

The Fascist Seduction of Narrative: Walter Benjamin's Historical Materialism Beyond Counter-Narrative

Tadashi Dozono¹ 

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Abstract This essay introduces Walter Benjamin's historical materialism to illuminate how history teachers may invoke a critique of the past and present through democratizing the production of knowledge in the classroom. Historical materialism gives students access to the means of knowledge production and entrusts them with the task of generating a critique of politics through encounters with historical objects. The rise of the alt-right, alternative facts, and fake news sites necessitates social studies methods that intervene into the fascist seductions of narrative in history. A Benjaminian pedagogy emphasizes reading practices that acknowledge the political layers of history inscribed within the objects. This generates space for forms of pessimism and dialectic critiques of barbarism that students may experience with history beyond the teacher's capacity for understanding. In the name of democracy over fascism, the article adds a political critique to students' historical and critical thinking skills.

Keywords Critical theory · Critical pedagogy · History education · Frankfurt School

Critical thinking within a social justice context consists of two aspects often at odds: autonomous thinking, and a critique of the existing social order. In the Winter 2012–2013 issue of the American Federation of Teachers' *American Educator*, Sam Wineburg's article critiqued the enthusiastic application of Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* (1980/2003) within schools. Wineburg (2012) asked, "What does *A People's History* teach these young people about what it means to *think historically*?" (p. 28). This article touched a nerve within the social studies education community (Bogle and Mazelis 2013; Kysia 2013; Mikaelian 2013). Many interpreted his critique as an attack on Howard Zinn's counter-narrative work in order to discredit the value of *A People's History* (1980/2003) in the classroom.

✉ Tadashi Dozono
tadashisan@gmail.com

¹ Lyons Community School, Brooklyn, USA

The controversy brings to light a long-standing tension within history pedagogy. Wineburg expressed concern that the use of Zinn's book as a counter-narrative to mainstream textbooks would replace an unjust historical narrative with a more just yet nonetheless inaccurate one; this teaches a critique of society but fails to foster autonomous thinking. Erring on the side of autonomous thinking eliminates any notion of ideological hegemony, because it imagines that critique, left to its own devices, will invariably lead to the teacher's vision of social justice.

Both the far-right and far-left employ counter-narratives appealing to the rejection of the status quo. These narratives call for solidarity and change from the dominant social order that has failed the common people. In the far-right's alternative media today, we see propaganda narratives that instill a social critique but work against autonomous thinking. Ironically, Wineburg's critique of Zinn was adopted by far-right media, who failed to comprehend that Wineburg's position sees greater damage in the far-right's use of unsubstantiated sources in their counter-narratives of the world (Mikaelian 2013). Such commitment to a particular narrative allows the far-right to pick soundbytes from Wineburg to support their ends, rather than listening to Wineburg's underlying message.

This article asserts Walter Benjamin's historical materialism as a means to bridge critique of the dominant social order and autonomous student thinking in the classroom. Benjamin's historical materialism subverts the fascist threat of narrative by engaging students as participants in more democratic practices of history knowledge production. Benjamin's focus on the political demands interrogation of the barbarism alongside and within culture, and values forms of pessimism that result from the destructive side of technological progress.

The social critique embedded within Zinn's work is not achieved pedagogically through learning a new critical historical narrative. The role of the social justice teacher shifts to coaching students in improving their reading practices through politics, to read critically for power dynamics in the production of history.

Wineburg's (2001) work has helped to shift history pedagogy toward students doing the work of historians, beyond memorizing important facts and pre-determined cause-effect narratives. His research distilled three heuristics (sourcing, contextualization, and corroboration) that historians use when they approach a set of primary documents to encourage instructors to teach students how to think like historians. These heuristics are accessible to students and prioritize literacy skills and intellectual rigor in the social studies. Wineburg places student thinking as the central activity in the history classroom. However, this approach disregards relationships between larger social and economic inequalities, and their impact on students' experience of history. Freedman's (2015) article on historiography in history education brought these theoretical foundations to bear in the history classroom. This requires a re-engagement of foundational disciplinary debates about what it means to do history, the political investments involved, and the theoretical foundations of historical methods.

I assert supplementing Wineburg's heuristics with practices of interrogating the political socio-cultural dynamics within students' every encounter with history. Benjamin's historical materialism brings Zinn's political critique to Wineburg's historical thinking practices. The article begins by examining the two fascist threats Benjamin saw within the presentation of narrative (including radical counter-narratives). The first fascist threat is the allure of emotion over interrogation of evidence that comes with the commitment to an ideal endpoint of progress. The second is in the fascist authority over history's production. The article then turns to Benjamin's historical materialism as a form of autonomous thinking through political critique: first emphasizing the concept of barbarism embedded within

every documentation of culture; and second attending to a pessimistic stance towards the failures of technology's promise. Finally, I apply this framework to the classroom today in order to create experiences with historical documents and develop reading practices through politics with the potential to break open the status quo.

