

12-1-2016

The Constellation of Social Ontology: Walter Benjamin, Eduard Fuchs, and the Body of History

Kevin S. Amidon

Iowa State University, ksamidon@iastate.edu

Daniel A. Krier

Iowa State University, krier@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/language_pubs

 Part of the [Models and Methods Commons](#), [Political History Commons](#), and the [Political Theory Commons](#)

The complete bibliographic information for this item can be found at http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/language_pubs/114. For information on how to cite this item, please visit <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/howtocite.html>.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the World Languages and Cultures at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in World Languages and Cultures Publications by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.

Chapter 8

The Constellation of Social Ontology:

Walter Benjamin, Eduard Fuchs, and the Body of History

Kevin S. Amidon and Dan Krier

Walter Benjamin, Critical Theory, and the Problem of Sexuality

“Fuchs lacks not only a sense of the destructive in caricature but also a sense of the destructive in sexuality, especially in orgasm.” In this sentence, Walter Benjamin encapsulated perhaps the most pointed critique of his subject as he drafted the essay “Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian” (Eiland & Jennings, 2014, p. 549; hereafter: Fuchs essay). Nonetheless this striking critical statement did not appear in the published essay, for in the process of his final revision of the proofs, Benjamin struck the sentence (Benjamin, 1977, p. 1356). Benjamin’s editorial choice has one clear and well-documented explanation: he had no desire to offend Fuchs. They were personally acquainted in their mutual Paris exile of the mid-1930s, and they met several times. Fuchs even read and commented upon the essay draft, and Benjamin incorporated some of his suggestions (Eiland & Jennings, 2014, p. 550). From the time in late 1933 or early 1934 that Max Horkheimer, the director of the Institute of Social Research (hereafter: Institute) known to scholars as the Frankfurt School, had commissioned Benjamin to undertake the Fuchs project for the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* [ZfS], the Institute’s journal-in-exile, it took Benjamin over three years of effort to bring the essay to publication. During this interregnum, while dwelling upon the dissonant relationships of bodies, images and text in Fuchs’ work, Benjamin produced some of his most important

writings. Benjamin's essay on Fuchs finally appeared, without this provocative and highly critical assessment of Fuchs's understanding of sex and sexuality, in the 1937 volume of the *ZfS* (Eiland & Jennings, 2014, p. 546).

Benjamin's elimination of the sentence hints at much deeper critical stakes. It reveals a constitutive tension that runs through multiple strains of his work, a tension that generates dialectical energy between themes that appear variably conjunct and disjunct across Benjamin's prolific journalistic and scholarly production. This tension places the Fuchs essay even more centrally within the emergence of Benjamin's mature theoretical-methodological constellation than has already been recognized in the voluminous literature. It is the tension between body and image, between the biological-corporeal and the textual-representational. The critical significance of Benjamin's productive resolution of dialectical imagery from an extraordinary range of the material of modern life has occasioned vast and revealing scholarly commentary (Jennings, 1987). The significance of corporeality in his work, however, has not always been reflected in the scholarly literature (Richter, 2002). Body and image saturate Benjamin's writings.

Howard Caygill has recognized these issues most clearly in Benjamin's work as a whole:

Benjamin's resolution of the tension between word and image is often carried through in terms of corporeal rhythms...in the Baudelaire essay it is resolved into the libidinal rhythms of the orgasm. However the turn to corporeal rhythms is complicated by Benjamin's speculative account of experience which introduced the infinite into experience through the argument that time is not linear but a complex formation of past, present, and future. Accordingly the alignment of concept and intuition in experience was also of extreme complexity, with the

patternings of word and image shot through with memories and intimations
(Caygill, 1998, p. 80).

Nonetheless Caygill does not read the Fuchs essay closely. Nowhere, however, more significantly than in the Fuchs essay is it possible to derive a subtler understanding of the relationships between the body, sexuality, imagery, and history in Benjamin's later work. Such a reading can further point onward toward potential forms of critical theory that can fruitfully address emergent social forms and practices in the twenty-first century. The body of Benjamin's theory of history, read through its constellation of texts and images, reveals new paths to the understanding of social ontology.

Most centrally, it is the question of sexuality, and not just of its representation, but also of its elision, refiguration, reinscription, and sublation through Benjamin's critical constellations. The body, together with its socially and materially accreted sexuality, stands at the center of the critical resolution of Benjamin's methodological vision of materialist history in the Fuchs essay. It is at once revealed and hidden, made manifest not directly but obliquely through reflection on and refraction through the pursuit of a practice of history that is recursively constitutive of and coterminous with social ontology. Sexuality manifests itself within Benjamin's thought in the Fuchs essay in unique ways, ways that reveal further the close links between the essay and the work he pursued alongside it in the 1930s, particularly "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" (hereafter: Artwork essay). Furthermore, the clear emergence of sexuality into view within Benjamin's critical horizon allows further clarification of the links between the Fuchs essay and the work of Benjamin's interlocutors in the early Frankfurt School at the time, especially Max Horkheimer.

Benjamin constellates sexuality as the vector of biological reproduction, whereby it becomes capable of resolution from and through its commensurate dialectical partner, the technological reproduction of the work of art. This dialectical refraction of the issue of reproduction through both body and work becomes the conceptual fulcrum that allows Benjamin to structure his fully-fledged theory of materialist history. The stakes emerge at a central point in the Fuchs essay where Benjamin explores the “biological” quality of Fuchs’s understanding of artistic creativity. Benjamin frames this passage, like much of the essay, as simultaneous critique of and engagement with its subject, but always in the service of a more expansive argument about the method and material of history. He begins with a vividly phrased critique of the reductive (and of course heavily gendered) quality of Fuchs’s “biological” elision of creativity and sexuality through excess – but at the same time he grants Fuchs a significant level of interpretive innovation:

Fuchs’s notion of creativity has a strongly biological slant. Artists from whom the author distances himself are portrayed as lacking in virility, while genius appears with attributes that occasionally border on the priapic. The mark of such biologicistic thinking can be found in Fuchs’s judgments of El Greco, Murillo, and Ribera. “All three became classic representatives of the Baroque spirit because each in his way was a ‘thwarted’ eroticist”.... From different sources, this concept of genius fed the same widespread conviction that creativity was above all a manifestation of superabundant strength. Similar tendencies later led Fuchs to conceptions akin to psychoanalysis. He was the first to make them fruitful for aesthetics (Benjamin, 2002, p. 272; references hereafter by page number only).

Benjamin's concept of the biological is itself somewhat reductive here, for it resolves as the relationship between the corporeal and the sexual, admixed clearly with recognition of Fuchs's gendered analytical rhetoric. It therefore subtly reinforces the stakes surrounding the conceptual constellation of reproduction as the sublation of the corporeal in the essay.

