



A CARACTERÍSTICA DESTRUTIVA EM WALTER BENJAMIN

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RESUMO: Este artigo procura mostrar que, em Walter Benjamin, a destruição não ocorre por si mesma, ocorre pela criação de 'caminhos', portanto, aberturas, momentos de inauguração. No entanto, uma vez que essa reivindicação é feita, o que deve ser retomado é o 'momento' (Augenblick) da destruição. Embora o projeto da epistemologia possa ter sido distanciado, uma vez que o 'momento' não 'sabe', o que não está distanciado é o que pode ser descrito como a questão do julgamento. Destruição como caminho é um motivo que ocorre ao longo do texto. A atividade do caráter destrutivo é ainda descrita como 'construção de espaço' (Räumen) (BENJAMIN, SW 1.541 / GS.IV.1.397). Recordamos aqui a centralidade do que já foi identificado como o elo entre destruição, liberação e criação de espaços. Combinação de caminhos e criação de espaço.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Walter Benjamin; Filosofia; História

WALTER BENJAMIN'S DESTRUCTIVE CHARACTER

ABSTRACT: This article seeks to show that, in Walter Benjamin, the destruction does not occur for its own sake, it occurs for the creation of 'ways' thus openings, moments of inauguration. However, once this claim is made, what has to be taken up is the 'moment' (Augenblick) of destruction. While the project of epistemology may have been distanced, since the 'moment' does not 'know', what is not distanced is what might be described as the question of judgment. Destruction as way-making is a motif that occurs throughout the text. The activity of the destructive character is further described as 'space making' (Räumen) (BENJAMIN, SW 1.541/ GS.IV.1.397). Recalled here is the centrality of what has already been identified as the link between destruction, release and the creation of spaces. Way-making and space creation combine.

KEYWORDS: Walter Benjamin; Philosophy; History

To what or to whom does the name *The Destructive Character* refer?¹ The name names, of course, a text initially published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in

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November 1931.² Questions remain. Is there a character who is destructive? A character that might in certain circumstances be able to be named? Or, is ‘character’, now as a concept, the concept that is first deployed and then refined in Benjamin’s 1921 publication *Fate and Character*, already destructive? While the term ‘destruction’ has an important role within the history of philosophy, one that continues to link destruction to the creation of openings and possibilities, thus destruction as a form of inauguration, here emphasis will be given to Benjamin’s specific attempt to connect destruction to a project that in becoming political allows the ethical to be repositioned. Prior to turning to the detail of Benjamin’s text *The Destructive Character*, it is essential to begin with the engagement with the concept of ‘character’ that occurs the earlier publication *Fate and Character*. To the extent that the political is at work, and the ethical finds a different configuration, what then is also in play is a specific thinking of human being. Hence terms such as, ‘fate’, ‘guilt’ and thus the ‘guilt context’ and ‘fortune’ and therefore ‘the fortunate man’, are all central to understanding the philosophical anthropology that is integral to Benjamin’s own thinking.³ Part of the overall project here is to identify elements that might then be abstracted from that anthropology. If there is a general presupposition, then it concerns the necessary interarticulation of political theology and philosophical anthropology.

The density of the text *Fate and Character* is clear. Its initial prompt is to free the terms ‘fate’ and ‘character’ from the already determined set of associations in which they had been located. The terms ‘fate’ and ‘character’ had been taken to name a connection to the ‘ethical’ in the case of ‘character’, and the ‘religious’ in the case of

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² All references to Walter Benjamin are to the Selected Works (SW) and then the **Gesammelte Schriften (GS)**. Here SW 2. 541-2/GS.IV.1. 396-8.

³ The term *philosophical anthropology* while currently associated with work by Helmuth Plessner and Hans Blumenberg, amongst others, has a different orientation in this context. On the one hand it draws on work that is concerned with the constitution of subjectivity understood as both philosophical and historical. This is the process of subjectivization. Most philosophical positions have an implicit conception of subjectivization within them. There is equally a significant historical dimension linked to these processes. On the other hand, there is the assumption that concomitant with such processes there is that which is proper to the being of being human. The latter is addressed in this context in terms of ‘place’ and ‘justice’. While subjectivization is always conditioned, the ‘proper’ has an inherently unconditioned quality. The term *philosophical anthropology* as it is used here concerns how the relation between the conditioned and the unconditioned is configured. Here it pertains specifically to the occurrence of that configuration in the work of Walter Benjamin.

‘fate’. Moreover, these earlier definitions had an assumed complementarity or at least proximity between them. For Benjamin, neither of these identifications holds, nor moreover does any posited proximity. Their separation begins as a result of the role of ‘fortune’ (*Glück*) in how they are thought. While what Benjamin intends by formulations involving references to *Glück* is not straightforward, what matters here is that *Glück* is not the result of fate. Indeed, the contrary is the case. There another logic at work.

