

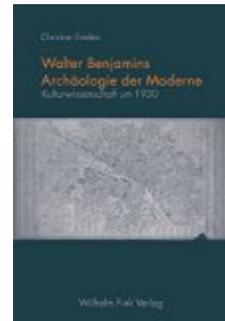
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Christian J. Emden. *Walter Benjamins Archäologie der Moderne: Kulturwissenschaft um 1930*. Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2006. 184 pp. EUR 24.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-7705-4338-0.

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Placing Benjamin in the Tradition of German *Kulturwissenschaft*

Hardly a celebrity during his lifetime, Walter Benjamin (1882-1940) is now recognized as one of the most original and influential modern European thinkers. Christian Emden's new book situates Benjamin's writings within the tradition of early twentieth-century *Kulturwissenschaft*, a very diverse field of cultural analysis that emerged in the late nineteenth century and is often traced back to Wilhelm Dilthey, Wilhelm Windelband, and Heinrich Rickert. According to Emden, Benjamin's thought is closely related to the study of culture as developed in Germany between 1880 and 1930 and at the same time reflects the transformations of *Kulturwissenschaft* after 1900. Building on his own explorations of memory, modernity, and the invention of antiquity, Emden pays particular attention to archeological figures of thought in Benjamin's work. In his view, it is as an "archaeology of modernity" that Benjamin's critical enterprise has much in common with the related projects of Max Weber, Georg Simmel, Adolf Bastian, Ernst Cassirer, and last, but not least, Aby Warburg and his school.

Emden argues that German *Kulturwissenschaft* came to an abrupt, albeit temporary, end in the early 1930s. He attributes this development to the paralysis and ultimate destruction of Weimar democracy, nagging doubts over the role of the bourgeois intellectual at a time of extreme political radicalization, the destruction of scholarly traditions by the Nazis, and the dissolution of traditional patterns of social orientation in the face of rapid technological modernization as well. He also cites important personal discontinuities, as well as new trends within

the social sciences. What appears to have remained after 1933, writes Emden with a view to contemporary critical theory, was the critique of a loosely formulated "bourgeois consciousness" deemed responsible for the totalitarian state (p. 15).

The book's underlying objective is to recover Benjamin's methods, practices, and strategies for the cultural analysis of modernity today. More precisely, Emden seeks to redress what he describes as Benjamin's effective "exclusion" from the intellectual record of present-day cultural history (p. 15). Noting that the methodological debates of the last decades have led to a rediscovery of Weber and Simmel, Emden finds that the relation between academic historians and Benjamin remains marked by a certain distance. "Even at the beginning of the twenty-first century," Emden writes, "Benjamin remains the inconvenient stepchild of historical thought—mentioned at the margins, but hardly ever noticed as a representative of a historical cultural science" (p. 12).

Emden notes that Benjamin's own critique of contemporary cultural history might have contributed to his negative reception by historians: in equating Rickert's historical *Kulturwissenschaft* with Karl Lamprecht's program of a universal cultural history, Benjamin evidently failed to notice that Simmel, Weber, and Rickert as well had realized already around the turn of the century that the social and cultural sciences needed to gain a better understanding of the contingency and heterogeneity of social processes, political action, and cultural

transformation. By the 1920s, Emden asserts, *Kulturwissenschaft* had changed fundamentally. While it appears that Benjamin was not fully aware of these changes, Emden counts his analytical practice among the most innovative achievements of historical cultural studies in this period. Important in this respect are Benjamin's rejection of teleological models of historical explanation, his sensitivity to the seemingly insignificant details of everyday life, and his keen interest in images, historical consciousness, and the social imaginary (the latter is defined with Charles Taylor as "that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy" [p. 127]). Emden argues that Benjamin's attempt to understand the social imaginary and historical consciousness in terms of the circulation of collective images is of great relevance for historical cultural studies also today. In his view, "Benjamin's archaeology of modernity is directed towards a history of the imaginary" (p. 101).

The first chapter traces Benjamin's attempt to locate modernity's prehistory in the Baroque of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The analysis focuses on the *Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1925/1928), the product of Benjamin's failed effort to attain admittance to the profession of university lecturer at the University of Frankfurt. In situating this work within a tight web of references to texts by Johann Joachim Winkelmann, Jacob Burckhardt, Heinrich Wölfflin, Alois Riegl, Warburg, Simmel, Oswald Spengler, and Carl Schmitt (to name just a few!), Emden shows that Benjamin's "baroque" designates a category of historical consciousness rather than a closely defined period in the history of art and architecture. This interpretation explains the apparent paradox that Benjamin can understand the modernity of the nineteenth century as baroque also. According to Emden, the baroque mode of historical consciousness finds its most direct symbolic representation in the ruin. In fact, for Benjamin and perhaps also for Emden, the lasting relevance of the baroque resides in the dynamics between the irreversible loss of the past and its symbolic afterlife (p. 47). Assuming that historical knowledge can only emerge through a procedure that recovers remnants of the past in the present, Benjamin dissolves the traditional concept of history into the meticulous study of an undetermined number of seemingly marginal objects. History becomes an endless process of excavation and (re)construction. Emden ends this dense first chapter with a discussion of melancholy, archaeology, and the crisis of historicism.

