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# THE REDUNDANT AVANT-GARDE

## Walter Benjamin and the Intelligentsia in the Age of Its Disappearance

Nikos Pegioudis\*

### ABSTRACT

Walter Benjamin had much to say about the intelligentsia, from vicious reviews such as “Left-Wing Melancholy” to the more programmatic essays “Author as Producer” and the Artwork essay. But while the specific allegiances, the “strategies” in the literary battle have been plotted with great precision, a larger debate in which these texts represent interventions has been passed over: the debate on the crisis of *geistige Arbeit* (intellectual labor). By re-inserting Benjamin’s intervention to this discussion, this article seeks to cast light on the philosopher’s different models for an effective politicized intelligentsia and explicate his final anti-intellectual position, i.e. that technological progress could

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lead to a general deskilling of artistic or cultural labor abolishing the mediation of the expert/intellectual. But the neutralization of the role of the intellectual would automatically lead to the end of the avant-garde. This is a surprising answer for a figure so closely tied to our notion of the avant-garde and a text which though it has come to pass as a manifesto of various avant-garde movements, it might had been originally destined to tell us something completely different.

## KEYWORDS

Avant-garde, Intelligentsia, Sociology of Knowledge, Intellectual Labor, Deskilling

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## A VANGUARDA REDUNDANTE

Walter Benjamin e a intelligentsia na época de seu desaparecimento

## RESUMO

Walter Benjamin tinha muito a dizer sobre a *intelligentsia*: de resenhas impiedosas como “Melancolia de esquerda” a ensaios mais programáticos como “O autor como produtor” e o ensaio da obra de arte. Mas enquanto as lealdades específicas, as “estratégias” na batalha literária, foram traçadas com grande precisão, um debate mais abrangente, no qual esses textos representam intervenções, foi deixado de lado: o debate sobre a crise do *geistige Arbeit* (trabalho intelectual). Ao reinserir a intervenção de Benjamin nessa discussão, este artigo busca lançar luz nos diferentes modelos do filósofo para uma efetiva *intelligentsia* politizada e explicar sua posição anti-intelectual final, isto é, que o progresso tecnológico poderia conduzir a uma desqualificação geral do trabalho

artístico ou cultural, abolindo a mediação do especialista/intelectual. Mas a neutralização do papel do intelectual levaria automaticamente ao fim da vanguarda. Eis uma resposta surpreendente para uma figura tão intimamente ligada à nossa noção de vanguarda e para um texto que, embora tenha se tornado um manifesto de vários movimentos de vanguarda, poderia ter sido originalmente destinado a nos contar algo completamente diferente.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Vanguarda, Intelligentsia, Sociologia do Conhecimento, Trabalho Intelectual, Desqualificação

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In April 1925, the photographs of four prominent German intellectuals appeared in the pages of *Uhu*, one of the most popular lifestyle magazines of the Weimar era published by *Ullstein* press.<sup>1</sup> Under the heading “Hands as a mirror of the genius: the right hand of the poet, the thinker, the painter” the hands of dramatist and poet Gerhart Hauptmann, scientist Albert Einstein, and Secession painters Max Liebermann and Lovis Corinth were exhibited as reflections of exceptional intellectual accomplishment.

Depictions of hands flooded the German illustrated press from the mid-1920s onwards. The hand, “one of the best cultivated physiognomic subdisciplines of the period,” as Claudia Sch-

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1 *Uhu* magazine has been digitized as part of the project *Illustrierte Magazine der Klassischen Moderne*; see the image in: [https://www.arthistoricum.net/werkansicht/dlf/73451/101?tx\\_dlf%5Bpagegrid%5D=0&cHash=1b2511c014592875758abe5ca9bbe6af](https://www.arthistoricum.net/werkansicht/dlf/73451/101?tx_dlf%5Bpagegrid%5D=0&cHash=1b2511c014592875758abe5ca9bbe6af), accessed June 23, 2021.

mölders notes, undoubtedly proved “profitable for economic exploitation” (Schmölders 2006: 48). In this period of hand-reading mania, palm readers like Marianne Rasching created and published an inventory of more than four hundred handprints of eminent personalities (Fig. 1),<sup>2</sup> psychoanalyst Julius Spier, Carl Jung’s student and founder of the discipline of “psycho-chirology” propagated his views in art-cultural magazines like Alfred Flechtheim’s prestigious *Der Querschnitt*,<sup>3</sup> and Hans Cürlis, an art historian and early pioneer of documentary film began his *Schaffende Hände* (creative hands) project, a series of films capturing contemporary artists and craftsmen at work.<sup>4</sup> All kinds of illustrated magazines followed the trend and published articles on the “psychology of hands” addressing a variegated public from photo amateurs to art lovers or the “modern woman”.<sup>5</sup>

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2 Among them painters Max Liebermann, Lovis Corinth, Hans Baluschek, Max Slevogt, Heinrich Zille, George Grosz, and Käthe Kollwitz, sculptors Fritz Klimsch and Georg Kolbe, art dealer Alfred Flechtheim, directors G. W. Pabst, Josef von Sternberg, F. W. Murnau, and Fritz Lang, and writers Bertolt Brecht and Alfred Döblin.

3 See Spier 1931. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

4 The most detailed monographic study on Cürlis is Döge 2005. The first film of the *Schaffende Hände* series (1923) captured Secession painter Lovis Corinth at work. The series was completed after almost five decades, in 1972. Cürlis continued the series well into the 1950s. Among the artists he filmed were Max Slevogt, Max Liebermann, Lesser Ury, Max Pechstein, Wassily Kandinsky, Alexander Calder, Heinrich Zille, Käthe Kollwitz, Otto Dix, and George Grosz.

