

THE NEW BARBARIANS: FROM THE IMPOVERISHMENT OF EXPERIENCE IN TIMES OF THE GREAT WAR

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ABSTRACT: The text contemplates the challenges of the experience in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, emphasizing the peculiar character of the First World War as a milestone of its inflection. Following the terms that Walter Benjamin uses in *Experience and poverty* (1933), the resignification of the concept of “barbarism” is questioned as a symptom of contemporary inexperience in the face of the dilemmas of diversity in the globalized world. The outline of an ethics of sense is suggested in the midst of such adversity.

Keywords: Experience; First World War; diversity; globalization; sense

When a village grows into a city,
or a boy becomes a man,
the village and the boy disappear into the city and into the man.

Sigmund Freud.

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Thoughts for the Times on War and Death, 1915.

In a 1933 text entitled *Experience and poverty*, Walter Benjamin states that there was in his time a “new barbarism” that, far from signifying a negative concept, sustains humanity and moves it forward. Only a sufficiently large concussion could arouse in men the awareness that barbarism sustains and propels them. Historically, the use of the term is ancient and always referred to the negative antithesis of some other: what does not speak Greek correctly, what is not Roman, what is not civilized, what is not human. Benjamin's resignification could find meaning only in a profound inflection: according to him, the expectation of learning from experience. The temporal dimensions that complexify time, because they meet and mismatch, bequeathed in this learning a more definite orientation, although it was also complex, in the days before the threshold of the twentieth century, whose extremes of violence, unheard-of abilities, self-destruction and media profusion of sense made the experience difficult to grasp continually.

Before understanding what is meant by barbarization or impoverishment of experience, first, according to Benjamin, and then, as will be understood here, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by "experience." In antiquity, the idea was tied to the classic conception of history: "to have an experience' means to go from there to experience and know something: it is, in a way, a voyage of discovery", which confuses itself with the ancient Greek practice of history. The historical narrative reports and reflects what one experiences (KOSELLECK, 2014, p. 20). In the German language, used by Benjamin, to experience [*erfahren*] is also "to know something", being *fahren* to travel (*Idem*). According to what is adopted here, experience is the means by which man finds the possibility of filling, with the aid of thought and his imagination, the imperative void between his appearance and disappearance, between birth and death, or that is, life itself. The extract from this relationship is meaning as recognition of the significance and relevance of experience. Thus, history and life are synonymous.

In the decade when Benjamin wrote his text, the cultural environment absorbed the "crazy 1920s" that most immediately suffered the impact of the Great War, and faced his new situation more directly. Along with that effervescence, a "poverty" is unveiled to this generation, which in the previous decade had "one of the most terrible experiences in history" (BENJAMIN, 1994, p. 114). The Great War of 1914-1918, now known as World War I, was not just about the socio-political engineering of a total conflict. She plundered the cultural and moral heritage of a "civilization" she believed to be found on the march of progress. As such, it constrained a historical sense by which the West, and especially Europe, translated and disseminated its experience.

The direction of the most diverse dimensions of life in the preceding centuries, especially those held in the Enlightenment prognoses, is clouded by the frustration of the early twentieth century. Rather, the possibility of the future as a privileged temporal *locus* of "perfectibility", as Rousseau said, a "perpetual Peace", as Kant had imagined, or merely an evolved

“historical framework” achieved by man, as it appears in the formulation of Condorcet. The light of the future – of knowledge learned, taught and experienced – is shaded not only by the carnage of the twentieth century, but by the inexperience of action in the world.

The "human heritage", in Benjaminian terms, is then paid "for the small coin of the ‘actual’" (*Ibidem*, p. 119). A “poor actual” is the sequence of the generational story advocated by the critic's sensitivity. Fifteen years after the declaration of the end of the Great War in the face of the Weimar Republic crisis and the year of Nazi rise in Germany, Benjamin is able to announce the barbarization of experience, the sense of existential crisis and even the “next coming” war. (*Idem*). However, this barbarism is no longer a negative. Their barbarians, notably their artists, are not indecent: they still have a desire to live with some “decency”, which if it cannot be in the riches of yore, was in the display of their misery (*Ibidem*, p. 118). This takes a character of honesty towards the world of lack of habit. The barbarians “in a good

way” aspire to “break free from all experience” (*Idem*) and make their constructions with glass, without aura, without mystery, without much adaptation, as to say: we are all children in this world, let us be adults in recognizing it.

