



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

## PHANTASMAGORIA, SOCIAL MOVEMENT AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL MATERIALISM

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### Abstract

I will first advance the hypothesis that *The Arcades Project* has to be read with the perspective of a new type of scholar who corresponds best to Walter Benjamin's last intentions. This new type of scholar sets himself up against the flâneur. He is the ragpicker.

Next I will show how the ragpicker pays attention to utopic images that spring up from the collision between machinism and the "originary history" stored in the "collective unconscious". He brings out a dynamic relation between a world vision that comes with this emergence, the "anthropological materialism" (and in particular in its collectivist French version, ripe with socialist utopias), and the social movement of 1830. He gives a sense to this social movement in the frame of an atypical progress, a "vertical" progress, which succeeds in the explosion of mechanic time.

Then I will analyse the fight between the worker speech, which the ragpicker tries to recompose from its scattered fragments, and the nascent bourgeois imagery. I analyse in particular this imagery in the form of philanthropy and in the form of the illusion of the union of all producers that each composes; in *The Arcades Project*, this refers to the phantasmagoria of civilisation. The phantasmagoria of civilisation tries to evoke dream symbols from the social movements of the 1830's and the 1840's in order to monopolize them. With its embryonic phantasmagorias, the bourgeois class then defused the power of anthropological materialism. With a "strange severing of the time" that Walter Benjamin notices with a floating class, the "bohème", the ragpicker tries again to put these dream symbols into contact with the tradition of the defeated, and to turn its recurring invisibility into a permanent visibility.

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### *Introduction*

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Walter Benjamin's historical-sociological reasoning in *The Arcades Project* – this “book which is not a book”— is not that of the *flâneur*, but of the ragpicker. The ragpicker incorporates the heretic model of the scholar, he collects the junk of the dream life of the community from the first socialist utopias to the last bourgeois phantasmagorias, from the beginning to the end of the 19th century relating them by means of assembling without interpretation to the economic structure of capitalism and to the burgeoning social movement. He assembles the disjoint elements of a real historical experience, expressed through worker's speech rather than in bourgeois imagery.

Still both (the workers speech and the bourgeois imagery) encompass something that Benjamin calls “anthropological materialism”. This “anthropological materialism” was brought back to life by the mechanization of modern times, circulated in all different kinds of discourses in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, supported the social movement (1830, 1848, ...) and then was enclosed into phantasmagorias of the interior (1830-1848), phantasmagorias of the market (World exhibitions from 1851 to 1867) or phantasmagorias of the civilisation (Hausmann's Paris).

Fascinated by theses phantasmagorical elements, the ragpicker could be mystified by them, caught in the trap of magic; or he could simply translate them into theory and get caught in the trap of positivism. In the two cases, he would be surrounded by magical facts instead of interpreting them. He instead sees elected affinities between them and connects them directly, and precisely where he could succumb to either magic or positivism, this helps him to reveal a real historical experience and detect the false continuity of an enchanted world as well as a narcotic positivism.



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## 1. What is Anthropological Materialism?

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“The history of anthropological materialism stretches, in Germany, from Jean Paul to Keller (passing through Georg Büchner and Gutzkow); in France, the socialist utopias and the physiologies are its precipitate.”<sup>2</sup>

In *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin tries to re-evaluate a neglected tradition, “anthropological materialism”, born at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It develops itself particularly during a moment anterior to the Congress of Tours, a moment anterior to the development of Marxism: the period of the 1820’, 30’s and ‘40s. The surrealists, for him, are heirs to anthropological materialism because they try to relocate themselves to this historical moment<sup>3</sup>.

For Benjamin, French anthropological materialism (Fourier, Saint-Simon, Démar, Ganeau, Toussenel, Vésuviennes, fusionisme, “Jenny l’ouvrière”, Balzac) expresses itself in the collective, in urban physiology and above all in socialists utopias, while German anthropological materialism (Jean Paul, Keller, Büchner, Gutzkow, Feuerbach, Nietzsche) expresses itself in the individual, almost in a pedagogical relation. Anthropological materialism found in Germany its most incisive formulation because its opposite, idealism, was formulated with the greatest clarity, but it found in France its most collective formulation because it was there that the political thought was formulated with the greatest intensity<sup>4</sup>.

