

An observation of the information revolution  
through Walter Benjamin's critical concepts of progress

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Prof. Riaz Khan as part of the Master's coursework of New York University  
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Where is the Life we have lost in living?  
 Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?  
 Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?  
 The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries  
 Bring us farther from god and nearer to the dust.

(T.S. Eliot, *The Rock*, 1934)

## Introduction

In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Walter Benjamin uses a vivid metaphor to capture his disavowal of an uncritical understanding of progress.

A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something... This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage... the storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (1968:thesis X)

The allegorical angel of history looks at nothing but the ruins of the past, whilst being blown backwards into the future by the storm of progress. The concept of progress is an important one for Benjamin; the idea of linear progress is at the heart of Benjamin's perception of historical materialism and his notion that the future holds salvation, and the past offers redemption. For Benjamin, historical progress cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a 'homogenous, empty time'. "A critique of the concept of such a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself" (1968: Thesis XIII).

I believe that many of Benjamin's critiques of progress are exacerbated in today's context of the information revolution. In our time inasmuch as progress operates within an ever-accelerating social and technological transformation—not only cannot progress be distinguished from its progression through a homogenous empty time, but also, progress cannot be sundered from technological change. How can we address questions regarding technological progress within a social system of predominant ideas and values—that are themselves subject to constant flux? In what follows, I draw upon Benjamin's critical concepts and apply them to the contemporary technologies and their potential and actual effects on our information driven society. I will discuss the advent of the information revolution and offer a critique of its hollow concept of progress that presupposes a linear process of progression of mankind through homogenous empty time. To do so I identify two of the digital revolution's dominant aspects: the

compression of space and time and the inequality in dispersal of information technologies. I will use Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* as a basis, and review texts in Anthropology, Economics, History, Popular and Cyber culture, to emphasize how Benjamin's critique of modern progression is relevant today more than ever.

## The Advent of the Digital Revolution

Computer and information technology are all around us, and have transformed our lives – in the realms of business, entertainment, scientific research, medicine, education, art, etc.– computers and telecommunication technologies are part and parcel of everyday practices. The nature of the changes, which promotes the proliferation of computerized telecommunication systems, global information flow, and the profound role of the Internet, gives the information revolution its digital flavor. Simply speaking, mankind is now witnessing its third dramatic revolution (counting only the Neolithic and the Industrial revolutions). As Manuel Castells puts it: we are living in a time interval that is characterized by “changes in our ‘material culture’ by the works of a new technological paradigm organized around information technologies” (1996). Like former revolutions the information revolution has had in the recent past, and will have in the near future, profound implications on the ways we understand and utilize space and time, the basic categories of human existence, which meanings we rarely debate (Harvey1990)<sup>1</sup>.

How do these implications on concepts of time and space propagate? When exploring the motivations behind the dispersal of the new technologies we find that in many cases an information society is valorized and promoted virtually as a social vision—a desirable way of life in its own right (Dutton et al. 1989). Consider for instance the following advertisement (The Village Voice, April 2002):

“Evolution mandates that there are times when a species must adapt. Like now ... Ever since the dawn of mankind, people have used the hand for communicating. Now however, with the arrival of *mLife*, and the growing popularity of text messaging from AT&T wireless, it looks as though the thumb is taking over.”

The copywriters of AT&T surf the revolution waves so audaciously as to offer the lay people an alternative existence, which transcends their normal beings: not just boring text messaging (which

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<sup>1</sup> Harvey's detailed report on the aesthetic implications of these shifts, in his seminal essay *The Postmodern Condition*, is diametrically connected to our matter, but is beyond the scope of this essay.

would greatly increase the enterprise's revenues from each user, a main reason for the dispersal of new technologies in its own right) but – mLife - a whole new evolutionary stage (the age of *homo-mobiles?*). This little ad conceals two main themes of the digital revolution that I want to highlight – inequality in the dispersal of digital technology and time & space contraction. Suffice it to note now the division between those who have and those who have-not (the ad strictly tries to convince people to join the mLifers), and the spatial contraction (the thumb taking over the hand). This rhetoric is not new—remember the older Yellow Pages slogan: “let your fingers do the walking”—but it depicts the new way of living as something desirable in its own right. Compare this promotion with Eliot's older cry for our lost lives (“Where is the life we have lost in information?”), to get a sense of the tensions that the revolution brings about. More in what follows.

