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## **Street culture**

### **The dialectic of urbanism in Walter Benjamin's *Passagen-werk***

**Abstract** This article develops a sociological reading of Walter Benjamin's 'Arcades Project', or *Passagen-werk*. Specifically, the essay seeks to make explicit Benjamin's non-dualistic account of structure and agency in the urban milieu. I characterize this account as the 'dialectic of urbanism', and argue that one of the central insights of Benjamin's *Passagen-werk* is that it locates an emergent and innovative cultural form – a distinctive 'street culture' or jointly shared way of modern urban life – within haussmannizing techniques of architectural administration and spatial domination. In the modern metropolis, Benjamin sees a new kind of collective – an embedded and effervescent sociocultural group held together not by the functionalist imperatives of capitalist urban planning but by an improvisational mode of street life.

**Key words** agency · culture · embeddedness · structure · urbanism

Streets are the dwelling place of the collective. The collective is an eternally restless, eternally moving being that – between building walls – lives, experiences, recognizes, and invents as much as individuals do within the protection of their own four walls. For this collective, glossy enameled shop signs are a wall decoration as good as, if not better than, an oil painting in the drawing room of a bourgeois; walls with their 'Post No Bills' are its writing desk, newspaper stands its libraries, mailboxes its bronze busts, benches its bedroom furniture, and the café terrace is the balcony from which it looks down on its household. The section of railing where road workers hang their jackets is the vestibule, and the gateway which leads from the row of courtyards out into the open is the long corridor that daunts the bourgeois, being for the courtyards the entry to the chambers of the city. Among these latter, the arcade was the drawing room. More than anywhere else, the street reveals itself in the arcade as the furnished and familiar interior of the masses. (Paris Arcades, M3a,4<sup>1</sup>)

While his reputation as one of the pre-eminent essayists, literary critics and philosophers of the 20th century has been secure for several decades, core insights in Walter Benjamin's *Passagen-werk* cast light on a thematic that is perhaps most accurately characterized as neither literary nor philosophical but rather *sociological*.<sup>2</sup> The thematic, to put the matter rather crudely, is that of structure and agency in the urban milieu. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that one of the overarching concerns of Benjamin's *Passagen-werk* is the complex relationship between distinctly urban structures – arcades, one-way streets, broad boulevards, transportation hubs, public squares and parks – and the perceptive schemes, dreams, durable collective dispositions, and embedded practices of the agents who, according to Benjamin, 'interiorize' such structures.<sup>3</sup> In Benjamin the interiorization of urban space is the dialectical process by which structures become ingrained in practices and practices make transformative use of structures – turning shop signs into wall decorations, walls into writing desks, newspaper stands into libraries, benches into bedroom furniture and, indeed, boulevards into barricades. For Benjamin the city is a site of *porosity*: in the city streets, buildings and collective actions interpenetrate in what Benjamin called in his essay on Naples 'unforeseen constellations'.<sup>4</sup>

Though Benjamin himself never uses the phrase, I want to characterize and elaborate this relationship of constellated interpenetration as the 'dialectic of urbanism' in what follows. I want to argue that what distinguishes Benjamin's formulation of a dialectical urbanism is its singular ability to illuminate how the modern city can be *both* an administratively structured 'objective' site or force-field of planned relations *and* a reflexively structuring 'subjective' space of collective dwelling, improvising, appropriating, dreaming, innovating, struggling and transforming. The core strength of Benjamin's account of urbanism is that it locates an emergent and innovative cultural form – a distinctive street culture or jointly shared 'way of life' or 'way of making', to borrow useful phrases from Louis Wirth and Michel de Certeau – *within* techniques of architectural administration and spatial domination.<sup>5</sup> Put simply, in the modern metropolis Benjamin sees a new kind of collective – an emergent and effervescent sociocultural group whose existence is determined not by the functionalist imperatives of modern capitalism but by an improvisational mode of embedded street life.

