



Scan to know paper details and
author's profile

Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin: Eros of Friendship and Elective Affinities in Dark Times

Maria Francisca Pinheiro Coelho

Universidade de Brasili

ABSTRACT

When we talk about the relationship between Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) and Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) the friendship between the two authors is always remembered. The philosopher Hans Jonas - Arendt's friend since they were classmates at the University in Marburg – in the tributes paid on the occasion of her death, highlighted her vocation for friendship. According to him, what moved her was the Eros of friendship (*Eros der Freundschaft*).

Among her closest friends, there was Walter Benjamin, with whom she was familiar during the exile in Paris, in the years from 1936 to 1940. What I would like to show is that friendship as conceived and grown in practice by the two thinkers would be in the center of their life as a moral trace. This paper aims to broaden the relationship between Arendt and Benjamin in two areas here interrelated: friendship, built in the situation of Jewish-German refugees philosophers in Paris, and the elective affinities in relation to the vision of modernity and to the concept of history.

Classification: For Code: 370199

Language: English



London
Journals Press

LJP Copyright ID: 573333

Print ISSN: 2515-5784

Online ISSN: 2515-5792

London Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Sciences

Volume 19 | Issue 4 | Compilation 1.0



© 2019. Maria Francisca Pinheiro Coelho. This is a research/review paper, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 Unported License <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>, permitting all noncommercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin: Eros of Friendship and Elective Affinities in Dark Times

Maria Francisca Pinheiro Coelho

ABSTRACT

When¹ we talk about the relationship between Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) and Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) the friendship between the two authors is always remembered. The philosopher Hans Jonas - Arendt's friend since they were classmates at the University in Marburg – in the tributes paid on the occasion of her death, highlighted her vocation for friendship. According to him, what moved her was the Eros of friendship (*Eros der Freundschaft*).

Among her closest friends, there was Walter Benjamin, with whom she was familiar during the exile in Paris, in the years from 1936 to 1940. What I would like to show is that friendship as conceived and grown in practice by the two thinkers would be in the center of their life as a moral trace. This paper aims to broaden the relationship between Arendt and Benjamin in two areas here interrelated: friendship, built in the situation of Jewish-German refugees philosophers in Paris, and the elective affinities in relation to the vision of modernity and to the concept of history.²

In suggesting to approach the interface between the two authors through the concept of elective affinities, the objective is to explore the dialogue

between their thought. Elective affinity is defined as a particular type of relationship between ideas, social or cultural configurations, not reducible to causal determination directly or to the influence in the traditional sense.³

In all situations, whether in the interrelations between subjects and works, or in the convergence between social phenomena, the concept of elective affinities corresponds to the existence of attraction and reciprocities. It is a convergence and mutual attraction between certain situations and phenomena, intersubjective and affective relationships. The analytical limits of the research are fundamentally delimited by the themes of modernity and history, as a way of recovering these themes in the contemporary times, in a critical perspective.

Author: Universidade de Brasília – Brasil.

I. FRIENDSHIP AND ELECTIVE AFFINITIES IN DARK TIMES

Days before attempting exile in the United States, Walter Benjamin met with Arendt in Marseilles, France. He delivered to Arendt, among other manuscripts, his latest essay, *On the Concept of History*, which in New York was to be given to Theodor W. Adorno, as representative of the Institute for Social Research, of which Benjamin was a member. The manuscript originally had no title and Hannah Arendt entitled it *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, in the book *Illuminations*,

¹ Paper presented at the course: European Identity, 3-7 September 2018, in the Inter University Center (IUC), in Dubrovnik, Croatia.

² The subject of this work is part of my research as a Fellow of the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES), in the Senior Visiting Abroad Program, from August/2018 to July/2019, at Freie Universität, Berlin, Germany, at the Otto-Suhr-Institut für politische Wissenschaft, under the supervision of Priv.-Doz. dr. Wolfgang Heuer.