I

In the “hundred years of peace” of the nineteenth century,² theories generally embraced, often with special passion, the ideas of a better future than the times still lived. The prospect of change was not excluded from its promises and met its most sophisticated advocates. Their transformations were not unambitious, but kept a harmony in their evolution. This is because the minds that reflected them still had some relation to the experiences of the past, affirmed about him the superiority of the present, and even more that of the future. Even when they proposed the revolution they reserved a harmonious

² Using Karl Polanyi's expression in *The Great Transformation*.

development. As William Everdell recalled, Marx's dialectic and Darwin's evolution thought extraordinary movements, but never catastrophic or unpredictable. "Softness was one of the main metaphors of the time" (EVERDELL, 2000, p. 22). Literature allowed its readers to follow the unfolding of a story, the evolution of a character that was inserted in a time, in a world. There was in him a past, a present and a future. The experience might have glimpsed alternatives, but these were not the result of uncertainty: they remained secure in the heritage acquired by the past and gave meaning to historical continuity.

It is to this continuing vision that the twentieth century comes to impose its embarrassments. In 1915 Freud writes: "the war we did not want to believe broke out, and brought about... disillusionment" (FREUD, 2010, p. 215). The unexpected world conflict of unprecedented proportions, thanks to its mobilizing and technical capacity, makes him suspicious of the progress that civilization believed to be living. If even those who claim the most civilized governments in the West ignore the practice of

"civilized" conflict, how can one think of the experience of ongoing civilizing progress? The demand for deprivation in the name of a morality that was not met by its greatest advocates had opened wide the contradictions of the historical process as it had been thought so far. The moral state of these men at war seems no less barbaric than the previous states. On the contrary, given the frustration manifested by the way in which fighting unveiled death, the past could not be considered worse than the present.

The times around the Great War had to deal with a reworking of the whole mental organization conquered by previous centuries, now from the perspective of discontinuity. Certainly this movement does not owe its existence only to the 1914-1918 conflict,³ but finds its first maximum expression in it. As Carl Schorske pointed out, twentieth-century intelligentsia "proudly proclaimed their independence from the past". He stated, as I said, the "modern" as a way of distinguishing itself

³ That is why it is preferable to adopt here the expression "times" of the Great War. Everdell, for example, devotes much of his work to the discontinuity movement identified even before 1914.

from all that preceded it and no longer as a simple antithesis of the old. “Modern architecture, modern music, modern philosophy... are defined not from the past, and indeed not from the past, but from the independence of the past” (SCHORSKE, 1988, p. 13). Distrust in past experiences was imposed to act in the present and to project a future. Time, more consciously, began to appear as a discontinuous complex.

Contemporary, Western thought has constantly struggled with this question, showing how the twentieth century, from its inception to the first decades of the twenty-first, alters the experimentation of time. Marcel Proust's literary sensibility at the beginning of the last century, for example, already confronted the temporal dimensions, placing the narrator of his “search for lost time” in an “extratemporal” experience. Its loss of time is more serious than the loss of past time, it is a loss of the very possibility of understanding itself in time: “It was something far more precious than an image of the past, and it offered me all successive images, and never seen, that separated the past from

the present” (PROUST, 2016, p. 735). Proustian experience, contemporary with war, reveals the looting of temporal linearity and challenges the human capacity to understand it. How to unanimously understand a cause, an effect, if each is given innumerable solutions?

In the historical field, Reinhart Koselleck manifested this challenge through the “sediments of time”, where linearity is not exempt from circularity and what is singular and cannot be equated at all coexists with “repetition structures” that resemble events.⁴ It is no longer about separating the synchronic from the diachronic, but understanding them in dynamic stratification. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has challenged the temporal dimensions of the present through the idea of a new chronotope for the 21st century. In it, the past constantly invades the present – one might add, in order to justify it –, while the future only threatens the species of extinction. In his words, “the future no longer presents itself as an open horizon of possibilities [...] it is a

⁴ REINHART, Koselleck. *Sediments of time: on possible histories*.

dimension that is increasingly closed to any prognosis – and which, at the same time, seems to approach as a threat". The present, by the future made past, in turn, manifests "that we are no longer able to bequeath anything to posterity" (GUMBRECHT, 2015, p. 15-16). These references express this heritage of a discontinuous and complex development of time also experienced today.

