Contemporary Political Theory
https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-024-00692-2

REVIEW

Walter Benjamin and the idea of natural history

Eli Friedlander Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2024, 350 pp., ISBN: 9781503636552

Michael Villanova[1]

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Limited 2024

Eli Friedlander's new book takes up the difficult task of systematizing the thought of Walter Benjamin. This task is difficult for three reasons. First, as Friedlander makes clear, there is a sizable amount of Benjaminalia that reads Benjamin as an eclectic thinker, a critic interested in niche literary and philosophical debates defying easy systemization. Second, the oeuvre of Benjamin—sprawling across essays, travelogs, memoirs, notes, and unfinished works—might, at first glance, resist the scholar's wish to read his work as following a distinct thread. Third, there is the insistence that not only is Benjamin an anti-systematic thinker, but that his critical insights needed to understand modern life are derived from his anti-systematic tendency.

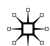
Friedlander frames Benjamin's diffuse writings within the question of 'nature' and relates Benjamin's insights on nature to philosophy's core areas of inquiry. Friedlander thus attempts a 'speculative reconstruction of what can at most be called a "Benjaminian" philosophy, which, in fact, was never elaborated in that way in the corpus of his writings' (p. 9). Whereas Benjamin has been continually (re)interpreted for specific disciplinary interests, Friedlander suggests that his book departs from this approach by 'show[ing] the continuity, rigor, and inner logic of Benjamin's thought on this fundamental theme' (p. 2). He writes, 'isolating an aspect of Benjamin's thought allows me not only to bring out the tenacity of his questioning but also to devote attention to many details without losing the unifying momentum' (p. 3). Friedlander's method of close reading brings the idea of nature to the fore of Benjamin's writings, while attempting a new course in thinking through Benjamin's works; by reading Benjamin as a thinker concerned with something as central a philosophical concept as 'nature,' Benjamin, according to Friedlander, can be understood as a serious philosopher.

The book goes through various popular and ignored works of Benjamin's corpus in a slow and methodical manner, drawing out a distinctly Benjaminian definition (and often relying on Friedlander's translation of key passages) of standard

✉ Michael Villanova
mvillanova@gradcenter.cuny.edu

[1] Graduate Center, City University of New York, New York, NY 10016, USA

Published online: 17 March 2024



philosophical terms. In doing so, Friedlander puts Benjamin in direct conversation with speculative philosophers and German idealists. In some inevitable sense, what we also get in this work is Friedlander's Benjaminian philosophy, one that attempts to philosophize through Benjamin and not merely referencing Benjamin as a crutch to make a larger point. In adopting this method, Friedlander often adds insight to how Benjamin's philosophy both picks up and departs from prior philosophical traditions with clarity.

Friedlander's method of systemization is on display in his reading of Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence.' Across three chapters in Part II, he starts with fundamental ideas around character, fate, and innocence in Benjamin's works, to understand how these ideas connect his readings of literature to political concepts, such as mythic and divine violence. In the preceding chapter, Friedlander combs through Benjamin essay 'Fate and Character,' clarifying its content and making unique connections between Benjamin's writings on individual history with that of the collective and political nature of violence. A fated person, Friedlander writes, is one without character that lives in anxious ambiguity (say, left to the judgment of the law), while a person of character is uncritically viewed as being stable, and knowing oneself throughout time (pp. 90–91). The pay off in this method is to show how—without leaving Benjamin's texts and armed only with philosophical inquiry—one can reach insights into the concept of violence because of Benjamin's rich and varied sources for his vocabulary. Friedlander shows how by drawing out these underlying, steady definitions, new terrain can be clarified for Benjamin's political philosophy.