The section of the essay from which this quotation is drawn culminates in a lengthy discussion of how Fuchs's terms of analysis reveal his heavy investment in the German "Social Democratic doctrines of the period," particularly the ways in which "the Darwinian influence served to maintain the party's faith and determination in its struggle" with Bismarck and the Prussian state apparatus during the 1870s and 1880s (p. 273). Benjamin thereby expands his engagement of the biological to include not just the corporeal-sexual, but also the heavily contested intellectual politics of Darwinism in Germany during the latter half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth (Gliboff, 2008). Attention to this moment of German social democratic history redoubles Benjamin's critical focus on how the biological dialectically interpolates both the corporeal and the political: German socialists made the Darwinian "laws" of natural selection into a direct correlative of the "laws" of Marxian historical progress and revolution in the later nineteenth century (Kelly, 1981, chap. 7). With this argument about the politics of biology, Benjamin successfully widens his analytical optic to encompass clearly the question of historical materialism as revealed in the history of party-political conflict received and refigured by Fuchs.

The body, in its reproductive capacity, thus serves Benjamin's critical goal of the manifestation of the full historical stakes of the rise of the technological reproducibility

of the work of art. As Benjamin achieved stages of completion in the Fuchs and Artwork essays, both of which were written in the midst of his necessarily fragmented and methodologically fracturing Arcades Project, the issue of sexuality became submerged somewhat back into the vast and diverse body of material out of which Benjamin sought to constellate his materialist history. His deletion of the sentence about the destructive power of sexuality in the published version of the Fuchs essay forms the most visible evidence of this process. Benjamin struggled for some three years with the composition of the essay, and the trajectory of the emergence and submersion of the material manifestation of the body's reproductive processes thus forms a conceptual-critical correlative of the flow Benjamin's own intellectual development. The critical exploration of the potential for destruction inherent in reproduction, both that of the artwork and that of the material body, becomes his manifest interest. This central theme in Benjamin's work took its final fragmentary form during his fatal 1940 flight from the Nazi occupation of France in his "On the Concept of History," which derived much from the Fuchs essay. Through Benjamin's method, bodies and artworks are rendered recursively fragmentary through the destructive power of reproduction, particularly where that reproduction is excessive. They thereby become, however, in dialectical constellation with one another, the incipient material of historical representation itself. In Benjamin's optics, the traces of the body devolve through representation into works like the caricatures that Eduard Fuchs so vigorously reproduced and ramified within the vast textual structures of his books. The materiality of the body, and along with it the sphere of sexuality, can therefore appear to vanish within the Fuchs essay, the history of its composition, and its accompanying work. This vanishing is, however, itself an artifact of

Benjamin's critical-historical method. His dialectical images remain everywhere saturated with sublated renderings of the body.

Eduard Fuchs: The Vanishing Mediator of Classical Critical Theory

Fuchs (1870-1940) led a colorful if often, in the words of his two-time scholarly biographer Ulrich Weitz, "shadowy" life as printer, publisher, social democratic (and sometime communist) advocate and agitator, administrator, author, and collector. His books and his marriage made him rich. The two of Fuchs's several profusely illustrated and extensively annotated sets of multi-volume publications that Benjamin analyzed most extensively logically contain the most material related to the body and sexuality, and their pictorial representation: *Illustrierte Sittengeschichte vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* [Illustrated History of Manners from the Middle Ages to the Present; 6 vols. Originally published 1909-12] and *Geschichte der erotischen Kunst* [History of Erotic Art; 3 vols. Originally published 1908; 1922-23] (Benjamin, 2002, pp. 272, 280, 289). These collections, brought together out of Fuchs's own vast personal collection of caricatures, accrete massive amounts of text to the high quality, lithographically reproduced images visible on nearly every page (Bach, 2010).

Fuchs lived in the late 1920s and early 1930s in a Berlin villa designed for a previous owner by the young Mies van der Rohe that he filled with his massive collections (Gorsen, 2006, p. 221). Nonetheless his socialist politics, along with the recurring perception among prosecutors that his books were criminally obscene, brought him a lifelong series of criminal and civil charges, trials, imprisonments, controversies, and clashes with various authorities. Fuchs had been among the prominent Social

Democrats who split with the party over its support for the First World War to found the Spartacist League/Independent Social Democratic Party. That party went on to fracture further into the Communist Party of Germany (KPD). Fuchs participated in both of these party-political innovations, though he subsequently broke with the KPD in 1928 (Weitz, 2014). While Benjamin never implies that Fuchs came to take a certain personal pleasure in his adversarial position to the German state, Peter Gorsen calls the lengthy set of conflicts over obscenity in which Fuchs and his publisher, Albert Langen, battled the imperial authorities before the First World War “crafty [*listig*]” (Gorsen, 2006, p. 219). In 1933 Fuchs fled the Nazis for exile in Paris, where he and Benjamin became personally acquainted. Despite much effort his collections were never restituted to him, and were largely auctioned off by the Nazis.

Generally unremarked in the English-language literature is that Fuchs did not happen by chance upon his contacts to the figures of the Frankfurt School, especially Horkheimer. From the initiation of the underlying institutional developments in the early 1920s that led to the Institute’s foundation until Fuchs’s death in 1940, he was in regular contact with Horkheimer. Likely from its inception, Fuchs belonged to the trustees of the Society for Social Research [*Gesellschaft für Sozialforschung*], the private foundation established in 1922 by Felix Weil with a substantial endowment from his wealthy father to support the Institute that came to share its name (Gorsen, 2006, p. 220; Weitz, 1991, pp. 413-416). The early group of trustees also included additional Weil family members, Friedrich Pollock, Max Horkheimer, Kurt Albert Gerlach, and Richard Sorge (Jay, 1996,

pp. 8-9; Wiggershaus, 1995, pp. 20-21).¹ It appears that Fuchs and Weil had originally met in Tübingen when they overlapped for a short time as students there, and discovered their shared interests in revolutionary politics. Weil's activities as a student agitator had even led to his legal banishment from Württemberg, and his relationship with Fuchs remained close enough that he apparently even arranged for Fuchs to serve as trustee of some portion of his personal fortune (Weitz, 2014, p. 272). Fuchs's association with the Institute took the form of his establishment in 1924, again with Weil's financial assistance and after discussions with Horkheimer, of a Berlin-based *Sozialwissenschaftliches Archiv* (Archive for Social Research). The primary goal of the Archive was to collect material about the German working class and the political parties affiliated with it (Weitz, 2014, p. 273). For this archive, Fuchs purchased a large amount of material from the newly-formed KPD, which at the time was constantly in the sights of the German authorities for its advocacy of revolutionary overthrow of the republic. The Archive attracted notice from significant figures in international communism, and brought Fuchs into contact with David Riazanov, the director of the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow. In October 1925, however, barely a year after the Archive had begun operations, the Prussian police raided it on the suspicion that it formed an illegal archive related to the KPD's treasonous activities. Fuchs was soon being personally

¹ Neither Jay nor Wiggershaus note that Fuchs was among the original trustees, and this is surely a significant source of the lack of awareness about his participation among English-speaking scholars. It is possible that Fuchs joined at a somewhat later date, and therefore would not have been listed among the founding trustees. It is nonetheless clear that his involvement was significant. Fuchs's somewhat shadowy involvement could plausibly have been the source of rumors noted by Jay: "To my knowledge however, there is no evidence to indicate any political contributors, although allegations to this effect were made by the Institute's detractors in later years" (Jay, 1996, p. 8).

investigated for treason by the state prosecutors, though they concluded in March 1926 that evidence was insufficient to charge him (Weitz, 2014, pp. 276-284).

