In a letter written in French from Paris on February 22, 1940, Walter Benjamin informed Max Horkheimer, then an exile in New York City, that he had just finished «a certain number of theses on the concept of history». Viewing them in relation both to his former work on Fuchs (from which he culled some of the most memorable statements) and to the second essay he was planning on Baudelaire, Benjamin described his «thoughts» as «a first attempt» to set up an outlook of history that was supposed to cause «an irreparable split» between their materialist «viewpoints» on one side, and «the remnants of positivism» on the other. These «remnants», Benjamin maintained, still deeply informed even those views of the past that were «closer and more familiar» to them.  

1 Though better known as Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen in the two-volume edition of the Schriften, Theodor W. Adorno and Gretel Adorno eds., Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1955, I, pp. 494-506, Benjamin’s brief work appears in the German standard edition of his writings, Gesammelte Schriften, Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser eds., Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1972-89, 7 vols., I, 2, pp. 691-704, with the original title Über den Begriff der Geschichte (On the Concept of History). This was the title of the first edition of the Theses, published in 1942 in Los Angeles by Horkheimer’s Institute for Social Research in a special typed issue of Studies in Philosophy and Social Science (the temporary English edition of the Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung), titled Walter Benjamin zum Gedächtnis. Benjamin’s letter of February 22, 1940 to Horkheimer (in its French original) is also
Those brief, dense meditations – the last ones of Benjamin’s tragic life – may in fact be seen as part of a much more ambitious and sweeping project, a devastating critique of «historicism» (Historismus) as the dominant view of history in post-Enlightenment Europe, from the Romantics through the eve of World War II. Broadly speaking, the historicist outlook whose main «ideas», «positions», and «methods» came under Benjamin’s militant and at once disillusioned attack rested on a metaphysical belief in the commonality of life; conceived the historical world as a manifestation of the soul or mind (a «mind-constructed

Printed in Gesammelte Schriften, I, 3, pp. 1225-26. His essay on Fuchs, Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und der Historiker (1937), is in Gesammelte Schriften, II, 2, pp. 465-505. Because of the brevity of the work, in my quotations and translations from Über den Begriff der Geschichte I will simply indicate the Thesis’ number or letter parenthetically in the text (e.g., Thesis 7, Thesis B), without further footnotes or page references. In my quotations from Benjamin as well as from other writers all emphases are added, unless otherwise specified. For other passages quoted from foreign language editions, sometimes I use my own translations. Whenever I do this, I indicate only the original title of the work. When an English title is noted, all translations must be attributed to the English edition acknowledged. In such cases, as a rule, I always indicate both titles, first date of publication, and (if available) the translators’ names.

To view Benjamin’s Theses in the light of a larger critique of historicism, it is crucial to take into account his fragments and preparatory notes of the 1930s, gathered in Gesammelte Schriften, I, 3, pp. 1223-66, as well as the materials he planned to use for his unfinished work on Paris and the nineteenth century, Das Passagen-Werk, in Gesammelte Schriften, V, 1-2, especially Section “N”, double titled Erkenntnistheoretisches, Theorie des Fortschritt, V, 1, pp. 570-611. This monumental work has been translated into English by Howard Heiland and Kevin McLaughlin, The Arcades Project, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1999; see Section “N”, On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress, pp. 456-88.

Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften, I, 3, pp. 1240-41.
world», or world of «objective spirit», as Dilthey called it after Vico and Hegel; and addressed its various objects and phenomena, from the smallest fact to the most influential epochs, as if they were all virtually knowable through personal experience and psychological insight, as well as susceptible to being represented through a narrative or epic discourse.

A compact and critical outline of this dominant view can be found in one of Benjamin’s notes of the 1930s, where he explicitly gives us the gist of the historicist legacy by envisaging its «three most important positions» as strongholds. The first position was «the idea of universal history». The second was the notion of historical representation as narrative (the notion [...] that history is something that allows itself to be narrated). «The third bastion of historicism», as he styled it, was «the method of Einfühlung», namely «empathy», as the term may have been more immediately grasped, outside Germany, in the jargon of turn-of-the-century European culture and Geisteswissenschaften at large. These bulwarks of historicism were to be attacked and «shaken to their foundations» by the «destructive powers of historical materialism». These powers, according to Benjamin, had been «paralyzed» for too long, and were, therefore, very much in need of revitalization and revision. Here is the corresponding list of his materialist countermeasures: «The de-

destructive moments: disintegration of universal history, liquidation of the epic element, no *Einfühlung* with the victor*"*5.

In particular, this «third bastion of historicism» was, for Benjamin, exceptionally sturdy, «the most solid and the most difficult to assail». And it is on *Einfühlung* that he in fact concentrated the destructive energies of one of his most penetrating reflections on the concept of history:

Fustel de Coulanges recommends to the historian who would like to re-experience [*nacherleben*] an era to dismiss from his thoughts all he knows about the subsequent course of history. There is no better way to exemplify the method with which historical materialism has broken. It is a method of *Einfühlung.*

(Thesis 7)

The «method» that Benjamin tried to undermine here through the example of Fustel de Coulanges6 can indeed (though not exclusively) be read as the most immediate equivalent of the process of sympathetic/empathetic understanding theorized by the later Dilthey and synthetically formulated as the «rediscovery of the I in the Thou»7. In

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7 Dilthey, *The Construction of the Historical World*, p. 208: «Understanding is a rediscovery of the I in the Thou: the mind rediscovers itself at ever higher levels of complex involvement: this identity of the mind in the I and the Thou, in every subject of a community, in every system of a culture and finally, in the totality of mind and universal history, makes successful co-operation between different processes in the human studies"
fact, Dilthey’s epistemology stood at the apex not only of his career as a thinker but also of the historicist movement as a whole. And perhaps it was not a coincidence that, even as Benjamin was starting his Marxist/Messianic subversion of historicism, a magisterial assessment of the emergence of that movement, and, incidentally, of that of its cognitive method par excellence, had just been completed by Friedrich Meinecke in his monumental study on *The Origins of Historicism*. By recognizing Johann Gottfried Herder as «the creator of a new method of *Einfühlung*» and emphasizing the importance of his «receptive» approach to history⁸, Meinecke had in fact located the roots of the method that, through subsequent developments and the concurrence of many an equivalent notion, was to contribute to the shaping of those views of the past that we have come to associate, for better or for worse, with the rise and predominance of romantic and post-romantic consciousness and historical research over the course of the nineteenth century, both in Europe and in the United States⁹.