5 See, inter alia, Reuter 1929; Altena 1928; Reuter 1931.



Fig. 1 – Handprint of George Grosz signed by the artist; from Marianne Raschig, *Hand und Persönlichkeit: Einführung in das System der Handlehre 2* (Bilderteil) (Hamburg: Enoch, 1931), 24

How can we read this hand obsession? The contention that hands reflect not just one's character, but also social and class background was the principal motif in the texts that put those pictures into context in the societal morass that followed the collapse of the German Empire. But there is, I suggest, yet another reason that make these photos and films stand out: the effort to conserve the aura and status of the intellectually eminent individual in modern mass culture, an effort that dramatically underlines the miscommunication between the former and the public that the photographed hand of the genius addressed.

From this standpoint, they can be seen as another product of the Weimar-era debate on the crisis of *geistige Arbeit* (intellectual labor). For it was often in this phenomenon that the root of every other crisis (economic, social, or political, moral or aesthetic) was sought. Thus, I suggest that we read this attention to the hand as an effort to reconstitute the confidence to the heroic image of the intellectual as a key figure in overcoming the manifold crises of capitalist society.

Further, those close-ups of hands of intellectuals and artists paradoxically function as simulacra of a culture of distance which Helmut Lethen has skillfully analyzed and associated with New Objectivity in his study *Cool Conduct*. Lethen identifies “the practice of physiognomic judgment” among “the core ideas of the 1920s cult of objectivity” (Lethen 2002: 36). “The decade of the new objectivity,” he adds, “held out the possibility of calling on the techniques of the physiognomic gaze [...] The medium of photography, the camera’s eye, meant that immediacy had finally found its neutral medium in technology” (Lethen 2002: 86). But this technologically achieved cold immediacy – which would reach its most disturbing levels with the pseudo-scientific anatomical photos, used by the National Socialists to set the standards for racial purity – was simultaneously underlining and keeping the distance between the hand of the genius/expert and the eye of its average viewer.

This distance was always central in the debate on the crisis of intellectual labor in Weimar Germany. The centrality of space and distance is not surprising as in the final analysis at stake in this debate was the orientation of politicized intelligentsia, the

definition of their position in a world which had been thoroughly changed after the Great War. But this insistence on a distance also reveals the uneasiness of the intellectual, his difficulties in configuring a new position and role and, in the final analysis, a sense of powerlessness. In a way, then, the frozen snapshot of the intellectual's hand can also stand as a monument to the failure of the intellectual to accomplish his historical role as an agent of collective interest.

“These are days when no one should rely unduly on his ‘competence’. Strength lies in improvisation. All the decisive blows are struck left-handed.” (Benjamin 1979: 49). This quote by Walter Benjamin can be read as an appeal to the intellectual to stand up to his historical role. To overcome his incompetence – depicted by those frozen snapshots of his “creative” but powerless hands – by way of transcending the limits of his “competence” (another word, as we shall see for the intellectual's expertise). Walter Benjamin had indeed much to say about the intelligentsia, from vicious reviews such as “Left-Wing Melancholy” to the more programmatic essays “Author as Producer” and the Artwork essay. But while the specific allegiances, the “strategies” in the literary battle, have been plotted with great precision, the larger debate on intellectual labor in which these texts represent interventions has been passed over. In what follows I will examine Walter Benjamin's exploration of the potential or impotence of the intelligentsia in blocking the path of capitalist destruction. This study, I shall argue, can help us to grasp this (which was also his) failure. I shall conclude, however, that it was the very realization of this failure that led Benjamin



to a radical anti-intellectualist position, a position that has not been explored in scholarship. From a series of polemical articles which the German cultural critic began around 1929 to his Artwork essay there is a decisive break in his approach of the question of “revolutionary intelligentsia”: his famous 1936 essay marks an abandonment of his faith on the intellectual as a positive social agent. Benjamin ultimately applauds the application of technology and the potential of its mastering by the masses as a preparation of the ground for a complete bypassing of intellectual mediation. And the end of the intelligentsia as a distinct social class would have another repercussion: the death of the avant-garde – be it political or artistic.

### **The Intellectual as an Outsider or Distance as a Means of Reorientation**

*Geistige Arbeit* (intellectual labor) constitutes a very useful – though rather marginalized in art historiography – methodological category for the exploration of the extremely complex constellation of artistic, cultural and political projects of the Weimar period. The term was associated with the free professions and it was particularly the transformation of the latter in a technologically advanced society and a capitalist economy that preoccupied an untold number of intellectuals and artists from the mid-nineteenth century through the Weimar period.

The First World War and the Great Depression may have changed the discourse of the debate, but its basic parameters remained the same. The crisis of *geistige Arbeit* was interpreted as

a symptom of what Max Weber famously termed “the disenchantment of the world”, the effects of rationalization and capitalist economy on traditional cultural values. In fact, it is imperative to stress that Weber first coined this famous term in his lecture “Science as a Vocation” which together with his “Politics as a Vocation” were part of a seminar on the general theme of “Geistige Arbeit als Beruf” that had been organized by the Bavarian branch of the Free Student League (*Freistudentische Bund*). The first lecture was delivered on 7 November 1917 in Munich.<sup>6</sup> The central question of the seminar was the fate of intellectual workers in modern capitalism: To which degree could intellectual workers secure their independence in a labor market determined by capitalist relations of exchange and production?

Lethen sees Weber’s “Science as a Vocation” lecture as “the signature of new objectivity”; he argues that Weber’s archetype of intellectual is the “defiant,” “cool” persona whose professional stance is dictated by a sense of “disillusioned realism” (Lethen 2002: 42-44). Lethen, I feel, overemphasizes the negative aspect in this intellectual conduct but the question we should ask is what was at stake in the deliberate distance dictated by this “disillusioned realism”. I think that we come closer to the crux of the matter when we consider Karl Löwith’s remark that Weber essentially defended a “freedom of movement” on

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6 Two more lectures, “Education as a Vocation” by the Munich pedagogue and pioneer of vocational education Georg Kerschensteiner and “Art as a Vocation”, for which art historians Wilhelm Hausenstein and Heinrich Wölfflin were approached, were apparently never delivered. See the detailed discussion on the preparation of this series of lectures in Schluchter 1994.

behalf of the modern intellectual which is rightly assessed as a positive element:

The precondition for this position is precisely the world of “ordinances”, institutions, enterprises and securities to which it is opposed. Weber’s own position is essentially one of opposition; his opponent is part of himself. To accomplish within the world but against it, one’s own purposes which are of this world but calculated for it – this is the positive meaning of the “freedom of movement” with which Weber was concerned (Löwith 1993: 77).