In the Benjaminian text, one can see that the steel and glass metropolises now housed the new crowds that could only live with their "actuality." Their telescopes, airplanes, and rockets desired, if not the fastest, at least the demand for acceleration. They attested to the tiredness that led them to want to escape from their prison on earth. Everything is glassy, transparent. It may be big, but it doesn't hide behind its grandeur, it simply displays it. Disappointment here assumes the feature of fidelity, which is not intimidated by failure. It does not "leave a trace" because it does not care about the mortuary, only about the "new" uncommitted with its futures. The future threatens: there

may be war, famine, there will be death. The past seems to say nothing about it.

It's hard to think here, perhaps torturous, but certainly a challenge. The Ontology itself presents its manifestations: What was a philosopher like Martin Heidegger proposing his idea of ontic, if not a mind willing to move away from it? Before thinking what is something, it is, for him, it is necessary to think what is this "is" of the inquiry, that is, to seek to ask about one's own being. Paraphrasing Plato, he puts his question at a distance from the Greek philosopher: "For it is manifest that you have long been acquainted with what you intend to mean by employing the expression 'ent', which we once believed to understand but which now perplexes us'. Today we have an answer to the question of what do we mean by the word 'between'?" (HEIDEGGER, 2012, p. 31).⁵ It is important to mention that Heidegger almost certainly wrote these lines, which

⁵ The reference to Plato is given in *The Sophist*, 244a.

open his *Being and Time*, in his cabin in the Black Forest and not in an apartment in the Berlin metropolis.

Thinking about reality, a nonspecific task at a given time, makes a turn on itself. The real takes on an even more escaping character from mental apprehension. Its significance is impoverished and oscillates between the “barbarism” dedicated to the euphoric attempts at transformation, or at least the production of something that deserves to be called “new”, and the pure description, which struggles to preserve what is already dust. Desires from various fields, diffused in mass, came in search of sense. To the atrophy of metaphysics came the world of action, wanting rather than trying to tackle problems, “to make it possible to live with them”, as Hannah Arendt pointed out by referring to the active dimension of twentieth-century philosophical existentialism (ARENDT, 1976, p. 35). Here Arendt draws attention to the man unpreparedly pressed for past and future, being between the two and not much as a participant in

both. He is in the gap that “became tangible reality and perplexity for all” (*Ibidem*, p. 40).

The results of this experience of the inexperienced present themselves as a mixture of “sobriety” and “ecstasy” – following the concepts that Gumbrecht chooses to think about these times – showing themselves in the public manifestations of plurality and anonymity (GUMBRECHT, 2014, p. 156-157). The mass movements of the period, socialism and fascism, dialogue with the surrender of these men who lived an intense process of self-understanding. Happiness “had lost its status as a point of reference and possibility, even as a distant horizon of concrete existence, or as a topic of philosophical speculation” (*Ibidem*, p. 46).

II

The times of the Great War, manifested in succession by the diffuse interwar period, by the Second War – which led to total war in the extreme – and by subsequent ideological

conflicts, left to contemporary thought the challenge of inexperience that seems to plague the 21st century as well. Experience can rarely be given such clairvoyant meaning as in the macroideas that combined, in spite of their criticisms, the meaning of life in a Christian Europe in Middle Ages, or a Western civilization in Modernity, for example. The fondness for the concept of democracy in the twentieth century offers signs of resignification, even trivialization, which contradict and pluralize its semantic content more extensively and more rapidly.

The widening of the possibilities of life in the “world” epithet of the last hundred years, of the interconnected and rich-plurality world, which now become more imperatively known, has challenged and still challenges the conferral of meaning to experience. So much so that in his early manifestations Benjamin is able to refer to non-experience. The twentieth century, since World War I, presents a more violent symptom of this process. Violent because it overthrows, or at least constrains, the most prevailing conceptions – in the specific case of the Great War, the

progressive ones of civilization and democracy, making all the discursive essays that follow do not fail to highlight every moment their inevitable failures, which soon destroy them.⁶