The Fascism Within Teleological Narratives of Progress

For Benjamin, the danger of fascism within history lies in the seduction of narrative—the capacity to pull emotional strings, the promise of progress, and its allure of authority over knowledge. Walter Benjamin understood fascism as a looming threat that arose alongside modernity's new forms of mass media and technology, beyond the specific political parties and leaders in Europe during his day. He witnessed the use of new media and technology to coerce the masses to a unified vision at the expense of such media's democratic potential. This mirrors a similar concern of fascist tendencies today: the use of media to coerce using emotional narratives over critical thinking. For Benjamin, fascism lies less in the fascist leader than in the banality of the everyday and the consumption of media, influencing the masses' willingness to follow.

Benjamin lived in Germany and France when the rise of fascism led directly to his suicide at the border between Spain and France in 1940. Although never officially a faculty member of the Frankfurt School for Social Research, Walter Benjamin's work was deeply intertwined with the Frankfurt School, and with Theodor Adorno in particular. The Frankfurt School focused on the challenges presented by modernity and industrialization, with particular attention to the role of new forms of mass media for democratic practices, in the shadow of authoritarianism and fascism. Their work is often framed as a form of neo-Marxism, bringing in psychoanalysis, political philosophy, sociology, and other disciplines to address their concerns with Marxism. The Frankfurt School's work informed the development of critical theory, critical race theory, and critical pedagogy.

Benjamin's writings addressed this question of how to awaken the masses from the coercion of fascism. Benjamin understood that historical counter-narratives of the underclass do not in themselves lead to revolution, but rather maintain a fascist control over history's production of meaning. The emotional appeal of counter-narrative has the capacity to fill a void for those who feel excluded and provides explanations for why they feel what they feel. Many left-leaning educators adhere to a form of Marxist historiography that emphasizes the importance of Marxist counter-narratives, retelling history as the story of class warfare. Such counter-narratives can rely on an optimistic emotional appeal resembling fascism. The historical events and evidence are lined up to tell the story, and each historical document is interpreted through that singular narrative lens.

Walter Benjamin cautioned against pedagogical projects committed to a specific ideal of utopian society as a final endpoint to history (which he terms historicism¹), because they promote fascist regimes of knowledge. Historicism during Benjamin's time referred to those historians within the developing discipline who saw history as a positivist science, with the possibility of generating laws of history to predict and direct the course of human civilization. Any articulation of politics that relies on a distinct end goal remains committed to cultivating a specific trajectory of progress. This political end goal, no matter how

¹ Other scholars, such as Popper (1957/2002), critiqued historicism for its fascist tendencies as well.

radical, becomes a static identity, a vision to be preserved and communicated by the few who hold authority over its authentic realization, which ultimately remains tied to the interests, perceptions, and experiences, of the status quo.

Benjamin's critique of the Social Democrats' pedagogical program in Germany was that the idea of progress was used to measure the span between a legendary origin and a legendary end point, understood to represent the historical process as a whole, rather than a useful category to interrogate specific historical developments (1999, p. 478). Hence, commitment to a history-as-progress narrative negates the possibility of critical theory (and historical materialism).

There is a danger when a teacher of certain privilege is committed to social justice, and in their position of authority, teaches students from marginalized populations about their very marginalization. Benjamin pointed to the Social Democrats' crime of being disconnected from the experiences of the masses: "In reality, a form of knowledge which had no access to practice, and which could teach the proletariat nothing about its situation as a class, posed no danger to its oppressors" (Benjamin 1937/2002b, p. 256). Rather than transforming the relations of the production of meaning, teachers committed to a particular social justice narrative of history reproduce the status quo by keeping students (as the masses) out of their system of meaning-making. Critique of society must come through students' autonomous thinking, not at its expense.

Many communities in the US distrust those in power who claim to act in their best interests, resulting in a pervasive sense of alienation across the political spectrum. In Benjamin's day, historicism and positivism failed because "[i]n the development of technology, it was able to see only the progress of natural science, not the concomitant retrogression of society" (Benjamin 1937/2002b, p. 266). The positivists among the Social Democratic theorists "misunderstood the destructive side of this development because they were alienated from the destructive side of dialectics" (Benjamin 1937/2002b, p. 266). The Social Democrats ignored the fact that new technologies did not mean progress and improved quality of life for everyone. The history teacher that promotes a particular progressive interpretation of history alienates students whose experiences do not align with that narrative.