Then if Weber’s model was somehow the signature of New Objectivity we should try to read this signature in all its dialectic complexity as a distance that intellectuals take only to place themselves within this world to better confront it – a confrontation in which the intellectual’s “opponent is part of himself”. Löwith brilliantly brings out contradiction as “the motive force of Weber’s whole approach,” a contradiction “between the recognition of a rationalised world and the counter-tendency towards freedom for self-responsibility” which manifests itself in Weber as a “conflict within the human being between man and man-as-specialist” (Löwith 1993: 77).

As I shall argue, in the debate on the role of the intellectual or *geistiger Arbeiter* the radical positions of left-wing intellectuals like Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer are crucially determined by this same element of contradiction. Their positions are remarkably close to Weber’s critique of capitalist economy in the concluding lines of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber’s groundbreaking study can and should be connected with the debate on vocational identity and

the crisis of intellectual labor in modern capitalism. In his conclusions Weber defines “rational conduct of life on the basis of the idea of the *calling* [*die rationale Lebensführung auf Grundlage der Berufsidee*]” as “one of the constitutive elements of modern capitalist spirit, and not only that but of all modern culture” (Weber 2010: 200); Weber associates this rational conduct of life with the “renunciation of the Faustian universality” and the complete domination of “specialized work,” a situation which he then summarizes with a famous (still unattributed) quotation: “Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nothingness [*Nichts*] imagines that it has reached a heretofore unattainable level of humanity” (Weber 2010: 201). It is this professional asceticism, the expert’s seclusion from the world – or the intellectual’s hand that fails to grasp, to return to our introductory image – that Benjamin will attack in his writings exploring new models of intellectual labor and in all cases, as we shall see, Benjamin espouses an interdisciplinary conduct which aims at breaking the narrow limits of specialized work. And it must be stressed that the left-radical intelligentsia confronted the same contradictions arising from the defense of its own “freedom of movement” and the desire to place itself within the world.

The social position of the modern intellectual emerges as a central question in Benjamin’s oeuvre from the late 1920s onwards. I will begin by discussing a well-known review written in 1930 and published in 1931 by the social-democratic periodical *Die Gesellschaft*. This review, titled, “Left-Wing Melancholy: On Erich Kästner’s new book of poems” was originally destined for *Frankfurter Zeitung*, but it was rejected by the newspaper’s editors

due to its highly polemical tone. Indeed, as Benjamin's title implies, his text was not plainly a literary review: it was an attack on left-wing exponents of the then fashionable New Objectivity.

Now *Neue Sachlichkeit* was never a homogeneous cultural trend; depending on its context – literature, the visual arts, architecture – it had different meanings and was expressed in different forms. But if contemporary left-radical critique does vary in its assessments of works categorized under this wide and sometimes ambivalent term, arguments often converged when this critique turned from object to subject, i.e. from the work to its author. Cynicism, superficial provocation and pseudo-objectivity, hence a distance from or ignorance of actual social conditions are some recurring charges against the exponents of New Objectivity. Walter Benjamin's critique follows these lines, but it is exceptional in the articulation of its counterproposal.

The essence of Benjamin's critique is concentrated in the following oft-quoted excerpt:

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 (Benjamin 2005b: 424).

To unravel its meaning, we must attend to the positive assessment of the first parameter of these antithetical schemes, i.e. "parties," "schools" and "producers". There is an implied precondition for the activation of this positive function of the intellectual within a party, a school or his own site of production: the

clarification of his own political, cultural and economic position. This self-awareness in its turn presupposes the transgression of self-interested motives (which form the basis of “cliques,” “fashions” and “agents”) in favor of collective interests. Further, this transformation of the intellectual is inseparable from the radical reworking of his production; decisive in the latter is the activation of a work’s pedagogical function. The pedagogical or didactic aspect of the work is not perceived in dogmatic terms; it is rather the openness of the work which can critically engage and hence contribute to the self-awareness of its addressee.

In the final analysis, it is precisely this pedagogical aspect that Benjamin finds totally missing from Kästner’s satire and this is why he juxtaposes it to Brecht’s poems. Brecht’s work, Benjamin asserts, creates a tension between two poles: professional and private life. He writes: “In this tension, consciousness and deed are formed. To create it is the task of all political lyricism, and today this task is most strictly fulfilled by Bertold Brecht’s poems” (Benjamin 2005b: 426). The way Benjamin perceives this tension recalls the role Weber prescribed to the intellectual in his “Science as a Vocation” lecture, i.e. to “accomplish within the world but against it”; in other words, Benjamin’s conception is very close to Weber’s “freedom of movement”; for the desired tension between the intellectual’s field of expertise and social role that Benjamin highlights can be achieved only through this freedom, this “improvisation” that is capable of circumventing the limitations of one’s own “competence”, bringing the “decisive left-handed blows”.

Benjamin also expressed his profound mistrust of the possibility for a functional collaboration between left-wing intellectuals associated with the *Neue Sachlichkeit* and the proletariat in his 1930 review of Siegfried Kracauer's study *Die Angestellten*. This was again published in *Die Gesellschaft* under the title "Politicization of the Intelligentsia" (a title chosen by the editors of the journal despite Benjamin's objection) (Steiner 2010: 93). Here he claimed that based on educational privilege, the ties of the intellectuals with the bourgeoisie were historically so strong that they remained unshaken even in the current process of their proletarianization. Through their education, intellectuals remained in solidarity with the bourgeoisie.