Benjamin brings together, under this name, French and German writers, philosophers and activists who, facing the nascent industrial world, develop a very similar vision of the world (“materialism”) applied to human issues (“anthropological”).

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<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Walter, *Gesammelte Schriften V. Das Passagenwerk*. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, 1982, Fragment W8,1 [Benjamin Walter, *The Arcades Project*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1999, p. 633]. Now: PW (W8,1) [AP 633].

<sup>3</sup> PW (a1,1) [AP 698].

<sup>4</sup> “the role of anthropological materialism in France should be compared with its role in Germany. It might turn out that there, in France, it was the human collective that stood at the center of interests, while here, in Germany, it was the human individual. We must note, as well, that anthropological materialism attained sharper definition in Germany because its opposite, idealism, was more clearly delineated over there.” PW (W8,1) [AP 633]. “Fourierist pedagogy, like the pedagogy of Jean Paul, should be studied in the context of anthropological materialism.” PW (W8,1) [AP 633]. “The words of Jean Paul which I put at the head of this biography of Fourier – ‘Of the fibers that vibrate in the human soul he cut away none, but rather harmonized all’ – these words apply admirably to this socialist, and in their fullest resonance apply only to him. One could not find a better way to characterize the phalansterian philosophy.” Pellarin Ch., *Notice bibliographique* (1839), p. 60, cited in Pinloche A., *Fourier et le socialisme* (Paris, 1933), p. 17-18, cited in PW (W1,1) [AP 620].



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He re-forms therefore a tradition of which these authors were unaware even though there are clear relationships and reciprocal influences between that tradition and their work.

“We smile at the chimerical pretension [of Saint Simon] to trace all physical and moral phenomena back to the law of universal attraction. But we forget too easily that this pretension was not in itself isolated; under the influence of the revolutionizing natural laws of mechanics, there could arise a current of natural philosophy which saw in the mechanism of nature the proof of just such a mechanism of social life and of events generally.”<sup>5</sup>

Anthropological materialism combines paradoxically a romantic vision of human beings with a scientific vision of material energies. It was a reaction against the disenchantment of modern life.

Toussenel: “Fourier ... claims to ‘join together and enframe, within a single plan, the societary mechanics of the passions with the other known harmonies of the universe”<sup>6</sup>

“Materialism” refers to Newtonians forces of universal gravitation; “anthropological” refers to physical forces of attractions and repulsions that result from them and such as they apply themselves to a pedagogical process, for the individual, or to a political arrangement, for the collective. In a better world, in a society without classes, universal gravitation applies to humans in their sociability under social passions, sympathies and antipathies.

“The anthropological materialism is comprised within the dialectical.”<sup>7</sup>

Benjamin tries to reevaluate this neglected tradition especially against dialectical materialism that eclipses anthropological materialism in the second part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Anthropological materialism contains elements which are refractory to Marxism. The power of anthropological materialism is to confuse moral non conformism and proletarian revolution<sup>8</sup>.

I will attempt to picture the figure of the ragpicker who is assembling The Arcades Project as a privileged entry to Benjamin’s anthropological materialism. Anthropological materialism is

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<sup>5</sup> Spühler Willy, *Der Saint-Simonismus*. Zürich, 1926, p. 29, cited in PW (M2,7) [AP 420].

<sup>6</sup> Toussenel, in Armand and Maublanc, *Fourier*. Paris, 1937, vol. 1, p. 227, citing Fourier Charles, *Traité de l’association domestique-agricole*, Paris and London, 1822, vol. 1., p. 24-26, and *Théorie de l’unité universelle*, 1834, p. 31, cited in PW (W13,1) [AP 641-642].

<sup>7</sup> PW (U12,4) [AP 591].

<sup>8</sup> PW (a1,1) [AP 698].



