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NOW-TIME IS NOT THE SAME AS NOW-TIME

Kia Lindroos (1998): Now-Time/Image Space. Temporalization of Politics in Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History and Art. Jyväskylä, SoPhi. 303 pages.

Human beings exist in 'the' time. They had since 'primeval times' difficulties with 'the' time and its significance. The topic 'time' is as old as the humankind, and it remains as well in the present as in the future of a human being. This is guaranteed already through the existential conditions. The beginning and the end of human beings are chucked between birth and death. "*Mitten wir im Leben sind, sind wir vom Tod umfassen,*" composes Paul Gerhardt in the baroque era, and this song is still being sung in churches.

Time is, however, not only to be understood in this existential and banal sense as an always-present-problem of human beings, as a problem they confront directly and indirectly 'during the time' that is given for them on earth. The question of what does time "mean" becomes a social event only through the way in which people understand their time. The social question is connected to the meaning and sense people attach to time, and to the ways they individually and collectively use their time in such a network of meaning. In other words, time is a social and a political figure. It becomes materialised in institutions, in

production circumstances and in this way it becomes 'objective'. Individual time exists always in the midst of the time concept and in the midst of general organisation of time of a society and 'its' time.

For this reason, different epochs of the history of mankind are distinguished according to their concept of time, according to the meaning given to it, and correspondingly, how the epochs dealt with time socio-politically. Yet, already the concept of history, if it is expressed in such a distinction, shows a specifically 'modern' understanding of time. The specificity of the modern age goes even deeper. Modernity is almost emphatically fixed in time. Past and present times are directed forward. Progress becomes the faith in time, as "the process of civilisation". This progress is arranged in every possible way. It is especially expressed through the modern form of politics, the national state; through the modern form of the profit-oriented economics and competition disciplined growth; and through the modern form of culture, of orientation towards this progress. Because of this fixation upon time of its corresponding, but not to each other reducible forms of production and socialisation, the modernity itself starts gasping. The future oriented time does not only replace the space orientation aligned to tradition and stability. This time, propelled by innovation and growth-orientated competition, eats even its own children. It speeds up and the institutions and the habitus that it created are its drive, motivated by the insatiable "greed for possessing and dominating" (Kant). In the economic jargon this is called "productive destruction" (Joseph A. Schumpeter). There is a double effect due to the expanding acceleration, which from the beginning aimed economically but also politically and culturally at the globalisation, and we face at present one of its strong growth struggles. On the one hand, the always-precarious balance of the modern production forms falls into an unambiguously crooked situation. Economics, dynamically penetrating everything, hastens away from the politics that rather slows down and is statically oriented. This orientation fractures individually, it turns to the actuality or it is, as a counter-move, in the danger to succumb to all sorts of centrism of the "identity politics". On the other hand, the speed that overtakes itself produces a new contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneity, of which social costs and normal disasters are nearly impossible to estimate or to master organisationally and responsibly.

That is, considered from today's perspective, from the year 2000, roughly the general 'time background' which gives Kia Lindroos' work on Walter Benjamin and his particular 'concept' of time its relief and its significance that reaches deeply into the 21st century – at least according to the way in which Kia Lindroos reads Benjamin. She shows in her original interpretation, that Walter Benjamin's work was not only concerned with the time that Benjamin interpreted against the dominating stroke of the modern age. He was not only concerned with the allegedly linear progress, with the breaking-off of its costs, which show its enormous dark-rooms. "That everything just goes on, that is the catastrophe." Walter Benjamin's notion of time can be seen in the *kairos*, the right moment, the interruption of continuity in a dense present time. Now-Time constitutes the opposite of the abstractly indifferent time-god *Chronos*. And when the 'kairological' view roams into the past, it discovers it in a new way: the losers of the history gain a leading and obliged presence. (That is one of many aspects that Richard Wolin's interpretation can absolutely not see. Benjamin has a different and far sharper insight into constellations of danger; cf. Wolin, 2000).