It is particularly "modern Berlin radicalism and the New Objectivity – both of which acted as godparents to reportage" which is targeted by Benjamin (Benjamin 2005a: 306). Why this attack on reportage? Benjamin questions the reporter's public image as a "specialist" in social issues, an "objective" mediator between state or private institutions and social life. He thus attempts to expose reportage not only as incapable of penetrating social relations, but also as masking the actual distance between, on the one hand, a left-radical intelligentsia entrenched in a bourgeois aloofness grounded in its cultural capital and, on the other hand, the working classes, whose life reportage supposed to depict.

We encounter a similar critique of this distance between the reporter and his subject in a 1928 engraving by Karl Rössing

from his series *My Prejudice against These Times*.<sup>7</sup> The work is titled *The Photojournalist at the Execution* (Fig. 2). Here the reporter visits an actual execution (the attentive viewer will notice the shadows of rifles on the ground, between the reporter's feet) to capture the convict at the moment of his death. But the image is symbolic; the way the reporter holds his camera like a gun suggests that *he* is the real executioner. The passivity of the blindfolded, tied worker is juxtaposed to the dynamic posture of the reporter, an element that further enhances the distance between the two. The death of the worker has a double meaning: it also denotes his symbolic return to insignificance after the departure of the reporter from the scene. The reporter will flee with his precious image upon which he builds his own career, while his proletarian subjects will retreat to their everyday routine. The reporter acts strictly as a professional, he sees everything with equal indifference, as mere themes that can be exploited to intrigue his public and bring success to his paper and himself; as Benjamin would put it, there is no tension between his professional and private life.

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<sup>7</sup> Rössing's circle of engravings was first published by the book club *Büchergilde Gutenberg* in 1932. The latter had been founded in 1924 by the educational association of book printers (*Bildungsverband deutscher Buchdrucker*). For a more recent reprint see Rössing 1979.



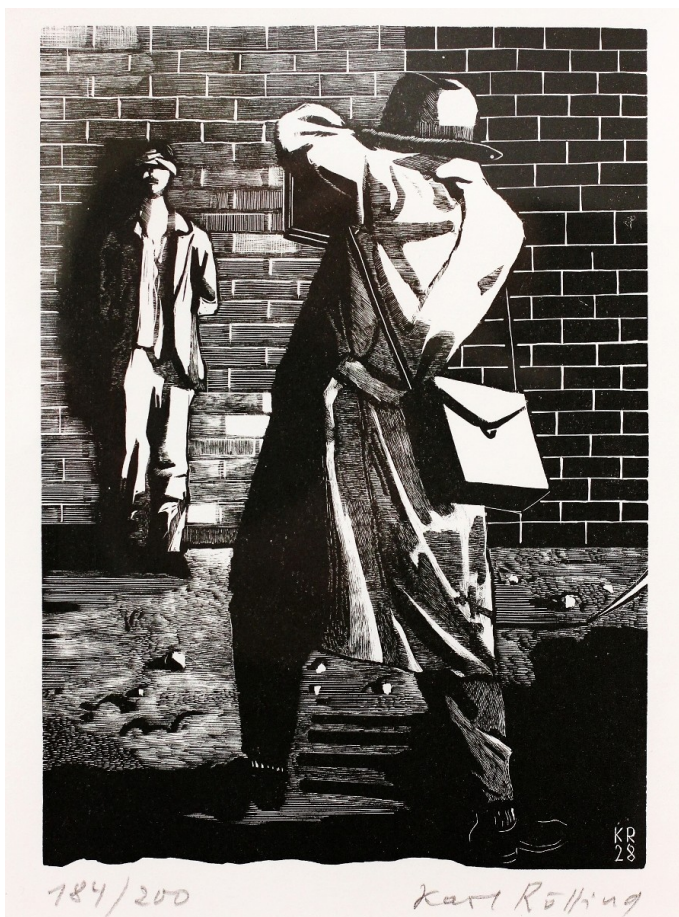


Fig. 2 – Karl Rössing, *Der Pressephotograph bei der Hinrichtung* [The Photojournalist at the Execution], 1928, Engraving from Karl Rössing, *Mein Vorurteil gegen diese Zeit* (Berlin: Büchergilde Gutenberg, 1932) ©galeriehochdruck.com

In contrast, Kracauer has succeeded, according to Benjamin, precisely because he has generated this tension; he praises the fact that “he has even left his Doctor of Sociology cap at home” (Benjamin 2005a: 305). Kracauer himself had pointed to the ineffectiveness of reportage to capture everyday existence

with a sharp formulation: “A hundred reports from a factory do not add up to the reality of the factory, but remain for all eternity a hundred views of the factory” (Kracauer 1998: 32).

“An outsider makes his mark”, Benjamin’s suggested title for his Kracauer review, surely better reflects the essence of the text. Benjamin, failing to pursue an academic career, spoke himself from the position of the outsider and it is from this position that he outlined the profile of the outsider-intellectual as a model for independent and truly revolutionary intellectual labor, a concept in contradistinction to the Communist Party’s (KPD) committed agitator. It is crucial to note that Benjamin first elaborated this notion of the active outsider-intellectual in 1927, during his Moscow sojourn, when he reflected on the possibility of joining the KPD:

There are and there remain external considerations which force me to ask myself if I couldn’t, through intensive work, concretely and economically consolidate a position as a left-wing outsider which could continue to grant me the possibility of producing extensively in what has so far been my sphere of work (Benjamin 1986: 72).

He reflects on this dilemma the next day:

Whether or not my illegal incognito among bourgeois authors makes any sense. And whether, for the sake of my work, I should avoid certain extremes of “materialism” or seek to work out my disagreements with them within the Party (Benjamin 1986: 73).

We know Benjamin’s decision on the matter: he chose to remain an institutionally unattached outsider. We also know that this was a decision full of contradictions. For though this

freedom of movement guarantees more constructive intellectual work, at the same time it complicates the dissemination of this work and undermines its political effectiveness. We must also stress that the position of the outsider is a pessimistic position. In his essay on Surrealism, Benjamin would describe this heroic pessimism – which again can be related to Weber’s position on the fate of intellectuals in modernity – as an absolute “mistrust in the fate of literature, mistrust in the fate of freedom, mistrust in the fate of European humanity, but three times mistrust in all reconciliation: between classes, between nations, between individuals” (Benjamin 2005d: 216-7). As we shall see, Benjamin would also come to adopt this “all along the line pessimism” – a pessimism which would finally generate his mistrust in the contribution of intellectuals (himself included) to the preparation of the conditions for revolution.