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⁹ Selbstdgefühl and Mitgefühl (reflexive feeling and sympathy), Empfindlichkeit and Übereinstimmung (susceptibility and congruity), Neigung and Theilnahme (love and sympathy), Mitwissenschaft and Mitfühlung (co-knowledge and sympathy), Gleichartigkeit and Gegenseitigkeit (kinship and reciprocity), Nacherleben and Erlebens (re-experiencing and lived experience) Selbstatskeit and Verstehen (identity and understanding) – just to limit ourselves to the German context (say from Herder and Goethe through Schleiermacher, Wilhelm von Humboldt and Niehbur, to Ranke, Droysen and Dilthey) – are all equivalent notions that describe the same receptive and analogical attitude towards the past. «The foundation of Romantic historiography», possible. The knowing subject is, here, one with its object, which is the same at all stages of its objectification». 

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The «method of Einfühlung» which Benjamin attacked in his Theses, as well as in other fragments, preparatory notes, and in some sections of his Arcades Project, must then be viewed, extensively, within that larger intellectual and cultural context of theoretical reflection and historiographical practice. That is why, in keeping with this extensive view, Benjamin himself, in his own unfinished French version of the Theses, chose to render his German «Einfühlung» (significantly, I believe) with the more comprehensive «identification affective»10, namely a process of identification based on feeling and aspiring to cognitive validity through imagination and insight, which in the British tradition of moral philosophy, descriptive psychology, and aesthetic criticism (say, from Shaftesbury and Francis Hutcheson through Hume, Burke and Adam Smith, whose works were for the most part familiar to Herder) had long been known and theorized as sympathy or sympathetic identification and fellow-feeling. To sympathize or to empathize, namely to feel with, to feel for, or to feel into, for the romantic historian or for the spokesman of historicism at large meant essentially and invariably ‘to know’ 11.

maintains Lionel Gossman in Between History and Literature, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1990, p. 297, «was not a rhetoric but a metaphysics, a philosophy of universal analogy, according to which the mind can grasp the world, the self the other, because they are structured the same way».

10 Similarly, in the same Thesis, Benjamin translates the German verb «sich einfühlen» with the French «s’identifier». Benjamin’s own French version of the work, Sur le concept d’histoire, though unfinished, is also included in Gesammelte Schriften, I, 3, pp. 1260-66.

11 As he wrote letters in French during his Parisian exile, and as a French scholar who had devoted and was still devoting most of his intellectual energies to the study of Baudelaire and Paris in the nineteenth century
As he comes to storm this bastion of «identification affective» in Thesis 7 (with all the historicist and positivist «remnants» allegedly castled in it), first of all Benjamin undermines, symptomatically, its sentimental premise, debunking what he derogatorily and somehow reductively calls «the indolence of the heart» (the historian’s «source of sadness» for the lost forms of life and the vanished past). He then questions its claims to epistemological validity by exposing its incapacity «to get hold of the authentic historical image». Ultimately he denounces its ideological instrumentality: «The nature of this sadness», he states midway through his

(besides other French classics such as Proust, Gide and Rousseau), it is not surprising that Benjamin felt it important, even urgent, to have his own French translation of the Theses. Within this linguistic urgency, I see his renditions of «Einfühlung» and «sich einfühlen» with «identification affective» and «s’identifier» illuminating. This terminological flexibility testifies to the fundamental, conceptual unity as well as to the widespread practice of the methodological approach of the historicist school at large. For this reason, in this context, the crucial notions of sympathy and Einfühlung can and, to a certain extent, must be used as equivalent terms. Though slightly different from an etymological point of view (sympathy: feeling-with; and Einfühlung: feeling-into), these words, along with all their numerous and relevant synonyms, which I have invoked here in passing, were interchangeably employed to convey the same process of emotional sharing, affective and imaginative identification, and, ultimately, universal analogy and resemblance between subject and object, selves and entities, the historian’s mind and the historical world. This conceptual unity persisted over and beyond the course of the nineteenth century, even when specialized distinctions between the two terms were introduced in the wake of late-nineteenth-century psychology and aesthetics, especially after the influential studies of Theodor Lipps. In English and American scholarship, these distinctions developed with the growth of modern and contemporary psychology, in particular after the introduction of the term «empathy» by Vernon Lee and Edward B. Titchener.
*Thesis*, «becomes clearer when one poses the question: with whom does the historian of historicism really identify [*sich eigentlich einfühlt*]?»

The answer inevitably sounds: with the victor. And the rulers are, each time, the successors of those who have been victorious before. Hence *Einfühlung* with the victor always benefits the rulers. (*Thesis 7*)

The sympathetic/empathetic approach serves a vision of history as conquest – the select record of that which through physical and/or cultural strength has resulted in success, of that which has won. As such, it sustains and glorifies a process that is in fact a procession, the «triumphal procession» (*Triumphzug*), as Benjamin puts it, of the rulers of history as heirs of the victors.

Before or aside from this parade, in which the «spoils» that are carried along are put on show as «cultural treasures» (*Kulturgüter*), Benjamin sets a critical and antagonistic figure – a «historical materialist» whom he first envisions as a «detached beholder». As he surveys the treasures on display in such a forward march (namely the continuum of history), this beholder realizes that they have a suspect «origin»:

They owe their existence not only to the exertion of the great geniuses who have created them, but also to the anonymous drudgery of their contemporaries. (*Thesis 7*)

That is why the contemplation of the past (such a great past in such a grandiose form) becomes a visual experience that can no longer move or please the historian, but, as Benja-
min had already pointed out in his essay on Fuchs, rather shocks and fills him with «horror». For the historical materialist, in other words, such an articulation of the past – which «rightly culminates in universal history» (Thesis 17), namely the history of what «Great Men» have achieved and «Great Powers» have determined in this world\(^{12}\) – is one and the same with the annals of class-dominance and the power of oppression. «There is no document of civilization [\textit{Kultur}],» runs the great dictum of Thesis 7, «that is not at the same time a document of barbarism». In addition, when the historical materialist comes to realize that «barbarism» taints not only every single work of culture but also the «process of [cultural] transmission» at large, he «dissociates himself from [that process] as far as possible». «Whereas historicism celebrates geniuses and heroes», Benjamin says in an earlier version of the same Thesis, «the historical materialist keeps his distance, should he even resort to the fire tongs»\(^{13}\). Detached, horror-stricken, estranged, the historical materialist is thus brought to face his ultimate, sternest assignment: «He regards it as his task», Benjamin states at the very end of Thesis 7, «to brush history against the grain».