Through his work with the Archive and its materials both before and after its official dissolution, Fuchs was regularly in correspondence with the Institute, especially with Friedrich Pollock, who held a range of responsibility for the Institute's administrative operations (Wiggershaus, 1995). He apparently even regularly visited the Institute's photographic laboratory in Frankfurt in order to assist in the making of photographic reproductions of significant documents and images of the history of Marxism, all the while in regular correspondence with Riazanov (Weitz, 2014, p. 286). Nonetheless the relationship with the Institute had moments of significant friction. In the aftermath of the police raid on the Archive, it came to light that, apparently without Fuchs's knowledge, some of the Archive's employees had been hired at the behest of the KPD. Pollock and the Institute, always concerned that they not become associated with potentially illegal political activities, chose to close the archive and end the employment of the staff effective 31 December 1925. As Pollock wrote to Fuchs, the Institute "has been drawn, due to the lack of conscience on the part of certain employees, into a political affair." Because the Institute "wanted to avoid, under all circumstances, being drawn into the political struggle," it had no choice but to dissolve the Archive (Weitz, 2014, p. 282).

Pollock's language here prefigures conflicts that the leaders of the Institute, especially Horkheimer, would have with other members during the Institute's period of exile in the United States due to concerns that the Institute not cultivate a political reputation too close to Marxism or communism (Amidon & Worrell, 2008; Worrell,

2006). It is therefore no exaggeration to describe Fuchs as having held a central position in the establishment and financing of the Frankfurt School. Fuchs even corresponded with Horkheimer in the late 1930s about the possibility of emigrating to the United States (Weitz, 2014, p. 357). Horkheimer remained circumspect in his extant correspondence and papers about why he wished to have an article about Fuchs written for the *ZfS*, and why he chose Benjamin to write it. There is also no evidence in the correspondence between Benjamin, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Pollock that Fuchs himself felt it necessary to reveal to or discuss with Benjamin his longstanding connections with Horkheimer and the Institute. Fuchs, indeed, always remained the vanishing mediator, the “man in the shadows.” Scholarship has revealed, however, that his activities were so closely bound up with the Institute that while he cannot count as one of its inner circle, he must be recognized as standing among its most closely affiliated figures.

Sexuality, Pornography, and the Realization of the Fuchs Essay

When Benjamin’s complete draft of the Fuchs essay reached New York, Horkheimer proved to be very pleased with it despite its arduous process of composition and much concern about the result. He wrote an extensive letter to Benjamin on 16 March 1937 with his thoughts and comments about the essay, and introduced it with a statement of strong praise: “I congratulate you on it. I read it with the greatest pleasure. You have solved this task, which for many reasons did not come easily to you, at last in a way that the true theoretical intentions of the *Zeitschrift* are advanced by it” (Benjamin, 1977, p. 1331; trans. Amidon). In introducing his suggestions for (mostly minor) revisions, Horkheimer went on to emphasize the collaborative nature of the work represented in the

ZfS, stating that the authors of all of the major essays in the volume shared ideas with one another on their pieces, usually in person. The institute's project thus represented a multi-layered form of collaboration. The 1937 issue of the *ZfS* also represented the moment at which Horkheimer's vision for Critical Theory achieved its methodological breakthrough. It contained, along with the Fuchs essay, Horkheimer's essay "Traditional and Critical Theory," which brought together in a fully-fledged programmatic statement Horkheimer's long-developing ideas for the Frankfurt School's method of critical interdisciplinary scholarship (Amidon, 2008). While the *ZfS* had published Benjamin's work previously, particularly a French translation of a shorter version of "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" in the 1936 volume, the simultaneous publication of the Fuchs essay and Horkheimer's methodological manifesto demonstrates the centrality of Benjamin's intellectual work to the project of Critical Theory at the moment of its crystallization. While Benjamin would occasionally express to others a desire to maintain some distance between his own work and the Institute's greater project, in the later 1930s his essays became major pillars of the Frankfurt School's emergent scholarly and critical identity (Eiland & Jennings, 2014, p. 388).

In Horkheimer's conclusion to his letter of 16 March 1937, however, he takes up, after six pages of detailed comments on the content of the essay, a theme that foregrounds the core thematic constellation of the essay discussed above: pornography. Pornography brings together in a complex and value-laden genre the constitutive themes of the essay: corporeality, sexuality and the reproduction of images. Horkheimer's comments contrast strongly with Benjamin's choice (likely made later, and without evidence that Horkheimer, Adorno, or others suggested it), to tone down in his critique of Fuchs's

understanding of the destructive power of sexuality and the orgasm. Horkheimer suggests to Benjamin that he address the concern, clearly broached in Fuchs's trials on charges of obscenity, that his volumes were received in the market as pornography:

I found one small thought lacking, which while less than flattering with respect to Fuchs, could be revealing to the matter. Nowhere, namely, is it indicated, that even despite all the Puritanism, the success of Fuchs's publications in the market can be derived not least the fact that they were sought out as pornography. That he himself never reckoned with this, and in fact was not even capable of reckoning with this, doesn't necessarily do him honor, but belongs nonetheless to the understanding of his livelihood as a writer. I leave it to you whether you want to add a little sentence or a paragraph in which this subject matter is thought about (Benjamin, 1977, p. 1337; trans. Amidon).

Horkheimer then concluded his letter by explaining that Friedrich Pollock, who functioned as the chief administrator of the Institute, would be arriving in Paris on the same ship as the letter, and that he would trust Benjamin and Pollock to decide how to approach Fuchs with the manuscript of the essay. Horkheimer was not optimistic, expecting that Fuchs would "curse."

Benjamin responded to Horkheimer's comments extensively in a letter of 28 March 1937. Nowhere in this letter, however, did he address Horkheimer's remarks about the perception of Fuchs's publications as pornography. As published, the essay does contain one mention of pornography. Nonetheless, there appears to be no other mention of Horkheimer's suggestion anywhere in Benjamin's later published correspondence. Benjamin thus becomes, in a curious way, doubly silent about sexuality

and its visual representation as pornography: not just did he eliminate his critical comment about Fuchs's lack of understanding of it, but he appears to have chosen not take up Horkheimer's suggestion that he elaborate on pornography in the essay itself.