The idea of the outsider is entwined with Benjamin’s institutional critique. Notice the point in which it appears in his Kracauer review:

since the medium in which this reification of human relations actually takes place is that of the organization – the only medium, incidentally, in which reification could be overcome – the author [Kracauer] arrives inevitably at a critique of the trade unions.

This critique is not carried out in terms of party politics or wage policy. Nor can it be found in a single place; rather, it is something that emerges at every point. Kracauer is not concerned with what the union achieves for its members. Instead he asks: How does it educate them? What does it do to liberate them from the spell of the ideologies that hold them in thrall? His *consistent outsider status* greatly helps him in formulating answers

to such questions. He has no commitments that might allow authorities to trump his assertions and force him to hold his tongue (Benjamin 2005a: 306).<sup>8</sup>

It is this outsider position, then, which guarantees the dialectical penetration of reality. All Benjamin's models of the politicized intellectual share this outsider quality: Brecht, Kracauer and, as we shall see, Sergei Tretyakov.<sup>9</sup> One might reasonably argue that Benjamin's model of the outsider is still close to Weber's conception of the objective, "heroic" intellectual since the pivotal point is the intellectual's freedom of movement between different institutions, his non-fixed position which not only allows him to keep a clear, as possible unmediated, judgment, but also to recast institutional structures, to reactive stagnant, bureaucratic organizations.<sup>10</sup> It is crucial to note though that Benjamin rejects both the bourgeois and the communist conception of the role of the socially engaged intellectual: the author should neither be a mere reporter nor an agitprop functionary.

It should be added that Benjamin's review of *The Salaried Masses* was published in the context of the sensation caused by the publication of Karl Mannheim's 1929 study *Ideology and Uto-*

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8 The emphasis is mine.

9 Interestingly, in his seminal study of the German intelligentsia Fritz Ringer (1969: 239) notes the distinction between "mandarin orthodoxy" and the radical intelligentsia arguing that "the radical was typically an outsider in some way. Very often, he had contacts in the world of the nonacademic, unofficial, and unconnected intelligentsia, with artists, journalists, and writers".

10 Benjamin had read Weber's "Science as a Vocation"; see "Verzeichnis der gelesenen Schriften [n. 831]". In: *Gesammelte Schriften* 7.1. Eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1991: 451.

*pia*.<sup>11</sup> Though their approaches differ from a political standpoint, Benjamin's notion of the outsider is remarkably close to Mannheim's concept of the free-floating intellectual (a term that Mannheim borrowed from his teacher, sociologist Alfred Weber, Max Weber's younger brother). In the final analysis, they both share a faith in the potency of the unattached intellectual to attain a functional political role. Mannheim is not that far from Benjamin and Kracauer (or Max Weber) when he observes:

Only he who really has the choice has an interest in seeing the whole of the social and political structure [...] The formation of a decision is truly possible only under conditions of freedom based on the possibility of choice which continues to exist even after the decision has been made (Mannheim 1954: 143).

This is precisely the advantage that Benjamin ascribes to the outsider-intellectual, an advantage which can protect from institutional structures that could impinge upon the intellectual's autonomy. A final important observation: Benjamin's concept of

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11 Some of the most immediate and important reactions to Mannheim's book were published in the same journal, in which Benjamin's review appeared (*Die Gesellschaft*); those and other replies (by, among others, Ernst Robert Curtius, Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer, Hannah Arendt, Otto Neurath, Karl Wittfogel and Helmuth Plessner) are collected in Meja and Stehr 1982: 417-678. Kracauer critically appreciated Mannheim's study and he also sent him a copy of the *Salaried Masses* which was praised by Mannheim for introducing a new method "which is called to amend, at least in this intuitive and likewise constructive form, the shortcomings of our old statistic and other scientific methods" (quoted in Wendt 2010: 102. For Kracauer's review of Mannheim's book, see Kracauer 2011). Kracauer was generally positive towards Mannheim's study, but he pinpointed the ambiguity of the political mission of the "free-floating" intellectual: "the avant-garde of the intellectuals [must] not evaporate into syntheses which finally prove advantageous to the existing society" (Kracauer 2011: 136). Note that the dispute is not over the necessity, but the nature of the intelligentsia as an avant-garde.

the outsider-intellectual (as well as Mannheim's "free-floating intelligentsia") still explores the potential of an avant-garde intelligentsia, the subject of "true consciousness" par excellence that grasps the essence of social reality. Therefore, the position of the outsider-intellectual is conceived as a *leading* position.

In all texts examined above, intellectual and vocational crisis were inherently bound together. For contemporary intellectuals, the study of vocational reorganization was essential to understand the shifting class identities – a result of a social mobility manifested in the proletarianization of the middle classes. A valuable contribution to this direction was the publication, in 1930, of a collective study titled *Deutsche Berufskunde*, whose central idea was that "with the dissolution of estates into which one is born and the shifting class relations [...] vocation remains the only power which forms masses and by which the masses can be categorized".<sup>12</sup> In a period in which Benjamin was occupied with the critique of the blindness of intellectuals towards the radical changes that capitalist production had inflicted upon their own field, it is not surprising that he chose *Deutsche Berufskunde* as the epicenter of one of his radio talks, transmitted by *Südwestdeutsche Rundfunk* on 29 December 1930.