The wired world is a very young child of human history. By recent estimates, our planet is over four billion years old and the first human beings walked the Earth already three hundred millennia ago. Yet, most technology has been invented and evolved over the past five hundred years and computer technology in particular only over the past fifty years or so (Leer 1996). The acceleration in the pace of information technologies' development is evident. Gutenberg printed the first publication in 1442. It took four hundred years for Morse to send the first telegraph message in 1844, but as little as 60 years later, by the mid 1920's radio was a reality, and soon thereafter public television broadcasting became ubiquitous. Computer research was accelerated after World War II, and helped create the Arpanet, which served as the foundation of the Internet, which was launched in the 1980's and only a decade later commoditized during the mid 1990's. Should one mark these milestones on a graph, an exponential pace of developments would clearly emerge. In other words, if we scale down human evolution to a timeline, and mark on it important signifiers of progress (i.e. use of tools, domestication of animals, invention of writing, the steam engine, the advent of Print, the Internet, etc.) we would clearly see many more markers towards the end of the time-line—an ever increasing pace of changes—that depicts the built in compression of time in our era. Benjamin clearly notes this contraction; he writes:

“...the paltry fifty millennia of homo sapiens constitute something like two seconds at the close of a twenty-four-hour day. On this scale, the history of civilized mankind would fill one-fifth of the last second of the last hour.’ The present, which, as a model of Messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in an enormous abridgment, coincides exactly with the stature which the history of mankind has in the universe” (1968: Thesis XVIII)

We will return to the social implications of Benjamin's analyses later, but first let us jot down more aspects of time-space contraction. The impact of advances in information technology, communications and media can be summed up in one sentence: Quite literally, the world has shrunk (Leer 1996). The application of communication networks and digital technologies has changed the constraints of time and space, shifted geographical and industrial borders, and reduced the importance of physical location. As Don Tapscott identified in his book *The Digital Economy: Promise And Peril In The Age Of Networked Intelligence* (1996), the loosening of time and space constraints (among other shifts) enabled a rise of a new economy, where three factors are paramount to our discussion. **Virtualization** is the process where physical things become virtual, changing the metabolism of the economy, the types of institutions and relationships possible, and the nature of economic activity itself. **Disintermediation** is the elimination of intermediaries in economic activities including agents, brokers, wholesalers, retailers, broadcasters, record companies, and anything that stands between producers and consumers. **Immediacy** is the time scale of the new economy. The new economy is a real-time economy. Commerce becomes electronic as business transactions and communications occur at the speed of light rather than that of the post office. I find a virulent example of these three themes when looking at the rhetoric of the internet. Compare the naming of electronic mail to that of standard mail. The advent of e-mail and the proliferation of courier services, clearly demonstrates the virtualization, disintermediation and immediacy typical of the new economy. The new economy's contrast with the old one facilitated the coining of new tropes to describe the former. The traditional mail services are now infamously known as 'snail-mail' services: what was so recently a sign of progress becomes a sign of backwardness. Another interesting example is found in the Internet's naming realm: the brevity of the trope 'dot.com' describing the new internet companies coined after the popular domain name suffix of the corporations' web sites. This trope, which is nowadays used in economic jargon to belittle a certain type of companies, encapsulates in a powerful manner the business logic of these companies' formation: the hope for a singular blitz profit. Save for a few cases (e.g. amazon.com and ebay.com), the delusional profits never materialized: in a reverse big-bang all that remains from the entrepreneurs' world-changing dreams and the investors' evaporated capital is the small dot in 'dot.com'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> As a very mad investor told me during looking at the last stages of operations of a software start-up company: "I gave them two million dollars. They gave me only a name"

Another aspect of the space time compression is identified by Kearny and Giddens. In his anthropological report *Anthropology of Globalization and Transnationalism*, Kearny finds globalization to be fraught with the movement of information, symbols, capital, and commodities in global and transnational spaces. The last three decades ushered significant increases in the volume and velocity of such flows (1995). As Giddens's articulates in the *Consequences of Modernity*, we are dealing with the contraction of space and time that manifests itself as the intensification of world-wide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa, and local events precipitate to have global effects in real-time (Giddens 1990). An example of such contraction can be found in the global media, examples of which include CNN and MTV—among other global television networks—the programming of which is directed at and consumed by what might be called *horizontal* audiences, rather than *vertical* ones, denying the standard boundaries, and again, shrinking the world.