Benjamin's silence here is curious not because it evinces a reticence to discuss or analyze the relationship between pornography and other forms of text and image. Rather, it is curious precisely because Benjamin clearly did consider pornography to belong to the spheres of representation and reproduction that drew his interest in the Fuchs essay. In 1927 he wrote and published in the respected journal *Die literarische Welt* a short essay with the title "A State Monopoly on Pornography." This essay is a reflection upon the banning by the Spanish authorities of a certain class of publications widely available in newsstands. These often included texts by respected authors writing pornographic literature, often under their own names. In it he argues – in a manner striking for its combination of seriousness and irony – that language, by its very nature, contains elements that tend toward the pornographic. Benjamin does not consider here directly the relationships between language, text, and image that became central to the Fuchs essay, but the stakes are similar. He argues that all language is representational, and holds within itself a certain pornographic potential: "In one respect, pornographic books are like other books: they are all based on language and writing. If language did not contain elements in its vocabulary that are obscene in themselves, pornography would be robbed of its best instruments" (Benjamin, 2000, p. 72). This claim develops into an early form of Benjamin's argument for a critical-historical method that pays closest attention not to the beautiful or privileged, but to fragments, detritus, remainders:

Language in the various phases of its historical development is a single great experiment that is conducted in as many laboratories as there are people.... By-products of every kind are inevitable. They include all the idioms and fixed expressions, whether written or spoken, that stand outside normal usage: nicknames, company names, swear words, oaths, devotional expressions, and obscenities. These may be excessive, lacking in expression, sacred, a fermentation of cultic language, or else overexplicit, shameless, and depraved. The waste products of daily usage, these same elements acquire a crucial value in other contexts – in scientific contexts, above all – since there these astonishing linguistic splinters can be understood as fragments from the primeval granite of the linguistic massif (Benjamin, 2000, pp. 72-73).

Knowledge, for Benjamin, emerges most significantly from objects that, because they are perceived only as waste, are commonly overlooked by disciplinary inquiry. They resist easy subsumption into received forms or categories.

Benjamin draws two conclusions from this set of observations about the inherently pornographic qualities of linguistic representation. The first is that rather than try to banish the obscene from social discourse, society ought to make use of the forces out of which it emerges. Here he prefigures arguments from the Fuchs essay. Rather than suppressing the obscene, he argues that it represents powerful forces that must be harnessed. He deploys a powerful technological metaphor here: “Just as Niagara Falls feeds power stations, in the same way the downward torrent of language into smut and vulgarity should be used as a mighty source of energy to drive the dynamo of the creative act” (Benjamin, 2000, p. 73). The second is a counter-intuitive idea that must at once be

provocative and ironic: “For this reason we call for a state monopoly on pornography. We demand the socialization of this not inconsiderable source of power” (Benjamin, 2000, p. 73). His conclusion is that doing so would put economic forces into the service of art, because talented authors could be properly remunerated for their expertise. This fascinating heterodoxy in Benjamin’s thought – a quasi-capitalist argument in the service of the goal of the “socialization” of the power of a socially disruptive representational form – looks forward to the fully developed critical-historical methods advocated in the Fuchs essay.

Historical Materialism, Knowledge, and the Remnants of the Corporeal

The Fuchs essay takes the stakes of the argument found in “A State Monopoly on Pornography” and develops them both in breadth, incorporating the representation and reproduction of images as well as texts, and in depth, exploring a controversial but shadowy figure who worked across political, cultural, and intellectual boundaries. The result is a complex and variegated discussion of the political economy of art, out of which Benjamin develops a sophisticated argument about the critical methods of historical materialist scholarship. His argument brings together the material of history, the relationship between text and image, moral psychology, the biological, and the corporeal.

Before the Fuchs essay saw print in the 1937 *ZfS*, however, Benjamin had to contend with a concern on the part of the editorial board, likely led by Pollock, that the essay was too overtly Marxist, and could therefore endanger the Institute’s scholarly status – much in the same way that Pollock had scolded Fuchs a decade before for having allowed, even unintentionally, the Institute to be pulled into political controversy through

the Archive's links to the KPD. This resulted in a third elision in the process of the essay's realization, alongside Benjamin's removal of his strongest critical statement about Fuchs's deficits and his lack of response to Horkheimer's advice that he address the question of the pornographic marketability of Fuchs's works. In the original published version of the essay, the editors deleted the entire first paragraph, which included the claim that "it is the recent past of the Marxist theory of art which is at issue here.... For unlike Marxist economics, this theory still has no history" (260). Benjamin had little choice but to go along with this decision. The apparent motivation on the part of the editors was that Fuchs's collections, still stuck in Nazi Germany, remained in (ultimately unsuccessful) litigation about their release and potential export, and that reminders of Fuchs's Marxist associations could possibly endanger this process further (Benjamin, 1977).

Benjamin's argument in the first section of the Fuchs essay rapidly develops into a powerful statement of the critical-historical method that not only observes and analyzes the material detritus of modern life, but takes on the hypostasized edifices of disciplinary orthodoxy about historical facts and breaks them up. Just as language tends toward the pornographic, materialist historical cognition tends toward the destructive, even violent:

The historical materialist blasts the epoch out of its reified "historical continuity," and thereby the life out of the epoch, and the work out of the lifework. Yet this construct results in the simultaneous preservation and sublation [*Aufhebung*] of the lifework *in* the work, of the epoch *in* the lifework, and of the course of history *in* the epoch (262; emphasis original).

For Benjamin here, “life” carries three valences of meaning, and a fourth that remains a dialectically charged implication. It means, firstly, the life of an individual as biographical history; secondly, the metaphorical sense of the epoch itself being alive, rather than dead; and thirdly, the conceptual sense of life as the object of biological inquiry. The fourth valence is the implied one: if “life” in all these senses forms a locus of historical materialist inquiry, then the question of the embodied qualities of that life is dialectically implicit. In all three of these valences of meaning, the corporeality of the living being is sublated. The body’s absence from these arguments recursively generates the possibility of its presence.

The remarkable conclusion here is that a successfully critical historical materialism renders historical facts not as an eternal, “epic” image of the past, but as a means of linking past, present, and future. Thus, Benjamin argues, adding further layers to the concept “life”: “Historical materialism conceives historical understanding as an afterlife of that which has been understood and whose pulse can be felt in the present” (262). The past, therefore, has two lives. Benjamin’s motto here could very well be “The past is dead. Long live the past.” “Afterlife” here stands dialectically stretched between the prepositional sense of ‘living past’ a given point in time, of surviving and carrying forward, and the nominal sense of a ‘living past,’ that the past lives on without bound through its remnants and artifacts. This ‘living past,’ however, is what the historical materialist presents through experience: “Historical materialism presents a given experience with the past – an experience that is unique.... The immense forces bound up in historicism’s ‘Once upon a time’ are liberated in this experience.... [Historical materialism] is directed toward a consciousness of the present which explodes the

continuum of history” (262). The unity implied here between the nominal and prepositional qualities of the living past requires in turn the unity of the subject and object of historical practice. The body becomes social by living past itself, resolving into the possibility of its own cognition beyond itself in the living past. Experience, then, is the body’s journey into historical materiality, but this materiality is always dialectically charged with the body’s vanishing into historicity.