The argument to be advanced here thus seeks to make explicit a distinctly *sociological* account of urbanism in Benjamin's *Passagen-werk*, and to suggest the relevance of that account for contemporary discussions of social action and urban life. In the first instance, I want to show how Benjamin's 'Arcades Project' contains a richly materialist account of urbanism, one that micrologically describes the city as a dense composition of ensembles of sociocultural practices and

empirical grids of administrative techniques. Beyond that, I want to suggest that such an account contains one of Benjamin's chief but hitherto undeveloped contributions to social theory, and in particular to the theory of social action and change. Indeed, among the many things Benjamin provides us with in his study of Paris is a uniquely non-dualistic description of a street culture in which collective improvisational action is embedded in modern urban structures in potentially context-transforming ways.<sup>6</sup>

## I

In order to grasp the uniqueness of Benjamin's account of urbanism it is necessary to begin by contrasting that account with two of the dominant German sociological discussions of urbanism and urbanization Benjamin draws on in the 1930s: Friedrich Engels's ethnography of the conditions of the working class in England and his essays on housing, and Georg Simmel's writings on the sociology of urban life. Benjamin was of course quite familiar with both Engels and Simmel, as the not infrequent citations of and allusions to their works in his own writings on Paris (and elsewhere) demonstrate. But, as we shall see, it would be wrong to construe Benjamin's analyses of Paris as a mere application or extension of the urban analyses of Engels and Simmel. On the contrary: where Engels and Simmel see urbanism primarily in quasi-functionalist terms – as a force that liquidates collective life under the imperatives of industrial capitalism – Benjamin suggests that the modern city is also the site of the emergence of new and innovative forms of shared *social life*.

In his 1844 study of the conditions of the working class in England Engels describes firsthand the daily degradations wrought by the intersection of modern capitalism and urbanization. Continuous repression of numerous human capacities in favor of production, persistent homogenization of heterogeneous ways of life, relentless thingification of human subjects, deepening and ever-widening material inequalities between the laboring class and those who profit from that labor, unimaginable squalor and overcrowding – all this Engels describes in rich detail in his well-known study.

Yet it is not simply the physical and moral depredations of capitalism that Engels chronicles. One of the central objectives of Engels's work is to demonstrate the extent to which the conditions of the working class are not the result of the collective actions of that class but rather are created and administratively maintained by urban planning and design. Engels repeatedly emphasizes the direct connection between capitalism and modern urban planning; in Engels the

potential emergence of an urban culture is wholly undermined by the architectural administration of urban space.

Indeed, for Engels there is a *causal* link between ‘the dissolution of mankind into monads’, as he describes modern urban life, and the administration of urban space in industrial cities such as London and Manchester, where boulevards, main thoroughfares, and building façades are designed to conceal everything that disturbs the eyes and nerves and pocketbook of the bourgeois shopper.<sup>7</sup> This kind of ‘shameful piece of town planning’ – which Engels suggests is common to all big cities – *(re)produces* spatial forms that both atomize the collective and make invisible the degrading reduction of human life to an animalistic state of nature under the imperatives of modern capitalist urbanization.<sup>8</sup>

For Engels, such an orchestrated production of urban space has not merely aesthetic but also, and more fundamentally, economic and political dimensions, as Engels was to argue especially in his later (1872) essays on the growing 19th-century problem of urban housing shortages. From Engels’s perspective there is an unmistakable political economy at work in the ‘housing question’. That economy works in the following way. Large industrial cities draw huge numbers of workers to their core. This influx, however, is met with building plans that are designed to accommodate not the everyday life and collective practices of laborers but rather *commerce*; hence it is streets, and not workers’ quarters, that are improved and expanded. Such improvements and expansions of urban thoroughfares, moreover, are designed to increase real estate values, ex-urbanize the laboring class, and reduce the potential of workers’ rebellions. Urban planning thus ‘beautifies’ by strategically dividing and peripheralizing undesirable or potentially unruly populations, thereby controlling the threat of class conflict and raising property values by dominating the means of *spatial (re)production* in the city.

In his later essays on housing Engels makes precisely this point about the political economy of spatial division and ex-urbanization in his reflections on the planning of Paris carried out according to the ‘method’ of Baron Georges-Eugene Haussmann, prefect of the department of the Seine from 1853 to 1870. Engels writes:

By ‘Haussmann’ I mean the practice which has now become general of making breaches in the working class quarters of our big towns, and particularly in those which are centrally situated, quite apart from whether this is done from consideration of public health and for beautifying the town, or owing to the demand for big centrally situated business premises, or owing to traffic requirements, such as the laying down of railways, streets, etc. No matter how different the reasons may be, the result is everywhere the same: the scandalous alleys and lanes disappear . . . but they reappear again immediately somewhere else.<sup>9</sup>

Or again, in the same context Engels says:

The growth of the big modern cities gives the land in certain areas . . . an artificial and often colossally increasing value; the buildings erected on these areas depress this value, instead of increasing it, because they no longer correspond to the changed circumstances. They are pulled down and replaced by others. This takes place above all with workers' houses which are situated centrally and whose rents, even with the greatest overcrowding, can never, or only very slowly, increase above a certain maximum. They are pulled down and in their stead shops, warehouses and public buildings are erected. Through its Haussmann in Paris, Bonapartism exploited this tendency tremendously. . . . The result is that the workers are forced out of the center of the towns towards the outskirts . . .<sup>10</sup>