\(^{13}\) Benjamin, \textit{Gesammelte Schriften}, I, 3, p. 1249.
Thus the appreciative and affective attitude of the romantic/bourgeois chronicler comes to be counterpoised by an opposite method. This involves a different mode of vision and affection as well as an alternative process of cognition (detachment vs. involvement, horror vs. compassion, dissociation vs. complicity, critical distance vs. celebration). It also calls for a concrete action that, for the materialist, accomplishes itself as an antagonistic and subversive practice of history. As he knows that «the history of the oppressed», as Benjamin says in another fragment, «is a discontinuum», then the materialist must seek for the «rags» and the «fissure[s]» of tradition, namely the «places where tradition breaks off», as he says in his *Arcades Project*, thereby setting himself – over against the continuum of the oppressors – to undermine and explode the given course of history¹⁴.

Benjamin’s statements are illuminating and problematic at the same time, especially if we look back to some counter-traditions of romantic historicism, and there find – outside the dominant outlook – an antagonistic and subversive practice of history already at work. Whether we call them oppositional systems of bourgeois thought or protomaterialist schools of historiography, those counter-traditions managed to set up alternative projects that did not embrace the hegemonic view of history *qua* history of the victors, but committed themselves to an adversarial view of history *qua* history of the vanquished. These projects, in fact, purposed to revisit lost or neglected periods of the past to re-assert the historical existence of the conquered peoples, namely the ancient races of those vanquished in the con-

¹⁴ Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, 3, p. 1236; *Das Passagen-Werk*, p. 591 [N 9, 4], p. 592 [N 9 a, 5].
quests whose lines of descent – despite their systematic ex-punction from the annals of the rulers – were reclaimed by the lower and subjugated classes of the present. Thus they resorted to the method of sympathy not to patronize or re-suscitate the defeated and the downtrodden as forgotten cultural residues in the history of the victors, but to approach and vindicate them first as a race and then as a class in their own right – thereby tracing their struggles for power and consciousness over centuries of serfdom and oppression – from the non-dominant viewpoint of the vanquished themselves.

In two earlier essays, I used Benjamin’s insights to trace the critical genealogy of the sympathetic/empathetic approach. I explored the paradoxes of its conceptual structure; emphasized its theoretical inadequacy as a historical method; and eventually exposed its ideological complicity with a dominant view of history that throughout the major line of romantic historicism (say Herder, through Ranke and Carlyle, to Bancroft and Dilthey) indeed presented itself, essentially and inevitably, as the history of the victors15. In this essay I want to step beyond or outside that line, invoking the inclusiveness of Benjamin’s critique of «the method of Einfühlung» or «identification affective» to reassess the merits as well as the limitations of those romantic counter-traditions that may be said to have tried to use his-

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tory «to take possession», in Benjamin’s terms again, «of the tradition of the oppressed»16.

I. Sympathy and Antipathy
One of the most striking merits of historicist counter-traditions in Europe was to set up a sharp opposition between victors and vanquished (or conquerors and conquered, invaders and natives, aggressors and victims) and stand up for the latter. Thus, by taking sides with what Benjamin would call the «generations of the defeated» (Thesis 12), the antagonistic historian purposed to fight for the oppressed and repressed past in the name of the present and its power of redemption. This vocation originated from an awareness that the histories of modern nations – as Sismondi, Manzoni, Thierry, Guizot, as well as other liberal and radical writers variously recognized through their interest in the middle ages – could all be traced back to armed invasion, hence the exercise of power and oppression, «the rights of conquest», in Sismondi’s words, «over human society»17.

By the first decades of the nineteenth century this realization was hardly novel. In fact, it had been invoked, used, and manipulated – especially in debates upon national origins and institutions – from the seventeenth century onwards. The Frankish conquest of Gaul, the Longobardic

16 Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften, I, 3, p. 1236.
conquest of Italy, or the Norman conquest of England, along with their concomitant racial oppositions (Franks versus Gauls, Longobards versus Romans, Normans versus Saxons), had been deployed and exploited to trace back privileges and legitimize inherited power or, on the contrary, to denounce that power and reclaim the domain of liberty and ancient authority. The polemics on the origins of feudal rights and laws in France, from Boulainvilliers through Dubos and Montesquieu; the 'Longobardic question' in Italy, from Machiavelli through Muratori and Giannone; or the 'Norman Yoke' controversy in England, from the Puritans through Burke and Paine, are all well-known examples.

In the romantic period, though, as the precondition of long-established and often mythical theories of lost rights, the conquest became also a radical historiographical principle in its own right. As such, it excited a new and more rigorous interest in the fate of those races and nations that, as Thierry and Manzoni pointed out in retracing the early medieval history of France and Italy, had been blotted out from the course of the major events exclusively focussed on the feats of the conquerors or of their kings. «The history of France, such as the modern writers have made it», Thierry complains, «is not the real history of the country, the national, the popular history»18. That «history», in fact, he says elsewhere, «was devoted to the service of the ene-

mies of our forefathers»19. Manzoni too unmasked the historiographical distortions of ancient chroniclers. «Contemporary writers», he remonstrated, as he examined the scanty sources and records of the Longobardic history of Italy, «report only the main, bare facts [...] and in general, when they pass a judgement on the actions, serve that power they always hold to be in the right». Later writers of the middle ages, in his eyes, were no less suspect and complaisant. «They too are flatterers», he continues, «ministering to power in general, and to that power, in particular, whose heirs were living at their times»20.

By sympathizing with the victors – as Thierry and Manzoni realized more than a century earlier than Benjamin – the historians of the past had served the «power» of their masters, namely their current rulers as heirs of the earlier conquerors. So, contrary to the complicitous or limited views of his predecessors, the romantic historian aspired, through example, to make himself «the friend of the conquered»21, to wrest the silenced and nameless vanquished from obscurity and oblivion. Accordingly, the humble and the oppressed, the subdued and the defeated – over against their oppressors and their oppressors’ «apologists» and


«panegyricists» — were reawakened and brought back to life as agents and protagonists on the historical scene. Thus Thierry in his vindication of political genealogy and historical resurrection:

We, who are [the serfs’] descendants believe that they were worth something, and that the most numerous and most forgotten part of the nation deserves to live over again in history.21

There was a redemptive tendency within romantic historicism that never gave way to the eulogy of heroes and the great men of universal history. Thus sympathy for the neglected and the feeling of a historical want («I feel within me with profound conviction», Thierry says, «that we have not yet a history of France»22) were dictated not only by pietas or cultural relativism but also by historical vengeance and political praxis. And it is in fact on these ideological premises that Marx and Engels and then twentieth-century historical materialists such as Lukács and Gramsci (and, to a certain extent, Benjamin himself) saw these projects as important bourgeois precursors of the history of class struggles.23

As a starting point for knowledge of the past and human praxis in the present time, sympathy, for the oppositional historian, was always and necessarily sympathy for the vanquished against the vanquishers. His compassionate reflections on the sad state of Europe after the fall of the Roman empire (when «society», in Sismondi’s words, «was divided between the conquerors and the conquered», and «power henceforth, through many generations, belonged only to barbarians») testify to his antagonistic use of fellow-feeling. His first task was to condemn the invaders, so as to debunk the historiographical myths of their much-celebrated character:

We are easily seduced by the display of energy; the courage of the barbarians, employed only in crimes and devastation, attracts us […] and a poetic hue still disguises ages that can only teach us one lesson – to avert at all price their return.