Section II of the Fuchs essay focuses on the details of Fuchs’s biography. In Section III, Benjamin further develops his critique of what he sees to be the uncritical aspects of cultural history [*Kulturgeschichte*] out of significant thematic elements that he has raised in his treatment Fuchs’s “life.” Here is found the aphoristic phrase that has emerged from the essay as its most memorable, that “There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (267). The context of this statement, however, is crucial to its interpretation. Benjamin embeds it within the elaboration of his thematics of life in multiple ways. First, he links history to life through the concept “lineage,” emphasizing the generational flow of the material that becomes history. Here he emphasizes in particular the ways that traditional disciplinarity renders that material static, even dead, and thereby sunders it from historical cognition. This deadening process further leaves this material indistinguishable from property, and thereby from the processes of alienation that underlie capital accumulation

Doesn’t the study of individual disciplines (once the semblance of their unity has been removed) inevitably coalesce in the study of cultural history as the inventory which humanity has preserved to the present day? [...] Whatever the historical

materialist surveys in art or science has, without exception, a lineage he cannot observe without horror (267).

Then, after the famous phrase about the mutual implication of culture and barbarism, Benjamin redoubles the focus on property and ownership, drawing in his themes of human reproduction and destruction. He initiates the passage with a rhetorical flourish that shows the stakes, and demonstrates that claims about barbarism are only a subsidiary point. The passage culminates in a statement that makes clear the distinction between the “survival” of the dead artifacts of cultural history and the living past – afterlife – of the objects of dialectical materialist history.

Nevertheless the crucial element does not lie here. If the concept of culture is problematic for historical materialism, it cannot conceive of the disintegration of culture into goods which become objects of possession for mankind.... The concept of culture – as the embodiment of creations considered independent, if not of the production process in which they originate, then of a production process in which they continue to survive – has a fetishistic quality. Culture appears reified (267).

This sense of reification captures the process whereby concepts, ideas, and representations – the intangible material that recursively renders into the texts and images of the objects of culture – become property. It is how these objects are separated from the dialectically charged space of experience out of which they emerge and which further allows their capture as forms of capital. Here lies the core of Benjamin’s critique of Fuchs: as a materialist and as a historian, he was unable to see deeply enough into these dynamics. Fuchs’s studies and collecting practices made materialist historical analysis

possible. Fuchs himself, however, never achieved a fully-fledged form of historical practice adequate to his material.

The passage that leads into this statement by completing Benjamin's discussion of Fuchs's biography in section II brings together all of the essay's thematic constituents: the body, sexuality, production, destruction, excess, experience text, even war. This thematic complex then requires a symbolic figuration adequate to the density of the material packed into the argument. That figure, expanded and refigured into the concept traffic [*Verkehr*] in the passage, is perhaps the nineteenth- and twentieth-century technology that captured the greatest symbolic power, because it became the visible figure of the institutional expansion of capital accumulation through public and private finance: the locomotive. Benjamin quotes here both French and German figures who saw the locomotive as "the saint of the future" and as a kind of refigured "angel...since a locomotive is worth more than the nicest pair of wings" (266). Benjamin was furthermore one of the earliest literary critics to recognize the significance of an author whose work explores in great symbolic and figurative depth the nature of *Verkehr*: Franz Kafka (Anderson, 1992). Further, this passage points subtly to the primary means by which the body is sublated into and through capital: through the alienation of labor. The embodied qualities of industrial labor – everywhere manifest in the physical operation of the shrieking, panting, smoking, roaring steam locomotive with its engineer and fireman visible in the cab and illuminated often by the light of the firebox flames – vanish in the experience of the bourgeoisie. Benjamin's words give this dialectics of corporeality, and its links to historical materialist practice, vivid texture:

It may cause one to ask whether the complacency [*Gemütlichkeit*] of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie did not stem from the hollow comfort of never having to experience how the productive forces had to develop under their hands. This experience was really reserved for the following century, which has discovered that the speed of traffic [*Verkehr*] and the ability of machines to duplicate words and writing outstrips human needs. The energies that technology develops beyond this threshold are destructive. First of all, they advance the technology of war and its propagandistic preparation (267).

Here “traffic” – *Verkehr* – must be understood to carry its double load of symbolic meaning emerging from the German concept: *Verkehr* is both traffic in the technological-economic sense, and sexual relations not as an abstract concept, but as the potential physical interaction between bodies. The economy’s surplus, which becomes its potential for destruction, thus reveals its close correlation with the potentially excessive moments in sexuality. Destruction thereby begins to reveal its dialectical variegation. Within the entire Fuchs essay, this passage brings out most directly the negative loadings of destruction in Benjamin’s thought. Nonetheless it reveals where, using Benjamin’s own term, the threshold lies between destruction as violence, exploitation, and alienation and destruction as a constitutive process in the making-manifest of the material of a living, productive, dialectical form of history.

Prurience, Prudery, and Production: Sexuality and its Representation under the Condition of Technological Reproducibility

At this point in the essay, the stakes of the statement about the destructive quality of the orgasm that Benjamin excised from the essay have been revealed. He is ready to describe in detail the content of Fuchs's work, and how it relates to the methods and tasks of historical materialism. Benjamin targets his criticisms of Fuchs at several different levels of argument. Foremost among them is Benjamin's exploration of how and why Fuchs's work could at once be seen by the German authorities as prurient to the point of pornographically obscene, but at the same time, Fuchs's own arguments recapitulated forms of bourgeois moralism to the point of prudery. This discussion extends over sections IV and V of the essay, which further extend the exploration of the themes of dialectical materialist epistemology, creativity and biological life.

Benjamin begins with a short discussion of Fuchs's career that brings out the tensions and struggles that Fuchs faced: "Those aspects of his work which are likely to endure were wrested from an intellectual constellation that could hardly have appeared less propitious. This is the point where Fuchs the collector taught Fuchs the theoretician to comprehend much that the times denied him" (268). Immediately here, for the first and only time in the main body of the essay, Benjamin raises the question of pornography in relation to Fuchs's work, framing it with a statement about the destruction of traditional disciplinary discourses: "He was a collector who strayed into marginal areas – such as caricature and pornographic imagery – which sooner or later meant the ruin of a whole series of clichés in traditional art history" (268). Fuchs himself, in Benjamin's interpretation, specifically set himself apart from classicistic concepts of art, but in doing so, the qualities of moralistic prudery that his work contains became manifest through a kind of sublimation of the corporeal aspects of artistic representation. Benjamin frames

this in an embedded quotation from the first volume of Fuchs's *Erotic Art*: "Fuchs prophesied a new beauty 'which, in the end, will be infinitely greater than that of antiquity. Whereas the latter was only the highest animalistic form, the new beauty will be filled with a lofty spiritual and emotional content'" (269). It is not the stock Marxist rhetoric of "form" and "content" which interests Benjamin here, however, but rather the opportunity to highlight how Fuchs's weaknesses contribute to the advancement of historical materialist understanding. He continues with another of the essay's well-known passages that vividly represents practices of the reception of art as themselves the fragmentary artifacts of cognition that must be sublated into a fuller form of knowledge:

Of course it would be a mistake to assume that the idealist view of art was itself entirely unhinged. That cannot happen until the *disjecta membra* which idealism contains – as "historical representation" on the one hand and "appreciation" on the other – are merged and therefore surpassed (269).