Under historicist narratives of progress, knowledge remains confined under an aura of correctness, determined by the academy's investment in maintaining control over the production of meaning. These pedagogical projects fail because they do not account for how the social relations of economic production are inherently related to knowledge production economies. In the history classroom the teacher that serves narratives of progress, subservient to the authority of the academy over history knowledge and a singular ultimate vision of the Good, remains invested in reproducing the status quo.

Democratization Against the Fascist Authority Over Knowledge

Students who enter the classroom wanting concrete answers supplied by the teacher must be repositioned to understand that they have authority in the learning process. Bain's (2006) research found that the teacher's authority often remains unquestioned even when students learn to be critical of texts. The teacher must break with reproducing the ritual of history's authority, passing the torch from the teacher to the students as masses. Hegelian light in hand, students can witness for themselves the burnt embers of history strewn below their feet, unnoticed and unremarked.

Benjamin asserted that objects are held captive under an aura of meaning determined by the ruling class, and that destroying such aura potentially opens objects to more democratic reading practices. Walter Benjamin's concept of "aura" is a key term in his work. In this context, it refers to the "true" meaning an object holds, inscribed by the ruling class onto the object. An example for how ritual and aura are linked is in the religious uses of artworks. A religious idol has meaning determined by the ruling priest class, who preserve the object's aura through ritual and keep it from view of the masses.

The value and meaning of a work relies on its embeddedness in tradition. "An ancient statue of Venus, for instance, existed in a traditional context for the Greeks (who made it an object of worship) that was different from the context in which it existed for medieval clerics (who viewed it as a sinister idol)" (Benjamin 1936/2002d, p. 256). We read historical objects differently than people did in the past. Snyder (2003) saw Benjamin's focus on art objects as "grounded in his belief that perception is historically and socially conditioned, and that the material basis of society somehow gives structure to the perception of... classes within it" (p. 163). Hence, the ways we read historical objects are intertwined with the ways technologies of a particular moment shape social relations and economic positions. The focus shifts from learning how to place objects into a flat historical narrative, to the investigation of why objects were understood in particular ways in the past, versus why an individual might read them in particular ways today.

Our technological moment determines our access to objects, and thence the opportunity for individual experiences with objects. The Venus statue's meaning and use value change once it can be reproduced and exhibited en masse, sold in stores around the world. This reproducibility changes our access to knowing the object and thence our perceptions, conditioning how we make meaning of that object. In the classroom, our relationship to history is affected by technologies of reproducibility. The internet has allowed scholars, communities, the public, and archival institutions, to distribute historical documents en masse. This technological reproducibility has allowed teachers to shift the focus from textbooks toward experiences with the documents firsthand, yet the mere distribution of these objects does not directly lead to democracy.

Technological reproduction opens the object up to meanings beyond those assigned by the ruling class. Benjamin (1936/2002d) stated, "for the first time in world history, technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual" (p. 256). Caygill (1998) pointed to the manner in which aura serves ritual, which in turn serves the continued domination of the capitalist class: "Aura is inseparable from ritual, and is preserved in it; ritual, as Benjamin later defines the term, is a form of technology, a means of organizing and controlling the environment" (p. 105). With meaning no longer predetermined by the ruling class, the gravity of the political comes to the fore, and the viewer can relate to the object with a different means: through politics. Benjamin's writings contain an openness towards politics as the various configurations and hierarchies of power in society. Hence, I take Benjamin's references to the political to include race, gender, sexuality, class, religion, nationality, amongst a multiplicity of axes of power.

Given that teachers can increasingly provide all students with a copy of artifacts and historical documents in the classroom, teachers can loosen their grip on the meanings students make of those documents. That does not mean decrease rigor, but to put the responsibility of interrogating knowledge and power on the student rather than dependent on teachers for knowledge.

Benjamin's auratic destruction requires students to develop the skills of Wineburg's contextualization heuristic. Many classrooms today emphasize modeling think-alouds for students, to model how the teacher reads and makes sense of a text. But there is a line

here between modeling for students the correct logical steps in encountering a text, versus providing a model of how to mediate encounters with historical texts. A Benjaminian pedagogy emphasizes students learning to do that skill of contextualization independently, interrogating documents through their particular experiences with these objects rather than learn step by step how to reach the same conclusions as the teacher. It is a difficult challenge for teachers to let go of their authority over knowledge, while maintaining the role of the teacher in the room, helping students better mediate their reading practices on their own.

