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April 11th, 2014

Book Review: Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings

2 comments

Estimated reading time: 5 minutes

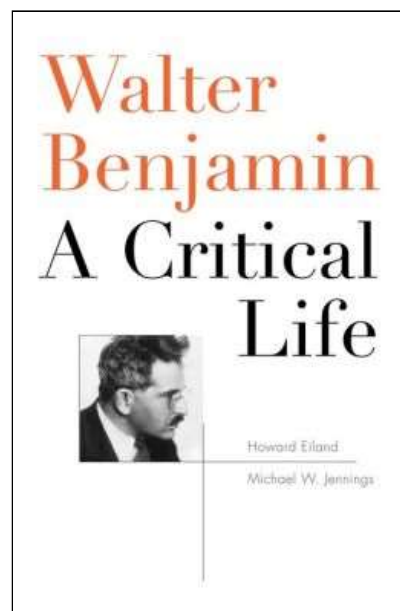


*Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings' book maps the life of philosopher Walter Benjamin from beginning to end, tracing the roots of his thought all the way from his early childhood to his seminal work as part of the esteemed 'Frankfurt School', and ultimately to his last months in Paris. The biography is very well written, featuring sparse, elegant prose – a lot is said, yet a lot is left to the imagination – and it is this characteristic that ultimately makes *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* such a great read, writes Luke McDonagh.*

Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Harvard University Press. April 2014.

Find this book: 

Walter Benjamin's status as one of the greatest philosophers and social theorists of his era is undisputed. During his life (1892-1940), Benjamin was a respected critic of culture and aesthetics, but it is only since his death that his writings on the meaning of art and truth – such as the famous essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' – have truly been widely appreciated in the English-speaking world, and his influence can still be felt today across fields as diverse as anthropology, art theory, and law. Nonetheless, there is great sadness in acknowledging his posthumous exalted status, given that he died tragically young at the age of 48, committing suicide while attempting to flee the Nazis in 1940. This new biography – *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* – maps his life from beginning to end, tracing the roots of his thought all the way from his early childhood to his seminal work as part of the esteemed 'Frankfurt School', and ultimately to his last months in Paris (largely spent writing his final major work – 'Theses on the Philosophy of History') before his untimely death in Portbou, Catalonia.



Like most thinkers of his generation, WWI proved to be a formative time for Benjamin – he supported the anti-war stance of the radical leftists Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg when war broke out in 1914. Moreover, soon after the opening of hostilities Benjamin was rocked by the suicide of two of his anti-war friends. This personal tragedy seems to have deeply affected him; the authors note that suicidal thoughts began to recur in Benjamin's private writings in the years that followed.

The authors note that during this formative period the young Benjamin demonstrated a restless intellectual character; he constantly moved around, spending time at universities in Berlin, Freiburg, Heidelberg,

Munich and Bern, before eventually gaining a position at Frankfurt. As a philosopher, during these early years he veered between Kant and Nietzsche, but as he matured as a thinker he moved more and more towards Marx, influenced in particular by Georg Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* – perhaps the most important work in early Western Marxism – as well as by his interactions with the communist politician Karl Korsch and the playwright Bertold Brecht.



Sketches of Walter Benjamin. Credit: Renée CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Early on in the book, the authors – **Howard Eiland** and **Michael W. Jennings** – argue that in addition to being a brilliant thinker, he was also a writer of ‘immediately engaging and memorable prose’. However, they further remark: ‘Yet for all the brilliant immediacy of his writing, Benjamin the man remains elusive.’

Indeed, his Frankfurt School colleague Theodor Adorno once remarked that while he was in many ways a generous friend, Benjamin ‘hardly ever showed his cards’. Constructing an appropriate biography for such an elusive character is obviously a great challenge. Thankfully, the writers do not oppress the reader with dubious psychological interpretations of Benjamin’s actions; instead, at the crucial critical junctures that occur in his life – such as his turn towards Marxism – they simply draw

attention to his own private and public writings, bringing his thoughts to life, yet allowing him to remain an appropriately ambiguous figure.

For instance, in the chapter on the 'Metaphysics of Youth' the authors reflect upon Benjamin's Jewish upbringing. They note that although he was not a religious man, Benjamin's Jewish identity lay 'at the core of his being'. A certain duality is present in his thoughts and actions in this regard; for example, Benjamin opposed political Zionism, yet the prominent Zionist Gersholm Schloen remained one of his closest friends throughout his life (Benjamin even gave a parting gift to his friend, wishing him well, as Scholen emigrated to Palestine in the 1920s). Indeed, Benjamin's private diaries and letters to friends during his university days illustrate the dialectical conflict he felt between his dual self-identities as a German Jew and as a cosmopolitan European – not to mention the intellectual and physical terror he felt as the Nazis began to march across Europe, eviscerating this pluralist ideal.

As a piece of text, the biography is very well written, featuring sparse, elegant prose – a lot is said, yet a lot is left to the imagination – and it is this characteristic that ultimately makes *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* such a great read. The reader is left with a real understanding of what makes Benjamin such a brilliantly enduring figure in the realm of European thought – yet the man himself remains elusive and enigmatic, as he was in life, even to his closest friends.

Luke McDonagh is a Lecturer at Cardiff University. He was previously a Fellow in the LSE Department of Law. Luke holds a PhD from Queen Mary, University of London (2011), an LLM from the London School of Economics (2006-7) and a BCL degree from NUI, Galway (2002-05). He has previously taught in the areas of Public Law, Administrative Law and EU Law at Queen Mary as well as Constitutional Law and Tort Law at NUI Galway. [Read reviews by Luke.](#)