Reception context: West Germany, 1968 and after

Assessments of Walter Benjamin’s proximity to Marxism alter depending on the where and when of the assessor. For example, in West Germany, following 1968, there was little doubt that Benjamin’s work represented a contribution to Marxist scholarship, if an unconventional one. He was also called on as a guide to political praxis. The mobilised students of the late 1960s took their lessons from him in pirate editions. The specifically 1960s’ rediscovery of Benjamin by the cadres of social revolt is encapsulated in their image of him with photocopier in one hand and joint in the other. An embellishment of the image might include a Kalashnikov or bomb – Andreas Baader of the Rote Armee Fraktion would cite Benjamin in the coming years, for example drawing on ‘On the Concept of History’,1 in his ‘Letter to the Prisoners’ from 1976.2 Out of this, and sometimes in critical dialogue with it, there were significant neo-Marxist appropriations

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1 Benjamin 2003.
2 See Markner 1994.
of him too, perhaps most notably in the work of Jürgen Habermas. Habermas’s essay ‘Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism’, published first in German in 1972 was a keynote statement. 3 It located Benjamin as an exponent of ‘redemptive criticism’, in contra-distinction to ‘ideology-critique’ or ‘consciousness-raising’ criticism. Redemptive criticism had no immanent relationship to political praxis. Habermas’s was an effort to wrest Benjamin away from any instrumentalist uses to which the student movement might put him.

Much of the debate of Benjamin’s legacy in these years focussed on questions of art and aesthetics, with an emphasis on the relationship between technological reproduction of art (as analysed in Benjamin’s 1930s essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility’) and art’s autonomy, as forwarded by Adorno in his critical engagement with Benjamin. Under examination was the interpretation of the ‘politicisation of art’ and the ‘aestheticisation of politics’, as forwarded by Benjamin in the epilogue of his ‘Work of Art’ essay. Key texts included Heinz Paetzold’s Neomarxistische Ästhetik (1974) and Helmut Pfotenhauer’s Ästhetische Erfahrung und gesellschaftliches System from 1975. 4 Through the 1970s in West Germany, Benjamin was used to establish parameters for Marxist, neo-Marxist or materialist engagement in a highly politicised scholarly field, where the legacy of communist practice and theory from the period prior to the Third Reich was re-discovered, examined and contested.

Bernd Witte’s contribution in 1975 analysed Benjamin in relation to his antagonist in the field of literary studies, Georg Lukács. 5 A new ‘materialist’ literary theory was proposed on the basis of Benjamin’s critique of Lukács. Benjamin was seen to provide writers and artists on the Left with a vocabulary for art and culture that did not share the assumptions of the socialist realism with which Lukács was associated. Socialist-realist directives ranked the intelligibility of content above form. At its most basic, socialist realism advised that the content of the picture or the story had to be clear, unambiguous, delivered through ‘realist’ means and present the inexorable rise of a heroic working class and peasantry. Lukács, in line with socialist realists, advocated nineteenth-

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3 Habermas 1972.
4 Paetzold 1974; Pfotenhauer 1975.
5 Witte 1975.