With a more democratic process of meaning-making in the history classroom, there is a risk in this opening up students to the validity of their own interpretations of historical objects that can result in misrecognition and misinterpretation. The teacher's role moves from teaching students a new critical historical narrative to guiding students in their reading practices for the political. The teacher's response changes from, "no that's not the right answer" to asking "Is that what the text says? Read the text again." This moves the central relationship to be between the student and text, and not teacher to student. Such practice has become commonly emphasized within historical thinking pedagogy. The value of historical objects is not that they reinforce traditional meanings of objects, but that these objects help us to break with those narratives we already consume. Given Wineburg's corroboration heuristic, some of the more exciting moments in historical thinking are not those when documents confirm the narrative we have heard before, but rather when they contradict, when they disrupt, the narrative that has been presented as true (VanSledright 2002). But as Freedman (2015) pointed out, without guidance (through politics), students are likely to engage in positivistic conclusions rather than critical reasoning.²

What Benjamin adds to historical thinking is this concern for the political layers embedded within the document, and how one's experience with the document can reveal the political layers in the present, and the student-as-historian's specific political position within socio-economic relations in the present. History pedagogy involves helping students to address every historical object through a critique of politics embedded within that historical object, including the politics embedded within that very encounter. Each encounter allows the student to ask: "How has power shaped this object's production, preservation, and this very encounter?"

Benjamin's historiography requires this destruction of our commitments to reaffirming identity categories through history. If we place legitimate subjectivity as the end-goal, we reinforce the auratic ritual of history. The importance we place on our histories, on our search to recover our histories, for the sake of constructing positive identities, must be disrupted and questioned. As the priest class promises redemption and paradise in the afterlife to the poor and downtrodden, there is a false promise to the marginalized that the history discipline can provide the means to reach historical legitimacy.

In destroying the teacher's authority over history's aura, one must simultaneously destroy students' investment in history as a legitimizing ritual of subjectivity. History's aura of disciplinary authority over what it means to be a legitimate historical subject is intrinsically stacked against vast areas of the world. The discipline presents the failure as the peoples' failure to not properly documented their achievements, unlike Rome and Greece. Populations whose historical records have been systematically destroyed or have not existed in "legitimate" archival form, already fail in the game of history, because the

² This article builds on Freedman's (2007) prior assertion of the need to train students to analyze causes of social inequalities as increasing democratic practices within social justice education.

history discipline has been created to privilege certain legitimate forms of evidence over others. We must awaken from the seduction of history's authority to validate our existence as full subjects. This opens up history to other relationalities beyond the promise of redemption and legitimacy.

Walter Benjamin's Historical Materialism Against Fascism

Benjamin's historical materialism establishes a focus on politics through critical thinking, to interrogate objects and sources through a lens always already critical of how power functions in the production, preservation, and reading of historical texts. Brown (2001) stated it perhaps most succinctly when she wrote that Benjamin was "set against Marx historiographically, while joining with him politically" (p. 156). Benjamin's historical materialism paired Marx's politics with a radical historiography, reformulating the ways we produce meaning in history.

Historical materialism is based on the premise that human history has been shaped by the material conditions and relations of production, which have shaped social relations. Marx outlined his conception of historical materialism as follows: "In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of the development of their material powers of production" (1904, p. 11). Marx asserted that the base of society is the material, which is articulated in society as the relations and forces of production; this then shapes the superstructure (culture, the state, religion, institutions, science, etc.), which in turn shapes consciousness.

In order to break with the status quo, changing the relations of the production of meaning in the superstructure is coterminous with changing relations of production in the base.³ Benjamin's historiography requires that we not only interrogate the past but interrogate how the historian's present position within relations of production inflects their reading of the past.⁴ The masses must be trusted in their capacity to make meaning from their own readings of texts, which democratizes knowledge production and wrests power from those who have traditionally controlled the production of knowledge.

To achieve this democratization, Benjamin's historical materialism makes the object-as-material the locus. Benjamin conceptualizes the object as *monad* to emphasize this shift in how we think about the historical object, as this singularity in its own right. Historical materialism focuses not on the narrative timeline to be filled, but on the interrogation and contextualization of historical objects in the current moment. The student no longer needs to rely on the teacher or textbook as mediator of meaning between past and present, but rather, constructs meaning through their relational experience with the object.⁵ The object

³ Benjamin (1936/2002d) explained that because "transformation of the superstructure proceeds far more slowly than that of the base, it has taken more than half a century for the change in the conditions of production to be manifested in all areas of culture...The dialectic of these conditions of production is evident in the superstructure, no less than in the economy" (pp. 251–252).

⁴ Leonardo's (2003) article on Paul Ricoeur's work covers similar theoretical moves as Walter Benjamin here, on a broader educational level.

⁵ Adorno (1958/2000) wrote of the need to see beyond the intentional identity that dominates the possible meaning of the object, and to be able to see all of the non-intentionality, all of the other things that object might mean, beyond a rigid eternal narrated meaning of the object.

no longer lives in the narrative, but rather, history lives within the object (as monad) (Benjamin 1937/2002b, p. 262).