Kia Lindroos begins with the hypothesis that Benjamin's work might be best comprehensible if it is understood as a permanent attempt to conceive history and time adequately, that is, in a qualitatively different way than progress. And – Benjamin-appropriate – she understands his concepts of history and time as being eminently political. His maxims are called interruption, standing still, breaking through, awaking or acting. Benjamin's whole dictionary is 'programmed' in this way, for example in concepts from the moment to the aura, the state of emergency, the authenticity, the break, the dialectic image, the experience, the awakening, the presence of mind, the now-time, the catastrophe, the immediacy and the suppressed. 60 years after his death, in time that was transferred by many non-Benjaminian fractures, is more than ever progress oriented. Hence, it is already for the sake of Benjamin's political intentions and ideas worth to remember and to save Benjamin's '*Zeit-Geist*' in immanent criticism. (60 years ago, at the 27th September 1940, Walter Benjamin, born 1892, committed suicide at the flight from Nazi bloodhounds and their collaborators).

That is exactly the way in which Kia Lindroos proceeds in the three main parts of her work dedicated to Benjamin and Benjamin's *kairos*, followed by a summarising and cautiously outlining final part. She presents first Benjamin's Historico-philosophical theses, the quintessence of Benjamin's world experience as a time experience – if it is at all possible to construct them in this way. Namely, Benjamin never wanted a "synthesis". After this part, Benjamin's presumably most well-known essay, "*Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*", becomes the core of Kia Lindroos' discussion. In the final part, she turns to Benjamin's *Zeit-Bilder*, his *Bild-Räume* and *Raum-Bilder*, to the characteristics of his dialectical image, in which she proceeds with mimetic strength of language. Benjamin's concepts and insights are then demonstrated with the example of the text-writer and filmmaker Chris Marker, with his image-/film-/textwork *La Jetée*, shedding light upon Benjamin, Marker and all readers in a well educated manner rich of imagination.

The art of interpretation is always difficult. It is never understandable without clarification. Its devices and perspectives should be made sincerely transparent. Otherwise the interpreter's 'own spirit' takes over far too immediately and the reader is not able to recognise which is the interpreted and which is the original work. These general and minimal requirements of any work of the other person matters particularly for Walter Benjamin's torso-rich writings. (Cf. some important remarks made lately in George Steiner 2000. Steiner calls Benjamin "a genius of incompleteness"). Being anything else than a "system" thinker, anything else than the one attempting to identify complex states of facts and social conditions within one concept, Benjamin's investigating back-and-forth-thinking style is distinguished through the way in which he sees – almost simultaneously and notifying the relations between – many dimensions of what "is the case", "was the case". Yet, he does not 'clearly' distinguish these dimensions from the theological-messianic up to the materialistic side of the phenomena (and vice versa).

Reality and times become 'fluid'. All his texts (and everything becomes potentially text), receive a socio-genetic depth room, and they become temporally multidimensional. Then, Here and Now and in the possible *kairos* of the future as future's presence and future's past. Subject and object lose their unambiguous definitions. Their one-

sidedly subject-oriented relation of domination is broken up. In this way all the life, the life of the identifying method, which usually calls itself scientific and serves the linear god *Chronos*, diminishes and moves away. Now, all is thoroughly ambivalent, and all what is thoroughly ambivalent in social reality, comes forth.

Die Wahrheit, vergegenwärtigt im Reigen der dargestellten Ideen, entgeht wie immer gearteter Projektion in den Erkenntnisbereich. Erkenntnis ist ein Haben (...). Ihm bleibt der Besitzcharacter. Diesem Besitztum ist Darstellung sekundär. Es existiert nicht als ein Sich-Darstellendes. Gerade aber dies gilt von der Wahrheit. (Benjamin 1925, in Kia Lindroos p. 64).

“Benjamin’s Image-space (*Bildraum*) does not offer an answer to this complex question of text and images. Yet, it does offer a perspective on a broader reflection of images, as the distinctive limits between signified, signifier and aesthetic object/subject seen to break down both in the intellectual reflection and action. Where the concept of the dialectical image remains on a theoretical level, and also on the level of the surface/configuration in approaching epistemological questions in deciphering of the present, the function of the image-space introduces the perspective of conceptualising the subjectivity and perception. The interplay between subject and object becomes a reflective relationship, in which the spatial and temporal borders between the aesthetic object and subject are neither visible nor simply distinguishable. ...” (Kia Lindroos p.205).