³ Cf. LÖWY, Michel. Redenção e utopia: o judaísmo libertário na Europa Central: um estudo de afinidade eletiva. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1989.

edited by her in 1968 with texts by Walter Benjamin.

The name *About the Concept of History* was given by Adorno, being adopted officially in the work of Walter Benjamin.⁴ We chose to use the title attributed by Arendt *Theses on the Philosophy of History* for being closer to the posthumous version left by Walter Benjamin entitled *Historical-Philosophical Reflections (Geschichtephilosophische Reflexionen)*.⁵

According to Laura Adler, in her book *Nos Passos de Hannah Arendt* (2007), a biography, the frequent contact and friendship between Arendt and Benjamin was an emotional security in those times of prejudice and persecution. She describes that always in the late afternoon Arendt was going to meet Benjamin in the National Library, in Paris. At night they read aloud and dissected texts from Kafka: "He embodies for her the writer who knows how to come out of nowhere and make any idea of redemption definitely absurd. She is the salvation for all his torments, the incarnation of his resistance to the theology, his source of hope. Each day he gives her the courage to live. Each night, she helps him overcome his despair".⁶

The main idea of mine research is that the friendship and elective affinities are part of relationship between the two philosophers. The Eros of friendship in the sense of cultivating Hannah Arendt's affective relationship with her friends would be close to Aristotle's understanding of friendship in his book *Ética a Nicômacos*: friendship as a moral excellence, related to human coexistence and consequently of the public sphere. Although Arendt referred to her private world when she was speaking about her friends, she had the dimension of this world in

which she felt secure about the outside world, in which most of the time felt like a stranger.

The friendship for Hannah Arendt also involved an understanding of friendship in Cicero in his book *Sobre a Amizade* which is more concerned with personal and affective relations. We understand that the meaning of the cultivation of friendship in Arendt involves both the understanding of friendship, as a moral excellence and a relation with the concept of world in Aristotle, as well as the aspect pointed out by Cicero of the personal relationships between people who admire each other. Walter Benjamin was her friend, but with him she also shared a vision of the world outside.

In dark times, Berthold Brecht's expression which Hannah Arendt used as the title of her book *Men in Dark Times*, published in 1970 Arendt speaks of the need to reconcile with the world. The sense of belonging to the world was realized through the private world of friends. Dark times are not new, as they are not a rarity in history. She argues that even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination and that such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts, but from the history of men and great works.

Walter Benjamin is unsuccessful in his attempt to exile to the United States. In Port-Bou, a small town on the border of France and Spain, he decided to end his own life (ADORNO, 2012, p. 476). In 1941, while waiting in Lisboa for the ship to the United States, Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher, her second husband, read the *Theses on the Philosophy of History* aloud to each other and to the refugees who gathered around them. In 1942, Hannah Arendt registered her deep friendship with Walter Benjamin in a poem, entitled "W.B".

W. B

The twilight will come back someday.

The night will descend from the stars, We will rest our arms outstretched Nearby, at distances. From the darkness they sound softly Little archaic

⁴BENJAMIN, Walter. Über der begriff der Geschichte. Suhrkamp – Herausgegeben von Gerard Rauled, 2008, Werke. v. 19.

⁵Von Walter Benjamin Posthume Abschrift. In: BENJAMIN, Walter – Über der begriff der Geschichte. Suhrkamp – Herausgegeben von Gerard Rauled, 2008, Werke. v. 19. p. 93-106.

⁶ADLER, Laura. Nos passos de Hannah Arendt. Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2007, p. 148 (Our translation).

melodies. Listening, Let's detach ourselves, Let's finally break the ranks. Distant voices, closer to mourning. These are the voices and the dead pre-sent as messengers in front, to take us to sleep.⁷

II. ON THE CONCEPT OF HISTORY AND VISION OF MODERNITY

Storytelling has always been the art of retelling, and it gets lost when the stories are no longer preserved. She gets lost because no one else wiggles or weaves as she hears the story. The more the listener forgets himself, the more deeply he records what is heard in him. When the rhythm of work takes hold of him, he hears the stories in such a way that he spontaneously acquires the gift of telling them.

