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Resistance

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ABSTRACT: The term 'resistance', as it appears in the writings of Walter Benjamin, marks the attempt to think a politics that emerges out of a certain experience of history and time. This entry shows that *Widerstand* is conceived here principally as a resistance against the course of a catastrophic history — a desire for time to cease its flow and come to a standstill.

Resistance

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Resist: from the Latin *re-sistere*. Literally: to stand again — that is to say, to cease one's movement, to remain standing, to stand still. This literal sense of the word, *resistere* as a cessation of movement, informs its ancient usage. One of the most common uses of the Latin verb is in the imperative, *resiste*: the demand to 'halt' or 'stop'. The verb is also used figuratively to indicate a cessation of the movement of speech itself: *resistere media in voce*, to stop in the middle of saying something.

What does it mean to think resistance in the modern, political sense of the word in light of its etymological root? What does it mean to think resistance not as a play of force and counterforce, of action and reaction, but rather in terms of movement and its arrest? What does it mean to think of resistance, *Widerstand*, in terms of standstill, *Stillstand*?

These questions are a persistent concern in the work of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin uses the word *Widerstand* only rarely. But when the word does surface in his writings, it

is deployed as a technical term at the nexus of his political thought and his reflections on history. What constitutes resistance in its political dimension is perhaps best captured by a formula that is found in a study of the early 1920s, where Benjamin refers to ‘a resistance against the stream of historical becoming’ (*ein Widerstand gegen den [...] Strom geschichtlichen Werdens*).¹ This resistance is not directed against one process of becoming and in favour of another. Rather it is a resistance against historical becoming as such — history insofar as it manifests itself as a stream, a continuous flow.

Nowhere does Benjamin elaborate what is entailed in such resistance more clearly than in his work on Karl Kraus. His essay on the Viennese journalist, Benjamin writes in a notebook, is to ‘designate the place, where I stand and do not participate’ (*wo ich stehe und nicht mitmache*).² This description of what is at stake in the essay resonates with the first published portrait of Kraus, written in the mid-1920s under the title ‘Monument for a warrior’ (*Kriegerdenkmal*). Here Benjamin conjures up an image of the writer as an ancient warrior caught up in a battle against a force that constantly threatens to overpower him. The adjectives punctuating the portrait evoke a fight that must appear to be already lost: his struggles against his contemporaries are ‘hopeless’; his attempts to change the world are ‘helpless’;

1 Walter Benjamin, “‘El mayor monstruo, los celos’ von Calderón und ‘Herodes und Mariamne’ von Hebbel. Bemerkungen zum Problem des historischen Dramas”, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1972–91) II: *Aufsätze, Essays, Vorträge* (1977), pp. 246–76 (p. 249). [Benjamin’s *Gesammelte Schriften* will henceforth be abbreviated as GS. All translations are mine.]

2 Walter Benjamin, ‘Schemata zu “Karl Kraus” <1>’, in GS II: pp. 1091–94 (p. 1093).

his humanity is 'powerless'. 'The rock with which he is to bury his enemy rolls out of his hands as it did for Sisyphus.'³

For the force against which Kraus never ceases to struggle despite this powerlessness Benjamin reserves the name 'world history' (*Weltgeschichte*). Kraus is the emblematic figure of an experience of the history of the world that never loses sight of its catastrophic dimension. In the writings of Kraus, perhaps most notably 'The Last Days of Mankind', Benjamin recognizes the insight that the catastrophe is neither an exception in history nor some event that still awaits us; the real catastrophe is that the world — *this* world — continues to run its course. Or, as a careful reader of Benjamin has paraphrased this thesis: 'The continuum — continuation as such — is the catastrophe.'⁴ This experience of history is marked by a curious inversion of the concept of progress (*Fortschritt*) and the corresponding representation of a progression (*Fortschreiten*) of humankind through time. The advancement of history is not conceived as humankind's steady approach towards its moral destination; rather, the very progression of history, its *Fortschreiten*, is grasped as the inexorable perpetuation of misery and suffering. 'The concept of progress is to be founded in the idea of catastrophe', Benjamin writes; 'that things "go on like this" is the catastrophe (*daß es "so weiter" geht, ist die Katastrophe*)'.⁵

In the figure of Kraus, this experience of world history as catastrophe is pushed to an extreme. History congeals