Due to the characteristics of his methodological non-method, which is also about to emancipate the readers as their own interpreters, Benjamin’s texts are not easy to read. This methodological non-method explains, for instance, Benjamin’s love for the presentation of details, for image, architecture and word quotations and for hardly explained montages. The difficulty remains in spite of their strictly anti-hermetic make and intention. The texts require from the readers less the “*Anstrengung des Begriffs*” (Hegel), than the strenuous art of the self-discovering, yet also modest, simultaneously listening art of reading.

Especially in this art Kia Lindroos’ Benjamin book is convincing. She is able to consider the several aspects of Benjamin’s time-concept in Benjamin’s own expressions in detail. However, she also succeeds in this in other’s remarks on Benjamin and in the already men-

tioned “practical application” to Chris Marker. She presents the time concept without reducing Benjamin in an “anti-Benjaminian” way into only one line or aspect, and also without any ‘deep murmur’ or the move into fashionable glitter of strained interpretations, which for their part lose their subject as well as their object from the sight within the pretentious gesture of reflection. In the best parts of her almost thrillingly written book Kia Lindroos succeeds in playing the role of a critic in a way that was familiar to Benjamin himself (cf. e.g. pp 18). She enters into Benjamin’s texts without being too encumbered. She skilfully draws also from other texts of Benjamin texts as she convincingly interprets the Benjaminian oeuvre with its transformations, without compressing it in one form – such a procedure would in the case of Benjamin be misleading – but as persistent attempts, sometimes even confessions, to confront the dominating understanding of time. These are attempts to detect, to save and to actively remind the peoples of their own time that appears like a rupture in time and in their ‘politics’. Kia Lindroos proceeds also immanently developing the themes and consequently, she presents simultaneously cautious and self-certain, stimulating interpretation of Benjamin’s ‘kaiology’ and through this, its meaning that she has both newly and re-discovered.

With Benjamin’s help Kia Lindroos touches several topics and problems. She raises questions and continues them a step further independently and in her experimental closeness to Benjamin. On the track of Walter Benjamin and Kia Lindroos I only can present a few of these topics, by sharpening them politically. Despite a few carping critical adiafaphora, this context includes my only criticism to Lindroos’ excellent illumination of Benjamin’s work.

Kia Lindroos asks Benjamin here or there certainly correct and important questions. However, she does not further develop these questions to Benjamin and beyond Benjamin. She proceeds too cautiously, too much remaining in the approach. Above all the final part is characterised by this almost too outsized caution. And as a minor remark: the political science as a discipline with gigantic ‘time lacks’ gets off too lightly. Lindroos’ small, but altogether certainly not inappropriate art to refuse the work of coming to a head can be demonstrated as the first problem that I would like to take up with Benjamin/Lindroos, and see the problem of the *kairos* as almost the *ens politicum*.

“If the temporal question in Benjamin’s thought is discussed in historico-philosophical terms”, formulates Kia Lindroos in introduction remarks of part III, (“Images as Passage to Time”), “the temporal limit-space does not, at first sight, go any further than this. Benjamin seems to be ignorant to the modern request to speculate on the coming time. He does not raise questions as *what* is the consequence of the emphasised moment of action? *How* is it possible to interrupt the linear course of events in concrete terms? – Or – *what* does the Now-time have to offer in a broader context, if it is thought as a cornerstone of thinking in ‘political categories’? The future, conceived of as an ordinary horizon of actions or spheres of expectations, is dimmed in Benjamin’s work. The future exists only as a seed in the present, in the process of creation. The realisation of *Kairos* remains within the frames of the capability of the subject to turn the moments of recognition into action.”

In other words, problems occur, if we pose questions following a discourse that is external from the problem of temporality itself. There are no sufficient answers to such questions in Benjamin’s work, since the remainder of the interpretation, and the decision as to *how* we might act ‘after’ the recognition of the moment of the Now or the achievement of the sovereignty of action, is left up to the questioner him- or herself. This ‘answer’ leaves the subject with the idea of the radical freedom of action. “However”, Kia Lindroos continues, after asking such in terms of the work and politics essential questions in two short paragraphs, “instead of pursuing this idea further, I turn back to Benjamin’s own concepts and further question, how we might find the disruption and chaos a way out of linearity in terms of images” (p.192).