*Walter Benjamin
The storyteller*

The great deeds and works that mortals are capable of, and which are the subject of historical narrative, are not part of a totality or a comprehensive process. The emphasis of historical narrative always rests on unique situations and isolated traits. These unique situations, or events, interrupt the circular movement of daily life. These interruptions are the theme of history - the extraordinary, in other words.

*Hannah Arendt
The concept of ancient and modern history*

The main references in this topic are the texts by Hannah Arendt *The Concept of history: Old and Modern* and the *Tradition and Modern Age*, both from her book *Between the Past and the Future*; and the last written by Walter Benjamin *Theses on*

the Philosophy of History, that involve different interpretations. The theses require a complex reading and divided philosophical, Zionist and Marxist views.

Schöttker and Wizisla argue that Hannah Arendt, from whom in exile gained the trust of Walter Benjamin, shaped the reception of his writings like few others. Previously, Gershom Sholem and Theodor W. Adorno, long time Benjamin's friends, had emphasized philosophical and theological perspectives. Arendt accused both of repressing the materialistic positions of Walter Benjamin: "This accusations became part of controversy surrounding the editing and interpretation of Benjamin's writings, which continues to occupy the research until today".⁸

According to Hannah Arendt in the essay *Walter Benjamin 1892-1940* in everything he wrote proved to be a *sui generis* writer: "He had an argute perception that all solutions were not only objectively false and unsuitable to reality as would lead him to a false salvation, which was called Moscow or Jerusalem."⁹ The only position for which he could be defined was of "a *Homme des lettres*, whose unique perspectives neither the Zionists nor the Marxists had or could have conscience."¹⁰

There are many transcriptions about these *Theses*. As mentioned, the manuscript given by Walter Benjamin to Hannah Arendt had no title, which was published by Theodor W. Adorno as *On the Concept of History* (Über der Begriff der Geschiehte). The Walter Benjamin's Werke, volume 19, contains the different versions of the manuscript, one of them Walter Benjamin's Posthumous Transcript, entitled *Historical Philosophical Reflections*.¹¹

⁷ W. B

Einmal dämmert Abend wieder, Nacht fällt nier von den Sternen Liegen wir gestreckte Glieder In den Nägen, in den Fernen Aus den Dunkelheiten tönen Sanfte kleine Melodeien. Lauschen wir uns zu entwöhnen, Lockern endlich wir die Reihen. Ferne Stimmen, naher Kummer - :Jene Stimmen jener Toten Die wir vorgeschickt als Bote Uns zu leiten in den Schlummer. Reproduced by Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, Hannah Arendt, for love of the world. Yale University Press; New Haven and London, 1982.

⁸ARENDDT und BENJAMIN. Herausgegeben von Detlev Schöttker und Erdmut Wizisla. Germany. Suhrkamp, 2006, p. 9 (Our translation).

⁹ARENDDT, Hannah. Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940. In: _____. Homens em tempos sombrios. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1987, p. 163 (Our translation).

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 156.

¹¹*Geschichtesphilosophische Reflexionen*. Von Walter Benjamin Posthume Abschrift. In: Walter Benjamin – Über

In 1968, Hannah Arendt edited in New York the book *Illuminations*, with a collection of texts by Benjamin, among them *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, the title adopted here. As Introduction to the book she wrote the essay *Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940*. In the Editor's Note, Arendt clarifies that the translation of the texts was from the edition published and introduced by Professor Adorno, under the title *Schriften*, by the Suhrkamp Verlag, in 1955: "In the only case in which I was able to compare the original manuscript with the printed text, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, which Benjamin gave me shortly before his death, I found many important variants" (ARENDR, 1969, p. 266). She also mentioned that the manuscript for the Theses was first published in *New Rundschau*, in 1950.