Though based on what Benjamin was to recognize as a suspect dichotomy («civilization» versus «barbarism»), Sismondi’s sharp judgement called in question the causality of the victors – strength, success, and therefore sympathy with those who emerge triumphant from the contest. By so doing, he turned the historicist «lesson» of the past into a function of a political praxis against the enemies and their

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haunting cultural spectres: «to avert at all price their return». Manzoni too denounced the acclamation of the barbarians’ courage and rebelled against «the preference» and the «almost absolute approbation» that past historians had «bestowed on the oppressor»28. Thus he also countered the causality of the victors by exposing not only the historical origin but also the cultural rationale of their supremacy and mastery after their conquest of Italy:

The end of the laws [of the Longobards] was not the equal well-being of all the inhabitants of the country they possessed, but the preservation of class privileges, the maintenance of their domination [...] Their end was to continue to oppress [...] with impunity the genuine possessors of the land, the natives, the peaceful men.29

Energy, courage, strict rule, the sacrifice of passions and private interests, equality among their members – all of these qualities and allegedly «beautiful and noble dispositions» of the barbarians’ laws, in Manzoni’s eyes, were not so much «the means of virtue» as the necessary «precautions of unjust force against the rights» of the natives. They were political tools that came to be ideologically consolidated as examples of moral and social «perfection», through compliant «praise», by the cultural work of the history of the rulers30. Besides Thierry’s example, of course, Manzoni had Sismondi’s particular «lesson» in mind here. The Swiss historian, in fact, had explicitly censured the Longobards’

violence, pointing out the racial «hatred» underlying their relationships with the natives:

The Longobards did not ally themselves at all with the Italians, as had done the Goths, their predecessors. Since their establishment in the country, they had taken advantage of their victory in a much more ruthless way, and a more violent hatred separated the two nations.31

This «hatred» was reciprocal and deep-rooted, and lasted long after the conquest. «It is not to be doubted that the Romans, in their turn», adds Sismondi with a sharper edge, «felt even a greater antipathy towards their oppressors»32.

After a principled condemnation of the aggressors from the viewpoint of civilization, the second task of the oppositional historian, then, was to keep alive the fires of «hatred» and «antipathy» («antipathie», a term that was soon to become crucial in Thierry’s writings) as sources of long-lasting resentments and contrasts through the centuries, up to the class conflicts of the present time. Thus Thierry in the preface to his History of the Conquest of England:

The higher and lower classes who, at the present day, keep so distrustful an eye upon one another, or actually struggle for systems of ideas and of government, are in many countries the lineal representatives of the peoples conquering and the peoples conquered of an anterior epoch. Thus the sword of the conquest, in renewing the face of Europe and the distribution of its inhabitants, has left its ancient impress upon each nation created by the admixture of various races. The race of the in-

vaders, when it ceased to be a separate nation, remained a privileged class.33

For this «lineal» reason (from «race» and «nation» to «class»), conquerors and rulers were connected through the political exercise of power. That is why even when he had to come to terms with the indirect consequences of a conquest, such as «co-existence» and inter-racial «marriages»34, the progressive drawing closer of «victors and vanquished, inhabitants of the same country», or their alleged fusion «into one people»35, the oppositional historian was always wary of the mixture of races, always suspicious of misleading assumptions about cultural integration and political equality. Thus he rejected any idea of oblivious amity on a conquered soil. Not really refreshed by the idyllic «dews of happiness» (as apologists liked to maintain), the land came to be viewed as a vast stage for tragic clashes, where «force, all on one side, and helplessness, all on the other, made of injustice the easiest and most natural thing» to take place36. Though it was, at times, inevitably to be recognized as a fact (one that could not be denied in the long run, at least

36 Manzoni, *Discorso*, pp. 229, 204.
from a «physical» viewpoint), the fusion of conquerors and conquered would always enclose inherited social tensions and cultural contrasts, not to speak of relapsing genealogical conflicts or political clashes of power relations. Thus Thierry reminds his French people, oppressed under the Bourbon restoration:

We believe we are a nation, and we are two nations on one soil; two nations, inimical in their reminiscences, irreconcilable in their projects; the one formerly conquered the other, and its designs, its eternal desires, are the renewal of that ancient conquest enervated by time, by the courage of the conquered, and by human reason.37

There was a «spiritual» division («two hostile camps») that would not wane even after centuries of «physical mixture»: «whatever may have been the physical mixture of the two races», he says of the Franks and the Gauls, and of their descendants on the soil of France, «their constantly opposing spirit has existed till the present day in two always distinct portions of the mingled population»38.

The early Manzoni, once again, may be here invoked as an attentive keeper of such «inimical reminiscences» and «opposing spirits» as well as a relentless foe of the theory of racial and national assimilation after a conquest39. The indisputable separation of conquerors and conquered for him was indeed «the master-fact» of the whole history of the so-

37 Thierry, Sur l’antipathie de race qui divise la nation française (1820), in Dix ans d’études historiques, trans. On the Antipathy of Race which Divides the French Nation, in The Historical Essays, p. 89.
38 Thierry, On the Antipathy of Race, p. 90.
called ‘barbarian’ ages. And this fact was so crucial as to cast light not only on the centuries previous to the invasion, but also and inevitably on those following it. Thus he used the racial contrast as a historical fact against the “arbitrary principle of the unity” of races, as much as a strategy to mobilize the heirs of the vanquished in the political arena, make them conscious of their exploited condition as “a scattered, nameless people” so as to have them rise again as “one nation” in the land of their forebears. The enslaved condition of Italy provided Manzoni with many a version of the downtrodden’s “ancient sorrow” under the “tramp of barbarous feet”, from the Longobardic and then Frankish yoke in the middle ages, through the Spanish tyranny of the seventeenth century, up to the Austrian oppression of his own times. All of these were periods branded by the “unjust right of the sword”, to be not only historically condemned but also fought against with “drawn swords” (as he puts it in his celebration of the revolutionary risings of 1821), “sharpened in the shadow”, and then “shining in the sun”.