Of course 'haussmannization', and Engels's discussion of that process, is of particular interest to Benjamin in his study of Paris, as is well known. In fact, it was Haussmann himself who wrote that 'Architecture is nothing more than Administration'.<sup>11</sup> As an architectural mode of dominating urban space haussmannization is a core feature of Benjamin's *Passagen-werk*. Yet it would be a mistake to say that Benjamin's discussion of haussmannization is merely a restatement of Engels's position. To anticipate for a moment the argument to be developed in what follows: what distinguishes Benjamin from Engels is that the former views urban life not as the brute 'murder' or death of the social by capitalist-inspired urban planning but as a *dialectic* in which vibrant cultural forms and collectives emerge *in the streets*.<sup>12</sup> For Benjamin, the joint actions of the proletariat, however exploited and degraded that class may be, produce not merely commodities but also symbolic forms – shared situated orientations towards and appropriations of urban space – that harbor the potential to alter the reifying locations in which those forms are embedded.

Like Engels's, Simmel's discussion of the city takes into account the power of capitalist forms of organization and administration to disintegrate collectives and disfigure individuals. He sees how the capitalist metropolis atomistically structures human existence, producing, like the money that animates it, 'de-colored' and badly reified individuals.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, in his 1903 essay on the metropolis and mental life Simmel makes much of the role of 'dissociation' in modern capitalist urban life. 'Dissociation' is for Simmel the general processes through which individuals become both psychically hardened to harsh urban environments and uncoupled from one another as an adaptive response to the colonization of human interaction by the impersonal rationality of capitalistic existence in the city. Or, as Simmel himself says:

Punctuality, calculability, and exactness, which are required by the complications and extensiveness of metropolitan life, are not only most intimately connected with its capitalistic and intellectualistic character but also color

the content of life and are conducive to the exclusion of those irrational, instinctive, sovereign human traits and impulses which originally seek to determine the form of life from within instead of receiving it from the outside in a general, schematically precise form.<sup>14</sup>

We could summarize Simmel's basic point here by saying that the cause of the dissociatedness of urban existence is simply the calculative, instrumental reason of modern capitalism.

But unlike Engels, Simmel locates in the economic rationalization of urban life and the atomization that accompanies such rationalization a new kind of socialization and, more controversially, a certain individual freedom. According to Simmel, along with the psychic hardening of individuals come new possibilities for individual *self*-constitution. It is for this reason that Simmel strikingly claims that 'what appears here [in the capitalist metropolis] as dissociation is in reality only one of the elementary forms of socialization. . . . It assures the individual of a type and degree of personal freedom to which there is no analogy in other circumstances.'<sup>15</sup>

According to Simmel, the dissolution of collective life in fact outfits urban actors with the mental freedom to cultivate a unique self – a self whose emancipation is made possible by the functionalist imperatives of the urban milieu, where sociality is marked by ever-shifting encounters, alliances and only loose or 'secondary' ties to others. Thus for Simmel the paradoxical silver lining, as it were, of modern urban life is that the 'metropolitan type' gains a certain personal freedom to individuate himself precisely because he is not entangled in the kind of tight web of rigid norms, obligations and rules characteristic of more traditional, non-urban social forms.<sup>16</sup> Put rather crudely, Simmel's claim is that while the structures and routines of city life are profoundly dissociating, such dissociating features make possible a flexible scheme of perceptions – an urban habitus, as it were – of creative individualism. Thus in Simmel's view the urban milieu, while it 'murders' the collective, makes possible the birth of a new, psychically emancipated, self-made individual.

When viewed in this way, Simmel's dissociated individualism presents an aesthetic of self-making that stands largely in contrast to Engels's reifying functionalism. Nevertheless, though Simmel's theory of an urban habitus that 'socializes by dissociation' helps to distinguish it from Engels's analyses of urban class domination, its rather heroic account of the dissociated individual's ability to wrest a realm of psychic freedom from the rationalized necessities of the capitalist city must not be construed as the basis for a culture or *collective* action. On the contrary, Simmel presents his metropolitan type as an *individualistic effect* of the leveling tendencies of modern city life. In Simmel (as in Engels) there is no sign of a collective that actively interiorizes urban

structures in ways that transform not merely actors but also the locations in which they are embedded. For Simmel, human freedom in the urban milieu is not made by men and women; instead, it is a dissociating by-product of the force of the metropolis. Put differently, Simmel contrasts his lone, blasé individual with the metropolis in such a way that the former is deprived of the shared practical power it would need to reflexively appropriate and transform the latter.<sup>17</sup> In short, like the reductivism of Engels's functionalism, the aestheticism of Simmel's individualism suffers from a functionalistic one-sidedness: it overdetermines the 'objective' forces of the urban milieu. For Benjamin, as we shall see in the next sections, the modern metropolis is not merely a rigidly administered space of atomistic division or individual self-making but also an effervescent site of collective interiorizing.

