatastic will*, touch at crucial aspects: The *Leibraum* on a first level points out the dimension of collectivity, its presence on the streets, its unpredictable emergence and moves, and it points out the risks humans take in a revolution, such as imprisonment and death. More, it manifests a dialectical battle within the

²⁰ “...dem entspricht der Zwiespalt zwischen ihrem utopischen und ihrem zynischen Element.”, Benjamin, *Passagenwerk*, GS V, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1977, p. 51, Wilfried Menninghaus, *Schwelkenkunde*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp 1986, p. 19.

²¹ Benjamin, *Passagenwerk*, GS V, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1977, p. 178.

²² “C’est un champ de forces, un espace non seulement d’images mais de corps et d’action collective (*Leibraum*), qui propulse et est l’image, l’engloutit et la dévore.” Irving Wohlfahrt, Pourquoi n’a-t-on pas lu le Livre des Passages? Conjecture sur une Conjoncture, in: Bernd Witte (ed.), *Topographies du Souvenir “Le livre des Passages” de Walter Benjamin*, Presses Nouvelle Sorbonne, Paris, 2007, p. 33.



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human being, between historical materialism and the physical body. It destroys the classical political subject and the individual conceived of by the needs of the bourgeois salon oscillating between rational and irrational forces, survival seeking and risk taking. But the risks and promises of revolutions go deeper. What is at stake in a revolution is humanity as such. And this is what comes to the fore in the dimension of the *apocatastic will*. On a first level this includes the contestation of human history by singular and collective memory. Thus memory is a constitutive element of revolution. But it is not objective it has a fictive dimension, trying to touch at the bottom of things. Benjamin refers to a theological example but it does not need to be so. Any utopian origin, whether it is the classless society or paradise presents a beginning which is at the same time an end that is located in a different time dimension. And thus stands in opposition to our concept of humanity, its history and future. A revolution is “man”-made, but it touches at its decay. Man has to start from scratch all over again.