As a political strategy deeply rooted in history, racial antagonism then worked as an explicit incitement to intellectual opposition as well as to revolutionary praxis (to sharpen both words and swords, so to speak), especially when the present time reflected the past, as it did both in Italy and in France after the Congress of Vienna. In France, in particular, the strokes of the ultra-conservative govern-

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40 Manzoni, Discorso, p. 204.
41 Manzoni, Discorso, p. 205.
ment, as Thierry noted, provoked even «the least fanatic to illegal resistance», thereby causing «the most enlightened portion of the youth of the middle classes» to waver between «action» and «books», «revolutionary effervescence» and «serious study». And it was in France that such a dialectic of culture and praxis brought about one of the most cutting projects of romantic historiography at large – a radical reconstruction of the national history as the history of the vanquished. «The Gauls», proudly states Thierry, «were before France».44

II. Antipathy of Race and Class Struggles

«M. Thierry has written an ingenious Book», exclaims Carlyle through the rhapsodic voice of Herr Professor Sauterteig in Chartism, «celebrating with considerable pathos the fate of the Saxons fallen under that fierce-hearted Conqueror, Acquirer or Conqueror, as he is named»:

Noble deeds, according to M. Thierry, were done by these unsuccessful men, heroic sufferings undergone; which it is a pious duty to rescue from forgetfulness. True, surely! A tear at least is due to the unhappy; it is right and fit that there should be a man to assert that lost cause too, and see what can still be made of it.45

«Pathos» and «a tear», «pious duty to rescue from forgetfulness» and «lost cause» – namely sympathy, filiopietism, and historical redemption of the defeated and the downtrodden. Though half-mockingly, Carlyle here gets to the bottom of

44 Thierry, Autobiographical Preface, pp. xv, ix.
the sentimental approach that the French historian employed not only in his *History of the Conquest of England* but also in his concurrent reflections on the history of France. Thierry, in fact, capitalized on the method of sympathy, by him politically qualified as a «plebeian sympathy», sustained by a compassionate «duty of filial piety» for the «stormy life of the ancestors of French citizens». Thus he resurrected the ancient Gauls (once overrun by the Germanic Franks) and glorified them as the vanquished forefathers of the latter-day «plebeians», the people of modern France. By so doing, he claimed the present rights of the third estate through the past ones of their forgotten progenitors. At the same time, in unison with Sismondi and Manzoni, he warned against the calamitous power of fellow-feeling, especially when «the victor is the only man displaying himself» on the cleared battlefield:

> Our interest [...] is easily lost on metaphysical subjects; and for want of food, is bestowed on the success of the conqueror, on the success of our own enemy. We rejoice in his joy; we join our voice to the acclamations which proclaim our nothingness. Such is the fatal force of human feeling. The French have experienced it.

This «human feeling», distrusted by Thierry, may be viewed as the romantic antecedent of that suspect «identification affective» with the victor that the historical materialist, as Benjamin argues, ought to avoid at any cost through an inverse process of detachment and estrangement from the inher-

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Thierry shunned its «fatal force» by re-channelling the flow of feeling towards the conquered, then turning it against the conquerors and their descendants. So he took on the collective identity of the subdued through national genealogy («we, sons of the conquered [Gauls]»48), felt himself into the miseries of another country’s down-trodden (the Saxons, «whom I loved», he says, «as if I had been one of them»49), and never tired of reminding his romantic colleagues and fellow plebeians that their history, as the outcome of an invasion, was marked not so much by harmony and unity as by struggles and divisions. Thus, through sympathy, he came to ground his theory and practice of history in the opposite concept of «antipathy» – what he called, in keeping with his radical theory of the conquest, «the antipathy of race», the aversion of the sons of the oppressed to the oppressing class50. To Thierry this concept was crucial for solving the «grand problem» of all his historical researches («the problem of the conquests of the middle ages, and their social results»), hence for grasping the history of all the European countries that were still struggling with those results, including the history of France and ancient Gaul51. From this perspective, it is significant that one of his most trenchant expositions of this principle of «the antipathy of race» should occur in a meditation on «the History of Ireland», a country where the consequences of the Anglo-Norman conquest (in the wake of the conquest of England that Thierry viewed as «the last

In truth, the stamp of conquest is marked on every page of the annals of the Irish nation; all the consequences of that first event, so difficult to recognize and trace in other histories, stand out in this one with striking clearness and relief. What can only be guessed at elsewhere, here presents itself under the least doubtful aspect, and in the most palpable form: the long persistence of two inimical nations on the same soil, and the variety of political, social and religious struggles, which spring, as from an inexhaustible source, out of the original hostility; the antipathy of race surviving all the revolutions of manners, laws and language, perpetuating itself through centuries, sometimes smouldering, more frequently flaming, at intervals giving way to the sympathies caused by community of habitation, and an instinctive love of their native land, then suddenly starting up, and separating men once more into two hostile camps. The grand and sad spectacle of which Ireland had been the theatre for seven hundred years, placed before me in a somewhat dramatic manner, what I confusedly saw at the bottom of the histories of all European monarchies.53

In the history of the French monarchy in particular, and in its most extreme political form and consequences, this antipathy of race had already eventuated in the revolutionary struggle of 1789 — «the triumph of the new vanquishers», in Guizot’s words, «over the old masters of power and soils»54. It was the same antipathy that had also borne revo-

53 Thierry, Autobiographical Preface, p. xi.
olutionary fruits elsewhere, for example in England, where in 1640 the descendants of the vanquished Saxons fought against the heirs of the Norman invaders, thereby engaging in «a great national reaction», according to Thierry, «against the order of things established six centuries previously by foreign conquest»; or in the New World, where «America», in Thierry’s extolling words again, «rejected from its bosom the nation which pretended to be its master, and from that day has been free»55. At a time when the restoration of the absolute monarchy after the Congress of Vienna had also reinstated the ancient oppression, to view the revolution as an outcome of this antipathy of race was a crucial strategy for Thierry as well as for the early Guizot:

For more than thirteen centuries, France contained two [estranged peoples], the victors and the vanquished. For more than thirteen centuries, the vanquished people struggled to shake off the yoke of the victors. Our history is the history of this struggle. In our days, a decisive battle has been engaged. Its name is revolution.56