But the *kairos* is a hard nut to crack. Isn’t it, considering the virtually dominating capitalistic-etatistic chrono-logic, at best a *spem contra spem*? And how could the disruption with the time, the ‘invasion’ of another time, be organised? What would its political preparation be? And above all: How could it be of some reliable duration? If it should not only stop the logic of the modern *Chronos* for a moment, such as the Paris Commune and similar events? The political problem of the *kairos* is not only related to the difficulties Max Weber faced with the requirements of the “*Veralltäglichung des Charisma*”; the political (radical-) democratic problem rather lies in the ques-

tion how – beyond break, exception and other kairos-logic occurrences – some reliable, some accountable, some responsible duration formed by participation, by decisions, by actions could be possible. Here one finds, if one likes, Benjamin's failure. It lies in his ignorance of institutional-material considerations, and not in his untimely messianic anarchic thinking and aspiration. Richard Wolin, himself settling manifestly in the middle of the contemporary chronologic, obviously stumbled over the latter and laments with false pathos (Wolin 2000, p.41 f. with a wrong association of Weber's distinction between 'Gesinnungsethik' and 'Verantwortungsethik'. Well, if the eye is not "sunny", how could it see the "sun")?

Especially, if one does not (only) make fun of Benjamin's 'Copernican turn' – "Politics attains primacy over history" – (see again Wolin 2000, p.35), becomes important the question about his consequently manifold and multidimensional notion of politics that departs from the active subject. It is evident that with this concept of politics you can not have daydreams of the "delight of commonness". The Now-Time is filled by action and therefore almost radically opposed to the linear lack of perspective. Now-time is without horizon and future and because of this it includes the catastrophe and its recognition. There is (not surprisingly) an analogy to Hannah Arendt's concept of natality and the ability to begin new and 'Neuanfangenmüssen' of all politics. Nevertheless, the question raises again: how could such a – likeable – anarchy be institutionalised? Benjamin is familiar with the problem of 'masses' – negatively (by the National Socialism) and positively (by proletarian masses). But he only 'resolves' it in political aesthetics – in spite of all non-progress oriented and qualitatively extended materialism.

For that reason, and not only rather incidentally as by Kia Lindroos, arises the question of the elective affinities (*Wahlverwandtschaften*) between Benjamin's *kairos* and his state of emergency (*Ausnahmezustand*) and that of Carl Schmitt. This elective affinity is not dubious primarily, because anti-liberal Carl Schmitt used his powerful expressions to serve national socialists – "The Führer sets the law" (Schmitt after the Röhm coup); and not because he later presented in his Hobbes book (in 1938) anti-Semitic tirades – although both slips do not just represent peccadilloes as many of the contemporary recipients see it. Such an elective affinity, which could have been

supported by their contemporaneity, would be dubious, because Schmitt's friend-enemy "concept of the political" and his "*okkasioneller Dezisionismus*" (Karl Löwith excellently on Schmitt) would – at least partly – unhinge Walter Benjamin's own view of history, which is directed against the ("linear") victors and which speaks for the suppressed, for the "*Verdamnten der Erde*".

Here is not the place to enter into the Schmitt-Benjamin relationship (cf. the summarising and newly opening excellent essay of Horst Bredekamp 1999). Overmuch abridged, only a few words should be said: Benjamin was undoubtedly fascinated by the state of emergency – from the baroque book until his historico-philosophical theses. And therefore he was in the same way fascinated by the disruption of the wretched routine, by independence, by decision and action. From the absence all these issues in National Socialism he suffered with more than one good reason. Simultaneously it is true, that in Benjamin the relation between the state of emergency and 'normality' remains unclear. However, Benjamin undoubtedly did not share Schmitt's concept of politics and he opposed the Schmittian state of emergency that is useful for domination and the 'occasional decisionism' free of criteria.

