

Wolfgang Fritz Haug

MAKING ANTAGONISMS PRODUCTIVE: ON THE STRUCTURE  
OF INTERPARADIGMATIC COMMUNICATION (1982)

How to communicate between different religions  
and philosophies in the current world crisis<sup>1</sup>

I.

An eminent figure who brought together Marxist philosophy and Jewish theology as combined in relation to the transformation of the world would in these days be celebrating his ninetieth birthday: Walter Benjamin, born on July 15, 1892 in Berlin. In flight from the agents of the German Reich he poisoned himself on September 27, 1940, in the Pyrenees. We could quite appropriately dedicate out Seminar to the memory of this martyr of the German Jews and of a religiously articulated social criticism. One of his last writings --*On the Concept of History* (Über den Begriff der Geschichte)-- begins with an image. We are to imagine that ostensive chess-automaton, constructed in the form of a >puppet in Turkish attire<, which sat before a chess board, which was

>placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent from all sides: Actually, a little hunchback who was an expert chess player sat inside and guided the puppet's hands by means of strings.< (Benjamin 1969, p. 253)

Benjamin suggests that we imagine

>a philosophical counterpart to this device. The puppet called ^historical materialism^^ is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists

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the services of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight.< (Ibid.) .

In the meanwhile theology--thanks to Theology of Liberation and similar movements in different religions--no longer looks wizened; it doesn't keep out of sight nor must it, and historical materialism appears today largely shriveled on the one hand, and blown up on the other, and in many countries has to keep out of sight. Yes, it appears as though one could today invert the image. As though theology was like that Turkish puppet, in which the hunchback, this time Marxism, sits. Whatever Benjamin's theses are directed against or working toward is, regardless of how we interpret the image of the puppet with the hunchback, clearly of contemporary relevancy. In many areas he anticipated problems which are today recognized world wide, increasingly in Marxist circles as well. For example the split with the faith in evolutionary progress, above all with the belief in the progressive power of technological development as such. *Progress in technology, retrogression in society*, noted Benjamin. Furthermore, he develops his thoughts against the historicist conception of empty homogeneous time, filled with a sequence of facts. He attempts to rearticulate work, so that it is no longer the exploitation of nature; he attempts to think discontinuity in history and to think multilinearities. These are questions which historians, philosophers, linguists, psychologists etc in almost all countries are posing today. A little anecdote shows that in the view of Benjamin himself it is his inner antagonism of Marxism and theology which allows him his most important innovations.

Benjamin was a contributor the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (Journal for Social Research), the organ of

>Critical Theory<. He had submitted an article. In the name of the editorial board Adorno wrote him and demanded that he rework the article. In the letter, which has been preserved, Adorno writes that he wants to >get to the very center of things<. And what is this center? >That you (Benjamin) have done violence to yourself in this piece, in order to pay tributes to Marxism<. Benjamin, says Adorno, did damage to himself in that he >forbade< himself his >most courageous and fruitful ideas through a kind of pre-censorship constructed according to materialist categories<. And Adorno tries to persuade Benjamin to make use of his >own specific kind of thinking<, as he says, even if it appears to be >apocryphal< from a materialist point of view.

Benjamin answers on December 12, 1938. He refers to a discussion with Adorno.

>When I refused then, to adopt in the name of my productive interests an esoteric development of thought [and esoteric means here theological, WFH] and in so doing to pass over the interests of dialectical materialism and to go on to the agenda, at stake was not finally mere loyalty to dialectical materialism but solidarity with the experiences we all have had in the last 15 years. So it is here, too, a matter of my own specific productive interests. I do not deny, that they may occasionally attempt to do violence to the original interests. *We have here an antagonism which I would not, even in my dreams, wish to get rid of.*< (Italics by WFH)

It appears retrospectively to me that the accents and relationships of force in this antagonism between theology and historical materialism in the thought of Walter Benjamin often shifted back and forth. The Benjamin specialists will argue without end among themselves, to whom he really belongs, to the Marxists or to the theologians. That this fight is unresolvable is a most interesting feature of Benjamin. *That he would not even in his dreams wish to get rid of this antagonism makes his bearing and his*

*thought so viable for the future.* And this also gives a link to our discussion in the coming days. We, the participants, come from different cultural, philosophical, religious and political paradigms which in many ways tend to be antagonistic. One of our major problems will be how to make productive our antagonisms, given that it would be neither desirable nor possible to get rid of them. Benjamin is, as an individual, as a theorist, as ex-centric as our discussion, which will not know a dominating center with dominated peripheries. But it is not only that we must forge a virtue out of necessity--*aus der Not eine Tugend machen--*; if we are attentive we feel our own productive interests addressed in these antagonisms.

## II.

I would like now to pursue in a somewhat more general way what it was that made the antagonism of theology and Marxism so productive for Benjamin. Above all: what is it in the religious, which can make it fruitful for a social-theoretical and social-critical position, aiming at the transformation of the world? When we take a look at the literature, asking what the religious is supposed to be, then one probably can't formulate the first impression better than the Christian Protestant theologian Helmut Gollwitzer in his beautiful little book, *What is Religion?*, where he states: >We are flooded by a wave of babble about religion in which nothing, nothing at all is clarified.< And if Marx's dictum about religion being the opium of the people is correct in any respect, then it is here, he adds. When we take a look at the religio-sociological literature, the dominant impression is that articulated clearly by Gollwitzer : >I can't be puzzled enough by the self-evidence with which I hear Christian