This argument does not denigrate Fuchs's conceptual vocabulary or interpretive practices, or of other theorists of art like Heinrich Wölfflin, whose formalism is compared in this section to Fuchs's practices. Slightly later, Benjamin also dramatically compares Fuchs to the ethnologist Adolf Bastian, whose "insatiable hunger for material" (271) led him to embark on research and collecting expeditions with the same tireless, nearly compulsive enthusiasm that Fuchs showed toward his collecting, writing, publishing, and political work.

This discussion of the ways in which forms of interpretive or disciplinary practice themselves must be understood as the material of historical understanding – an argument that parallels closely Horkheimer's claims differentiating Critical Theory from traditional

theory – leads Benjamin toward his first longer discussion of technologies of reproduction in the Fuchs essay. This anticipates not only later passages but also develops parallels with the Artwork essay, composed in the midst of the long process of work on the Fuchs essay. Here it becomes clear that rhetoric of destruction is directed specifically not toward material objects – and most definitely not toward bodies – but toward abstract disciplines and techniques of representation and interpretation that can become captured within processes of technological reproduction. He develops this argument from the outset by distinguishing “the historical object” itself from such disciplinary practices: “The historical object removed from pure facticity does not need any ‘appreciation.’” Furthermore, Fuchs was a pioneer because, as Benjamin argues, his work centers around “motifs” that “refer to forms of knowledge which could only prove destructive to traditional forms of art” (269).

Fuchs’s failure – the reason that his interpretations have little “destructive force” (270), is because Fuchs did not make this connection between artistic objects, practices of interpretation and representation, and technologies of reproduction. He could therefore default only to largely vacuous interpretive concepts like “mood of the times,” which despite his materialist intentions left his thinking undialectical and therefore inadequate to the fullness of history. Benjamin, however, takes this opportunity to make some of his most forceful statements in the essay about the centrality of reproductive technologies to historical understanding. The central point here is how a clearly historical materialist approach can counter the process whereby art and its processes of production, interpretation, and reception can be captured by capital.

The concern with techniques of reproduction, more than any other line of research, brings out the crucial importance of reception; it enables us to correct the process of reification which takes place in a work of art.... For it is precisely historical materialism that is interested in tracing the changes of artistic vision not so much to a changed ideal of beauty [a core argument in Fuchs's texts], as to more elementary processes – processes set in motion by economic and technological transformations in production. (269-270).

Attention to the history and political economy of the many layers of reproduction begins, therefore, to emerge as the most effective epistemology. The dynamics of capitalism tear the work of art from its technical and social field of relation. Historical materialism seeks to restore this embeddedness.

Sections V, VI, VII, and VIII discuss both intensively and extensively Fuchs's ideas about artistic creativity. Benjamin thus returns through two different angles to the issue of the body: through Fuchs's arguments about the embodied qualities of creativity that link it to sexuality, and again through Fuchs's tendency to recapitulate forms of bourgeois moralism in his texts. This two-pronged approach generates the most revealing contrasts and tensions between Benjamin's methods and Fuchs's. It thus makes manifest the reasons why Benjamin struggled with his work on the Fuchs essay: they both make arguments about the relationships between the body, art, and the social, and teasing their positions apart is a not a straightforward task.

Section V contains the most revealing material in the essay on life and the forms of inquiry into it. Here, as introduced above, Benjamin engages with the disciplinary field of biology in his exploration of the flaws in Fuchs's historical approach. He states

that “Fuchs’s notion of creativity has a strongly biological slant” (272). The meaning of “biological” here only becomes clear in the subsequent discussion, as Benjamin explains how that this refers to how Fuchs saw creativity as a manifestation of sexuality. Without using the Freudian language of sublimation (as significantly as is what Benjamin notes to be Fuchs’s closeness to psychoanalytic concepts), Fuchs saw artistic objects as manifestations of erotic energy. Biology therefore becomes, in Benjamin’s analytical schema, coterminous with a concept of sexuality as something going well beyond the sphere of the corporeal. While this hardly does justice to the complex politics of the biological disciplines in the early twentieth-century German-speaking world, Benjamin develops the claim into a subtle linking of Fuchs’s Social Democratic commitments in the 1890s to his own arguments about historical materialism – and this link itself reveals significant moments of those biological politics. As Benjamin explains, the German Social Democratic Party’s commitment to Darwin alongside Marx as a foundational narrative of historical progress meant that “history assumed deterministic traits” (273). What the SPD did with its program of political education, therefore, was to produce a kind of pseudo-dialectics. Where the emergent narratives of large-scale change in dynamic societies or organismal populations that parallel each other in Marx and Darwin contained highly variegated dialectical tools of analysis, the party’s making of them into reified forms of political enlightenment evacuated them of their power for historical materialism.

Benjamin goes on to show further – in another exploration of the subtleties of the epistemic field of biology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – the functioning of a number of sub-disciplinary emanations of nineteenth century biology in

the political discourse of the time. Here he appropriates terms from the critic H. Laufenberg that link biological and political-economic categories: “Nevertheless, many were satisfied with the theses which divided historical processes into ‘physiological’ and ‘pathological’ ones, or affirmed that the materialism of natural science ‘automatically turned into historical materialism once it came into the hands of the proletariat’” (273). Clearly, such naïve political narratives could not carry the power that their original advocates had hoped they would. Benjamin rounds off the section with the conclusion that no matter how much narratives of progress might seem to embody the living past of historical materialism, they usually fail, because they traffic in the evacuation of the dialectical aspects of thought.

Section VII focuses specifically on the question of Fuchs’s bourgeois moralism, and how it relates to the reductive historical thinking that led Fuchs to give credence to undialectical progress narratives. Again, of course, Fuchs’s collecting and scholarship carry the potential to provide the basis for a genuinely materialist history. But undifferentiated forms of the reception of Marxist thought and theory thwarted this possibility. Revolution was no simple narrative of progressive triumph in sequential class conflicts:

Not surprisingly the bourgeois moralism contains elements which collide with Fuchs’s materialism. If Fuchs had recognized this, he might have been able to tone down this opposition. He was convinced, however, that that his moralistic consideration of history and his historical materialism were in complete accord. This was an illusion, buttressed by a widespread opinion badly in need of

revision: that the bourgeois revolutions, as celebrated by the bourgeoisie itself, are the immediate source of a proletarian revolution (277).

