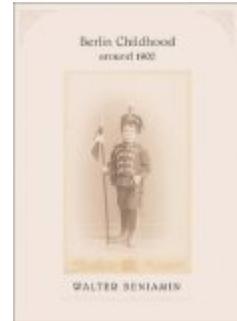


Walter Benjamin. *Berlin Childhood around 1900*. Introduction by Peter Szondi. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006. xvi + 192 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-674-02222-5.

Reviewed by Andrew Donson (Departments of German and History, The University of Massachusetts Amherst)

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## Objectifying Childhood around 1932

This memoir is no ordinary set of reminiscences.[1] Walter Benjamin was a Marxist and one of the twentieth century's greatest theorists of literature and history. In contrast to his colleagues in the Frankfurt School, like Theodor Adorno, he was optimistic about the materialism of modern mass culture. For these reasons he eschewed writing an autobiography in the conventional sense. Instead, he experimented with recalling pleasant childhood memories of things and places, according to the premise that no one can ever offer a linear narrative of the past or an argument about causal relations. Historians hoping for a straightforward story of a middle-class Jewish childhood in Berlin around 1900 will, for these reasons, be disappointed. However, those interested in the challenges of representing childhood will find it highly rewarding.

Benjamin hoped his experimental style would reveal, as he claimed in another autobiographically inspired work, the "real treasure" gleaned in confronting the past through "images, severed from all previous associations that stand—like ruins or torsos in the collector's gallery—in the sober rooms of our later insight".[2] The images in this memoir were accordingly material remnants of his past, memories of ordinary objects like socks and glass miniatures. They had less to do with what came before than with what the past offered in coming to terms with his present: Benjamin hoped to paint a montage using metaphors of childhood, as it meant to him during his anguished exile—a result of the collapse of the Weimar Republic and the rise of the Nazi dictatorship. He later

committed suicide, in 1940, after the Germans invaded the Vichy zone in France, where he sought refuge, and he was unable to escape over the Pyrenees into Spain. Adhering to his theory of history, Benjamin revised the manuscript several times, on each occasion assembling disconnected fragments of his memory about a world to which he would never be able to return. His hesitancy to publish the memoir in a final book form—some parts were published in 1932 in *Die Literarische Welt*, a German arts-and-letters magazine, others were written in 1938 and published posthumously—was the logical conclusion of his theory of history.

Despite its literary experimentation, the memoir portrays a sensitive, intellectual, and lonely bourgeois young Jew growing up in a large, predominantly Protestant and working-class city. Most conspicuous is his alienation in a family facing the challenges of assimilation despite their reform Judaism and their attempt to integrate into gentile culture through strategies like celebrating Christmas and Easter. In the memoir, Benjamin often discusses his mother, who, like most middle-class Jewish mothers in pre-1914 Germany, was loving, attentive, and nurturing. Yet in the entire memoir he mentions not a single friend. This is partly because his theory demanded primarily constructing metaphors from his early material world. But the absence of friendships perhaps reveals how much the isolation of Jews motivated him to avoid writing about painful emotions and relationships. Benjamin describes himself as an occasional *flâneur*, a solo wanderer through the culturally diverse (though for him

apparently silent) big city. He lived in the segregated opulence of the upper-middle class and enjoyed summer vacations, weekends in his family's garden, and ironed and neatly folded linen with scents of lavender. He caught glimpses of his parents' parties with their lobsters displayed on silver platters. Save his occasional and, to him, dangerous excursions into working-class neighborhoods, he had almost no interactions outside his middle-class ghetto in the Old and New West of Berlin.

This book is readable. At times, its descriptions are sublime, the lovely prose of a twentieth-century master. But it would require much guidance for undergraduates to understand. I would not recommend it for narrow-minded social historians. It would be highly appropriate for a course on memory or for anyone interested in the

relation between theory and history. This work is one of the least abstruse of Benjamin's notoriously difficult writings. It is therefore less relevant for social historians of childhood than those seeking an introduction to a thinker whose influence on contemporary historiography has been prodigious and continues to grow.

#### Notes

[1]. Originally published as *Berliner Kindheit um 1900*, ed. Theodor Adorno (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1950).

[2]. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 611.

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