The historical objects themselves recover their multidimensional properties by students investigating the object's position in the relations of production. "Rather than asking, "What is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time?" I would like to ask, "What is its position *in* them?" (Benjamin, 1934/2002a, p. 770). For example, if we were to take a painting, the question would not be to just look at the content of the image, and what the image tells us of the relations of production of its time, but rather, how does that painting's own production illuminate the relations of production of its time? This then challenges the traditional practice of setting objects within a static narrative.

Classroom activity shifts from what the teacher or textbook wants the historical object to mean, toward students interrogating that object for the political layers of that object's production and preservation. For Benjamin (1937/2002b, p. 267), the meaning of objects is produced by mining the layers of political experience with the object, through an awareness of the political relations of technological production, the political relations of historic preservation, and the experiences of the masses (or the student in the present). The work (as historical object) becomes more subjective, not because of opinions and stances toward production, but because the object is understood *in* the relations of production (the base), and *in* the relations of the production of meaning (the superstructure).

This political experience highlights what Benjamin refers to as the barbarism, alongside the presentation of culture within the object. Additionally, his politics value the pessimism that arises from the experiences of the under-class, in spite of the apparent technological progress of society. It is this pessimism, this capacity to see the juxtaposition of the wreckage within the past and current society that Benjamin saw the possibility for the break with the status quo. The promise for democracy involves a risk by entrusting the masses with knowledge production in their own right. Democracy's triumph over fascism is through teaching students political critique within and through autonomous thinking.

The Barbarism Within the Means of Production and the Production of Meaning

Historical materialism breaks the ruling class's domination over history by breaking these relations in the production of meaning.⁶ Benjamin's historiography overlapped with his aesthetics, as both are invested in the production of meaning. The meaning inscribed on an object can be understood through aesthetics: how we perceive and value objects.

The ruling class controls not only the means of production, but the cultural value system of aesthetics that gives material objects meaning as well. Walter Benjamin (1999) stated in *The Arcades Project*, "Barbarism lurks in the very concept of culture—as the concept of a fund of values which is considered independent not, indeed, of the production process in which these values originated, but of the one in which they survive" (p. 467). It is here that we find the richness of Benjamin's project to reconfigure historical materialism. Barbarism is not merely in the exploitation of workers but hidden within a value system that promotes a certain "good" of the bourgeoisie while undermining the existence of the

⁶ Volosinov's (1986) concept of the accents of signs helps to see history as the struggle over forces producing accents of meaning, privileging the dominant class's reading of historical objects while obscuring all other readings.

disenfranchised. For Benjamin (1937/2002b), “history represents, for consciousness, the category of possession in the same way that capital represents, for economics, the domination over past labor” (p. 256). The concurrent technologies of production define the relationships of society, of aesthetics, and subsequently of history.⁷

Textbooks, even when they attempt to provide students with experiences with historical objects, generally predetermine the identity and meaning of those objects. Such textbooks are guilty of the sort of historicism that identifies with the victors (Löwy 2005, p. 47). For example, in the textbook *Modern World History: Patterns of Interaction* (Beck et al. 2006) by McDougal Littell, there are six “History through Art” mini-sections spread throughout the book. These sections explain the historical significance of art objects to students. One focused on “Cultural Blending in Mughal India” (Beck et al. 2006, pp. 88–89) has photographs of four works of art: a dagger handle, the architecture of Humayun’s tomb, a Mughal court painting, and a woven tent hanging. None of the descriptions mention class dynamics, but emphasize the mix of Hindu, Muslim, Persian, and Indian cultural influences. Terms used in the text to describe these objects include golden age, success, tolerance, blending, unity, and extravagant. These objects represent progressive notions of trade, technology, civilization, and culture, incorporated into the textbook’s larger narrative of civilizational progress. Students are not given the opportunity for further interrogation of these objects; there is no room for interpretations of barbarism under the textbook’s authority over meaning.

Historical materialism necessitates an honesty and ethics towards the objects, beyond what we want them to be. Benjamin (1940/2002c) wrote, “They are called ‘cultural treasures,’ and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For in every case, these treasures have a lineage which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great geniuses who created them, but also to the anonymous toil of others who lived in the same period. There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (p. 392). This becomes a central reading practice within Benjamin’s historical materialism. One can imagine a poster on the wall of a history classroom, referenced daily while reading primary documents: “There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (Benjamin 1940/2002c, p. 392). This directs students to listen beneath each text, rather than the teacher making the object speak for the victors (or the under-class) alone.

