

Samuel Weber. *Benjamin's -abilities*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008. viii + 363 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-02837-1.



Reviewed by Kai-Uwe Werbeck

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Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

Walter Benjamin, one of the greatest and most diverse thinkers of the twentieth century, was, among other things, a literary critic, a Frankfurt School philosopher, a cultural analyst, and a keen observer of modern life. The broad range of his in parts rather esoteric and prophetic oeuvre ensures that fascination with Benjamin's work remains undiminished and the output of academic research on his writings is kept on a constantly high level. The density of Benjamin's theories allows for extensive analysis of the minutest detail. While the abundance and complexity of the material offers a seemingly never-ending source for interpretation, most scholars consider it next to impossible to subsume Benjamin's thinking under one particular methodology. In his latest contribution to the wide array of scholarship on Benjamin, however, Samuel Weber, a leading theorist on literature and media, sets out to achieve just that--and succeeds. To be more precise, he points out a salient, but somewhat neglected, feature of Benjamin's style of writing. Weber focuses on Benjamin's interest in language in general and a spe-

cific linguistic phenomenon, the forming of nouns from verbs, to secure the theoretical framework for this daring endeavor.

The title of the book already refers to the critical "-abilities," to be read as a suffix here and not as a noun. Weber employs the suffix, the German translation of which is "-barkeiten," to create a trajectory from Benjamin to Jacques Derrida and back to Benjamin that defines -abilities (as in "iterarion" versus "iterability") as the distinction "between empirically observable fact and structural possibility" (p. 6). For Derrida, Weber explains, "iterability, the power or potentiality to repeat or be repeated, is not the same as repetition, precisely because it is a structural possibility that is potentially 'at work' even there where it seems factually not to have occurred" (p. 6). The concept of potentiality as an inherent characteristic of certain concepts--such as Benjamin's famous "reproducibility" of the artwork, to name but one example--is used as a springboard by Weber in order to approach several of Benjamin's main concepts from this angle and read them against the grain. This

approach is convincing in that the meaning of language for Benjamin can hardly be overestimated, and his persistent recourse to the suffix "-ability" is very much acknowledged, but rather marginally analyzed. Applying the question of potentiality enables Weber to deal productively with diverse concepts by creating linguistically a common ground for comparison that is necessarily rooted in language but at the same time surpasses it.

Given the scope of his endeavor, Weber's book appears rather short at 322 pages (plus Weber's own translation of one of Benjamin's lesser known essays, "Seagulls," which also inspired the book's cover design; extensive notes; and an index). The book's two sections, one entitled "Benjamin's -abilities" and the other "Legibilities," contain twenty chapters. As a rule of thumb, the chapters of the first section establish Weber's argument as to why the focus on the little suffix is fruitful. He introduces the logic of the "-ability" via a recourse to Derrida's works on language and sketches out the concept of potentiality by offering an intellectual prehistory of the "-barkeiten." Weber follows a trajectory from Immanuel Kant to Friedrich Hölderlin, among others, in order to illustrate the influences that had an impact on Benjamin's thinking in terms of the "-abilities" and beyond.[1] Each remaining essay in the first section centers on one particular -ability, such as Impart-ability or Translatability, and deepen the reader's understanding of what Weber is attempting to argue, namely that the "-ability" "is *immediately* effective qua possibility itself, and not merely as an anticipation of a possible realization" (p. 45), while simultaneously giving insight into Benjamin's broad oeuvre. The second section, in contrast to what its title might suggest, moves away from an exclusive focus on the written word and employs a broader understanding of what a text is. It is here, for example, that the reader encounters Weber's previously published article "'Streets, Squares, Theatres': A City on the Move--Walter Benjamin's Paris," which focuses on how to read

an urban landscape. The act of reading in itself becomes a crucial factor for the production of meaning within the framework of potentiality, as aptly illustrated in chapter 13, which is entitled "Violence and Gesture: Agamben Reading Benjamin Reading Kafka Reading Cervantes."

Weber has written a book that relies heavily on language and reading and applies linguistic methodologies, such as etymology, in order to analyze the different theoretical categories discussed against the background of their potentiality. He switches fluently from English to German and other languages, taking apart the often complicated structure of Benjamin's word creations and using his findings as a key to the most important concepts for his re-reading of Benjamin. Although Weber guides the reader well, the details with which he deconstructs nouns, verbs, and adjectives are at times hard to follow due to their linguistic complexity. This is not so much an inherent weakness of Weber's book as an acknowledgement of the fact that a book that deals with Benjamin's infatuation with language can be as much a challenge to the reader as Benjamin's primary texts themselves. Weber's style of writing is not overly complicated or convoluted; rather, the book is intellectually demanding due to an absence of extensive theoretical detours.