3 Benjamin, 'Einbahnstraße', in *GS IV: Kleine Prosa, Baudelaire-Übertragungen* (1972), pp. 83–148 (p. 121).

4 Rebecca Comay, 'Benjamin's Endgame', in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 251–91.

5 Benjamin, 'Zentralpark', in *GS I: Abhandlungen* (1974), pp. 655–90 (p. 683).

into a concatenation of events and takes its course fatefully, as if it were subjected to laws of nature. 'For him,' Benjamin writes, 'the horrible years of his life are not history, but nature: a river, condemned to meander through a landscape of hell.'⁶ The 'stream of historical becoming' here returns as a river condemned to take its catastrophic course — an image of the history of a world that has abandoned its hope for divine salvation or the capacity of human beings to change it through purposeful activity. The reference to a 'landscape of hell' evokes the specific temporal structure of this history: hell is here to be understood not in the religious but in the mythical sense, as the ever-renewed, self-same present of Sisyphus Benjamin describes in notes of the same period. The point of ancient representations of hell, writes Benjamin, is not 'that "the same always happens again" [...] but that the face of the world, its enormous head, does not change precisely in what is newest, that this "newest" always remains the same.'⁷

Just as the experience of the progression of history undergoes an inversion, so the corresponding concept of the political is turned inside out. If there is a political dimension to Kraus's writings, it can only begin from his resistance to the advance of this catastrophic history — not as a positive contribution to the progression of humankind towards its moral destination. To the a priori will described by Kant, the will for the 'highest good' that discloses the task to promote its realization in a 'moral community', Benjamin counterposes another will: 'the will to interrupt the course of the world' (*der tiefste Wille [...] den Weltlauf zu unterbrechen*).⁸ If the Kantian political will is directed to-

6 Benjamin, 'Karl Kraus', in *GS II*, pp. 335–67 (p. 341).

7 Benjamin, *GS v: Das Passagen-Werk* (1982), pp. 1010–11.

8 Benjamin, 'Zentralpark' [*GS I*], p. 667.

wards an ever-receding but positive telos, this will intends nothing but a cessation.

A model for this will — which Benjamin describes in the same fragment as ‘the will of Joshua’ — is found in the ‘idiosyncrasy’ (*die Idiosynkrasie*), Kraus’s ‘highest critical organ.’⁹ Benjamin uses this term in the precise medical sense of an excessive physical reaction to something; the sense that is preserved in the German, where the terms can be used to describe the intolerance towards a certain sound, taste, or other sensation — the paradigmatic example being the intolerance for the sound of a nail scratching the surface of a blackboard. The idiosyncrasy thus exemplifies a will without positive end, a pure negativity: a state of extreme intolerance towards a phenomenon, where one cannot bear that it continues and is entirely preoccupied by the desire for it to stop. That Benjamin describes the ‘will to interrupt the course of the world’ as ‘the will of Joshua’ — the biblical figure who prayed that God help the Israelites in their battles at Gibeon by making the sun stand still — suggests that this desire is to be understood first and foremost in temporal terms. Towards the end of the essay, in a crucial passage, Benjamin cites one of Kraus’s poems:

Let time stand still! Sun, you come to completion!
/ Make the end great! Announce eternity! / [...]
You golden bell, melt in your own heat, / become a
cannon against the cosmic foe!¹⁰

‘Let time stand still (*Lasse stehen die Zeit*)’ — the will for history to be interrupted in its course is here described as a demand for time itself to be brought to a stop. The

9 Benjamin, ‘Karl Kraus’ [GS II], p. 346.

10 Ibid., p. 365.

resistance against the course of history that manifests itself as a 'stream of becoming' is rendered here as a resistance against time — that is to say, against time that manifests itself as a continuous flow. The impossible demand that Kraus makes is, in other words, a demand for the cessation of the flowing time in which the time that passes is not differentiated from a time that is yet to come; it is a demand that has no positive aim but arises from the *Widerstand* and *Widersinn*, a resistance that is also a repugnance at a flowing time in which every past and future are merely modifications of an ever-same present.

The resistance against time that is figured here thus has nothing to do with a desire for endurance — quite the contrary. What is unbearable about the flow of time is not that things do not endure, that everything perishes in time, but rather that the world and its time remain the same in this passing and coming into being. That Kraus, as portrayed by Benjamin, cannot stand time means that he cannot stand *this* time, the continuum — or what is described here as the time of the sun, the 'cosmic foe' that comes and goes day after day, again and again. It is this 'golden bell' that Kraus demands to melt in its own heat: rather than a desire for persistence, this demand for standstill would arise out of a desire for time as such to perish.

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