Undoubtedly, this was the same ancestral feud that Mignet had in mind when he reviewed «the progress of the Third Estate» from its original subjection as a vanquished people to «the acquisition of power». Thus he traced its repeated efforts, from «the times of feudal tyranny», through «ministerial and fiscal despotism» and «the time of the Fronde», up to the eve of the revolution, when again, «after a century of absolute submission», the vanquished people

«reappeared in the arena, but on its own account», and, as the new «antagonist» of the court, «was destined to combat and to displace it»57. And again, this was the same struggle that on the other side (that of the old victors’ lineage) was also acknowledged by Carlyle when, in meditating on the vanity of sovereignty in human history, he followed the French rulers’ long procession «into Night». Thus, from the «Merovingian Kings» and their founder Chlodowig («rough Clovis», the conqueror of ancient Gaul), he moved through the Carolingian dynasty and the «shaggy» Normans, and then «forward to Louis the Grand» and Louis XV, lying in his «sick-bed» on the eve of the revolution, fit emblem of the slow, natural agony of «French Royalty», shortly to be consummated by the quick, unnatural one of Louis XVI, their last political descendent, destined to be dethroned and beheaded by the fiercest heirs of the vanquished58. As Mignet says, recalling the crucial, genealogical fact that the king, before his trial, was addressed by his enemies as «Louis Capet» (the «name of the ancient chief of his race»), as they intended «to substitute his title of king by his family name»: «His ancestors bequeathed to him a revolution»59.

This genealogical struggle was then viewed as the ineluctable consequence (or bequest) of a heaped-up antipathy of race, one that had begun with a conquest and had kept

57 François A. M. Mignet, Histoire de la Révolution française, depuis 1789 jusqu’en 1814 (1824), trans. History of the French Revolution from 1789 to 1814, London, Dent, 1926, pp. 6-7; this translation was re-edited from the 1846 English edition (London, Bogue), while the first English edition of Mignet’s work appeared in 1826.
growing, raging throughout centuries of renewed and intermittent clashes. The revolution of 1789 had just brought those clashes to a climax, though it had not caused an irreparable break with tradition (as was instead often maintained by supporters and critics alike). On the contrary, as the liberal intellectuals argued against their enemies’ view during the Restoration, the revolution had inscribed itself within the broad tradition of French history. Thierry (and his fellow historians) rejected the royalist charge that the revolution was «an aberration», or «a deviation from the natural order of things». This confutation was one and the same with their bourgeois, basic «need to refashion national history so as to justify 1789 while portraying 1793 as an idea refuted by historical experience»60. It was in fact in 1793, with the regicide of Louis XVI, that the revolution had shown all the horror of its atrocities. That horror was not to be repeated in the present. Thus, in the face of past achievements and failures, the antipathy of race was recalled to re-enact that «decisive battle» (in Guizot’s terms again) so as to aspire less to a repetition of the revolutionary experience as such (indeed execrated for the republican excesses of the Terror) than to a gradual transition to that constitutional monarchy that was to fulfill the country’s liberal ideals in July 1830. It is in the context of these moderate aspirations and fulfillments that Thierry’s assertions about his lack of «any precisely revolutionary tendency» or his deep «aversion for revolutionary tyranny» must be understood61.

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60 Ceri Crossley, French Historians and Romanticism: Thierry, Guizot, the Saint-Simonians, Quinet, Michelet, London, Routledge, 1993, pp. 53, 25.
This context may also help explain the harsh judgment (a bourgeois ‘sentence’ in its own right) that Thierry and Guizot were to pass, two decades later, on the events of 1848, when «with the June insurrection», in Marx’s words, «was fought the first great battle between the two classes that divide modern society»\(^62\). As they came exclusively to identify the history of the nation with the history of the third estate – nourished by antipathy of race and struggling for thirteen centuries against their vanquishers, blotting out all the illegitimate inequalities in 1789, then achieving liberty and national unity in 1830 – they would not admit, in turn, any class conflict within the third estate itself. This is what Marx complained about when in a well-known letter to Engels he both praised and criticized Thierry, calling him «the father of the ‘class struggle’ in French historical writing», while at the same time denouncing his subsequent incapacity or unwillingness to acknowledge the existence of any «antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat». This «contrast» was not, as Thierry maintained, «born yesterday». Its «roots in history», Marx instead claimed, could be traced back to the rise of the third estate itself\(^63\). The early Lukács, following Marx, went as far as to view such a contrast as the very «tragedy of the bourgeoisie»:

The tragedy of the bourgeoisie is reflected historically in the fact that even before it had defeated its predecessor, feudalism,


its new enemy, the proletariat, had appeared on the scene. Politically, it became evident when at the moment of victory, the «freedom» in whose name the bourgeoisie had joined battle with feudalism, was transformed into a new repressiveness. Sociologically, the bourgeoisie did everything in its power to eradicate the fact of class conflict from the consciousness of society.64

To eradicate this «fact» was, I believe, what the liberal historians may be said to have ultimately tried to do in the field of history writing. This suspect attempt was also noted (through the lenses of Plechanov) by Benjamin. On the one hand, Benjamin in fact commended the early Guizot for his view of the «rise of the bourgeoisie as an age-long class struggle» against its feudal oppressors (namely as the race/class struggle of the vanquished against the victors). On the other, though, he openly deplored Guizot’s post-1848 denunciation of «the class conflict [...] between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat» – a class conflict that to the Frenchman’s eyes was in fact «but a miserable thing»65.

As these «noble spirits» of the 1820s – as radical Quinet also noted – were destined to «move away from the republican idea»66 and then abhor the revolution of 1848, so their principle of the antipathy of race was alike destined to be neutralized and impoverished by events. As the underlying

66 Edgar Quinet, Mémorial inédit (18 June, 1861), quoted in Alessandro Galante Garrone’s Introduzione to his Italian translation of Quinet’s La Révolution (1865), La rivoluzione, Torino, Einaudi, 1953, pp. xxvii-xxix.
assumption of the class struggle, antipathy may be said to have been, since the 1820s, instrumental in sustaining what may be called, in its broadest sense, an idealistic or providential vision of history. In the hands of the liberal historians, in other words, it turned out to be a tool whose final aim, in France and elsewhere, was to reorient and rebalance the historical course within the encompassing framework of a new totality. This was to be a cleared and renovated «theater of God» (to recall one of Herder’s definitions of world history), set up for the ultimate triumph of the truly national/universal bearers of what Manzoni and Thierry, Sismondi and Guizot envisioned as the leading «ethical powers» of the historical process – truth and freedom, progress and equality, civilization and the infinite perfectibility of mankind67. As such, the sympathetic/antipathetic ap-

proach lost much of its antagonistic impact not only on the front of revolutionary action but also on that of a radical historiographical practice. I point to these consequences not to scold Thierry and his fellow historians – as Marx did, benevolently though somehow awkwardly, I believe – for not being able to become historical materialists in due time, or for not doing their work properly («If M. Thierry had read our works», Marx wrote to Engels, «he would know that a sharp contrast between the bourgeoisie and the people naturally arises the moment the former ceased to oppose itself, *qua* third estate, to the clergy and the nobles»).