Chapter 2 engages Benjamin's concern with the cul-

tural and technological conditions of urban modernity and their radical effects on the structures of social experience and historical consciousness in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Again, Emden provides an impressive intellectual background for his readings of Benjamin's works, thereby creating the "context" within which Benjamin might be understood as part of the German historical cultural studies tradition. Seen in analogy with Warburg's library or his *Mnemosyne-Atlas* (2000), for instance, Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk* (1983) appears as an equally productive attempt to extrapolate new orders of meaning from the collection and reordering of seemingly insignificant historical objects. While chapter 3 explores the visual scripts of material culture and their "legibility" (*Lesbarkeit*) in more detail, the fourth and concluding chapter seeks to distinguish Benjamin's archaeological practice from the historical materialism of contemporary critical theory. In reducing social mentalities to economic relations, Emden writes, the early Frankfurt School unconsciously repeated the myths it set out to criticize. In fact, Emden argues that Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's cultural pessimism obscured the critical potential of the modern media, while Benjamin's meticulous study of the symbols and myths of European modernity involves a political program concerned with the demythologization of the social imaginary. Emden concludes that despite his close ties with the Institute of Social Research, and also despite his rather one-sided relationship with the Warburg School, Benjamin takes up a middle position between *Kulturwissenschaft* and critical theory, with a propensity towards the former (p. 7).

Seeking to place Benjamin on the map of German cultural history, Emden also confronts several other trends he finds at work in the study of Benjamin and (the current practice of) *Kulturwissenschaft*. First, Emden reacts to a certain tendency to decontextualize Benjamin's work: that is, to link his thought with various theoretical or cultural phenomena regardless of their historical context. Second, he resists Benjamin's *Vereinnahmung* by literary or media studies. Third, he indicates that poststructuralist and certain psychoanalytical readings have not aided a more level-headed appraisal of Benjamin's work among historians. Emden's own perspective clearly reflects a strong interest in archaeology as a model of cultural analysis. His book might also be read as contributing to the expansion of archaeology into a cultural science.

In conclusion, it is fair to ask whether the book could indeed assume the alternative title "Walter Benjamin for Historians," a claim presented in the preface (p. 7). In my opinion, this designation would cut both too short and

too wide, depending on how one reads the preposition “for” and who exactly is meant by “historians.” Certainly, this book is a very rich source for intellectual historians and other readers interested in the overlaps between Benjamin’s work and other varieties of early-twentieth-century cultural analysis. It is important to note, however, that neither Benjamin’s affinities with the Warburg School, nor his ambivalent relationship with the Frankfurt School (or psychoanalysis, for this matter) are new connections.[1] In light of recent research, it also seems necessary to strongly qualify general claims about Benjamin’s exclusion from or by the historical profession or a lacking concern for the historical depth of his work.[2]

One might also wonder whether those historians presumably addressed by this study will be entirely satisfied with its social and political dimensions. Emden notes that the dire political situation of the early 1930s had “decisive consequences” for the forms and functions of cultural analysis in Germany (p. 9). The exact nature of these consequences, however, remains somewhat under-explored. Most importantly, perhaps, Emden’s language is often too complex to be understood by readers not yet familiar with the main figures and fundamental issues of early-twentieth-century German intellectual and cultural history. The syntax is complex, while key concepts such as allegory, aura, or axial age lack easily accessible definitions. In fact, the entire constellation of *historische Kulturwissenschaft* could have merited some elaboration. Readers unfamiliar with the German term might wonder as to its status as a discipline and what to do with the “scientific” component in regard to Benjamin’s work. That being said, this rather slim book offers very rich food for thought. Considering Benjamin’s legendary outsider status, for instance, counting him among the major practi-

tioners of early-twentieth-century cultural history raises most interesting questions about the major conditions and assumptions of this field. In a recent review of *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, Emden highlights the necessity to identify modes of thinking that allow us to grasp the presence of the past beyond historical continuities.[3] Applying this insight to the book under review here, Benjamin’s place within the wider field of German historical cultural studies appears as an unruly, continuously-to-be-(re)discovered presence, the significance of which resides in the ability to construct new orders of meaning from (shifting) historical margins.

Notes

[1]. See, for instance, Cornelia Zumbusch, *Wissenschaft in Bildern. Symbol und dialektisches Bild in Aby Warburgs Mnemosyne-Atlas und Walter Benjamins Passagen-Werk* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004).

[2]. Vanessa R. Schwartz, “Walter Benjamin for Historians,” *American Historical Review* 106 (2001): 1721-1743; and *Walter Benjamin and History*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London: Continuum, 2005). See also John Czaplicka, Andreas Huyssen, and Anson Rabinbach, “Introduction: Cultural History and Cultural Studies: Reflections on a Symposium,” *New German Critique* 65 (Spring-Summer, 1995), 3-17, esp. 10ff. Benjamin and Warburg are described here as “essentially ‘ocularcentric’ cultural historians” (14).

[3]. Christian J. Emden, “Der unwillige ‘Klassiker’. Walter Benjamin zwischen kulturwissenschaftlicher Kritik und poststrukturalistischer Verklärung,” review of David S. Ferris, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, in IASOnline (July 22, 2005).

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