## II

The dialectic of urbanism in Walter Benjamin is a dialectic of spatial domination (or administration) and collective interiorizing (improvisational dwelling, and even struggling, as we shall see directly). In it appears not a 'murdered social' of dissociated individuals but a distinct *cultural* form, an 'eternally restless, eternally moving being that – between building walls – lives, experiences, recognizes, and invents as much as individuals do' (M3a4). Indeed, while Benjamin acknowledges that the cause of 'the demise of the arcades [is] widened walkways, electrical light, ban on prostitution, open-air culture' (C2a,12) – that is, clearly haussmannian – it is nonetheless in the open ruins and widened boulevards of the urban social that the 'restless' movements and ways of life of a collective emerge. Put most generally, what Benjamin's *Passagen-werk* demonstrates is that the demolitions and boulevards of haussmannization do not – in fact cannot – succeed entirely in dominating the ways of life peculiar to the modern city. For Benjamin, where there are streets there is collective improvisational dwelling and struggling.

Thus it is no accident that Benjamin describes Paris not merely as a haussmannized space of domination but also as 'a counterpart in the social order to what Vesuvius is in the geographic order: a menacing, hazardous massif, an ever-active hotbed of revolution . . . [in which] the lava of revolution provides uniquely fertile ground for the blossoming of art, festivity, fashion' (C1,6). Paris is for Benjamin nothing less than the Vesuvius of the social. Though there are, to be sure, many moments in the *Passagen-werk* that capture the 'hotbed of revolution' and the cultural magma of Parisian existence, two in particular deserve special consideration in the context of a discussion of the dialectic of structure

and agency in the urban milieu. The first of these, to which I have already alluded, is the interiorized practice of 'dwelling' (*das Wohnen*). The second is what I want to describe as the interiorized practice of 'struggling' (*das Kampfen*). While the former turns arcades into drawing-rooms, the latter turns boulevards into barricades. Taken together, these two constitute the central features of what I have been calling 'street culture' in Benjamin's *Passagen-werk*.

### III

The motif of dwelling (*das Wohnen, zu bewohnen*) runs throughout the *Passagen-werk*. In fact, for Benjamin the 'difficulty in reflecting on dwelling' (I4,4) constitutes one of the core challenges of his study of Paris; he even goes so far as to say that 'we must understand dwelling in its most extreme form as a condition of nineteenth-century human existence [*Daseinszustand*]' (I4,4). For Benjamin, dwelling is not merely an existential housing of the self but fundamentally a practical way of being in or 'interiorizing' the world – an 'Urform' of *Dasein* (I4,4), as Benjamin says.

Yet dwelling is for Benjamin not a passive residence that attends upon Being, as Heidegger puts it in *Sein und Zeit*, but an historically active practice of collective *in-habiting*.<sup>18</sup> It is for this reason that Benjamin contrasts dwelling in a house with dwelling in a case or shell (*Gehäuse*). 'The ur-form of all dwelling', Benjamin writes, '*is not being in a house but being in a shell. The shell bears the impression of its inhabitant*' (I4,4; emphasis added). Here what Benjamin is saying is that dwelling in 19th-century Paris is not a matter of mere bourgeois accommodation or self-preservation. Rather, it is a kind of *in-dwelling* – an improvised appropriation or interiorization that makes a home in, leaves a stamp on, and alters the space it inhabits. Benjamin makes this difficult but crucial point again in a subsequent entry in convolute I. There he writes that *Wohnen* should be conceived as a transitive. The 'lived-in' or 'inhabited life' ('*gewohnten Lebens*') is an active practice. It is a kind of being as doing that – hidden in the 'hasty actuality' (*hastigen Aktualität*) of its behavior – takes as its object and fashions for itself a shell (I4,5).