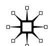
In his chapter 'Myth, Law, and Life in Common,' careful attention is paid to the ways that Benjamin's ideas of fate and the individual are not parallel to areas of contention such as 'legal violence' but key to reading how Benjamin understands the relationship between fate and the law (p. 119). A striking moment comes in Friedlander's ability to tie together Benjamin's concept of mythic violence with the notion of the law's origin. Tying these concepts together allows Friedlander to bring to the fore Benjamin's ability 'to diagnose the perverse character of legal institutions and the state through precisely the same question of the relation of the law to bare life' (p. 124). This brings out the salient political point about how the very origin of society or the social contract cannot be born of some natural pact but a relationship of coercion and force between people and society. This close reading of the origin of the law allows Friedlander to highlight the 'gap' between the notion of the law as an ideal and its pragmatic enforcement by the state that in turn seeks to determine and control every aspect of everyday life. In this reading, fate counterintuitively reappears as a contestable space, but a space that the law nonetheless seeks to determine in a conspicuous and yet diaphanous omnipresent feeling of 'power' that attempts to write the character and substance of collective existence (p. 130). Friedlander's method allows terms that have long piqued interest in Benjamin's political works to be read in concert with more literary terms to expound an engaging, clear, and original interpretation.

The central question of a 'natural history' in Benjamin's works is discussed throughout the book in sections about substance, God, identity, and the philosophy of history, among other ideas. In choosing this question, Friedlander philosophizes in Benjamin what Theodor Adorno spoke about in his 1932 lecture on the difference

between 'natural history' and 'natural-history.' The latter is the critical attempt to understand the way newness and recurrence both forms and deforms the collective nature of a given age, dissolving the functional notion of a fixed nature and the transhistorical concept of a phenomenological subject as the center of history (Adorno, 1932). Friedlander draws out similar ideas about 'natural-history.' This is stated most directly in his essay on fore- and after-history as the recognizable nexus, where one can reveal the 'polarization of tensions' that highlight the 'now' of present history and the materially and mythically determined past that is inherited as nature (pp. 194–195). The significance of this insight is not new for those already acquainted with the Frankfurt School, but new in its constellation among facets of Benjamin's thought; a new way of negotiating Benjamin's powerful vocabulary and thinking through Benjamin's place in the history of the philosophy of history.

While providing new readings of Benjamin, the idea of Benjamin as a thinker that intentionally resisted a coherent philosophy—thereby providing a language of theorization and method for producing insights to the fragmented and connected political crises of a particular age (see Jameson, 2020)—is not so much addressed in this book as to be outdone by the insights Friedlander plumbs from reading Benjamin systematically. What is missing is attention to Benjamin's method which allows for connections to be made that—at a purely conceptual level—are not supposed to happen. By focusing on systematicity, unaddressed are the ways in which Benjamin's ideas and writings are intentionally critical of conceptual thinking and where his method of thinking through fragments attempts to reposition the mind to new critical ways of seeing and knowing. What is flattened in the systematic Benjamin is the way that Benjamin's views and interests change over time, where his attention to fragments became essential for his thinking, and the way his writings were in conversation with and sculpted by his contemporaries across religious, political, and sociological backgrounds. However, a glimpse of this tendency, for example, is seen in the section on Benjamin's concept of history when Friedlander coins the provocative idea of Benjamin having a Goethean-Marxian view of history (p. 205)—on the one hand making interesting and new connections through Benjamin's works while also detailing Benjamin's avoidance to crafting a discrete system. Whether the systematic approach to reading Benjamin will take precedence over other more critical theorizations of Benjamin or provide insights that are most needed in the present juncture of various global crises remains to be seen.

Additionally, while providing new readings, in some areas the systematic approach repeats what has already been said about Benjamin. While the concluding chapters on *The Arcades Project* highlight the ways that Benjamin is concerned with philosophical concepts around nature and change, much of Friedlander's insights into the connection between culture, politics, and the ideological distortions of everyday life by capital have long been noted (see Buck-Morss, 1989, ch. 8). For example, while his discussion around the eternal newness of fashion and death in modernity and capitalism fits well with his larger argument about nature as a central concept for Benjamin, this connection is not unique due to the emphasis on nature in the philosopher's works. In some parts, Friedlander restates what has already been said about Benjamin in the vast secondary literature on the Frankfurt School in new ways. Yet, this is not to understate the value of this work which may allow us to



reread Benjamin with new clarity and exactness and which displays Friedlander's great attention to detail and rigorous scholarship.

References

Adorno, T. (1932). The idea of natural history. https://platypus1917.org/wp-content/uploads/readings/adorno_historynature.pdf.

Buck-Morss, S. (1989) *The dialectics of seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. MIT Press.

Jameson, F. (2020) *The Benjamin files*. Verso.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.