Theories and Methodologies

Benjamin's Fire Tongs

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In a quick aside sent off from that relentless series of fireworks *The Benjamin Files*, Fredric Jameson pauses to distinguish between the short story (in its traditional form of the folk or fairy tale) and the novel: "The secret of the novel," he remarks, "is the impossibility of its retelling" (167). The tale, on the other hand, as analyzed in Walter Benjamin's essay "The Story Teller," involves a structure of transmission, adapted to the situation, the occasion, and the people to whom it is told. Whereas the novel's narrator propels the actions of a plot that can never be repeated interestingly (think of the tedium of reading—or worse, listening to—any plot summary!), the tale is set in the middle voice so that its readers and listeners also participate performatively in its events, only to then find themselves propelled to relate it again, like the wedding guest in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner" or the third person in Sigmund Freud's account of the social construction of the joke: the distinctive power of the tale is that it precipitates its own compulsive retelling and elaboration, just as Benjamin's response to Franz Kafka was to write an essay in which he relates yet more stories. The same distinction might be usefully applied to books of criticism—which of them are, as it were, novels, and which of them are tales? While most play out at the level of the novel, offering plots or arguments that remain concluded and unyielding, there are also rare examples of critical works that operate like the folk tale, falling without warning on their readers, who with scarcely any choice find themselves driven to repeat and extend them, in short, to write another book. Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, with its compelling antitheses, might be one enduring example, and so too must be his student Jameson's *The Benjamin Files*. It's so rich and fertile in ideas, exploding with energy and insights, that the reader has little choice but to submit to its

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repetition effect with more writing, to extend its arguments and questions in new directions, and that is exactly the response that Eduardo Cadava and Sara Nadal-Melsió offer us in their brilliant, polemical *Politically Red*.

My Life in My Act

Writing in the glow of Jamesonian after-effects during the dark times of COVID-19 and the murder of George Floyd, Cadava and Nadal-Melsió find themselves spurred on to offer readings that register their own peculiar situation, reenactments driven by a need to transform the politics of Benjamin's and Jameson's "active and . . . energizing pessimism" (Jameson 235). Even in the forced hibernation of COVID, writing and reading, Cadava and Nadal-Melsió suggest, can produce a "critical strike" (71) that consists not in a mass refusal by academics to contribute to academic journals such as *PMLA* but, following the asseverations of Jacques Derrida, in a direct-action intervention through the creation of a new archive of political texts characterized as a "red common-wealth" of radical thought for the United States, from Karl Marx to Rosa Luxemburg, from W. E. B. Du Bois to Jameson (27; see also 286–89; Derrida 37). In tracing filiations between a dazzling array of revolutionary writings, they offer their readings as a form of political agency that can operate as a means of mobilization, for which they invoke Louis Althusser's claim, in his preface to *Reading* Capital (*Lire* Le capital), that "only since Marx have we had to begin to suspect what, in theory at least, *reading* and hence writing *means*" ("c'est depuis Marx que nous devrions commencer de soupçonner ce que, du moins dans la théorie, *lire* et donc écrire *veut dire*"; Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 29; Althusser et al., *Lire* 1: 15). Althusser's demand that to read *Capital* must involve reading "à la lettre" ("to the letter"; Althusser et al., *Lire* 1: 12; Althusser et al., *Reading* 11) turns out to be one of extreme complexity, since *Capital* involves a multiplicity of versions across different editions in different languages—there is no single definitive text (see Young, "Re-reading"). Cadava and Nadal-Melsió draw the reader's attention to Althusser's suggestion that Marx offers a new theory of reading in *Capital*, one that takes the form of a counterintuitive aphoristic insight worthy of Benjamin himself: "ce que l'économie politique classique ne voit pas, ce n'est pas ce qu'elle ne voit pas, c'est *ce qu'elle voit*: ce n'est pas ce qui lui manque, c'est au contraire *ce qui ne lui manque pas*: ce n'est pas ce qu'elle rate, c'est au contraire *ce qu'elle ne rate pas*" ("what classical political economy does not see is not what it does not see, but what it does see; it is not what it lacks, on the contrary, it is what it does not lack: it is not what it misses, on the contrary, it is what it does not miss"; Althusser et al., *Lire* 1: 22; Althusser et al., *Reading* 19; trans. modified).