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thus an object (socialist utopias, etc.) of the Arcades Project as well as part of the methodology (combined with historical materialism) imprinted by this object.

I would like to underline first the connection Walter Benjamin makes between anthropological materialism, particularly the French one, and social movement in eighteen-thirty. Benjamin quote, in *The Arcades Project* and in his *Thesis on the Concept of History*, a poem from Barthélémy and Méry entitled *L'Insurrection : Poème dédié aux Parisiens*, and written in Paris in 1830, just after the revolution. It refers to a particular day of 1830, the 28<sup>th</sup> of July, one day before the end of the revolution and its treason:

“Who would believe it! It is said that, incensed at the hour,  
Latter-day Joshuas, at the foot of every clocktower,  
Were firing on clock faces to make the day stand still”<sup>9</sup>

For Benjamin, these firings were the expression of a will to stop the mechanic time of progress, the expression of “elements refractory to Marxism”, the expression of the anthropological materialism. For instance, of the socialist utopian fantasies: “Only in the summery middle of the nineteenth century, note Benjamin, only under its sun, can one conceive of Fourier’s fantasy materialized.”<sup>10</sup> And the summery middle of the nineteenth century is 1830, the time of revolution. “The building of barricades appears in Fourier as an example of ‘non salaried but impassioned work.’”<sup>11</sup> Walter Benjamin brings out a dynamic relation between the “anthropological materialism” (and in particular in its collectivist French version, ripe with socialist utopias), and the social movement of 1830. He gives a sense to this social movement in the frame of an atypical progress, a “vertical” progress, which succeeds in the explosion of mechanic time. But in the other hand, he pays attention to utopic images that spring up from the collision between machinism and the “originary history” stored in the “collective unconscious”, that is to say from the collision between machinism and anthropological materialism that composes “phantasmagorias” into a false synthesis.

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<sup>9</sup> Barthélémy and Méry, *L'Insurrection : Poème dédié aux Parisiens*, Paris, 1830, quoted in PW (a21a,2) [AP 737], and in Thesis XV *On The Concept of History*.

<sup>10</sup> PW (W10a4) [AP 638].

<sup>11</sup> PW (E9a,9) [AP, p. 141].



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## ***2. Anthropological Materialism and Phantasmagoria***

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Phantasmagoria is a collective dream generated by a specific social class (for instance, the phantasmagoria of the Orleanist bourgeoisie or of liberal bourgeoisie), which picks up and neutralizes socialist utopias. It is a distraction from social reality in a better world, a world without classes, but it has always the ideological function to hide, protect and reproduce the social order. Antithesis to anthropological materialism but picking it up, phantasmagoria seems to have the function of ideology, the structure of myth and the brilliance of socialist utopia, which take part in French anthropological materialism.

From 1814 to 1848, utopian, conspiratory and mystagogic socialism (“refractory to Marxism”) transformed itself into a “scientific” socialism. In the meantime, anthropological materialism that subverted bourgeois mediocrity is picked up and reified in a thousand phantasmagorias, “in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions”.

This dream reifies itself in the architecture of the arcades of Paris, in the bourgeois interior under Louis-Philippe, in world exhibitions during the Second Empire, in the Parisian town-planning with Haussmann and in the image of culture and history from humanity’s legendary beginnings to its legendary ends.

I will take two examples: the phantasmagoria of the interior, and the phantasmagoria of the market.

### ***The Phantasmagoria of the Interior***

Under the July Monarchy (1830-1848), workplace’s architecture tried, with iron architecture and glass architecture, to emancipate itself from the traditional habitation, and began to assume a form that corresponded with their function. But by contrast, the interior of the bourgeois looked more and more like a “remote locale” where he assembled the “memories of the past”.