The philologist and critic Erich Auerbach opened his essay *Philology of World Literature*, drawing attention to the impoverishment of diversity through the process of contemporary uniformization in the twentieth century. “Our Earth, which constitutes the entire universe of world literature, becomes smaller and poorer in diversity every day” (AUERBACH, 2012, p. 357). What Auerbach calls impoverished diversity is the inauthentic character of experience that adheres to a “leveling” of its constituent elements. It would be sufficient, then, to call “literature” to refer to everything in the literary, dispensing with the use of the “world” epithet. What matters is that the German recognizes a tension between countless divergences and a tendency towards the standardization of world

⁶ On this, check out AUERBACH, Erich. “The brown sock.” In: *Mimesis*.

culture that suppresses the differences inherent in the enriched realization of such "literature" (*Ibidem*, p. 362).

The different suffers a contradiction in the diminution of the world by its interconnectedness. However, the diversity disturbed by media standardization cannot be believed to disappear completely. What emerges from this situation is the challenge of authenticity, which produces a new field rich in possibilities for experience, not the suppression of differentiation between men. What adds up is not the difference per se, but its wealth.

The issue had been honestly addressed by anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. The so-called "superiority" of Western culture over the other human cultures of the world is not due to an essential evolution but to the historically involuntary and progressive adoption of its "way of life." He wonders, "What is the point of defending the originality of human cultures against themselves?" Since the accusation of "underdeveloped" countries is not because of their westernization, but because of the lack of

faster means of involving them in this process (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 2017, p. 359). Questions follow this question. However, the conclusion of the Levistraussian discourse in *Race and History* is the fundamental contradiction that "in order to make progress, men need to collaborate and, in the course of this collaboration, they will gradually see the contributions whose initial diversity was precisely what made collaboration fruitful and necessary" (*Ibidem*, p. 374). Without diversity there is therefore no possibility of contribution. Homogenization, in turn, challenges as it makes such a contribution possible, but it cannot be seen as a destroyer of diversity, at the risk of humanity's ossification, which is unreasonable. Understanding this mechanism is more important than simply preserving the origin of cultures. More relevant is, above all, to understand that there are other ways of experiencing the world and that in this multiplicity lies the enrichment of experience.

Moving away from the biological explanation of race, concentrated "on the sociological and psychological productions

of human cultures” (*Ibidem*, p. 338), Lévi-Strauss points to the extraordinariness of cultural diversity, an imperative of human experience. It is not only between cultures, it is also within each culture, so that there is no closed linearity, no continuous and evolutionary progress that resists it. Diversity takes, in the anthropologist's analysis, the character of inevitable constancy, of a natural phenomenon, and of advantage even to multi-directional human development.

The debates of the end of the last century, already considered classic, about the finalist hypotheses of post-Cold War history and the maintenance of the national state under the sieve of cultural conflicts mark efforts to explain the existential void and the discursive multiplicity of contemporaneity, these being more evident than those.⁷ Their critical answers, attentive to the political field, question the naturalness of the idea of civilization and see barbarism as a characteristic, not of the

historical evolution of cultural groups, but of human attitudes. Tzvetan Todorov's publication, *The Fear of Barbarians*, is an example of this movement: civilization is in the possibility of openness to the other's humanity and not in their confrontation, “it is a horizon we can approach, while barbarism is a moat” – one could say persistent – “from which we try to move away [...]”. It is acts and attitudes that are barbaric or civilized, not individuals or peoples” (TODOROV, 2010, p. 32-33).

In the still recent world of the “new millennium” this has proved to be a more complicated challenge than one might suppose. Perhaps because diversity has turned out to be more diverse than previously thought. It is not restricted merely to the scope of political-institutional culture, but also to the most varied fields of contemporary experience, ranging from the academic to the professional, and why not to say individual. Diversity diversifies without measure within each other. It is little known to us and probably never quite known. The task that imposes itself, then, on thought is the provocation of experience, pointing

⁷ FUKUYAMA, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992); and HUNTINGTON, Samuel P. *The clash of civilizations*.

out this complexity. However, the marginalization of authenticity in favor of the descriptive and the restraint of the critical spirit that develops the capacities for conversation between the different ways of conceiving the world characterize the new times and challenge the contemplative activity of the human, who resists the empire of irrevocable certainty. That's why it's poor.