In the relations of friendship and intellectuals between Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin, it is as if the wind of Benjamin's thought was blowing in Arendt's own thinking, and vice versa. Although the works of the two thinkers do not always talk to each other, there is a comparative potential to be explored. In this sense, the questions and reflections on the conception of history and the critical view of modernity in a perspective of progress are probably the greatest mark of the dialogue between them.

The poetic thought that Arendt attributes to Benjamin could also be extended to her, who has a particular predilection for literature and the art of storytelling. Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt both criticize the concept of History as something linear, continuous and universal. If in Benjamin there is a critique of the concept of history based on an idea of progress, a critique to the concept of history that seeks absolute truths, a critique of the concept of history that seeks an idea of causality (by ignoring occasional events capable of illuminating a period), there is in this understanding an identity with the concept of history in Hannah Arendt.

der begriff der Geschichte. Suhrkamp – Herausgegeben von Gerard Rauled, 2008, Werke. v. 19. p. 93-106.

If, for Walter Benjamin, the time of history is the time of "now", the theme of the story in Hannah Arendt is the "extraordinary". In both, the particular informs the understanding of the general. Referring to the ancient history that fixes on the narrative of the facts, Arendt recalls: "Causality and context were seen as a light provided by the event itself, illuminating a specific segment of human problems; were not regarded as possessing an independent existence that the event would be merely the more or less accidental expression, however appropriate".¹²

If we compare *Theses on the philosophy of history* with the conception of history as the extraordinary in Hannah Arendt, it is possible to perceive that the two authors are in fact referring to a critique of the modern conception of history and to a critique of modernity itself as a continuum. In relation to the understanding of history, the *elective affinities* between the two philosophers focus on the critique of modernity, by a totalizing vision. For them, the notion of experience and the meaning of particular events are essential for understanding the history.

According to Arendt, "Benjamin was not very interested in theories or 'ideas' that did not immediately assume the most accurate external form imaginable. For him, the Marxist relation between superstructure and infrastructure became, in a precise sense, a metaphorical relation".¹³

For him, the metaphors are the means by which the unity of the world is realized poetically. Arendt emphasizes that Benjamin was therefore motivated to regard the metaphor as the greatest gift of language. The linguistic 'transference' enables us to give material form to the invisible.

¹²ARENDR, Hannah. O Conceito de história – Antigo e Moderno. In. _____. Entre o passado e o futuro. 2. ed. São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1988, p. 96 (Our translation).

¹³ARENDR, Hannah. Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940. _____. Homens em tempos sombrios. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1987, p. 143 (Our translation).

The two thinkers use very similar concepts, such as the understanding of the meaning of particular experiences and the historical narratives. In their thought there is a clear concern for the present time and the meaning of particular events. Arendt refers to a break in the thread of tradition, so that the past no longer communicates with the present. In the words of Benjamin, the angel of history looks back and sees only a heap of ruins.

Walter Benjamin criticizes the understanding of history as a positivist science, a vision that he expresses in several passages in *Theses on the philosophy of history*:

“The chronicler who narrates events, without distinguishing between the major and the minor ones does not take into account the truth that nothing that has ever happened can be considered lost in history. Undoubtedly, only redeemed humanity can fully take hold of its past. This means that only for redeemed humanity can the past be quoted in each of its moments (Thesis 3).¹⁴

“The true image of the past pervades swiftly. The past can only be fixed, as an image that shines irreversibly, at the moment it is recognized (Thesis 5).”¹⁵

Walter Benjamin criticizes the understanding of history as a positivist science, a vision that he expresses in several passages in *Theses on the philosophy of history*:

“The chronicler who narrates events, without distinguishing between the great and the small, does not take into account the truth that nothing that has ever happened can be considered lost in history. Undoubtedly, only redeemed humanity can fully take hold of its past. This means that only for redeemed humanity can the past be quoted in each of its moments (Thesis 3).¹⁶

¹⁴BENJAMIN, Walter. Sobre o conceito de história. In: _____. Obras escolhidas. v/. 1. 3 ed. São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense, 1987 (Our translation).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶BENJAMIN, Walter. Sobre o conceito de história. In: _____. Obras escolhidas. v/. 1. 3 ed. São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense, 1987 (Our translation).