Perhaps the truly distinctive character of Benjamin's formulation of dwelling as actively inhabiting a shell (*Gehäuse*) is most readily apparent when that formulation is contrasted not with Heidegger's existential analytic of *Dasein* but with Max Weber's sociological conceptualization of modernity. It was of course Weber who argued that the rationalizing imperatives of the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism had produced '*ein stahlhartes Gehäuse*', an iron-hard shell or casing in

which modern cultural life petrified.<sup>19</sup> For Weber such a shell is anything but a site of porosity, a locus of the complex interpenetration of structure and agent, as his stark metaphor clearly suggests. Indeed, in Weber the '*stahlhartes Gehäuse*' of modernity functionally determines the life-world of those entrapped in it. Benjamin, to be sure, clearly recognizes the threat posed by a totally rationalized and administered world, as we shall see in his considerations of the administration of urban space. But rather than overdraw or totalize such a threat, Benjamin includes an account of the potential of modern capitalist forms of urban culture to actively shape or 'interiorize' the very structures or shells in which they dwell: for Benjamin it is not simply that the shell shapes the inhabitant but also and more fundamentally that, to repeat the line cited above, 'the shell bears the impression of its inhabitant'. In this way Benjamin's conception of embedded dwelling stands in sharp contrast not only to Heidegger's formulation of a passive and abstract Dasein but also and perhaps more fundamentally to the so-called 'iron cage' thesis of modernity outlined by Weber.<sup>20</sup>

Of course Benjamin is careful to avoid a nostalgic de-historicizing of this situated practice of dwelling. He points out that the 'being of the shell' (*das Gehäusewesen*) peculiar to the 19th-century city becomes extinct in the 20th century, and with it the actively 'inhabited life' is greatly diminished (I4,4). For the living of the 20th century it is hotel rooms that increasingly become the houses of the collective (I4,4). Nevertheless, in Benjamin's urban historiography there is no reactionary Heideggerean yearning for 'authentic' being in the world. Nor is there any hint of a kind of Weberian prophesying about future existence in the iron shell of modernity. For Benjamin city cultures are historical through and through; they are in fact profoundly *transient* material ways of life.

Yet in the city the ruins of the collective ways of life of the past are, in Benjamin's *Passagen-werk*, never simply past, dead, or lost to the 'progressive' demolitions and architectural plans of urban administration. Indeed, any discussion of the historical decay of the practice of urban dwelling in Benjamin must pause over the following entry from convolute M. There Benjamin makes explicit the Parisians' technique of *inhabiting* their streets by citing a passage written in 1857 by Adolf Stahr.

Returning by the Rue Saint-Honoré, we met with an eloquent example of that Parisian street industry which can make use of anything. Men were at work repairing the pavement and laying pipeline and, as a result, in the middle of the street there was an area which was blocked off but which was embanked and covered with stones. On this spot street vendors had immediately installed themselves, and five or six were selling writing implements and notebooks, cutlery, lampshades, garters, embroidered collars,

and all sorts of trinkets. Even a dealer in secondhand goods had opened a branch office here and was displaying on the stones his bric-a-brac of old cups, plates, glasses, and so forth. . . . They are simply wizards at making virtue of necessity. (M3,1)

Reflecting on this spontaneous and collectively innovative inhabiting of urban space, Benjamin adds: ‘*Seventy years later, I had the same experience at the corner of the Boulevard Saint-Germain and the Boulevard Raspail. Parisians make the street an interior*’ (M3,1, emphasis added). Here we see how in Benjamin’s analysis the practical know-how or ‘feel’ for interiorizing urban structures and spaces, however dulled by the 20th century, remains a persistent and vibrant feature of the collective life of Parisian street culture.<sup>21</sup>

#### IV

Of all the convolutes in Benjamin’s *Passagen-werk*, the one devoted to *Hausmannisierung* and *Barrikadenkämpfe* is especially relevant for our purposes here. Hausmannization is the structural process of the administration and domination of urban space. Barricade struggles are the effervescent agentive appropriations and transformations of hausmannized boulevards into theaters of collective struggle. Hence convolute E contains in its very title what I have been calling the dialectic of urbanism. Further, it has as its explicit theme the *disenchanted* or political power of the urban collective. For while dwelling makes the street a home – and is thus an important aspect of street culture – Benjamin maintains that, in the end only struggles and revolution create ‘an open space [*das Freie*] for the city’ (M3); and it is the revolution wrought by struggle that ‘disenchants the city’ (M3). Put simply, for Benjamin urbanism is also a *political* way of life.