The reverse requires similar interrogation: within every documentation of barbarism is the documentation of culture. LaGarrett King noted the need to complicate curriculum about African Americans from centering on themes of victimhood and oppression to become balanced against narratives of resistance and perseverance (King 2017, p. 17). Teaching black and brown kids about their oppression and forcing students to see the horror and barbarism is not social justice. Within such documentation of barbarism are texts that reveal the development of “culture.” For example, in teaching about the racial wealth divide and the active disenfranchisement of people of color in the US (barbarism), I teach about the agency of communities of color through a rich history of cooperative economic activities (culture). Jessica Gordon Nembhard’s *Collective Courage* (2014) highlighted W.E.B. Du Bois’ earlier book *Economic Cooperation Among Negro Americans* (1907) documenting cooperative economic activity

⁷ In Benjamin’s (1934/2002a) “Author as Producer”, the author is understood as a producer of meaning, who must break with the bourgeoisie’s ritualization and specialization of knowledge production (Benjamin, 1934/2002a, p. 775). Historical materialism transforms the political relations of meaning production.

during slavery and beyond, yet these examples of cultural production are rarely taught in tandem with the barbarism of slavery. Obviously within each case, one must push students to further complicate the narratives and evidence, but this is an example in broad strokes for how these notions of barbarism and culture might influence curricula.

To reiterate, creating new counter-narratives of resistance does not resolve the threat of fascism. Privileging emotional attachments at the expense of interrogating the evidence reproduces the fascist threat. Benjamin's historical materialism focuses on the objects as monads, rather than emphasizing the needs of the individual in the present to create a better narrative. The emotional attachments and investments in the present are important within Benjamin's historical materialism, but as expressions of the relations of the production of meaning in the present, demanding analysis. Benjamin sees the need for this break from the status quo, but not as the myopic lens determining how we interpret objects.

There is so much danger in one's commitments to narrative goals. For example, rather than reformulating a clean mythic lineage of Aztec heritage as an act of reaffirming identity, one is confronted equally by the barbarism of empire building and human sacrifice that may contradict a desirable positive identity formation in the present. Wineburg's heuristics produce a similar interrogation of the past moment, but Benjamin's historical materialism means we engage a critical stance toward the barbarism not only of the past, but of objects' preservation and presentation today.

The way to disarm the power of dominant narratives for Benjamin is to critique the political formation of narrative itself, within the discipline of history. Here, Wineburg's (2001) focus on historical thinking heuristics meets with Zinn's (2003) social critique of the dominant narrative. This does not mean we give up narrative, but rather learn to critique it, to become aware of its limitations and seductions. Under this model, Zinn's counter-narrative plays a central role not in providing the more correct version of history, but as a tool to disrupt the assumed universality of the dominant narrative, which then can be paired with Wineburg's heuristics for students to think autonomously about their encounters with historical texts. Similarly, one might argue that the use of the term "barbarism" creates a new identity category. In pedagogy, the use of dichotomies such as barbarism and culture are thinking tools, almost like a dialectical practice drill to get students to ping back and forth between the two, to ultimately question the false stability of each, rather than accept two rigid categories. Counter-narrative and barbarism become tools of critique to question the givenness of culture and the dominant narrative.

Benjamin's critical stance ultimately takes issue with the discipline of history, in his critique of historicism. This is where this work diverges from "de-politicized" approaches to history, such as "big history" (Christian 1991). Such projects risk presenting human history on equal footing as natural history. Treating human history on the same terms as natural history actively obscures the political nature of human history as a discipline. To document, preserve, and present historical objects are politically active verbs (Trouillot 1995). Within every commendable act of preserving historical documents from oblivion are other acts of destroying historical evidence and deeming certain forms as unworthy of archive and preservation. Within every teacher's excited choice to teach a particular unit topic, there is the active dismissal of the worth of many other topics. What are the unseen political layers beyond the visible historical record? There is great violence done when one ignores the weight hidden amidst the vast dark matter of history, unseen, dismissed and unacknowledged.

The Potentiality of Pessimism

The teacher that loves history can misunderstand students' apathy or dislike of history as being disengaged, when in fact those students are fully engaged within history's production, experiencing it from a different positionality. As a queer person of color, I approach history through alienation, and most often from a position of anger and frustration. A pedagogy of Benjamin's historical materialism engages the student who sits with their head down during a lesson with primary documents about Lexington and Concord. My aim is not to get students to love history, but to recognize historical work from whatever positions students are already engaged in history's exclusionary system of knowledge production. Historical materialism values engaging history from a position of pessimism, as one relationality amongst others.

Benjamin (1936/2002d) reminds us of the inseparability of the means of production and the production of meaning: "*Just as the entire mode of existence of human collective changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception.* The way in which human perception is organized—the medium in which it occurs—is conditioned not only by nature but by history" (p. 255). The socio-economic relations between students and teachers impact the possibilities of meaning-making in the history classroom. It is the task of the historical materialist teacher to open up the production of meaning to students' particular modes of perception.