In this talk, characteristically titled "Carousel of Professions", Benjamin discusses *Deutsche Berufskunde* as a product of a new science of labor (*Arbeitswissenschaft*) and a valuable contribution in understanding the transformed nature of modern professions (Benjamin 1991: 667-676). From the whole volume,

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Schwartz 2005: 95-96. My thanks to Frederic Schwartz for bringing this source to my attention.

however, he cites only one essay, Peter Suhrkamp's "Der Journalist", about a peculiar type of professional, a "type of man who had to invent certain professions, when they did not yet exist" (Benjamin 1991: 671). Benjamin brings to the foreground a story which occupies a marginal position in Suhrkamp's piece on journalism; it is a story about a shoemaker from Suhrkamp's village who, thanks to the experience accumulated from empirical observations, had been turned into a jack-of-all-trades. Suhrkamp writes that the shoemaker was "a journalist without a newspaper" (Suhrkamp 1930: 383). The crucial characteristic of this peculiar shoemaker-journalist was that his life and action were organically connected with the life of the community.

Benjamin quotes this story as an example of how a profession can function not just as a means to secure one's own existence (*Lebensmittel*) but also as a purpose in life (*Lebenszweck*) (Benjamin 1991: 673). If in the past, intellectual work was perceived as a kind of social service (a "calling"), where the organic relationship between *Lebensmittel* and *Lebenszweck* was supposedly maintained, in modern society this harmony had been broken (remember again Weber's concluding lines in *The Protestant Ethic*). Thus, for Benjamin, the radicalization of intellectual labor was possible only by restoring this harmonious relationship, but only on the basis of dialectical materialism. A romantic return to the past is, therefore, dismissed.

There is yet another important passage in Suhrkamp's text on journalism (which Benjamin did not quote): his comparison of journalists with artists. For Suhrkamp, both observe the relationships between the human and the material world that consti-

tute reality and they understand them often in a better way than “experts” (Suhrkamp 1930: 383). However, there are two basic differences between authors and journalists. First, journalists work at a faster tempo; their work is dependent upon a specific moment, its characteristic is spontaneity. Second, “the journalist never creates something, as the author does, but he rather endeavors to change something that can be changed, and in his view, it is only the earthly and not the transcendent aspect of life that can be changed” (Suhrkamp 1930: 385). So, journalistic work, Suhrkamp suggests, is demystified intellectual work that exposes everyday reality.

What Benjamin, Kracauer, Brecht and Suhrkamp emphasized at this period is the significance of cultural mediation, the ways cultural institutions channel intellectual labor. It must be underlined that this concern was collectively explored by this circle of intellectuals and culminated in the common plan (from September 1930 to the spring of 1931) to found a new cultural-political journal which was to be fittingly named *Krise und Kritik* (Wizisla 2009: 66-97). The journal was to serve as a platform “in which the bourgeois intelligentsia can account for itself in regard to positions and challenges which uniquely – in current circumstances – permit it an active, interventionist role, with tangible consequences, as opposed to its usual ineffectual arbitrariness” (Wizisla 2009: 66). More significant, however, is the very shattering of the project which is to be attributed not so much on the financial problems of its publishing house (the Rowohlt Verlag) as the same ineffectiveness of left-radical intellectuals that the journal sought to overcome. For once more, at



the most critical political instance, i.e. after the threatening success of the National Socialist Party in the elections of September 1930, there was a complete failure in finding a common ground for even such a small-scale project as the founding of a journal. This failure made clear in practice the shortcomings of the type of the outsider intellectual.

Approximately a month after Benjamin's "Carousel of Professions", on 21 January 1931, a Soviet visitor, Sergei Tretyakov, lectured in Berlin on "The author and the socialist village". Tretyakov's ideas (as is oft-quoted) decisively shaped Benjamin's most famous attack on the German left-radical intelligentsia, namely his "Author as Producer" essay. What, to my knowledge, has not been noted in scholarship is the remarkable correspondence between Suhrkamp's text on journalism and Tretyakov's speech which is manifested in the way Suhrkamp's paradigm of the shoemaker-journalist parallels the new type of the Soviet author-journalist exemplified by Tretyakov.

Tretyakov suggested that an author should be organically connected with his subject matter. Mere inspection of the situation was insufficient; the author had to be actively involved in the life of the community, which constituted his actual material. He termed this new type of writer the "operative writer". The latter would not work in isolation on the production of masterpieces. The new tempo of life was dictating a new form of literature, and the medium that could best serve the work of the operative writer was the newspaper (Tretjakoff 1931: 39-42). Viktor Shklovsky, one of the key figures in the LEF (Left Front of the Arts) circle (to which Tretyakov also belonged) had argued

in similar terms in his semi-autobiographical *Third Factory* which was published in 1926:

At the moment, there are two alternatives. To retreat, dig in, earn a living outside literature and write at home for oneself. The other alternative is [...] to conscientiously seek out the new society and the correct world view. There is no third alternative. Yet that is precisely the one that must be chosen. [...] The third alternative is to work in newspapers and journals every day, to be unsparring of yourself and caring about the work, to change, to crossbred with the material, change some more, crossbred with the material, process it some more – and then there will be literature (Shklovsky 2002: 51-52).

Similarly, to Benjamin and Suhrkamp, Shklovsky espouses the model of an active, operative writer who does not only adapt his material to the times but is himself transformed by “crossbreeding” with his material. This is the exact opposite of the bourgeois reporter. It might seem that in this case the distance between the politicized intellectual and his material (the working masses) has been abolished. However, we must stress that Benjamin, Suhrkamp and Shklovsky only explore a potential: “there is no third alternative, yet that is precisely the one that must be chosen.”

### **From the Operative to the Redundant Intellectual**

Had the actual potential for the materialization of this third alternative been circumscribed in Weimar Germany, it was altogether eradicated by the Nazi dictatorship. Forced into exile, left-radical intellectuals would turn into outsiders par excellence.