“The true image of the past passes quickly. . The past can only be fixed, as an image that shines irreversibly, at the moment it is recognized (Thesis 5).”¹⁷

“Articulating the past historically does not mean knowing it 'as it was'. It means to appropriated a reminiscence, just as it flashes in the moment of danger (Thesis 6).”¹⁸

According to Walter Benjamin the task of the historian is “to write history against the grain” (Thesis 7):¹⁹

The idea of a progress of humanity in the history is inseparable from the idea of its march inside an empty and homogeneous time. The critique of the idea of progress presupposes the critique of the idea of this march (Thesis 13)²⁰.

The history is the object of a construction whose place is not homogeneous and empty time, but a time of 'now' (Thesis 14).

In the same sense, to Hannah Arendt the theme of history is the understanding of particular events capable of illuminating a time. The great deeds and works that human beings are capable, and which are the subject of historical narrative, are not part of a totality or a comprehensive process: "The emphasis always falls on unique situations and isolated traits. These unique situations or events interrupt the circular movement of daily life. The theme of history are these interruptions - the extraordinary, in other words".²¹

According to Arendt, the history, as a narrative of facts, must consider elements, such as: the narrative of facts and events; story of action of the winners and losers; the figure of the testimonies. There would not be the concept of universal history and of humanity as a whole, for every is

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ARENDR, Hannah. O Conceito de história – Antigo e Moderno. Ibid., p. 72 (Our translation).

conceived as itself, insofar as the particular informs the understanding of the general:

“Causality and context were seen in a light provided by the event itself, illuminating a specific segment of human problems; were not regarded as possessing an independent existence that the event would be merely the more or less accidental expression, however appropriate”.²²

Her critique of the modern concept of history focused on the following elements: the idea of progress; the relation between cause and effect; the generalized explanation of facts, to the detriment of looking at the particular; the influence of the Hegelian view of history as the uninterrupted development of the spirit.

According to Arendt, the absence of meaning of the modern world is announced with the identification between means and ends. The breaking of the ties of tradition would be the glorification of the work activity (understood as fabrication) in detriment of politics activity as the construction of agreements and of philosophy as the activity of thought. The alienation of the modern world would be characterized by the loss of a common world only possible in the public space: "The modern age, its growing alienation from the world, has led to a situation in which man, wherever he goes, finds only himself".²³

III. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

It was suggested in this comparative paper between the thought of Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin, constructed in times of totalitarianism and war, that the elective affinities between the two thinkers reside in the following aspects: in a particular relation about the critique of modernity and the idea of progress; in the critique of the concept of history that excludes the focus on the capacity to illuminate of particular events; in the notion of individual experience as something non transferable; and in valuing the collective experience as capable of breaking with

the continuum and creating revolutionary situations.

However, the similarities to the aspects discussed here do not erase the theoretical status and trajectory of each work in particular. In Hannah Arendt, the critique of modernity rests on a deep questioning of Marxist theory and for his glorification of the activity of work in the the detriment of the activity of politics, as a characteristic of action *par excellence*. In Walter Benjamin, the critique of modernity results from an appreciation of historical materialism as a possibility of redemption.

The critique of the *modern concept of history* in Hannah Arendt and of a *linear and empty time* in Walter Benjamin are very similar and demonstrate affinities of visions in relation to the characteristics and problems of the modern era. However, when discussing the elective affinities in the thinking of the two philosophers this work does not have a pretension of homogenization of its approaches. Life stories and unique trajectories can contribute to the knowledge of ideas that illuminate the understanding of a time and its characters without excluding each particular experience.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCE

1. ADLER, Laure. Nos passos de Hannah Arendt. Tradução de Tatiana Salem Levy e Marcelo Jacques. Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2007. 643 p.
2. ADORNO, Theodor W. Características de Walter Benjamin. In: COHN, Gabriel (Org.). Tradução Flávio R. Kothe, Aldo Onesti, Amélia Cohn. São Paulo: Editora Ática, 1986, p. 188-200.
3. ADORNO, Theodor W. Correspondência 1928-1940: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benajmin. São Paulo: Editora Unesp, 2012. 476 p.
4. ARENDT, Hannah. A tradição e a época moderna. In: _____. Entre o passado e o future. 2 ed. São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1988, p. 43-68.