The revolutionary break with the status quo for Benjamin reflects a pessimism that arises from the experience of the working class. Benjamin's idea of revolution is not the inevitable endpoint of technological progress; it is the interruption of a historical process headed towards catastrophe (Löwy 2005, p. 9). Benjamin's revolutionary pessimism has the capacity to see the wreckage, the failure of modernity, of capitalism, in spite of capitalism's apparent promise (Löwy 2005, p. 9). This revolutionary pessimism pairs with works in queer theory on the politics of affect and aesthetics (Ahmed 2010; Berlant 2011; Ngai 2005). These queer works critique the normative promise of the good life, made unattainable for the disenfranchised. Pessimism inverts the status quo, with the capacity to reveal the failure of the system, rather than accept the system's terms of failure directed towards the underclass. Benjamin's focus on the barbarism alongside culture similarly queers notions of what counts as culture, and the aesthetic and moral values we ascribe to "culture" over "barbarism".

Incorporating the pessimism of the oppressed opens up historical thinking to the particular relational experience between students and historical objects, experiences to which the teacher does not have direct access. A student who says they hate history is opened up to different implications, as a starting point to historical investigation, rather than ignored for not finding validation through history's authority. In addition to students' own cultural knowledge being a resource in the classroom, their modes of perception as a result of their positionality within the relations of production shape their analysis of texts. This pessimism shapes an analytic lens through which students may potentially disrupt historicism's dominance.

Benjamin's (1940/2002c) Thesis IX described the angel of history (in Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*) who serves as an image for the sort of spark that results from a revolutionary encounter with history. "Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet... But a storm is blowing from Paradise... This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned... What we call progress is *this* storm" (Benjamin

1940/2002c, p. 392). The pedagogical incentive is to create an encounter with the past that blasts open the potential of the monad (historical object), revealing the wreckage of capitalism and modernity, and the failure of the false promise of prosperity. The angel of history possesses this critical lens that comes with a certain pessimism, a pessimism produced from experiencing a world that has failed them. The potential is in students being able to see past the promise of our trajectory of progress, to recognize the wreckage of this path in order to disrupt the barbarism. And yet, the subordinate class must not become a fetishized messiah, reproducing an aura of vision over the tragedy of capitalism and modernity.

Pedagogy must value that perspective and foster critical readings from that position to see where students can go, beyond the teacher's own capacity to think and understand history. The attention to pessimism can both formally shape curriculum, as well as necessitate an openness to moments of student interpretation as they spontaneously arise. An example of such a spontaneous moment occurred while I was teaching a ninth-grade global studies unit on world religions. For their final assessment, students had to choose a theme to explain three religious objects from different religions. One student with a reputation for being disruptive and difficult in class (with a track record of frequently failing classes) had completed little of the groundwork for the project. He carried a strong pessimism towards the world around him, shaped by experiences of disappointment in his life, and a direct result of his family's deep poverty. His strong affinity for dogs and other animals stood perpendicular to his general distrust of humans. He had repeatedly expressed throughout the unit that he felt these religious objects we had been looking at were useless. Beginning from his particular engagement, we linked his pessimism and skepticism with the idea of false idols within Abrahamic religions. When pushed to produce something, he decided to write about the theme of "useless objects." His authentic engagement through pessimism was a more intriguing approach to the objects than most students took, leading to his rich critical analysis in his final assessment.

Pessimism can also be used to shape content in high school courses. My curriculum for twelfth grade government and economics classes takes heed from my students, and Benjamin's Thesis VIII: "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule...One reason fascism has a chance is that, in the name of progress, its opponents treat it as a historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are "still" possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical." (1940/2002c, p. 392). Although some might express shock at the rise of white supremacist groups as a sign of retrogression, for many who consistently experience the negative effects of societal progress, such a "state of emergency" fits into a logic of daily lived experience. This "critical state" (Benjamin 1982/1999, p. 471) shifts from being a triage event to sustained (and nonetheless crucial) critique, offering a possibility to leap out of the normative status quo into something else.

These government and economics courses are shaped by student surveys about their ideas on the state of our society and include topics such as gentrification and community land trusts, the prison industrial complex and prison abolition, conspiracy theories, cooperative economics and the racial wealth divide. These courses contradict a narrative of society's progress and celebration of civic responsibility. Instead, each course focuses on the barbarism of the system, and this pessimism towards a government that has failed. Yet these courses also look to strategies and solutions by various community-based organizations around the school and the world to overcome the failures of society and the system.

Historical Materialist Pedagogy

If historical materialism focuses attention on the object itself, then historical materialist pedagogy focuses on the experience between student and object. This pedagogy includes accepting potentiality over certainty, developing critical reading skills through politics, and creating experiences between students and historical objects.