Marx detects, Althusser claims gnomically, that political economy does not see what it sees, just as Althusser's analyst Jacques Lacan emphasizes that what the detective Dupin surmises in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter" is that the missing letter continues to elude detection because it is hidden in plain sight. Does reading red also provide us with a new theory of reading that helps us to see what we do not see when we see, a new form of surface or symptomatic reading? Cadava and Nadal-Melsió's strategy is to collide Althusser with Benjamin to offer a new modality of reading, of reading red, by means of historical conjunctions, creating an assemblage of writers and texts in new configurations that enable us to *faire bouger les choses* ("make things happen") by seeing them and reading them politically in relation to our own situation in the United States today, where questions of race in particular cannot be sidelined from any form of political radicalism.

Weaving Marxism and anarchism together with critical race thinking enables a very different kind of reading from Benjamin's own destructive interventions against radical aesthetics based on a "logic of separation and discontinuity" (Jameson 83). The paradoxes emerge particularly when Cadava and Nadal-Melsió turn to Benjamin's 1921 essay "Toward the Critique of Violence" to offer a symptomatic reading based on "one of the great mysteries of the essay": that Rosa Luxemburg "is not mentioned explicitly even once" (71). Seeing what is not seen, they explore Luxemburg's hidden role in this essay in which Benjamin invokes neither Luxemburg herself nor the violence of the Spartacist

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Uprising of January 1919 that led to her assassination. In Cadava and Nadal-Melsió's insistence "on the relation between language and action" (26), reading Benjamin and Luxemburg together cannot but highlight the contrast between Benjamin's antiaesthetic concerns and the direct political activism of Luxemburg. Her brutal political murder prompts us to ask what differences reading red might find between the language of the political revolutionary and that of the intellectual leftist writer. Should we (and if so, how should we) distinguish between the texts of militant insurrectionists like Luxemburg, Marx himself, Louis-Auguste Blanqui, Vladimir Lenin, György Lukács, or, to add three more whom Cadava and Nadal-Melsió leave out of their canon, Leon Trotsky, Antonio Gramsci, or Frantz Fanon—those who dedicated themselves to transforming their words into direct action, active political commitments that for Luxemburg, Trotsky, Gramsci, and perhaps Fanon, cost them their lives—and the texts of intellectuals of the same era such as Benjamin? Or, in terms of the dialectics of language and action, what makes a book move off the library shelf to become a force that operates as a motor of political and social change? With Fanon, not only does the sensual physicality of his language precipitate forms of affect in his readers, who intuit that every thought has been experienced through his body, but he himself was already posing this question of the relation between writing and political action in some of his earliest works:

> Je vois ma vie prise vertigineusement
> attachée à l'ACTE
> ruée contre l'ACTE
> Ma vie de cet acte élaborée. (*Écrits* 125)
>
> I see my life hanging vertiginously
> tied to the ACT
> rushing toward the ACT
> My life in this thought-out act.
> (*Plays* 156; trans. modified)

His life in his thought-out act: six years later he would precipitate himself vertiginously into an irrevocable political activism that would in turn create the basis for a book that became a foundational text for all forms of anticolonial revolution up to the present day. In the context of the widespread invocation of Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* in relation to the war in Gaza, should Cadava and Nadal-Melsió's strategies and projected canon of reading red be extended beyond US politics to a more radical internationalism? Would not internationalism itself be a form of resistance to the reemergence of US nationalism?

To put the question more graphically, in relation to Friedrich Engels's doodling, explored so creatively in the opening chapter of *Politically Red*, how does Engels's—how might our own academic—dawdling dilly-dallying doodling precipitate interventions in the realm of political action like Fanon's? Althusser's focus on reading *Capital* makes sense because, unfinished, unfinishable, and almost unreadable in its multiple drafts and revisions though it is (and for which the best preparatory reading must therefore be Marx's own favorite novel, *Tristram Shandy*), the fact remains that along with *The Communist Manifesto*, *Capital* has lit the touch paper to more direct political action than any other book ever written. To explore the force of a writing that has precipitated so much mass mobilization is to search for its invisible secret, to try to see what we see laid out before us but can't see.[1] In this context, the revolutionary power of Marx's *Capital* can be read in contrast to the ultimately ineffectual protest against genocide in Bartolomé de las Casas's 1552 *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*, which may remain "a resource for later writers" (Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 294) but also dialectically highlights a similitude with more recent genocides in our own century conducted without apology, shame, or remorse in the face of powerless, unavailing global protest. Las Casas's account of the conquistadores' unremitting slaughter of the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas prompted a question in his own day that remains as disturbing for us now—that is, judging from the ways in which humans continue to kill other humans in pitiless, inconceivable numbers, whether in fact human beings themselves are fully human. Humanism, even Fanon's "nouvel humanisme" ("new humanism"; Fanon, *Œuvres* 63), has always been too secular an ideology to confront this fundamental contradictory flaw in humanity that only theology has dared to address.