Fortune (*Das Glück*) is ... what releases (*herauslöst*) the fortunate man (*den Glücklichen*) from the embroilment of the Fates and from the net of his own fate. (BENJAMIN, SW 1.203/GS.II.1. 176)

‘Fortune’ (*Das Glück*) stands opposed to fate. Being released from the hold of fate – from the determinations of the already given, determinations which are themselves the already present articulation of relations of power - repositions human being within that setting. Consequently, it brings another thinking of human being into play. It has to be underscored that what is occurring here is a mode of release or separation. Benjamin’s language is precise. Within it there is a clear intimation of destruction. Destruction is there as a release and thus as an opening. ‘Fortune’, as it appears in this context, breaks the hold of fate; the recovery and production of the ‘fortunate man’ is its after-effect. Being human is reconfigured in the precise sense that another potentiality for human being is then actualized; a potentiality that was always already there. ‘Release’ has a double quality. There is a form of destruction that is equally the actualization of a potentiality. Furthermore, from within the setting created by Benjamin’s text, fate is repositioned in relation to the ‘law’. Benjamin’s invocation of the law necessitates that a distinction be drawn between justice and law. Law, in the Greek sense of *nomos*, can be understood firstly as a set of already present, thus historically specific legal statutes, though equally as normativity. Any appeal to the law will continue to oscillate between two specific forms of the conditioned, i.e. law and normativity. Both can be contrasted with justice as the unconditioned. It will be essential to return this distinction between law and justice.

The break of any substantive link between fate and religion, the detailed argument for which is advanced in *Fate and Character*, involves the move from an oscillation between sin and ‘innocence’ (*Unschuld*) to the interplay of law and ‘guilt’

(*Schuld*). Guilt names a subject position; to be guilty is to be before the law (the latter as conditioned presence). This is the philosophical anthropology proper to the fated. It names therefore a specific version of what can be called *being-before-the-law*; one in which the subject is constituted by its immediate relation to the law. Not only does guilt' identifies a subject position that subject held within a philosophical anthropology structured by a specific sense of the economic. To be guilty is to be continually indebted. Guilt and debt create their own subject. The economic proves decisive here. It is an economy of connection and simultaneity. Hence any *counter-measure* to this economy has to involve a sense of measure that has not already been set by the economy of guilt and debt. Thus, the *counter-measure* is both a release and opening in which the measure established by the law is suspended, and which creates a spacing for the actualization of other processes of subjectivization. In other words, there is the release of another potentiality for human being (a different position within a philosophical anthropology). A position that has already been described as the one held by, for example, 'the fortunate man'.

There are two passages in *Fate and Character* that are vital to understand the anthropological implications delimited by the insistent and effective presence of debt and guilt. The first addresses guilt directly. The second addresses fate. Each one needs to be taken in turn.

The guilt context (*Der Schuldzusammenhang*) is temporal in a totally inauthentic way (*ist ganz uneigentlich zeitlich*), very different in its kind and measure from the time (*Zeit*) of redemption, or music or of truth. The complete elucidation of these matters depends on determining the particular nature of time (*Zeit*) in fate. (BENJAMIN, SW 1.204/GS.II.1. 174)

Benjamin describes the time proper to 'the guilt context', which is a specific configuration of human being, as 'inauthentic'. Inauthentic temporality here is the naturalization of historical time and thus the equation of historical time not just with chronology nor simply with latter's inexorability, but equally with the processes of subjectivization it entails. The significant point is twofold. Firstly, there is the creation of subject marked by its non-correspondence to what it is potentially, though secondly, that non-correspondence is effaced by the work of an economy of guilt and debt in which all elements are connected. An economic of connectivity covers and effaces the power inherent in the recognition of this founding *non-correspondence*. Hence, the