Benjamin quote Kierkegaard’s *Diary of a Seducer* [*Either/Or*]:

“On the table stands a lamp shaped like a flower, which shoots up vigorously to bear its crown, over which a delicately cut paper shade hangs down so lightly that it is never still. The lamp’s form reminds one of oriental lands; the shade’s movement, of mild oriental breezes. The floor is concealed by a carpet woven from a certain kind of osier, which immediately betrays its foreign origin. [...] we sail out into the middle of the great ocean. When we sit at a distance from the window, we gaze



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directly into heaven's vast horizon ... Cordelia's environment must have no foreground, but only the infinite boldness of far horizons."<sup>12</sup>

In his idle hours, the bourgeois took a delicious pleasure in constructing for himself a model apartment, a dream house, a house of dreams, a "rêvoir"<sup>13</sup> – like Baudelaire said. His living room looked more and more like "a box in the theatre of the world", like an oriental boudoir. All this happens as if the "historicizing masks", chased out of the exterior, concentrated themselves in interior. This epoch was "furnished in dreams", and with its alternation in styles – Gothic, Persian, Renaissance, and so on – was the "dreamy epoch of bad taste" (Hessel).

Benjamin note that "over the interior of the middle-class dining room spreads a banquet room of Cesare Borgia's, or that out of the boudoir of the mistress a Gothic chapel arises, or that the master's study, in its iridescence, is transformed into the chamber of a Persian prince."<sup>14</sup> The growing opposition between reality and illusion materializes itself in the growing opposition between aggressive places of work and a *comfortable* interior.

Benjamin quote the etymology of the word 'comfort':

"In English, it used to mean *consolation* ('Comforter is the epithet applied to the Holy Spirit). Then the sense became, instead, *well-being*. Today, in all languages of the world, the word designates nothing more than rational convenience."<sup>15</sup>

Comfort, our "rational convenience", was first a "consolation". In his office, the busy bourgeois counts only on realities; in his interior, he asks to be *consoled* by his illusions. And the consolation came with a dissimulation. "The masquerade of styles, as it unfolds across the nineteenth century, note Benjamin, results from the fact that relations of dominance become obscured."<sup>16</sup> In his dreamy and, if possible, oriental interior, the bourgeois refuses to link "a clear perception of his social function" to his business interests. In other words, he represses his social function toward other men, and at the same time he represses from his consciousness the social agitation that ensued from it.

Consolation. Here, everyone can dream of instant fortune; "everyone aims to have, at one stroke, what in peaceful and industrious times would cost a lifetime of efforts. The creations of the

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<sup>12</sup> PW (I3a) [AP, p. 219].

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in PW (I8,3) [AP 227].

<sup>14</sup> PW (I1,6) [AP, p. 213].

<sup>15</sup> Weidlé Wladimir, *Les Abeilles d'Aristée*, Paris, 1936, p. 175 ('L'agonie de l'art'), quoted in PW (I6a,3) [AP 225].

<sup>16</sup> PW (I3,4) [AP 218].



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poets are full of sudden metamorphoses in domestic existence; they all rave about marquises and princesses, about the prodigies of the *Thousand and One Nights*. It is an opium trance that has overspread the whole population, and industry is more to blame for this than poetry. Industry was responsible for the swindle in the Stock Exchange, the exploitation of all things made to serve artificial needs, and the ... dividends.”, say Gutzkow, one of the upholder of anthropological materialism<sup>17</sup>.

Phantasmagoria tries to evoke dream symbols from the social movements of the 1830's and the 1840's in order to monopolize them. With its embryonic phantasmagorias, the bourgeois class then defused the power of anthropological materialism.

### ***The Phantasmagoria of the Market***

In the phantasmagorias of the market, the bourgeois imagery became abundant with the World exhibitions. Benjamin quote Julius Lessing's description of the *Crystal Palace*, from the London great exhibition of 1851:

“Lightly plumed palms from the tropics mingled with the leafy crowns of the five-hundred-year-old elms; and within this enchanted forest the decorators arranged masterpieces of plastic art, statuary, large bronzes, and specimens of other artworks. At the center stood an imposing crystal fountain. [...] Overall, it seemed a wonderland [appealing more to the imagination than to the intellect].”