²² Ibid., p. 96.

²³ Ibid., p. 125.

5. ARENDT, Hannah. *Between Past and Future*. New York. Penguin Books USA Inc., 1993.
6. ARENDT, Hannah. *Men in Dark Times*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1983.
7. ARENDT, Hannah. O Conceito de história – Antigo e Moderno. *In: _____*. Entre o passado e o future. 2. ed. São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1988, p. 69-126.
8. ARENDT, Hannah. Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940. *In: _____*. Homens em tempos sombrios. Tradução de Denise Botmann. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1987b, 133-176.
9. ARISTÓTELES. *Ética a Nicômacos*. Tradução de Mário da Gama Kury. 2 ed. Brasília: Editora Universidade de Brasília, 1992. 238 p.
10. BENJAMIN, Walter; SCHOLEM, Gershom. *Correspondência*. São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1993. 367 p.
11. BENJAMIN, Walter. As afinidades eletivas em Goethe. *In: _____*. Ensaios reunidos: escritos sobre Goethe. Tradução de Monica Krausz Bornebusch. São Paulo: Duas cidades: Editora 34, 2009, p. 11-121.
12. BENJAMIN, Walter. *Reflections*. New York. Harcourt Brace Jowanovich, Inc. 2007.
13. BENJAMIN, Walter. Sobre o conceito de História. *In: _____*. *Obras Escolhidas*. Tradução de Sergio Paulo Rouanet. v. 1. 3 ed. São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense, 1987, p. 222-232.
14. BENJAMIN, Walter. *Theses on the philosophy of history*. *In: _____*. *Illuminations*. Edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. New York. Harcourt Brace Jowanovich, Inc. 1969.
15. BENJAMIN, Walter. Über der begriff der Geschichte. Suhrkamp – Herausgegeben von Gerard Rauled, 2008, Werke. v. 19.
16. CÍCERO, Marco Túlio. Sobre a amizade. São Paulo: Editora Nova Alexandria, 2006. 119 p.
17. GAGNEBIN, Jeanne Marie. Walter Benjamin, ‘um estrangeiro de nacionalidade indeterminada, mas de origem alemã’. *In: Seligmann-Sivla, Marcio*. *Leituras de Walter Benjamin*. São Paulo: FAPESP; Anablume, 1999, 201-208.
18. GOETHE, Johann Wolfgang von. *As afinidades eletivas*. 1 ed. São Paulo: Penguin Classics Companhia das Letras, 2014. 319 p.
19. LÖWY, Michel. *Redenção e utopia: o judaísmo libertário na Europa Central: um estudo de afinidade eletiva*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1989. p.
20. SCHOLEM, Gershom. *Walter Benjamin: a história de uma amizade*. São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1989. 230 p.
21. SCHÖTTKER, Detlev; WIZISLA, Erdmut. *Arendt und Benjamin*. Germany: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2006. 210 p.
22. WHITTE, Bernd. *Walter Benjamin: uma biografia*. Tradução de Romério Freitas. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica Editora, 2017. 159 p.
23. YOUNG-BRUEHL, Elisabeth. *Hannah Arendt, for love of the world*. Yale University Press; New Haven and London, 1982.
24. YOUNG-BRUEHL, Elisabeth. *Por amor ao mundo: a vida e a obra de Hannah Arendt*. Tradução de Antônio Trânsito. Rio de Janeiro: Relume Dumará, 1997. 492 p.

This page is intentionally left blank