importance of the language of release. A setting captured firstly by the identification of inauthentic time as implicated in the creation of the subject, this temporality would then define this subject's inauthenticity, and then secondly, in the related possibility that fate need not be all determining. Inauthentic temporality is a form of time that assumes the impossibility of interruption and thus projects itself as one from which subjects cannot be released. There is a posited inevitability. Being fated therefore is inauthentic. It is defined by the continual interplay of guilt and indebtedness. The temporality is inauthentic because there is another possibility for time. In addition, the subject position created by that temporality might also be described as inauthentic. It is inauthentic precisely because the naturalization of this interplay of time and human being masks other possibilities. When Benjamin wrote, famously, of the Baroque in his *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* that '*Es gibt keine barocke Eschatologie*', he was already describing a structure of indebtedness and guilt that did not, within the Baroque context, allow a way out to be thought (BENJAMIN, GSI.1.246). Later in 'Capitalism as Religion' a similar structure of inauthentic temporality is identified. It defines both capitalism and religion (BENJAMIN, SW 1.288-291). Neither allows for its own suspension. Therefore, time must refuse the possibility of any type of interruption. Interruption would be, of course, both a form of destruction and equally a form of release. Destruction would free time from its naturalization whilst simultaneously allowing for the creation of another subject position. Again, there is an interplay of time and subjectivization. From within the setting created by 'Capitalism as Religion', the construction of the baroque subject and the formulation of both the temporality and the subject of fate – in sum fated being – there is the continual construction and reconstruction of an indebted and guilty subject. The question to be addressed concerns the response to this structure of time and authenticity; i.e. the response to fated being.

This is the point at which the concept of 'character' becomes decisive. Benjamin's formulation is straightforward. He wrote,

While fate brings to light the immense complexity of the guilty person (*der verschuldeten Person*), the complications and bonds of his guilt, character gives the mystical enslavement of the person to the guilt context, the answer of genius.(BENJAMIN, SW 1.205/GS.II.1. 175)

The formulation – 'the guilty person' (*der verschuldeten Person*) – is a position within a philosophical anthropology inscribed within an inauthentic temporality. What

matters therefore is what counts as a *counter-measure* to this setting. In the passage noted above ‘genius’ names the act of disruption. It is the same ‘genius’ that appeared earlier in the text identified with the sense of agency that displaces and thus moves trapped historical subjectivity beyond ‘the mist of guilt’. As the passage make clear, ‘genius’ has to be thought in relation to ‘character’(BENJAMIN, SW 1.202/GS.II.1). It can be argued therefore that character has a distinct role. It is not merely a character, or character identified with a singular already determined position. Rather, character stands against the already present determinations of fate and the specific conception of *being-before-the-law* those determinations demand. As the concept of character develops what will emerge is a radically different configuration of *being-before-the-law*.

The working supposition is clear. There is an important reciprocity between destruction and the concept of ‘character’. The concept has to be understood both in terms of the implicit philosophical anthropology that it enjoins, and the identification of the locus of destruction. References to ‘destruction’ occur in what is explicit in Benjamin’s thinking, which here is the continual creation of openings – spacings - and thus a more generalized thinking of inauguration as premised on destruction. Equally, such references also obtain in what is implicit, namely that these inaugurations and openings are the actualization of another potentiality for human being.

Benjamin’s *The Destructive Character* has particular point of entry. The ‘destructive character’ already figures in life’s continuity. Benjamin argues that were the recognition of that presence something over which one had ‘stumbled’, or if it came by ‘chance’, or if the recognition were delivered by a heavy ‘shock’, then, as the text makes clear, greater would be the possibility of ‘representing the destructive character’ (*Darstellung des destruktiven Charakters*) (BENJAMIN,SW 2.542/GS.IV.1.398). In other words, the possibility of presenting this quality is itself the result of that which is not organized by the economy that it addresses. It is organized in relation to that which is actual, but which is not determined by that actuality. A different economy prevails. Not only is there a concomitant relation of indetermination; such a relation is already the creation of a constitutive spacing. (This spacing will reappear.)

There are a number of attributes of the ‘destructive character’ that are fundamental. Once stated it will be necessary to plot they ways they cohere. Their coherence is sanctioned by a formulation that occurs towards the end of the text. Benjamin wrote,

No moment can know (*Kein Augenblick kann wissen*) what the next will bring. What exists he reduces to rubble – not for the sake of rubble, but for that of the ways leading through it. (BENJAMIN, SW 1.541/ GS.IV.1.396)

Destruction does not occur for its own sake, it occurs for the creation of ‘ways’ thus openings, moments of inauguration. However, once this claim is made, what has to be taken up is the ‘moment’ (*Augenblick*) of destruction. While it may be ‘way’ creating, what of the ‘moment’ itself? Again, the text is clear: ‘No moment can know what the next will bring’. While the project of epistemology – specifically here that sense of the epistemological that is occurs in relation to an already determined image – may have been distanced, since the ‘moment’ does not ‘know’, what is not distanced is what might be described as the question of judgment. Destruction as *way-making* is a motif that occurs throughout the text. Central to the description of the destructive character is the project of ‘room making’ (*Platz schaffen*). The activity of the destructive character is further described as ‘space making’ (*Räumen*) (BENJAMIN, SW 1.541/ GS.IV.1.397). Recalled here is the centrality of what has already been identified as the link between destruction, release and the creation of spaces. *Way-making* and space creation combine.