[...] It seemed then that the world we knew from old fairy tales – of the princess in the glass coffin, of queens and elves dwelling in crystal houses – had come to life ..., [and these impressions have persisted through the decades.]”<sup>18</sup>

And Lothar Bucher:

“It is with sober economy of phrase that I term the prospect incomparably fairy-like. This space is a summer night's dream in the midnight sun”.<sup>19</sup>

The utopian potential, all images of another society, exotic, without classes, fairy-like (“And now they lived happily ever after...”), was here completely salvaged and reclaimed. And it was so because the commodity was here totally fetishized.

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<sup>17</sup> Gutzkow Karl, *Briefe aus Paris*, Leipzig, 1842, vol. 1, p. 93, quoted in PW (I1a,5) [AP 214].

<sup>18</sup> PW (G6 ;G6a,1) [AP 184].

<sup>19</sup> PW (G6 ;G6a,1) [AP 184].





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## ***Conclusion. Anthropological Materialism and the Sociologist as a Ragpicker***

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Walter Benjamin elaborates his theory of phantasmagoria from the economic thematic of the value's process, which came with a dissimulation process of the traces of production. The bourgeoisie had to render sublime the order of its own domination in order to maintain it. Its phantasmagorias were deforming sublimations of the bourgeois order of property and production, delirious sublimations of the order of capital that reinforce, in a dreamlike manner, the hypostasis of the exchange value peculiar to fetishism.

With all these phantasmagorias, the bourgeoisie did not stop to cry out to the order of property and production: "Abide, you're so fair!" Repression of the work by capital, fetishism doubled itself, with the phantasmagoria, with the repression of the capital in the imaginary that picks up images of anthropological materialism.

The permanent repression of social movement generated the phantasmagorias of the bourgeois interior. The phantasmagorias of the market suffocated the "workers' parliaments" presented to the first World Exhibitions, and transformed them into a compact mass in an attitude of pure reaction where individuals were turned into objects subjugated by a divinely revered and poeticized merchandise.

The ragpicker has to find in this poetry, under the fetishism of the merchandise, the imposing machinism, that is to say anthropological materialism, from where Fourierist images of a human machinery sprang up, finally submitted to capital. These phantasmagorias transformed the dreams of a future society in distractions from the present poverty.

With phantasmagorias, capitalism was able to capture a poetic and playful intensity that was found in anthropological materialism, and thus to dispossess the social movement of its intensity, exactly as did fascism at the very moment Benjamin wrote *The Arcades Project*.

Yet the ragpicker's task consists in re-finding this poetic and playful moment peculiar to anthropological materialism. Collecting these scraps of dream in the real world and the scraps of reality in the dream world, he is trying to reverse the phantasmagorical tendency. He instils new life in the dream scraps of nascent capitalism that triumphant capitalism abandoned. The sociologist as a ragpicker thus integrates his object into a new historical system. His walk creates a "harmonic" game between the refuses of the society he collects, showing the harmonious society that society of



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fetishism and phantasmagorias repressed in permanence. He dreams that he collects his rags in an anthropological flow delivered from the exchange functions.

With his jerky walk, the ragpicker expresses at the same time the infernal temporality of fetishism and the vigorously emerging temporality of anthropological materialism, cracking the homogeneous temporality of phantasmagoria.

He goes through the reification and the modern myths that cover phantasmagoria up to differentials he catches a glimpse of at any moment.

Under the auspices of phantasmagoria, he perceives reified bodies, and under reified bodies, he perceives a real historical experience. Under phantasmagoria's horizontal temporality, he perceived fetishism's cyclical temporality, and under the latter, he reveals the vertical temporality, constantly interrupted, of anthropological materialism.

The ragpicker's jerky, dislocated step undergoes a double jerk in his "trouvailles" (finds). On the one hand, it is a jerk from reification against human creation, which the ragpicker analyses with the dialectical materialism. In the other hand, it is a jerk from human creation against reification, which the ragpicker theorizes with the help of anthropological materialism, elevating itself to a paradigmatic rank.