The work is therefore neither a quick read nor an accessible introduction to Walter Benjamin's life and work. Although Weber takes his time and virtuously illustrates relations between Benjamin's concepts and their intellectual predecessors (actually moments during which Benjamin's own voice is moved completely into the background in favor of a more holistic approach), the sheer amount of intellectual history covered forces Weber to be rather selective and exclusive in his explanations of secondary material. This economic necessity--which enhances readability--is at the same time the book's greatest strength and its major problem in terms of the audience at which it aims. Weber delivers state-of-the-art

scholarship on Benjamin, scholarship as challenging as it is fresh and sophisticated, but also ultimately assumes an already very knowledgeable reader, not only on Benjamin but also on French and German intellectual history. Apart from the linguistic intricacies per se, the book contains numerous quick references to rather complex concepts such as the philosophical basics of early German Romanticism (including that of the Absolute) or the role that allegory plays in German baroque drama. While this approach will not come as a surprise to Benjamin scholars, it may easily exceed the capacities of readers not that familiar with German philosophy and literary theory. The book is meant for an advanced audience; noting this is not meant as a criticism of Weber.

Weber touches on a vast number of topics and time and time again offers remarkable readings and analyses of Benjamin's texts, readings that point out seemingly self-evident commonplaces before turning them upside down and hinting at details that have gone surprisingly unnoticed so far. At times, during long stretches the "-ability" under discussion seems to move to the background or is even conspicuously absent altogether. One example is the aforementioned chapter, "Streets, Squares, Theaters," in which Weber builds up his argument on the role Paris plays in Benjamin's oeuvre. While the first pages of the essay name "knowability" as the pivotal theoretical construct, the focus is actually on the concept of the threshold (*Schwelle*), and the meaning of the names of urban localities. For a reader unfamiliar with the concept of Paris as "the capital of the nineteenth century" and therefore the quintessential modern place from which Benjamin derived many of his concept-forming observations (as, for example, sketched out in the eponymous famous 'exposé', written in 1935, to Benjamin's epic Arcades Project, posthumously published in 1982) this might look like an abrupt change of topics that labels the "-ability" as something tacked on, which indeed it is not.

Weber is well aware of the difficulties his approach presents and offers chapters to familiarize the reader with the most critical terms discussed in the book. The first of the two large sections of which the book is comprised offers the aforementioned "Prehistory," while the second begins with the marvelous "Genealogy of Modernity: History, Myth, and Allegory in Benjamin's *Origin of the German Mourning Play*." Still, at times the feeling remains that certain chapters could have been placed more appropriately, which mostly means earlier in the course of the book, in order to render the feel of the book a little more stringent. A fitting example is the chapter on "The *Ring* as *Trauerspiel*," which would have served as a great link between the "Prehistory" and the first chapter on a concrete -ability, "Criticizability," in the first section of the book, in that it offers a helpful insight into the concept of the mourning play, a dominant object of discussion in Weber's line of thought. By the time the *Trauerspiel* chapter appears in the structure of the book, the mourning play has already been mentioned several times.

Even so, all these points are minor flaws that come up only in connection with a more general audience in mind. For a Benjamin scholar the book is a must-read, since Weber achieves something that does not come to pass too often in Benjamin scholarship. He points out several new directions for further research and offers many interesting ideas on how to approach Benjamin in his totality by offering a template that can be applied to almost every niche of Benjamin's work. Of course, and to his credit, Weber never explicitly maintains the contrary, that the book itself covers all of Benjamin's facets. While certain concepts and categories, such as allegory, the question of translation, or history are dealt with in as much detail as the size of the book allows, other defining fields of Benjamin's interest, such as the rise of the cinema or his childhood memories, are either treated peripherally (the cinematic experience, for example, is subsumed under a general essay on media) or left out completely. The book

excels, however, by granting the reader a blueprint that can be applied to literally all of Benjamin's texts. By providing such a tool, Weber succeeds in creating a new methodology that is applicable to all of Benjamin's oeuvre.

In sum, there is hardly any way around this book for Benjamin and German studies scholars with a professional interest in the twentieth century. Admittedly, this is no book for anyone needing an introduction to the subject matter; it does not seek to be. At a minimum, a thorough knowledge of (at least) German intellectual history will be a prerequisite for coming to terms with this book in the comprehensive fashion it deserves. Although numerous sections will contribute to the cursory reader's understanding of Benjamin's relation to language (and its implications), the full use value of the book can only be unlocked by an advanced audience. Whether or not the application of the "-abilities" will actually be productive in all cases remains to be seen. It cannot be denied, however, that it is worth a try.

Note

[1]. Kant's difficult, if not "tortuous" (p. 16) style of writing, for example, is valued by Benjamin, Weber states, precisely because it demands that the reader struggle with a text.

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