Hausmannization, as we already have seen in a brief discussion of Engels, was a kind of architectural aestheticization of urban domination carried out according to the logic of capitalism. It was meant to divide, weaken, make invisible and ultimately ex-urbanize the collective dwelling of working-class Parisians. In it was also hidden a kind of idealist rage against the local and the unique and a hope that the complexities and new cultural forms of modern industrial society could be managed and disciplined by top-down planning. This is no surprise. In 19th century Paris the authoritarian dream of the disciplined metropolis fused with Hausmann’s own predilections for system and order. Hausmann, as David Jordan says in *Transforming Paris*, ‘did not easily tolerate the unique. His desire for uniformity, his sense of the city as a system made him suspicious. . . . The individual building, along with the individual dwelling, had no place in his city.’<sup>22</sup>

Benjamin is not insensitive to the powerfully reifying effects of haussmannization on city dwellers. In convolute E he cites various texts, including those of Engels, that call attention to the atomizing and peripheralizing outcomes of Haussmann's administration of Paris (see especially E1,4; E1a,1; E2,1; E7,5; E8a,2; E9a,8; and E12,1).<sup>23</sup> Yet Benjamin also emphasizes how, even in the highly administrated confines of such urban planning, collective forms of struggle continually emerge. Not despite haussmannization but precisely because of the ways in which social groups disenchantingly interiorize haussmannized spaces. What haussmannization produces is not merely boulevards but also the potential for new forms of collective *political* action. Those workers whom the logic of urban capitalism forces to collaborate to build the very boulevards that are designed to eliminate them from the city will use the occasion to contest and disenchant that logic from *within*; they will, that is to say, reconfigure and reclaim the terrain of the urban landscape they inhabit by constructing barricades out of boulevards.

Benjamin makes precisely this point about the potential for embedded counter-disciplinary collaboration in Paris in his citation of Georges Laronze. 'The comte de Durfort-Civrac objected', Benjamin writes, 'that these new boulevards, which were supposed to aid in repressing disturbances, would actually make them more likely because, in order to construct them, it was necessary to assemble a mass of workers' (E3a,4). And indeed, Benjamin remarks in his 1939 Exposé for the Arcades Project that barricade building – unthinkable in the absence of the 'unsalaried work' or collaboration of an effervescent collective – is in fact stronger, more elaborate, and better designed in 1871, that is, *after* Haussmann's boulevards are carved into Paris.<sup>24</sup>

Here the material significance of barricades and barricade struggles in Benjamin's descriptions of the haussmannization of Parisian life must be made explicit. For barricades are the material accomplishments of the collective *political* interiorization of urban space: they are not dwellings but rather arenas of struggle. But like the collective practice of dwelling, the erection of barricades by the working class, however short-lived the existence of such barricades may be, demonstrates a highly reflexive, practical orientation to streets and their uses and functions. Those who establish barricades view and in fact transform streets into improvisational sites of collective expression and fields of political struggle. Indeed, in *Barrikadenkämpfe* city streets become public theaters of creative contestation and material counter-appropriation. That is to say that when social struggles take to the streets, the forms of direct action such struggles assume alter the locus of urban political power: the authoritatively administered society of Haussmann is countered by the collective effervescence of direct political action in the urban milieu.

Benjamin's central point in convolute E is that the revolutionary actions of those who live in the city come about through the innovatively collaborative interiorization of urban spaces. However haussmannized such spaces may be, they in fact carry within them the potential for counter-appropriations, makeshift alterations, and collective change. By dialecticizing urbanism in this way, Benjamin is able to demonstrate how urban political change does not come flying in, as it were, from the outside. Instead, in the city it is collective forms of struggling that harbor the potential to clear the way for new forms of dwelling. Hence for Benjamin street culture is both an embedded sociocultural art and a profoundly situated political practice. Such an insight is the very hallmark of Benjamin's dialectical theory of urbanism.

## V

I want to close by suggesting that the relevance of the dialectic of urbanism in Benjamin's *Passagen-werk* stems from Benjamin's avoidance of the dualistic pitfalls of contemporary formulations of the relationship between structure and agency in social theory. On the one hand, Benjamin does not reify urban structures or degrade the collective efficacy of sociocultural groups. This distinguishes Benjamin's work not only from a thinker such as Engels, as we have seen, but also from the kinds of neo-functional theories of 'the culture industry', 'the state apparatus' or 'the penal society' one encounters in the work of Horkheimer and Adorno, Althusser, and Foucault. For Benjamin, as we have seen, the improvised dwelling and struggling of city life is never atomistically reducible to so many homologous effects of power.