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Benjamin's Fire Tongs

Though Benjamin has yet to precipitate a revolution, his language is riddled with "its own inner kind of violence," particularly in his characteristic use of a verb that Jameson points to as at once violent and temporalizing—*aufblitzen*, to "flash up, flare up" (Jameson 31). He does not tell us whether its closeness to *Blitzkrieg* was deliberate. The violence of Benjamin's fleeting flash constitutes his variety of surrealist shock that lies at the heart of his model of revolution and of history, equivocating between writing that takes the form of resistance and writing that generates action. Reading too must become proactive if it is to be transformational. Benjamin himself would rehearse this dialectic through his restaging of history by means of a model based on Sergei Eisenstein's convolutes for his film *Capital*: in *The Arcades Project* we find the script for a film in which the history that produced Charles Baudelaire and Marcel Proust would once again flare up momently in the present on the screen before its immersed audience (see Vogman, *Sinnliches Denken* and "Eisenstein's *Capital* Diaries"; Young, "Winging It" 52–54).

Operating on the basis of similitude, Benjamin's aesthetic mode will always be to put history in its own age while simultaneously reading it in the time of the now; in the same way, Cadava and Nadal-Melsió's red reading puts the past in dialectical conjunction with reading in the present. There is no more well-known or oft-quoted aphorism in that respect than the following passage from the seventh section of Benjamin's *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* ("On the Concept of History"): "There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. The historical materialist keeps his distance from all of this. He has to brush history against the grain—even if he needs a barge pole to do it" (*Selected Writings* 4: 407; qtd. in Cadava and Nadal-Melsió 157).

Cadava and Nadal-Melsió comment on this passage:

> brushing history against the grain means writing history against a historicism that privileges the victors, writing history from the point of view of the vanquished, that is, rather than from that of the victors . . . . [Benjamin] emphasizes the difficulty of this task by offering us a rather remarkable figure: given the strength and longstanding traditions of writing history from the perspective of the victors, he suggests, writing a history from the point of view of those who remain uncounted and unheard, who toil for others anonymously, is like pushing or pulling a heavy barge, loaded with the bulk goods and values of capital, forward—and trying to direct it, against the muddy but invisible ground of cultural sedimentation, with a barge pole. (158)

The toil of moving the barge transports them into the whole question of labor, from which they segue neatly into Marx writing on a barge while in Holland, even while admitting that a barge offers a rather different image from that of Benjamin's sailing boat setting its sails "for the wind of world history" with which Jameson opens his book (Benjamin qtd. in Jameson 1). As Cadava and Nadal-Melsió suggest, the barge is hardly the most revolutionary of ships. And the idea of Benjamin himself pushing a barge with a barge pole seems almost as incongruous as the story of his trying to escape from Marseille by boarding a ship dressed as a sailor—but still carrying his briefcase containing *The Arcades Project*. The unsettling image of the barge and its pole encourages the reader to return to Benjamin's original German: "Es ist niemals ein Dokument der Kultur, ohne zugleich ein solches der Barbarei zu sein. Der historische Materialist wahrt Distanz davon. Er hat die Geschichte gegen den Strich zu bürsten—und müßte er die Feuerzange zu Hilfe nehmen" (*Gesammelte Schriften* 1241).

It's now clear that Benjamin's "On the Concept of History" is as palimpsestic a text as Marx's *Capital*. Like *Capital*, it was never finished; it was also written in German and French, but unlike *Capital*, no part of it was ever published in its author's lifetime—it was first printed in 1942, less than two years after Benjamin's death, in the midst of tensions between Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Gershom Scholem, and Hannah Arendt. As Gérard Raulet's recent edition makes clear, what survives today is a constellation of six drafts, some of them written on the backs of envelopes, together with interrelated

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fragments, that present different versions of a text of which no final version exists. The draft that was in Benjamin's possession at the time of his death, which might have been the latest, disappeared with his briefcase. With no definitive version, it will always remain, perhaps fittingly, given its critique of the idea of history as progress, an evolving work that can never be definitively concluded (Benjamin, *Sur le concept*; Hill).