It might seem paradoxical, then, that it is precisely during his Paris exile that Benjamin abandons the idea of the outsider intellectual and espouses the model of the operative intellectual – a change of paradigm which is recorded in his “Author as Producer” essay. Benjamin argues here that the debate on radical art had been reduced to a non-dialectic opposition between political tendency and quality, an unproductive exchange of “arguments for and against” which did not touch the inherent connection between “political line” and “quality” (Benjamin 2008: 79-80).<sup>13</sup>

Benjamin’s text is partly a reworking of his “Left-Wing Melancholy” (to which he notably makes a reference). Contrary to the previous article though, the “Author as Producer” is a document of the ultimate defeat of Weimar era left-wing intelligentsia. As is well known Benjamin’s aim here is to regenerate the debate on politically tendentious art by transposing attention from the “attitude of a work *to* the relations of production of its time” to “its position *in* them” (Benjamin 2008: 81).

This leads him to the question of artistic technique and how the latter determines the political character of an artwork. Artistic technique in its turn cannot be separated from production relations within the institutions that circumscribe the production of art. Most importantly, it can function as an apparatus for the transgression of restricted institutional limits an issue which, as we have seen, was central in Benjamin’s work since at least 1929.

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13 The text was to be addressed at the Institute for the Study of Fascism in Paris, but the speech was never delivered. For an excellent account on the genesis of the “Author as Producer” see Gough 2002.

It is in this context that Benjamin points to Sergei Tretyakov and to the latter's notion of the operative writer as an "example of the functional interdependence [...] between the correct political tendency and progressive literary technique" (Benjamin 2008: 81). If, as Benjamin had commented on his "Carousel of Professions", Suhrkamp's shoemaker-journalist was a "type of man, who had to invent certain professions, when they did not exist", Tretyakov had to invent a new radical model of artistic practice which did not previously exist. For Benjamin, Tretyakov represents just an example in what he perceived as "a mighty recasting of literary forms, a melting down in which many of the opposites in which we have been used to think may lose their force" (Benjamin 2008: 82).

Tretyakov's literary technique is highlighted as innovative in both aesthetic and political terms. Benjamin's argument is that the expansion of the institutional barriers of literature by way of journalistic devices facilitates the transformation of the reader into a writer, hence producing an expansion of the category of possible writers. Moreover, he praises Tretyakov's example because he recognizes in it the potential for a radical relativization of educational privilege, which he had previously analyzed as the traditional means of the intellectual's social distinction and of his identification with the bourgeoisie.

To welcome Tretyakov's new model of active, operative literature Benjamin proceeds to a long quotation by a "left-wing author" who, as we know, is none other than himself. But the inclusion of this quotation (which in fact constitutes, more or less, the entirety of his 1934 short text "The Newspaper") in the

context of the “Author as Producer” does not support the argument he makes on the effective political intervention of the intelligentsia; instead, it drastically undermines the revolutionary potential embedded in his piece on “The Newspaper”. Why is that? In the latter text, he pinpoints the “reader’s impatience [...] the impatience of people who are excluded and who think they have the right to see their own interests expressed” (Benjamin 2008: 82-83) as the pivotal factor shaping the organization of the newspaper’s content. And whilst in the capitalist West publishers exploit and manipulate this desire of the excluded to have their voices heard, in Soviet Russia

the conventional distinction between author and public [...] begins to disappear [...] As an expert [the reader] – not perhaps in a discipline but perhaps in a post that he holds – he gains access to authorship. [...] Literary competence is no longer founded on specialized training but is now based on polytechnical education, and thus becomes public property (Benjamin 2008: 83).

At a first glance this quotation from “The Newspaper” is fully in line with Benjamin’s intention in the “Author as Producer”, i.e. to

develop the theory that a decisive criterion of a revolutionary function of literature lies in the extent to which technical advances lead to a transformation of artistic forms and hence of intellectual means of production (Benjamin 2005c: 783).

To fully grasp the revolutionary potential of his argument, I suggest associating it with the issue of the deskilling of labor. For it is precisely technologically induced deskilling of labor – from

the workshop to academic or extra-academic polytechnical education – that undermines the expert’s specialization and expertise and can turn education into public property. And it is on this basis that the ones excluded from knowledge can aspire to their integration into cultural production.

Benjamin has found, in other words, a solution. But he backs off from its consequences. For the problem is that he does not really touch on the question of deskilling in his “Author as Producer”. Instead, he turns to the Brechtian notion of the functional transformation (*Umfunktionierung*) of art. And this turn implicates a decisive change of focus from the excluded public to the heroic image of the avant-garde intellectual. Indeed, Benjamin perceives *Umfunktionierung* exclusively as a business of the avant-garde intelligentsia. This sudden retreat to the traditional role of the artist or intellectual as a social agent – a kind of specialist in his respective field – undermines the potential of technology to bypass mediation. For how can one expect that “the exemplary character of production” of the avant-garde intelligentsia suffices to “induce other producers to produce, and [...] to put an improved apparatus at their disposal [...] able to turn [consumers] into producers – that is, readers or spectators into collaborators”(Benjamin 2008: 89)?

Benjamin also underestimates the most vital problem for the materialization of this *Umfunktionierung*: that the success of the experiments promoted by the avant-gardists whose works he applauds (Sergei Tretyakov, John Heartfield, Bertolt Brecht and Hanns Eisler) depended on their freedom of movement – hence we revert to the intellectual’s semi-outsider position –

within the institutions which regulated the reception and dissemination of their production. In other words, the avant-garde intelligentsia could succeed only if it could set its own rules within those institutions. And this was not the case in either the capitalist West or the socialist East. The tragic end of Tretyakov in 1937 would stand as an appalling evidence of the strictly demarcated field of action for avant-garde intellectuals within the existing institutional structures.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Artwork Essay as a Case against the Feasibility of an Operative Intelligentsia**

Though the idea of the deskilling of labor was muted in the “Author as Producer”, it did serve as the point of departure for Benjamin’s decisive turn of stance towards the question of the relationship between the radical intelligentsia and the proletariat. This idea, it is my argument, reflected Benjamin’s growing mistrust towards the avant-garde position of the intellectual. From this standpoint, it constitutes his ultimate abandonment of the notion of the outsider-intellectual and represents an attack on both the bourgeois radical intellectual and his supposed communist agitprop or tendentious opposite. If Benjamin’s reference to Tretyakov as another paradigm of a truly radical, active intellectual still foregrounds the vanguard role of the intelligentsia for the transformation of the world in his “Author as Producer”, in the Artwork essay the revolutionary potential is rendered

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14 Tretyakov was arrested on 25 July 1937, charged with espionage and sentenced to death in September of the same year.

impersonal as it is ascribed to the new technological means instead of an enlightened individual (Benjamin 2008: 19-55). Consequently, it is a thesis that represents a distinct – though overlooked in scholarship – anti-intellectual position. It is from this point of view that we can understand the usually neglected short quote by Madame de Duras with which Benjamin opens his text: “The true is what he can; the false is what he wants” (Benjamin 2008: 19). Who is the subject in the context of Benjamin’s text? Is it perhaps the intellectual?