Instead, I point to those consequences to emphasize the Romantics’ incapacity to envision a new structure of history by which the old racial struggles they were able to recognize through their principle of antipathy (as well as the new class struggles they were unwilling to accept) could make sense outside the formal and substantial movement of the «ethical powers».

Thus Sismondi, for instance, could quite simply reverse the opposition between conquerors and conquered on a purely moral ground. «The history of Italy under the barbarians’ domination», he candidly states, championing the public virtues of the defeated against the brutality of the victors, «is more like the history of the conquering nations than that of the subjugated peoples». In other words, in the view of civilization and its values, though pillaged, oppressed, and dismembered, the vanquished nation was presented, at bottom, as the ethical victor on the devastated

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battlefields of history. «Our fathers were without arms», says Thierry, recalling the moral victory of the conquered Gauls over their conquerors, «and yet they managed to defeat warriors»70. Manzoni too used similar strategies of reversal. His liberal catholicism, in fact, could resort to providence to take care of the unsolved or unjust contrasts in the history of this world, as opposed to what was eventually to be expected «outside and beyond life». So even the offspring of the former conquerors of Italy – as he dramatized the Longobards in his historical play Adelchi against Charlemagne’s Franks – could experience misery and tragedy. Thus the sorrows of both vanquished and victors (being the latter, in turn, overrun by new invaders) were portrayed side by side. A «providential misfortune», he showed, could lower the status of the rulers and turn them into victims, place the children of the oppressors «among the oppressed», and have them fall in disgrace, and die, and sleep beneath the same soil that had harbored the dead of those races they themselves had subdued and destroyed at an earlier time71. Or he could invoke the avenging hand of God, the divine «Father of all peoples», even as he was vindicating the all too human strife between two estranged peoples in the revolutionary risings of 1821, to warn and remind the new «German» barbarians (the Austrians, on the Italian soil) of the rapacious nature of their usurpation72. But as ways of repairing past and present injustices, all these were, to say the least, rather mild versions of historical vengeance.

72 Manzoni, Marzo 1821, pp. 115-18.
III. Class Struggles and Historical Consciousness

Manzoni’s catholic compassion – what for Gramsci, after all, amounted just to a «paternal» and «aristocratic» attitude towards «the humbles»73 – was decisively less radical than Thierry’s moral glorification of the vanquished, though the French historian thought highly of the Italian writer and used to repeat, as George Ticknor reported, «long passages of *Adelchi*» to his visitors74. But even Thierry’s radicalism did not escape the shortcomings of the principle of racial antipathy, insofar as the principle of racial antipathy itself would imply some form of a novel harmony or more comprehensive totality wherein all the given antitheses of history would be overcome and composed once and for all (and wherein, as a consequence, new antagonisms such as those between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat could be neither contemplated nor accommodated). That is why «Thierry insists on unity», as it has been noted, «even where his own historicizing gaze kept discovering divisions»75. As it was viewed as a «historical anteriority», though momentarily impaired or lost, unity was of course recuperable, through

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75 Gossman, *Between History and Literature*, p. 105. This «inconsistency», according to Gossman, was a consequence of the «conquest theory» itself. This «theory», he argues, «transformed the logical priority of unity over division into a historical anteriority, and thereby defined division as a stage or phase, as something that had happened to an original unity, and not as an essential condition». «If it was not an essential condition», Gossman concludes, «it could presumably be healed, and unity was therefore in principle recuperable.»
human action and praxis, in the time to come. This impulse to heal a rift and recuperate a past condition in the future marks both the force and the vulnerability of Thierry’s vision, from the first projects of his histories of the vanquished to his Letters on the History of France and his History of the Formation and Progress of the Third Estate.

In fact, although Thierry viewed the conquest as an original point in time when a wrong had been done (one that had indeed left damaging consequences for the vanquished nation), he did not consider that wrong, after all and despite all, irreparable. To recall and invert an insight of Horkheimer – who claimed that «the injustice, the horror, and the sorrows of the past», as he wrote to Benjamin, «are», indeed, «irreparable» («The slain are really slain») – we may say that for Thierry, on the contrary, no wrong, no injustice, no pain suffered in the past were beyond redress, because the past itself was not yet completely past, not yet really concluded or consummated. In other words, the past for Thierry was yet to be brought to completion, yet to be redeemed through the ethical, forward course of history that was thus fully envisaged in its «idealistic», open form – borrowing Horkheimer’s terms again – of «incompleteness» (Unabgeschlossenheit)76. Only an idealistic assumption about «the incompleteness of history» could in fact allow the historian of the vanquished to speak so confidently, as Thierry did, about «a sort of restitution» and «restoration» for his subdued forefathers77. All the wrong, all the injustice, and all the pain suffered by the serfs and their descendants in

76 Benjamin, Das Passagen-Werk, pp. 588-89.
77 Thierry, Autobiographical Preface, p. xii.
the remote or more recent past were for Thierry reparable, to the extent that the continuity of the rulers who had perpetuated those horrors over the centuries – the continuum of the history of the oppressor, we would say in Benjamin’s terms – could be reversed by the sons of the oppressed. Thus over against the political lineage of the nobility of France – that «trace[d] itself back, in its pretensions, to the privileged men of the sixteenth century», then to «the possessors of men of the thirteenth century», and ultimately «to the Franks of Karle the Great» and «the Sicambers of Chlodowig», namely to the conquerors of ancient Gaul – Thierry claimed and opposed «the contrary descent»:

We are the sons of the men of the third estate; the third estate proceeded from the commons; the commons were the asylums of the serfs; the serfs were the vanquished of the conquest. Thus, from formula to formula, through the space of fifteen centuries, we are led to the extreme term of a conquest which it is necessary to efface.78

This passage offers an emblematic account of an alternative project of history qui history of the vanquished. At the same time it is a striking example of the limitations of those historicist counter-traditions that Benjamin strove to overcome in «the state of emergency» of the present day (Thesis 8). By invoking and following the opposite genealogy, Thierry travels both ways along the same structural continuity. His first movement is, as it were, against history – brushing it, to a certain extent, as Benjamin would say, «against the grain» (Thesis 7). He thus retraces the historical