The phrase "und müßte er die Feuerzange zu Hilfe nehmen" ("even if he needs a barge pole to do it") in the version that Cadava and Nadal-Melsió quote is absent in the version that was presented as the authoritative text in earlier German and English editions as if there were a "final" draft. The usual word for barge pole in German is *Bootsstange*, while the primary meaning of the word *Feuerzange* is in fact "fire tongs" (*Feuer* is "fire," and *Zange* is "tongs"). A literal translation would read "even if he needs fire tongs to do it." The barge pole appears because the German phrase "den würde ich nicht mal mit er Feuerzange anfassen" ("I wouldn't touch it with fire tongs") is habitually translated by its equivalent idiomatic phrase in British English, "I wouldn't touch it with a barge pole," which, while a passable translation, nevertheless changes the metaphor dramatically. To brush history against the grain so as to reveal its dark underside of barbarism therefore requires not a barge pole but the spark of a burning coal that will detonate an explosion to bring a momentary flash of illumination. Benjamin rewrites an everyday idiom used to express aversion and avoidance to convey instead the necessity of skillful intervention; the fire tongs are precisely what the dialectical historian needs to blast the epoch out of its historical continuity (Benjamin, *Selected Writings* 3: 262), overturning the complacent tendency to notice only civilization when in fact looking at the interworkings of civilization and barbarism and thus, once again, to not see what we see. Invoking Benjamin's *denkbild* ("thought-image") of history in the section titled "Feuermelder" ("Fire Alarm") in *Einbahnstraße* (*One-Way Street*; *Selected Writings* 1: 469–70), Michael Löwy notes that "Benjamin does not conceive revolution as the 'natural' or 'inevitable' outcome of economic and technical progress . . . but as the interruption of a process of historical evolution leading to catastrophe" (9). History, for Benjamin, is not the breaking of bourgeois forms toward a necessary socialist political outcome, as it is for Lukács, but a reiterated interruption, a destructive, wrecking force whose debris is piling up before us and going nowhere. To brush history against the grain is not just to reverse it but to explode its continuity.

This striking metaphor of fire tongs with which Benjamin raised the revolutionary stakes of his sentence prompts two significant theoretical questions. The first concerns the question of the archive and how texts can be presented to the reader in ways that make them more readable but at the cost of masking their multiplicity and fragmentary nature. Despite the vast amount of commentary on the text, until Raulet's French edition that includes all its different drafts side by side without privileging any of them, it was, in a sense, impossible to read Benjamin's "On the Concept of History." The archive is not an inert repository but a source of exploding energy and potential, presenting on occasion inflammable possibilities for a politics of reading and for critical strikes. Benjamin's phrase also raises questions of translation, showing how a plausible translation can be completely misleading. *Barge pole* succeeds as an idiomatic equivalent in English but fails to render the core sense of the metaphor as a literal translation does. The untranslatability of idiom can not only lead astray but also prompt ricochets in new directions—like Benjamin's own tangential billiard ball—rebounds that can be creative even if they have nothing to do with what Benjamin himself was thinking. In this case, however, the idiomatic translation annihilates Benjamin's politics of explosion and prevents us from reading red.

At the same time, while the fire tongs have served to light the touch papers of the critical explosions that Benjamin's dialectical document of civilization and barbarism continues to produce, it's significant that Löwy, like Jameson, highlights Benjamin's insistent critique of the fundamental Marxist assumption of teleological historical progress. This prompts a question posed many times before: In what sense

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can Benjamin be characterized as a Marxist at all? Though he describes himself as a historical materialist, if his historical materialism does not posit a hidden force of progression through the history of class struggle, if "On the Concept of History" suggests that history is not advancing but unfolding at a reiterated catastrophic standstill, how compatible are the progressive ends of *Politically Red* with Benjamin's pessimistic Marxism developed during the defeats of the Nazi era? Although Benjamin's catastrophic theory of history was fully endorsed by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), it is still hard to envisage an activist left politics today without some assumption of the possibility of progress (see, e.g., Žižek). If there is no chance of things getting better, of creating a more just world, what exactly are we reading red for? The very term *progressive* is typically still used freely today in North America to denote a generally liberal-left, forward-looking attitude or agenda. How would we talk of politics if we had to eschew the word *progressive* and its implications?

But

Against the defeats of the left today, *Politically Red* therefore conjures up the spirit of *reculer pour mieux sauter*, its project to redeem Benjamin's work from his antiredemptive pessimism so that we can start to move forward again in these times of uncertainty in which it feels as if we are only moving backward and the future is something whose consequences we dread (White). From this revisionary perspective, the problem in starting from Jameson's account is that he doesn't try to push Benjamin into his own or any other contemporary political agenda but rather to explore Benjamin in the moment of his own historicity, on his own terms, which, as any reader of Benjamin knows, is hardly a straightforward matter, and this constitutes the great strength of the book. Jameson then wants to use Benjamin's perspectives to explore the similitude between the defeats of his time and those of our own. Without just embedding Benjamin in his historical moment in the bland mode of biography—an analogue of plot summary—Jameson situates him within those historical conditions, issues, and pressures of the day that make his concerns and ideas meaningful. Jameson's text, like Cadava and Nadal-Melsió's, must therefore be unusually writerly—it's as if one can only get to grips with Benjamin's tale by repeating his writerly mode, even while his disparateness, the deliberate fragmentariness of his works, his relentless formal experimentalism, his moves across idiosyncratic dated texts, objects, and technologies, make his work so hard—and rewarding—to read. Jameson succeeds not (thankfully) in bringing it all together in a conventional critical holistic reading but rather in presenting the work as a readable constellation, enabling us to recognize connections or structural similarities between all the disparate elements, cities, technologies.