### **Progress and the Digital Divide**

Compression and contraction are often associated with homogeneity—many becoming one, vast becomes small, etc.—but for the information revolution hegemony rather than homogeneity is the case. Similar to its antecedent revolutions, the information revolution sweeps society with uneven vigor. The discrepancy in the distribution of digital technologies among different populations ('the digital divide') remains: certain nations, communities, and populations such as low income, minority, low achieving, rural, and non English speaking cannot cross the abyss, and are left behind (Falling Through the Net 2000, Hoffman et al. 1999, Bridging the Digital Divide 2001). Despite the incredible technological advances of the past decades, and the profound implications that the digital revolution has had on the Western hegemonic world, it has yet to touch the lives of most people in most parts of the world. Even where new technologies are available, for large populations they have had only minimal impact on the great social needs of our times: reducing poverty, enhancing health care, improving education, etc, but worse yet, in many cases instead of supporting community development the introduction of new technologies only lowers the glass ceiling above the heads of the digital-illiterates, which find themselves even less equipped with the knowledge and tool to participate in the global economy.

The usual meaning of 'the digital divide' is too often reduced to inequality in access to the Internet. Access alone does not solve the problem, but it is a prerequisite for overcoming inequality in a society whose dominant functions and social groups are increasingly organized

around information technology (Castells 2001). “The Internet is not just a technology; it is the technological tool and organizational form that distributes information power, knowledge generation, and networking capacity in all realms of activity” (Ibid). Thus, developing countries and populations are stopped at the gates, being disconnected or superficially connected to the Internet which is tantamount to marginalization in the global, networked system.<sup>3</sup> The form of globalization now being experienced and the conditioning of this experience by the particular digital forms of information technology imply that the contemporary patterns of globalization need to be understood in those same technological terms (James 1999). The benefits of globalization accrue to developed rather than developing countries. “The former will tend to benefit to a greater degree than the latter from the mechanisms through which information technology influences the pattern of globalization” (Ibid). In other words, the chances of the developing populations to cross the chasm, is getting smaller and smaller.

After introducing the digital revolution, the changes it induced on our concepts of space and time, the implications and the divides that ensue, let us proceed and try to better understand Benjamin’s critique of progress.

### **Benjamin’s Critical Analyses Of Progress**

In his essay *Time and History*, Siegfried Kracauer (1966) notes that for Benjamin, the idea of a ‘progress of humanity’ is untenable mainly because it is insolubly bound up with the idea of chronological time as the matrix of a meaningful process. Kracauer suggests that in referring to history, one should speak about the ‘march of times’, rather than about the “March of time” as he explains:

“...we may vividly recall certain events of our past without being able to date them. Perhaps the memory for qualities develops in inverse ratio to the chronological memory: the better equipped a person is to resuscitate the essential features of encounters that played a role in his life, the more easily will he misjudge their temporal distances from the present or play havoc with their chronological order. These errors must be laid to the difficulty for him to transfer his memories from their established places on his subjective time curve to their objective positions in chronological time—a time he never experienced. Nobody really experiences it. This once more highlights its formal character, its emptiness...” (1966)

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<sup>3</sup> See also Digital Divide Organization Homepage 2002 and the Digital Nations Prospectus 2002

According to Benjamin, Social Democratic theory, and even more its practice, has been formed by a conception of progress “which did not adhere to reality but made dogmatic claims” (1968: Thesis XIII). Progress as pictured in the minds of Social Democrats was:

- 1) the progress of mankind itself (and not just advances in men’s ability and knowledge).
- 2) something boundless, in keeping with the infinite perfectibility of mankind.
- 3) regarded as irresistible, something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course.

While it is arguable that Benjamin discounted both Marxist and non-Marxist historians for sharing a historicist conviction that history moved continuously and progressively along a chronological grid—where, he observed, a blank serial occurrences working to displace the present to an indeterminate past<sup>4</sup>—scholars are divided on the matter of adjudicating Benjamin’s critique of Historical Materialism. Historical materialism, Ronald Beinder (1984) notices, had always defined itself in terms of revolutionary expectations for the future. “Benjamin strictly reverses this perspective: historical materialism is to be defined by a certain relation to history, namely, a redemptive relation: Historical materialists are aware that each generation, including the present, is ‘endowed with a weak Messianic power’” (Ibid:425). “Historicism on the other hand portrays the past as something eternal, ‘Once upon a time is a whore in historicism’s bordello (Thesis XVI). Historicism presupposes a homogeneous, empty time, “which it attempts to fill with a mass of data” (Thesis XVII).” (Ibid: 427) The historicist “tells the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary”. But the historical materialist is different, Beinder tells us he “sees history as living and throbbing with revolutionary possibilities.... Where the historicist sees an inert ‘chain of events,’ the historical materialist sees a broken vessel in need of repair, a ruined past in need of salvation, a forsaken ancestor in need of awakening (thesis IX).” (Ibid)

Along the same lines, Rebecca Comay (1999), in her discussion of fetishism and dialectic aspects of Benjamin’s writing finds that “Benjamin raises the specter of an irreducible contamination between the messianic rupture and the oppressive viscosity in which it intervenes... [The observation points to] an essential link between the temporal structures of historical and technological transmission a link that becomes most blindingly visible in the modern age.” The essential link Comay identifies between the temporal structures of historical and technological transmission is evident in the digital revolution. Let us understand how.