Adorno (1958/2000) cautioned against a pedagogy that places the teacher as the authority over knowledge, whose instruction is measured by students' incremental progress of development. Knowledge becomes inscribed through ritual, requiring set procedure by the teacher in control of the production of meaning; this ultimately prevents knowledge (Adorno 1958/2000, p. 102). Instead of the teacher protecting students from failure by postponing knowledge under scaffolding, the risk of failure is a necessary part of historical materialism. Teachers are not positioned above students telling them the correct answer, but on the sideline coaching them to read the text through politics, to interrogate the possible contexts and ways power has shaped that text's production and preservation.

As an excited first year teacher, I placed an upside-down map of the world on the wall of my ninth-grade world history classroom. I soon realized that this was not a radical image for my students, because some of them could not recognize the standard map right-side up. My initial instinct was to scaffold their understanding: first, teach them the status quo map; second, teach that the map was a critique of the standard map; and lastly teach them how to interpret that new map's meaning. Such an act reinforces the aura of my authority over knowledge, that I can reveal the secrets the map is hiding, and students must listen to and absorb my wisdom resulting in their increased intelligence. Benjamin's historical materialism instead demands that the students ask the questions to interrogate the political layers of the upside-down map's creation, the privileging of language, names, layout, borders, amongst other politically-loaded decisions in the map's creation, and my choice to present this map on the wall.

Benjamin's historical materialism implies that the teacher must constantly return to their own position within society's means of production (and relationship to history), juxtaposed with their students' backgrounds. Focusing on these relations also requires letting go of the teacher's assumption that they know students' prior relationships to history. And that is ok. The teacher does not need to know exactly what events, documents, or images will spark the right politics in students. Jay (2005, p. 10) noted the etymological thread linking the terms experience and peril: there is this risk and danger involved, a risk of failure, a risk of misreading and misunderstanding through experiences with historical texts. The historical text serves as a possibility and potentiality to spark something through experience, rather than something concrete, stable and predetermined. There are political experiences that must be accounted for, and there are emotional reasons for distrust in some sources over others. Those political layers of experience become investments that must be interrogated through students' critical reading skills.

The historical materialist as teacher has before them the task of opening up space for these experiences as much as possible, to practice reading through politics. Benjamin's (1982/1999) pedagogy "means having the wind of history in one's sails. The sails are the concepts. It is not enough, however, to have sails at one's disposal. What is decisive is knowing the art of setting them" (p. 473). The teacher's role is to push students to better mediate their experiences with historical objects, to practice critical reading strategies of historical texts.

Through the barbarism and pessimism, historical materialism acknowledges the emotional layers of the political. Fascism pulls on emotional strings through narrative over the integrity of the evidence. If Benjamin's historiography were to end with validating the emotional reactions to the pessimism and barbarism, that would lead to fascism all the same. Students must learn to mediate their experiences with texts and mass media, to discern how their emotional investments interact with the evidence. There is an overwhelming amount of evidence, data, and news sources thrown in students' faces daily. Our task it to unpack all of the emotion we put onto objects, our expectations, our hopes and desires and fears, to resist the temptation to make the object our own through an investment in its meaning. It is difficult to separate the meanings we want to read from the historical object in its own right. Historical materialist pedagogy is an object-centered historiography, focused on the historical matter in and of itself. The student must discern what questions we can ask of the object, recognizing what the object can and cannot tell us.

For democracy to triumph over fascism, classrooms must provide a place for students to practice their skills at interrogating unsubstantiated evidence and see beyond narrative seductions. In addition to historical documents, those texts students are bombarded with daily ought to become texts under scrutiny in the classroom. Recently, an African American student shared with me a flat earth theory meme that said, "if the earth is round, why don't cars look like this?" with a picture of a stretched-out concave-curved car as though it were made to drive along the surface of a sphere. I could have easily written this off as silly fake news to be dismissed, but instead we looked at the meme the following day as a class to discuss what the meme reveals.

Students daily must unpack why flat earth memes have suddenly become common, amidst an array of media reacting to a distrust of the status quo. There is so much there to unpack in the contemporary context of relationships to knowledge and power in our society. Beyond the initial assumptions about this meme's seriousness and meaning, what are all of the layers of politics and power that are embedded and hidden within its creation and circulation? What political stakes make this meme seductive within a narrative of distrusting scientific evidence?

Memes, alt-facts, fake news—these represent our contemporary crisis of mimesis and the threat of fascism. Juxtaposing Benjamin's concern for the looming threat of fascism of his time against our own has the potential to spark new methods for teaching, in spite of the catastrophic trajectory of progress. Democratization occurs through the practice of critical reading skills, which mediate student experiences with historical objects through politics. Only through approaching historical material in its complexity can the barbarism of culture be disrupted.

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