Stronger than the problem of the Schmitt-Benjamin '*Wahlverwandtschaft*', recurs Benjamin's conceptions (to my opinion, in Schmitt's the qualitatively different conception as well) of the aestheticisation of politics in opposite to the politicisation of aesthetics. Kia Lindroos discusses their contrasts and their proximity and distance, above all in second main part of her book, in which the '*Kunstwerk*' essay is in the centre of interest. The differences between both kinds of politics become clearly visible, if one takes Leni Riefenstahl's party congress film "*Triumph des Willens*" as an example of the aestheticisation of politics in the sense of pseudo-ritual, pseudo-original mass stagings and matches it with Benjamin's rather expecting interpretation of the communist approach to proletarian masses. The qualitative differences between nazi and communist masses remain at the end vague and aesthetics-trusting, although the differences could be found in Benjamin's important concepts. (Who in the early 60's walked around the at that time almost unchanged "*Märzfeld*" in Nürnberg, was him or herself able to gain a vivid impression of leader-masses performance). What Horst Bredekamp calls

Benjamin's "shifting at will between political theory and theory of art", an ability which allowed Benjamin brilliantly start a technique/media sociology in the '*Kunstwerk*' essay, drives him in the aestheticisation of politics and the politicisation of aesthetics if not into a catastrophe, still into far too art-trusting assumptions. Also Kia Lindroos' summary shows rather the boundaries than the way in which politicisation of aesthetics, a central task of the present time, could look like and would be possible. How much more or less sublimated military thinking and its "*Stahlgewitter*", it is embedded in a good deal of the concepts of politics and in other political terms. How strong are social scientific concepts and thinking styles characterised by political aestheticisation, since they begin with dichotomous construction of categories (and reified reality) and reach until economic model-Platonism?

"The potential counter-movement, the politicisation of aesthetics that Benjamin expected from Communists, intended to emphasise the significance of the power included in arts. The consciousness of the mass, which following Benjamin's idea would have been constructed through aesthetic means, would have led to the general revolutionary action, and not to the destruction of war. In combination with the earlier discussed elements, the power of art appeared in the seed that awaited actualisation throughout the disrupted era. Benjamin's belief in the power of art is expressed in the unpublished fragment of the last chapter, in which Benjamin notes that art not only to be thought of in terms of the of the matter of a single *Dasein* and its conflict, but should also be thought of in the more intense context of the social level (...). At this point, the art and artists seemed to be more important and powerful actors in social change than politics and politicians. The politicisation of aesthetics implied action through and with arts" (172).

Topics over topics. I should mention Benjamin's understanding of the media, and that, what one could call Benjamin's theory of knowledge, more correctly his cognition and experience practice to which there exist several observations and statements in Kia Lindroos' book. It is not necessary, as Richard Wolin writes, to be caught in a "Benjaminian trance" in order to differently interpret a clause in a letter Benjamin sent 1931 to a friend: "I have never been able to do research and think in any sense other than, if you will, a *theological*

one: namely, in accord with the Talmudic teaching about the *forty-nine levels of meaning in every Torah-passage*.” (Wolin, 2000, p.40. Would Wolin have tried to understand this clause and therefor developed more insight, he would never have drawn the almost grotesque conclusions, which he suggests already in the title of his essay).

To rescue Walter Benjamin and his works in a Benjaminian sense for us, also for those political scientists among us, who can and want to hear how the contemporary chrono-logic hour has beaten, and who therefore wish to outline other times and detect and act in a different kairological ‘reality’ – to these questions (and more) Kia Lindroos adds excellently written, translucent and convincing contribution. Surely, one should not remain with Walter Benjamin’s insights. Who would like to do that anyway? Yet, the Benjaminian constellation of danger remains, possibly – *mutates mutandis* – it has even increased. Who is not able to gain and pass over a little glow from the fire of Benjamin’s insights and experiences, will be overcome by the global capitalistic, all penetrating Power of Now, even in completely uncritical science. Who does not want this, has today – as in other and still near times – to accept good deal of marginality. Walter Benjamin’s *kairos* remains a hard assignment. It is not a cheap bargain. And it is not a propelling charge for an academic career.

TRANSLATED BY KLAUS SONDERMANN

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