theologians today, who ought to be wary of it, speak of ^religion^, as though this singular corresponded to any demonstrable reality.< But he goes even further: Even the term >the religious< (das Religiöse) is usually constructed tautologically: >Inadvertently, it helps to presuppose what has yet to be proved, that this object area--as a separable and in the most differing cultures congruously identifiable entity--actually exists.< The religious would then, initially, be an only heuristically legitimate concept. Gollwitzer says: >In religious matters one can't be nominalistic enough.< I don't here have the time to go into the religio-sociological literature. I must be content with mentioning that in Emile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* we are presented with precisely the thought structure which Gollwitzer analysed. Durkheim is not interested in something which he introduces only incidentally , namely the difference between what he calls >religious phenomena< and what we may call *constituted religion*. The constitution-problem of religion as such is neglected. Instead, he ends up in an analysis of the social functions of the religious, and finally at what we may call >socialization<, *Vergesellschaftung*. The kernel of the religious, according to Durkheim, is socialization. To me this appears to be true in a deep sense. The problem is that Durkheim conceives of all socialization as religious and even calls every society a >church<, so that the church becomes the natural form of society. What must interest us, against such naturalism, is the constitution-problem of the church.

I would like to outline at least, in a very abbreviating way, a thesis, which serves as a guideline for the Research Project on Ideology (Projekt-Ideologietheorie - PIT) which I am conducting at the Institute of Philosophy of our

University. We assume that Durkheim is correct in reducing the religious to the kernel of socialization. We think, however, that this does not justify calling every socialization religious. The constitution of the religious as such deserves concentrated theoretical attention. I have no solution to this task, but at least a heuristic assumption. Namely, there is no other borderline which is for the time being more fruitful to focus on than the borderline between class societies constituted as states and the vaguely so-called original communalities, however we conceive of them specifically. What happens to religious phenomena in the transition to class societies constituted as states--this assumption seems to me to be fruitful--, gives us an insight into the formal constitution of the religious as such, as the >separable< sphere Gollwitzer spoke about. This assumption also allows us to formulate at least a hypothesis regarding the non-rejectable ongoing actuality of the religious. In the context of the destruction--or better: decomposition of the original communality, its formal constitution to the religious as a separable sphere in a particular form continues to have as its object the decomposed communality, though in a transposed *gestalt*. Therefore we may conceive of the religious as of alienated communality. If this proves to be valid it also helps to understand why even at the present no orientation towards a really human communality is able to rid itself of its relationship to the religious, whoever has to play the role of the hunchback.

If >religion< and >transcendence< appear often in the title and subtitles of this seminar, we nevertheless do not wish to contribute to the >wave of babble about religion<, of which Gollwitzer speaks. Let me say it with Jaques Prevert:

*Il y a des gens qui dansent sans entrer en transe.  
 Et il y a d'autres qui entrent en transe sans danser.  
 Ce phénomène s'appelle la transcendance  
 Et dans nos régions il est fort apprécié.*

(There are people who dance without entering a trance. There are others who enter a trance without dancing. This phenomenon is called transcendence, and is in our region strongly appreciated.)

We certainly do not want to fall into a trance without dancing; if we have a choice then preferably the other way around.

### III.

In conclusion I would like to speak about the communication problems, but also the communication interests of such a multinational, intercultural and--even within the context of one culture--interparadigmatic seminar. You may already have heard this desperately cynical term >unctalk<, derived from UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development). The word >unctalk< is used by insiders to designate a detached discourse in which many exalted terms are put side by side, with little relation to realities. This unctalk is very often the result of a manifold mutual intersection of intentions which neutralize one another, displace one another on the terrain of the phrase, where nothing means anything anymore and no one is caused any pain. And certainly such seminars as ours are in danger of going this more comfortable way. I am certain that we won't do this, *that we will not, even in our dreams, succumb to the*

*temptation of ridding ourselves of these antagonisms.*

Nothing is more necessary and more fruitful than to find forms of movement for the manifold antagonisms of our time, non-destructive forms of movement. The antagonism of which Benjamin spoke is only one of many and of these is perhaps the one for which a productive form can more easily be found, A non-destructive form should not be misunderstood as a form of >repressive tolerance< as Herbert Marcuse might say. A new universality, based on a productive coexistence of different specificities will not be achieved by a universal toothlessness of concepts. In his critique of historicism Walter Benjamin warned against assuming that there is something like a universal history of man, to which one could relate directly. He said, the language of historicism thereby becomes a sort of *esperanto*. This word is derived from *espoir, speranza*--hope. But here it becomes an image of desperate speechlessness, of phraseology. Such a language is the *desperanto* of our time.

What we have to learn is to endure in our discussion the antagonism between universalism and specificity, the concrete-specific of different cultures --but also of the different cultures within one society, not only of different societies or civilizations--that is, to endure and even make productive the dialectics of specificity and universality in a way similar to that demonstrated by Walter Benjamin in the antagonism of theology and Historical Materialism. It would be a horrible illusion to believe this aim to be unnecessary or even illusionary or to misunderstand it in a relativistic way. If we don't learn to make antagonisms productive, if we



resign and leave the field to relativism and conflict, this uncontrolled dialectic of relativistic tolerance and aggression could easily lead to the total repression of mankind, a negative universality of destruction. Atomic war is the absolute in the face of which every relativity ceases: The manifold dangers with which contemporary humanity is confronted in its very survival, forbid repressive tolerance in dealing with philosophy and religion in the transformation of the world. We must be able to talk critically about the different concepts, inherent in religions and civilizational patterns, --whether they are capable of diagnosing the dangers of the present, whether and what they can contribute to-the-articulation of projects, which render incapable of averting the danger. Because that much seems clear--and this is the basic assumption of the program of this seminar--: that political projects can be implemented only if they are culturally, religiously, and philosophically articulated within a society.

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