On the other hand, Benjamin rightly does not psychologize or hypostatize individual agency. This in turn distinguishes Benjamin's social theory from Simmel's creative but culture-less individualism, as well as from more recent analytic conceptions of the agent as a free-floating, empirically disembedded 'rational engineer' or a 'competent speaker' that one finds in Hempel and Habermas, respectively. For Benjamin, it is constitutive of the ways of life of urban agents that they are collectively embedded in complex structures of administration and domination in non-determining or actively 'interiorizing' ways. Rather than seeking to develop a counterfactual account of the way in which the *rational discourses* of urban actors transcend the locations in which they are situated, Benjamin makes explicit the context-transforming potential of the *improvisational actions* empirically enabled by such locations: streets provide, quite literally, the material resources for shared ways of dwelling and struggling.

In short, Benjamin's *Passagen-werk* is unique insofar as it presents

interiorizing actions such as dwelling and struggling as shared and situated practices or highly reflexive *ways of city-life*. Such a *sociological* perspective on urban practices suggests that Benjamin's work shares little with the tradition with which Benjamin was and typically remains associated, that of the Frankfurt School. Indeed, the theory of action evinced in the dialectic of urbanism stands in sharp contrast to the one-sided philosophical theory of instrumental action asserted by Horkheimer and Adorno in their totalizing formulation of a 'dialectic of enlightenment'. Instead, Benjamin's sense of action and culture seeks to capture both the limiting and enabling features of planned urban environments, and the collaborative appropriations and transformations of such environments by those who inhabit them. Furthermore, Benjamin's *Passagen-werk*, however idiosyncratically researched and presented, offers us a kind of empirical case study of embedded action that may be productively contrasted with Habermas's communications theoretic: in the urban milieu it is not the idealizing, context-transcending norms of validity-claims but rather the practical, context-dependent ways of improvisational dwelling and struggling that bind social actors together.

Of course it would be an exaggeration to say that Benjamin's *Passagen-werk* presents us with a *critical* theory of urban life. Yet there is, or so I have tried to argue, a rich sociology of urbanism at work in Benjamin's study of Paris. Admittedly, such an argument departs from the established literary and philosophical approaches to Benjamin's work; it also breaks with the canonical highlighting of the disjointed and unfinished character of the *Passagen-werk*. Rather than view the fragments of the *Passagen-werk* as 'the materials used in building a house, the outline of which has just been marked in the ground',<sup>25</sup> a much stronger claim has been developed here – one that has sought to show the uniqueness of Benjamin's account of urbanism and the relevance of that account for contemporary discussions of social theories of action and urban practice. In the *Passagen-werk* Benjamin describes an emergent way of collective street life embedded in contexts of spatial administration and domination. Hence the dialectic of urbanism presented in Benjamin's *Passagen-werk* is not merely a blueprint for some future project. Instead, it is a material description of the persistent power, however attenuated, of urban collectives to transform the cities they inhabit, if only one street at a time.<sup>26</sup>

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## Notes

- 1 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 423 (translation modified). References to the *Passagen-werk* hereafter cited in the text by convolute letter and number and silently modified where necessary.
- 2 Existing studies that develop the sociological relevance of Benjamin's work include David Frisby's *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson's *Paris as Revolution: Writing the Nineteenth-Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), and Sharon Zukin's *The Culture of Cities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995). See also chapter 2 of my study, *Interpreting Culture: Rethinking Method and Truth in Social Theory* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2001).
- 3 Of course in the German discussion Benjamin is not alone in his interest in the embeddedness of urban practices. Here one thinks not only of Kracauer's work, but also that of core works in urban sociology such as those of Engels and Simmel. I shall contrast Benjamin's work with that of Engels and Simmel in what follows. For a discussion of the shared sociological motifs of Benjamin, Kracauer and Simmel see especially Frisby, cited above.
- 4 See Benjamin's essay on Naples collected in *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1978), p. 166. This kind of non-determining porosity of structure and agency is similarly captured in the *Denkbilder* of Benjamin's *One-Way Street*, also collected in *Reflections*. See especially 'Construction Site', where Benjamin claims that children are 'irresistibly drawn by the detritus generated by building. . . . In waste products they recognize the face that the world of things turns directly and solely to them. In using these things they do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the artifact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship' (p. 69).
- 5 See Wirth's pioneering 1938 essay, 'Urbanism as a Way of Life', collected in *On Cities and Social Life* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1964). For a discussion of 'ways of making', see de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), especially the sections devoted to Foucault and Bourdieu and walking in the city. And for a not unrelated discussion of culture and administration, see Adorno's 'Kultur und Verwaltung', translated and published in a relevant collection of essays edited by Dennis Crow and entitled *Philosophical Streets: New Approaches to Urbanism* (Washington, DC: Maisonneuve Press, 1990). Finally, for a more literary treatment of Benjamin's study of 'streets as texts', see Eckhard Koeln's *Strassenrausch* (Berlin: Das Arsenal, 1989).
- 6 Susan Buck Morss's *The Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989) devotes less than a dozen pages specifically to Benjamin's sociological formulation of urbanism. The influential essays collected in *On Walter Benjamin*, ed. Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988) contain only