The consequences of the inauthenticity of thought, of the frustrated and stubborn attempts to level the possibilities of being, by common sense and media propagation, lead to the uniform attribution of meaning to what has already become plural, which leads to the trivialization of experience, or, in the terms mentioned here, to their impoverishment. The result is a conflicting profusion of senses of varying degrees, which they believe find uniform truth in their dispute rather than in their openness to the diverse.

In the most widespread means of communication, themselves in progressive circulation, where most recently the idea of fake news, which maintains the resistant essentiality, the

“chatter” that reproduces repeated discourses, arises dilemmas not only in those interested in developing authentic thinking, but to the public sphere itself. It is she who impoverishes herself. The range of these vehicles seems to be so vast that the obscuration not only affects every man in his daily life, but also his own world. The “we” become blurred in an attempt to find some sense for the “me”. He is not meant to be speculative or contemplative, but rather to tell the truth about the shifting ground of the factual.

The “self” is disturbed in the contemporary world in an inescapable attempt to explain itself. Their self-explanations come from the most diverse realms of political partisanship, “exact” sciences and technology, religions, astrology, not automatically meaning evil, but impressing that they are often galvanized into one and the same person. The evil lies in impoverishing something whose capacity for wealth is latent. The standardization of thought is not defended here – nor could it be anymore – but the possibility of thinking in the midst of the

diversity of a world made smaller. Diversity thus becomes wealth and opportunity, above all, for the contemplation of the anthropological necessity of the pluralizing sense.

III

Diversity can only mean an advantage for man, as Lévi-Strauss wanted, if he takes into account the human urgency to give sense to experience. It is not so much the sense "itself" that can save it. Knowing that a particular group understands the world in a way that differs from the one to which it belongs merely extends the encyclopedic framework of cultural knowledge. The key to "tolerance" is also insufficient, where one simply accepts the meaning of the other. What overlaps with this is the attempt to understand the "urgency" referred to. Analysis should thus turn to the subject himself, who wants and needs to determine both the meaning of something and its validity.

The attribution of sense is urgent because it is at the very heart of the process of cultural development. The sense, which is not necessarily logical, but obeys different modulations – such as the imaginary, for example – ascends culture, produces the man and is indispensable for life in him. Repulsion to the diverse identified above thus means repulsion to man himself. The refusal to consider this attribution keeps stable and in empirical crisis an essentiality that "the times" evoked here challenge a century or more in the history of Western thought. On the undisclosed essence, the urgent agency of the human subject is imposed, which, unlike the other species, can only count on thinking for its survival.

Without meaning, human beings are nothing but wanderers who walk in a vacuum. It is not a question of denying an immanent meaning that does not depend on human intervention, but of recognizing that it, if any, escapes its condition. He does not present himself – because he has never presented himself – completely to man. In this way, the human

condition participates in conferring meaning on what it lacks, meaning itself. Such recognition is the basis of possibility for the enrichment of experience.

This does not mean that it is legitimate to adopt deliberately and spontaneously no matter what the meaning. Here freedom confirms its tendency to behave like a prison. There must be an ethical and scientific limit to be calculated. Such forms, which work in a margin where much can be done, but not anything, deserve the special attention of those who study language, narrative, anthropology, and the humanities in general.

The first step, Benjamin's resemblance, though this is in its historical specificity, is in the recognition of man's miserable circumstance, especially in the last century. The next, perhaps, lies in the richness of seeing oneself as a being who circumvents the frustrating experience of the meaninglessness of his world, and sees his cosmos with responsibility for what is presented to him as being. Your nobility, or if you prefer, your "civilization"

lies in the various ways of looking at it. It would not be Western, but a "human civilization", as coined Norbert Elias, one of the greatest theorists of civilization that we know today and who gave the possibility of living predominantly decivilising times to the theorizing of the twentieth century (ELIAS, 2000, p. 22).

The disillusionment of the times of the Great War that so despaired the experience of the last century and, one might also say of the present, placed man in his "poverty" and "barbarism." It takes a more fruitful space for creation to happen and possibly save the indispensable coexistence for this species. But to use Benjamin's sensibility, the barbarian man survives and still survives laughing. Perhaps because the barbarians are no longer alone, isolated in the negativity of their exclusion. If there is a limit balance deposited by these dark times, of which heir today, he is in the consideration that the new barbarians are no longer the others, they are all.

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