There are two further aspects of the ‘destructive character’ to be addressed prior to taking up the question of how the it is to be understood. The first is the description of the ‘destructive character’ as ‘young and cheerful’. Such a description is not the fetishization of youth. Rather, the claim recalls the position advanced in *Towards a Critique of Violence* that education can subvert the operative presence of ‘mythic violence’ by circumventing strategies and modes of thinking dictated by instrumentality (BENJAMIN, SW 1.238/ GS.II.1.181). Equally, ‘young and cheerful’ is already a thinking of the future. It is not the future as a utopian projection. It is an identification of a future that is to be made without the already determined, thus known, presence of the image to come. The second is the description of the ‘destructive character’ as that which ‘forestalls’ (*zuvorkommen*) the ‘tempo’ of nature. Already written into nature is a logic of destruction and renewal. However, that logic allows for a mode of repetition that refuses any type of intervention. The ‘destructive character’ stands against processes of naturalisation. And yet, destruction is not nihilism. A point that is clear from destruction’s relation to the tradition. The claim made elsewhere in the

text that the ‘destructive character stands in the front line of traditionalists’ means that even if there were the ‘passing down of things’ (*überliefern die Dinge*), this is a mode of repetition that is creative. Hence the tradition acquires life. Living on rather than dying; the latter is the result of a repetition whose only justification is its own necessity. (A necessity which is the logic of both capital and religion.

The key moment in the text however is the following description of this ‘character’: ‘The destructive character sees no image hovering before him.’ (*Dem destruktiven Charakter schwebt kein Bild vor*)(BENJAMIN, SW 1.542/GS. GS.IV.1.397). Remembering that destruction stands against both fate and the subject as located within an immediate relation to the law. Once these determinations are taken into consideration, one possible identification of ‘the destructive character’ is Moses; specifically, the Moses of *Exodus XXXII*.

Moses destroyed the Gold Calf. In destroying the symbol, thus the image, he destroyed that to which any response had to be immediate. Equally he destroyed the law’s first presentation. At *Exodus XXXIV.1*, and on God’s instruction, Moses ‘hews’ another set of tablets. The text continues by staging the relation between the first set of tablets and the now new locus of inscription. There is an ensuing form of repetition: ‘I will write on the tablets the words that were (*hay*) on the first tablets.’ If there is a form of ambiguity that is introduced because the text uses the formulation ‘were’, it is compounded by both the impossibility of the symbol and the immediacy response, and the already enacted iconoclastic moment. Prior to that moment it was possible that a relation of immediacy might have prevailed. However, the flow of the text, its own set of possibilities, has moved against it. The possibility of a relation of pure immediacy – the set of relations and the effects envisioned by the Calf – has already come undone. It is not just that repetition threatens immediacy, more emphatically, the destruction of the symbol and the tablets means that the latter’s recreation cannot be thought in terms of its location within a structure of immediacy. That possibility no longer obtains. As such there has to be another relation to the law; a different space has been ope

There is still *being-before-the-law*. However, destruction – the iconoclasm that is necessarily coterminous with the founding of the law – locates the law within a setting of original mediacy. Responding to the law necessitates the clearing that destruction yields. Holding that space open positions human being as originally placed

before the law. *Being-in-place*, a setting demanded by *being-before-the-law* has to have unconditioned force. Place has to be thought therefore as integral to the law's unconditioned possibility. 'Space making' (*Räumen*) is the destructive character's recovery of *being-in-place* as an original condition. Equally, the law has to secure being, the *being-before-the-law* as itself an unconditioned necessity. The latter is the identification of the ethical within the being of being human; thus, the already present status of the ethical within a philosophical anthropology. What emerges is the continuity of the conditioned within the unconditioned. Their presence needs to be understood as reiteration of the non-correspondence between human being as positioned within an already determined disequilibrium within relations of power and the potentiality for a mode of being defined by the unconditioned. Indeed, it is doubled sense of non-correspondence that allows for judgement. The affirmation of judgment's possibility, one afforded by destruction, comprises the *counter-measure* to the economy of guilt and debt. If the latter becomes, in the end, the economy of death since it stems the hold of life within the reiteration of the given – the reiteration of fated being – then 'the destructive character' truly stands 'at the crossroad' (*am Kreuzweg*) pointing in the direction of life's other possibility; the other 'way' of the political.⁴

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⁴ What is opened here is the possibility of what James Martel refers to as a 'non-idolatrous politics'. While the argument is different, this is the direction in which a politics ground in mediacy's necessity would then have to move. See Martel. 2012.

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