Peter Szondi's literary reflections on Benjamin's 'city portraits'. Other influential commentators, including Habermas, Wolin, and Jay, have nothing to say about the issue of urbanism in Benjamin; for notable exceptions, however, see Alexander Gelley's fine 'City Texts: Representation, Semiology, Urbanism', collected in *Politics, Theory and Contemporary Culture*, ed. Mark Poster (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), and Graeme Gilloch's *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996). In prominent non-dualistic sociological theories of the situatedness of social action, such as the practice theory of Pierre Bourdieu and the structuration theory of Anthony Giddens, Benjamin's name does not appear.

- 7 Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, trans. W. O. Henderson and W. H. Chaloner (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1958), p. 31 (translation modified).
- 8 Indeed, Engels describes city life in Hobbesean terms, as a war of all against all. See especially pp. 31ff.
- 9 Engels, *The Housing Question* (New York: International Publishers, 1988), pp. 74–5.
- 10 *ibid.*, p. 23.
- 11 As cited in David P. Jordan's *Transforming Paris: The Life and Labors of Baron Haussmann* (New York: Free Press, 1995), pp. 159–60.
- 12 For Engels's allusion to 'social murder', see *The Condition of the Working Class*.
- 13 See Simmel's essay, 'Metropolis and Mental Life', collected in *Georg Simmel: On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald Levine (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1971). Of course the social function of money in modern life is the explicit topic of Simmel's *Philosophy of Money*, a text Benjamin cites often in his study of Paris but which, for reasons of focus and space, I shall not discuss here.
- 14 *ibid.*, pp. 328–9.
- 15 *ibid.*, p. 332.
- 16 Thus Simmel contrasts the disintegrated freedoms of modern city life with the communal restrictions of the rural existence of antiquity. See esp. pp. 332ff.
- 17 On precisely this problem in Simmel see Michael P. Smith's *The City and Social Theory* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1979), esp. chapter 3.
- 18 See, for example, Benjamin's description of the interiorization of the arcades, where the very structural features of the arcades – iron and glass – do not determine practices so much as they are actively inhabited or appropriated and transformed by them. Or, as Benjamin himself says, in the arcades 'pimps are the iron bearings' of the street, and 'its glass breakables are the whores' (F3,2).
- 19 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Harper, 1930), p. 181 (translation modified).
- 20 For an illuminating discussion of how Weber's English translator, Talcott Parsons, rather than Weber himself, is the true author of the well-known 'iron cage' thesis, see Peter Baehr's 'The "Iron Cage" and the Shell as Hard as Steel: Parsons, Weber, and the *Stahlhartes Gehäuse* Metaphor in *The*

- Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, *History and Theory* 40(2) (2001): 153–69.
- 21 To be sure, Benjamin often filters this observation through his discussion of the flâneur. Parisian streets ‘created’ the flâneur, for whom the city splits ‘into its dialectical poles. It opens up to him as a landscape, even as it closes around him as a room’ (M1,4). For a discussion of the definition and function of the flâneur in urban life – a discussion that is beyond the scope of the present inquiry – see *The Flâneur*, ed. Keith Tester (New York: Routledge, 1994). See also Zukin’s discussion of the flâneur in her *The Cultures of Cities*, cited above.
  - 22 Jordan, *Transforming Paris*, p. 160.
  - 23 But see also convolute J, where Benjamin says that ‘It is a very specific experience that the proletariat has in the big city – one in many respects similar to that which the immigrant has there’ (J66a,5). For his citation of Engels’s well-known comments on Manchester, see M5a1.
  - 24 See Benjamin, ‘Exposé’ (1939), collected in *The Arcades Project*, p. 24.
  - 25 See Rolf Tiedemann’s ‘Dialectics at a Standstill’, collected in Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 931.
  - 26 An early draft of this article was written and presented in conjunction with a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) seminar devoted to Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of the City, held at the University of California-Irvine (Summer, 2001). I am grateful to the NEH for its financial support, as well as to my seminar co-participants and the seminar leader, Alexander Gelley, for helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.