It is tempting to see the Artwork essay as a twofold critique of intellectual authority embedded in a traditional notion of both the role of the intellectual, and of artistic practice in general. Benjamin’s shift of focus to the ways technology might revolutionize artistic practice as well as its reception by the public, reflects his loss of faith in the potential for the political radicalization of intellectuals. The rise of fascism to power had proved that the hopes for a radical transformation of their social role were illusory. Benjamin was now concerned with the raising of a proper consciousness through the elaboration of new technological means and without the intellectual’s contribution. If cultural expertise could be radically expanded to a broad public thanks to technological advancement, then the traditional role of the intellectual would gradually wane.

To a certain extent his Artwork essay is a continuation of his main argument in the “Author as Producer”, i.e. the exploration of means to produce high-quality and politically effective tendentious art. There is, however, one crucial difference. The self-evident agent in the critique of tendentious art is the intel-



lectual. By the later essay, however, the operative intellectual is completely absent, a disappearance that has not been but needs to be explained. The question revolves again around the “apparatus” that can turn consumers into producers, but this time Benjamin makes a key move that would not have been unnoticed by his readers of the time: he takes the apparatus from the hands of the eminent intellectual and exhibits its potential for the (anonymous) masses of producers; it is now the *anonymous* camera user, the mechanic or the public-as-critic who embody the emergence of a new type of operative artist or intellectual. In this way, he returns to the problem of agency and mediation.

It is from this point of view that we can interpret Theodor Adorno’s reply to the Artwork essay, a reply which has significantly shaped its reception in scholarship, focusing attention on Benjamin’s optimism regarding the potential of film to transform the viewer into an expert. Yet an essential element of Adorno’s critique has evaded scholarly attention. Concluding his letter, Adorno argues for a “total elimination of Brechtian motifs” from Benjamin’s thought:

This prescribes our own function fairly precisely – by which I certainly do not mean to imply an activist conception of “the intellectual”. But nor can it mean that we should merely escape from the old taboos by entering into new ones [...] It is not a case of bourgeois idealism if, in full knowledge and without intellectual inhibitions, we maintain our solidarity with the proletariat, instead of making our own necessity into a virtue of the proletariat [...] that proletariat which itself experiences the same necessity, and needs us for knowledge just as much as we need the proletariat for the revolution. I am convinced that

the further development of the aesthetic debate which you have so magnificently inaugurated, depends essentially upon a true evaluation of the relationship between intellectuals and the working class (Lonitz 1999: 131-132).<sup>15</sup>

Here Adorno clearly discerns and immediately rejects Benjamin's radically anti-intellectual position. But Adorno was mistaken. Benjamin's essay did not inaugurate an aesthetic debate; instead his position can be seen as an attempt to bring to a conclusion the debate on the potentiality of a radical intelligentsia. Adorno exhorts Benjamin to return to a path which had been proven to be a *cul-de-sac*. For the quality of Benjamin's Artwork essay consists in his change of course from the exploration of the role of the intellectual to the examination of the manifold ways technology changes cultural production. The openness of the text is owed to this de-individualization of his subject, to his consistent focus on the potential embedded in modern technological media which now substitutes for his faith in the transformative capabilities of a quasi-heroic avant-garde intelligentsia. And it is precisely this openness that makes the Artwork still topical whilst time has long since taken the edge off Brecht's *Umfunktionierung* and Tretyakov's model of the operative writer.

Thus, in the Artwork essay Benjamin saw the transformation of the proletarian into an expert without the guidance of the intellectual as more possible than the transformation of the latter into an agent of the revolution. Adorno, still pursuing his

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15 Letter to Benjamin of 18 March 1936.

academic career when he sent his letter, missed Benjamin's bitterness over the inability of the intellectual to break away from bourgeois institutions – a precondition for a constructive collaboration with the proletariat. Additionally, by stressing once again Benjamin's dependence on "Brechtian motifs", he reduced the originality of Benjamin's provocative thesis.

Again, it must be emphasized that the basis of Benjamin's anti-intellectual position is the potential of polytechnic education to bypass institutional mediation in the cultural field or, in other words, to neutralize the role of the professional expert as an educator of the uninitiated. Benjamin suggests that by enabling the transformation of the modern public's sensory system and the deskilling of artistic labor technology paves the way for the promotion of a non-exclusive cultural agenda, which abolishes the distinction between the outstanding expert (the bourgeois social reformer-educator or the revolutionary artist-agitator) and the working masses as his auxiliary personnel.

It is as if technological knowledge itself gradually becomes "free-floating", with the effect that its use can be mastered by all those excluded by official, hierarchically structured institutions. For, in reality, the outsider was not the individual, unattached intellectual but rather the masses of lower middle- and working-class people who had been left excluded from cultural production before the age of the reproducibility of the work of art.

In this still-ongoing process a very specific position becomes redundant: that of the avant-garde. Questioning the expert's exclusive rights to intellectual property, the avant-garde loses its right of existence. This is a surprising answer for a figure so clo-

sely tied to our notion of the avant-garde and a text which though it has come to pass as a manifesto of various avant-garde movements, it might have been originally destined to tell us something completely different. By listening to it again we can perhaps better grasp our current situation.

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