In Benjamin's reading, bourgeois moralism arose out of this self-congratulatory sensibility, culminating in a "class morality" of "conscience" that served to embed the injustice of property relations built on the basis of alienated labor even deeper into economic relations.

The themes of sexuality, moralism, and creativity are read together in section VIII, which serves as the first of two full elaborations of Benjamin's thematic constellation. He begins by quoting a statement by Fuchs that clearly shows the tensions in his moralistic rhetoric about sexuality. Here Fuchs deploys the language of the "Lebensphilosophie" of nineteenth-century Germany, and furthermore, in an evacuated form, the vocabulary of "values" that dominated late German neo-Kantian philosophy around 1900, implying obliquely that sexuality drives reproduction, both artistic and biological. Where Fuchs finds sexuality and creativity demonstrably linked, he values them together. Where he sees sexuality essentially only as embodied practice of pleasure, his moralistic revulsion drives him so far as to dub it "evil." Here Benjamin again quotes from the early parts of the first volume of Fuchs's *Erotische Kunst*:

Concerning sexuality he says: 'All forms of sensual behavior in which the creative element of their law of life becomes visible are justified. Certain forms, however, are evil – namely those in which this highest of drives becomes degraded to a mere means of refined craving for pleasure...' Fuchs never acquired a proper distrust of the bourgeois scorn for pure sexual pleasure and the more or less fantastic means of creating it (278-279).

In a subtle but clear reference to the medicalizing discourses in later nineteenth-century European juridico-legal approaches to forms of non-procreative sexuality, Benjamin further notes how Fuchs, in a parallel manner, accepts and deploys arguments about practices seen as being “against nature” and representing “degenerate individuality” (279). Benjamin thereby closes additional links in his thematic constellation between the body, sexuality, reproduction, and historical knowledge.

Fuchs revels in his material undialectically, failing to recognize the moments of excess in commodity reproduction that destructively enable the accumulation of capital. He thereby accretes and recapitulates bourgeois moral forms including the exclusion and disavowal of non-reproductive sexuality, all via speculative detours into reductive biologicistic and natural-historical argument. Benjamin insists, rather, that the destructive excess itself becomes the engine of historical cognition. He thereby opens up a space for the emergence of social ontology. Fuchs looks on the surface like a libertine, and the German authorities repeatedly took him for a potentially criminal one. Nonetheless he was not. His short-circuited recapitulation of bourgeois modes of production and reproduction drive him to accept and deploy bourgeois sex morality. He was no libertine.

Benjamin appears here to be defending a kind of pleasure principle-driven practice and understanding of sexuality, but one that remains always in the service of historical materialist cognition. Fuchs liberates the gaze in the service of freeing the proletariat, and focuses it on the body and its accretions (fashion, caricature, political symbol). His underdeveloped theory of history, however, leaves the body subject to the coercive and alienating strictures of bourgeois disciplinarity, just as his techno-reproductive method itself resolved his collections into substantial financial and real

property. Benjamin liberates the fragments, remnants, artifacts, and detritus of the body in order to place them in the service of a fully dialectical materialist method that holds promise to give form to social processes. He does so, however, at the expense of requiring a sublation of the body. His method renders and dissolves corporeality into historical cognition.

Here, where Benjamin brings his analysis of Fuchs to its most pointedly powerful critical conclusions, this tension between their respective forms of argument erupts in a telling contrast. This is in the passage where Benjamin specifically explores Fuchs's engagement with the "sexual-psychological problem." At the same time that he praises some of Fuchs's analytical claims, he criticizes Fuchs for a "detour through natural history." He himself, however, deploys an analogous kind of argument in a footnote to this passage, almost as if he wished to demonstrate how his fully developed critical historical methods could do justice to the material of the past in ways that Fuchs's cannot.

In introducing this argument, Benjamin emphasizes that "it is difficult to clarify the sexual-psychological problem" (279). He continues, however, with a specifically historical-materialist discussion that links bourgeois economic and moral practices, and culminates in simultaneous criticism and praise of Fuchs:

But ever since the bourgeoisie came to power, this clarification has become particularly important. This is where taboos against more or less broad areas of sexual pleasure have their place. The repressions which are thereby produced in the masses engender masochistic and sadistic complexes. Those in power then further these complexes by delivering up to the masses those objects which prove most favorable to their own politics.... Fuchs failed to produce a social critique

in this regard. Thus, a passage where he compensates for this lack by by means of a detour through natural history becomes all the more important. The passage in question is his brilliant defense of orgies [found in vol. 2 of *Erotische Kunst*] (279).

Benjamin elaborates on how Fuchs, in this and similar passages, “deals critically with traditional norms” (279). Remarkably, however, and in a way reminiscent of the dialectical irony of his claims about state control of pornography, Benjamin includes a footnote here that itself hypothesizes a straightforwardly natural-historical explanation for human sexual practices, one that centers around precisely the thing that Benjamin thought Fuchs failed to understand: the orgasm:

Fuchs is on the track of something important here. Would it be too rash to connect the threshold between human and animal, such as Fuchs recognizes in the orgy, with that other threshold constituted by the emergence of upright posture? The latter brings with it a phenomenon unprecedented in natural history: partners can look into each other’s eyes during orgasm. Only then does an orgy become possible. What is decisive is not the increase in visual stimuli but rather the fact that now the expression of satiety and even of impotence can itself become an erotic stimulant (299n70).

Benjamin thus demonstrates that it is not biological explanation itself that he resists in Fuchs. Rather, it is inadequate methods that sunder the links between the past and the present, and make it impossible to link embodied practices to social reality.

With this point, Benjamin has rounded out the critical and methodological framing of the essay. He has not, however, yet fully shown how his own methods can do

greater justice to the material of history than can Fuchs's. This he does in the final two sections of the essay, which explore the cultural figure who most engaged Fuchs as a collector and author: the French artist and caricaturist Honoré Daumier. Benjamin allows his scholarly imagination full flight here, in an imagined rhetorical question linking Fuchs's interpretive work, the language of Darwinistic historical argument including its category "life," the production and reproduction of images, and class analysis, and the passage culminates in a claim about the representation of the body:

What impressed Fuchs most was the element of strife – the agonistic dimension – in Daumier's art. Would it be too daring to seek the origin of Daumier's great caricatures in a question? Daumier seems to ask himself: "What would bourgeois people of my time look like if one were to imagine their struggle for existence as taking place in a *palaestra*, an arena?" Daumier translated the public and private life of Parisians into the language of the agon. The athletic tension of the whole body – its muscular movements – arouse Daumier's greatest enthusiasm (281).

Here, the thematic constituents of Benjamin's entire analysis begin to come together in a thorough critical analysis of an artist who made full use of the reproductive technologies of his day. Fuchs recognized the significance of technological reproduction in understanding Daumier and his world, but his methods could not fully carry out the consequences of this recognition (283).