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<sup>4</sup> See Harootunian 2001

## A Critique of Digital Progress

In our time, we find traces of the two different approaches to History (and the resistance they provoke) in the discourse surrounding the digital information revolution. In “Welcome to Cyberia: Notes on the Anthropology of Cyberculture” Escobar (1994) investigates the relationship between ‘information’ and ‘capital’. Escobar wonders whether it is appropriate to postulate the existence of a ‘mode of information’ akin to a mode of production, stretching concepts of historical materialism into novel realms, and explores the theorization of the articulation between information, markets, and cultural orders. Seeing a process, rather than fragments, Escobar notes that the ‘shift’ to new information technologies marked the appearance of more flexible, decentralized labor processes traditionally stratified by gender, ethnicity, class, and geographic factors. The magnitude of the information revolution in the last decade turned the shift Escobar identifies into a rupture, a rupture which seams are the banks of the digital divide. In her recent elaborate research of the digital divide, the political scientist Pippa Norris (2001) finds that the role of technology fuels the debate among three groups: optimists that are envisaging the positive role of the internet for transforming poverty in developing societies, skeptics who believe that the new technologies alone will make little difference one way or another, and pessimists who emphasize that digital technologies will further exacerbate the existing divide. Looking into Norris’ further evidence we comprehend that the ‘optimists’ conceptualize ‘progress’ today like the Social Democrats—vis-à-vis Benjamin—perceived it at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Both groups perceive progress as the progress of mankind itself (i.e. the flourishing, romantic trope “the global village”), and as a boundless phenomenon that is both irresistible and linear (i.e. “the information super-highway”)<sup>5</sup>. The ‘skeptics’ and the ‘pessimists’, unlike the ‘optimists’, fear the new technology and its tendency to change labor relations within society. In *Patriarchy and accumulation on a World Scale*, Maria Mies explores the role of gender in the international division of labor. As Mies observes, women’s positioning in within the labor structure is obviously affected by the information revolution’s destructive powers:

From the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, the introduction of computers into many production processes, and later into communication and administration, resulted in a deep crisis in the areas of work. Not only were millions of jobs destroyed by the introduction of these labour-saving technologies, it also became clear that there would no longer be any substitute for

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<sup>5</sup> J. Macgregor Wise in his book *Exploring Technology and Social Space* (1997) shows how Vice President Al Gore played a dominant role in the development of these tropes, and this ideology.

these jobs in the future, and that full employment...was becoming obsolete and even more disquieting, these new technologies began to undermine the very definition of work in the industrialized countries. Machines were now actually making human labour redundant, not just for a while but for good, it seemed.

Compare Meis's dismay to Benjamin's observation about the illusions that technological innovation brings about. It seems as if Benjamin has anticipated what Meis finds in practice.

Nothing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving, with the current. It regarded technological developments as the fall of the stream with which it thought it was moving. From there it was but a step to the illusion that the factory work which was supposed to tend toward technological progress constituted a political achievement. (1968: Thesis XI)

## **Conclusion**

Spatial and temporal contraction on one hand and unequal dispersion of digital technologies on the other hand are leitmotifs of the information revolution that appear once and again when we closely observe the novel technologies. As I have argued, these facets of the contemporary revolution are clear examples of what Harvey identifies as "changes in our conceptual apparatus... [that] have material consequences for the ordering of daily life." (1990). Indeed the debut of the information revolution brought about grave effects on the ordering of daily life but—contrary to what digital evangelists have anticipated—the progress that we have witnessed was not a progression of mankind as a result of a digital melting pot effect, but rather, a tendency to create new inequalities while exacerbating old ones. In reality, the information revolution induced multiple gaps between those with and those without computers and communications, and the digital divide has developed into a series of rifts that create new disparities instead of eradicating former ones.

Benjamin deconstructed the concept of progress and elucidated his critique of it. In Benjamin's time as well as in ours, progress brings about friction and resistance, but sometimes these are too little too late. As I have shown, the friction is well manifested by the themes we have observed. Eliot's questions: "Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?" (Eliot 1952) originally pondering the logic of the socio-economic changes at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have no clear answer a century later, but we can hope that adopting Benjamin's critical methods we can at least monitor the information revolution with a judicious eye and, like Benjamin insisted, reject simplistic models of progress.

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