Jameson's willingness to situate himself in Benjamin's ambivalent sea of contradictions is aptly illustrated by his fondness for beginning a sentence, often a paragraph, with the word *but*. In his discussion of the novel as opposed to the tale, for example, four of six paragraphs begin with the word *but*, and a fifth begins with *yet* (166–67). A copyeditor or writing instructor might strike out these repeated *but*s, all stacked against the one paragraph that strategically begins not with a conjunction but with the word *experience*. But these insistent conjunction-qualifiers enable Jameson to read Benjamin by capturing the discontinuous forms of what Jameson calls his "figuration" (5), bringing to life the constituent dialectical contradictions of his fragmentary writing that allow him to propose different interpretive possibilities simultaneously without fully endorsing any one of them. Instead of just thinking of this structure in terms of Kafkaesque or Derridean undecidables, we might recall that Benjamin, who had himself already ventured his own solution to Bertrand Russell's famous set-theory paradox, was sitting in the audience of the 1930 Vienna Circle conference in Königsberg when Kurt Gödel announced his incompleteness theorem that ended the possibility of certainty even in mathematics (Edmonds 97–98; Fenves 125–30; Gödel).

Benjamin typically describes himself as a historical or dialectical materialist, without making any decidable commitments to communism or any other

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form of socialism. His interest in Blanqui—emphasized by Cadava and Nadal-Melsió in their wonderful chapter on his *Eternity under the Stars*—encourages us to put his sympathies closer to forms of anarchist philosophy, a possible model of similitude for our own time (Malabou). At the same time, twenty-first-century capitalism, which Cadava and Nadal-Melsió invoke so frequently as the object and practice against which the left must struggle, remains largely untheorized and unexamined in its operations by those on the cultural left. Can the ways of reading advocated in *Politically Red*—the breaking up of totalities, the emphasis on locating fissures, and so forth—really constitute a threat to it? Why does capitalism require totalities? Is it not adroit enough to immediately occupy and exploit fissures? Capitalism, as Marx and Engels pointed out many years ago, has long been a revolutionary economic system that maintains no intrinsic attachment to or dependence on any ideology that no longer serves its purposes. Capitalism's enduring advantage, as Jean-François Lyotard observed, is that it has no beliefs. Its fundamental mode of operation is to facilitate constant revolutionizing of production and of social relations: "all that is solid melts into air"—or perhaps AI (Marx and Engels 45–46). Benjamin cites Bertolt Brecht, who makes a similar point: "Communism is not radical. It is capitalism that is radical" (Benjamin, *Selected Writings* 2: 559). The weakness of the left has always been that it has ignored the example of Marx, who spent most of his life reading not just red anarchist and socialist writers but above all, and in scrupulous detail, the theorists of capitalism in all their various pitiless forms. *Capital*'s critique would be nothing without that deep reading, and that is its completely visible but unnoticed and rarely imitated secret.

Today, while the right reads left-wing philosophers either to appropriate their ideas or to try to discredit them, the left chronicles the negative effects of capitalism with little serious inquiry into how capitalism actually works successfully in practice in our own day in its multiple forms. Instead, one constantly finds oneself reading "critiques" in which capitalism is simply offered as the agential subject of the sentence, as if it were a godlike totality operating with a single intention. And yet, given that domestic consumption forms capitalism's primary driver, it is all of us who are in fact powering it onward by our everyday behavior as insatiable consumers. One cannot blame capitalism as if it were something outside us. Reading politically, reading red, should mean reading seriously not just the great revolutionaries of the left but also those of the right in order to begin to point the well-honed techniques of critique, fire tongs glowing red, in their direction effectively at last. As long as the left does not do this, capitalists will stay ahead of the game, we will continue not to see what we see all around us, and the explosion of history will never come.

Note

1. In her recent readings of Marx, as evidenced by her talk "Inhabiting Error" at New York University in the fall of 2023, Ngai seems to be pursuing this very question.

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