With this discussion, Benjamin completes his constellation of Fuchs's representational world. He can therefore grant Fuchs substantial recognition: Fuchs sought to restore a properly social understanding of art.

Fuchs belongs in this line of great and systematic collectors who were resolutely intent on a single subject matter. It has been his goal to restore to the work of art its existence within society, from which it had been so decisively cut off that the collector could find it only in the art market; there – reduced to a commodity, far removed both from its creators and from those who were able to understand it – the work of art endured.... Fuchs was one of the first to expound the specific character of mass art and this to develop the impulses he had received from historical materialism (283).

Thoroughly and successfully understood historical materialism is, therefore, the means to the end not just of countering the dynamics in capitalism that reduces objects to commodities, but also of creating a new form of social ontology that itself successfully resists its own evacuation through the processes of capital accumulation. Only such a form of knowledge production can do justice to the embodied practices of the production of art, to the sexual lives of individuals in their social surroundings, to the detritus thrown off by capital and its processes, and to the understanding of all of the valences of reproduction that affect and constitute bodies, works of art, and social worlds.

Conclusion: Historical Material, Social Ontology, and Critical Practice Today

Benjamin thus returns, after a thorough exploration of its consequences, to the point he drew at the beginning of the Fuchs essay out of an analysis Engels's discussion, in a letter to Franz Mehring written in 1893, of the fate of thought under the regime of capital. He quotes Engels:

Ever since the bourgeois illusion of the eternity and finality of capitalist production entered the picture, even the overcoming of the mercantilists by the physiocrats and Adam Smith is seen as a mere victory of thought – not as the reflection in thought of the changed economic facts, but as the finally achieved correct insight into actual relations existing always and everywhere (261).

The idea that capital dominates the world eternally leads not just to the commodification of bodies and ideas, but also to the evacuation of genuine political-economic understanding. This is a constitutive moment of the trauma in Eric Santner's concept of the "*traumamtlich*": the residual destructiveness present in the institutions and "offices" of the modern economy (Santner, 2015). Economic facts are emptied of social content by the false totality of capital. Capital thereby interrupts social ontology because ideas become disconnected from historical-political practice. Theory also, thereby, runs the risk of becoming uncritical: it becomes disciplinarily dominating, excluding from its closed sphere of explanatory technique the material from which new knowledge might emerge. Materialist historical practice resolves the possibility of the social out of the false equivalences of commodity production and reproduction. Meaningful critical historical practice thus becomes one with social ontology. Benjamin's materialist history also becomes further congruent with Horkheimer's Critical Theory, but with an even more subtly explored disciplinary and methodological dynamics: true disciplinarity resolves history as dialectical image in the present, and thus grounds the emergence of potential futures. All disciplinarity, if it is to be the source of genuine knowledge, must therefore recognize its essentially violent destructiveness to be capable of this emergent futurity. Method and material must become emergent in one another.

In pursuing this form of methodological-disciplinary renewal, Benjamin dissolves the problem of the representation of the body and of sexuality into his constellation of a materialist history. The body of - and in - history is thus resolved into the materialist historical process that is revealed through the detritus, artifacts, and *disjecta membra* of social relations. Materialist history is, therefore, social ontology, but it requires a simultaneous understanding of the stakes of the sublation of discrete bodies and sexual relations into the constellation of text and image to become so. This is a lesson that today's critical theory needs to make its own.

Today's undialectical discourses of "disruptive innovation" – seeking the destruction and fragmentation of existing modes of production in the name of new ones that seem, primarily, to concentrate capital accumulation only ever more thoroughly in the hands of the partisans of an apolitical or post-political technology – redouble the stakes that Benjamin identified in the nineteenth century's "bungled reception of technology" (266): that they heighten and thicken the reification of reproductive forces in the service of capital. A thoroughly revived materialist practice of the sort that Benjamin imagined, one that contains within itself the constitutive elements of social ontology, might however still hold the promise of attending to the genuine detritus of the contemporary techno-economy, perhaps even including the status of labor as a cast-off artifact of the cycles of capital accumulation through technological recursion. This lesson remains in need of learning and re-learning today.

REFERENCES

- Amidon, K. S. (2008). "Diesmal fehlt die Biologie!" Max Horkheimer, Richard Thurnwald, and the biological prehistory of German *Sozialforschung*. *New German Critique*, 35(2), 103-137.
- Amidon, K. S., & Worrell, M. P. (2008). ARL Gurland, the Frankfurt School, and the critical theory of antisemitism. *telos*, 2008(144), 129-147.
- Anderson, M. M. (1992). *Kafka's clothes: ornament and aestheticism in the Habsburg fin de siecle*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bach, U. E. (2010). "It would be delicious to write books for a new society, but not for the newly rich": Eduard Fuchs between elite and mass culture. In L. Tatlock (Ed.), *Publishing culture and the "reading nation": German book history in the long nineteenth century* (pp. 294-312). Rochester, NY: Camden House.
- Benjamin, W. (1977). *Gesammelte Schriften* (Vol. II.3). Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- Benjamin, W. (2000). *Walter Benjamin: Selected writings, Vol. 2, 1927-1935*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Benjamin, W. (2002). *Walter Benjamin: Selected writings, Vol. 3, 1935-1938*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Caygill, H. (1998). *Walter Benjamin: The colour of experience*. London: Routledge.
- Eiland, H., & Jennings, M. W. (2014). *Walter Benjamin*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gliboff, S. (2008). *HG Bronn, Ernst Haeckel, and the origins of German darwinism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Gorsen, P. (2006). Wer war Eduard Fuchs? *Zeitschrift für Sexualforschung*, 19(3), 215-233.
- Jay, M. (1996). *The dialectical imagination: A history of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*. Berkeley: Univ of California Press.
- Jennings, M. W. (1987). *Dialectical images: Walter Benjamin's theory of literary criticism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ Press.
- Kelly, A. (1981). *The descent of Darwin: The popularization of Darwinism in Germany, 1860-1914*. Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press.
- Richter, G. (2002). *Walter Benjamin and the corpus of autobiography*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press.

Santner, E. L. (2015). *The weight of all flesh: On the subject-matter of political economy*. K. Goodman (Ed.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Weitz, U. (1991). *Salonkultur und Proletariat*. Stuttgart: Stöffler und Schütz.

Weitz, U. (2014). *Der Mann im Schatten: Eduard Fuchs*. Berlin: Dietz.

Wiggershaus, R. (1995). *The Frankfurt School: Its history, theories, and political significance*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Worrell, M. P. (2006). The other Frankfurt School. *Fast Capitalism*, 2(1), 48-72.

The Social Ontology of Capitalism Krier, Daniel and Worrell, Mark P. (eds.) (2016), Palgrave Macmillan US reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan'. 'This extract is taken from the author's original manuscript and has not been edited. The definitive, published, version of record is available here: <http://www.palgrave.com/br/book/9781349950614>