78 Thierry, On the Antipathy of Race, p. 90.
process backwards and downwards, reverses the historicist «causal nexus»\textsuperscript{79} (present to past, sons to fathers, effects to causes), and eventually gets to the terminal point he wants to reach. In fact, at the bottom of this history of the vanquished, as well as at the bottom of the syntactic continuity of the first half of the passage itself – highlighted by anadiplosis, where repetitions link the end and the beginning of each sentence – lies «the conquest». This crucial event here works as an inverted telos that, «from formula to formula», is reached back in order to be exposed and obliterated. Thierry wanted to lay bare the first cause of the domination of the victors. Thus he invokes that «extreme term» as an inaugural act of usurpation and racial violence in the fifth century, to unmask and level out the current supremacy of one class over another, based on consecutive «distinctions» of «bloods», «castes», «orders», and, eventually, «titles»\textsuperscript{80}. So to expose the conquest as an «extreme term» in the past was the aim of the first «phase» of his «renovation of the history of France» – a «scientific» phase, as he called it, in which the historian «demanded a complete restoration of the altered or misconstrued truth». Then to «efface» the conquest once and for all, to force it to «abjure itself even to its last traces» in the present time, was the aim of the «other» phase – the «political one», in which he demanded «a sort of restitution for the middle and lower classes, for the ancestors of the third estate, forgotten by our modern his-

\textsuperscript{79} This is Ranke’s well-known definition of the historicist causality in Idee der Universalhistorie (1830 ca.), Wilma A. Iiggers trans., On the Character of Historical Science (A Manuscript of the 1830s), in The Theory and Practice of History, p. 40.

\textsuperscript{80} Thierry, On the Antipathy of Race, p. 90.
torians». This effacement was one and the same with the retrieval of a true foundation for the conquered race. This implied the survival of that race after the conquest, its continuous existence in the midst or in the shadow of the new rulers. It also established a new origin for a new beginning. Thierry kept true to this crucial point of his conquest theory throughout his career, even when, by the late 1840s and early 1850s, that theory was no longer the main foundation of his vision. The «starting point» of the history of the vanquished nation, he writes in the preface to his History of the Formation and Progress of the Third Estate, remaining steadfast in his first principle, «is the upheaval caused in Gaul by the fall of the Roman rule and the Germanic conquest». From this «starting point», the historical process could be reconstructed and set back on its right course of development. In other words, Thierry defamiliarized the past so as to have the people fully refamiliarize with what they had chosen to deny or forget, before showing that the reversed causality and the newly reconstructed chain of events had a different meaning and a richer promise.

Thus, after this reversal, Thierry starts out on what may be called his historical counter-movement. Upon the re-

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81 Thierry, Autobiographical Preface, p. xii.
82 Thierry, Essai sur l'histoire de la formation et des progrès du tiers état, Paris, Furne, 1853, p. 3. In his Autobiographical Preface (p. vii), Thierry recalls the moment of his first insight into the conquest theory when, after reading over some chapters of Hume’s History of England (1754-62), he was struck with the idea, ‘and exclaimed as [he] closed the book, ‘All this dates from a conquest; there is a conquest underneath it’’.
83 Thierry, On the Antipathy of Race, p. 89: ‘Instead of repulsing the conquest, they denied it, believing that by forgetting it themselves, they would make others forget it’.
trieval of such a new origin and the proclamation of such a new beginning, in fact, the spokesman of the serfs moves forward. He advances along the same «causal nexus» to legitimize the oppositional value of historical continuity for the progress of his people (and/or class), what the friend of the conquered may have even candidly thought of as the ‘true’ progress of the ‘true’ French people, hence «the real history of the country» that was «still missing», and that, therefore, «still remain[ed] to be written»:

The best part of our annals, the most serious, the most instructive, still remain to be written; the history of the citizens, of the subjects, and of the people is still missing. This history would present to us at the same time examples of conduct, and that feeling of sympathy which we vainly seek in the adventures of the small number of privileged persons who occupy alone the historical scene. Our minds would attach themselves to the destiny of the masses of men who have lived and felt like us, far better than to the fortune of the great and of princes, the only one which is related to us, and the only one in which there are no lessons for our use; the progress of the popular masses toward liberty and well-being would appear to us more imposing than the march of conquerors, and their misfortunes more touching than those of deposed kings.

So, while uncovering the falsifications of the annals of the rulers and divorcing itself from an imposed, useless affilia-

84 Thierry, First Letter on the History of France, p. 96. In his Autobiographical Preface he also makes similar claims for the national past, speaking of «a truly national history» (p. viii), «the real history of France» (p. xii), or «the true history of France» (p. xvii).
tion, Thierry’s subversion of historical ancestry («let us claim the contrary descent») aimed at a reappropriation of a past that was to be ontologically and ethically recovered so as to be redeemed and given historical dignity, and therefore political influence and power in the present day. As if an alternative and a truly national history could be epically and compassionately rewritten simply by changing agents and actions over the same sequential flow of the centuries, thereby filling out the same spatio-temporal structure (what Benjamin derogatorily called the «homogeneous, empty time» or «the homogeneous course of history») with different contents (Thesis 17). In fact, even this redemptive and vindicatory reconstruction — set in motion by such a unilinear reversal of direction and grounded in sentimental identification and lived experience («feeling of sympathy», affective response to those «who have lived and felt like us», the moving «misfortunes» of «the popular masses») — was still oriented and legitimated by the work of cultural values and the moral powers («the most instructive» parts of the past, «examples of conduct», «progress», «liberty») eventually leading to material betterment and happiness («well-being»). From this perspective, Thierry’s project embodies all the strengths and all the weaknesses of the historicist outlook he shared. Though moved by pietas and vengeance (plebian sympathy and antipathy of race), even the historian of the vanquished was engaged in an enterprise that was, after all, an articulation of the past informed by the same principles of the histories of the rulers — selection and reappropriation; redemption and restitution; causal connection and continuity; unity and totality; progress towards freedom and the infinite advancement of humanity, in this case epitomized by the race/class (namely the third estate) that would
arrogate to itself the role of the authentic representative of
the nation and/or humankind at large along what Thierry
himself envisioned as the «gradual and irresistible course of
social perfectionnement»86.

Plebeian sympathy and antipathy of race; antagonistic vo-
cation to recover the missing history of a nation as a history
of the vanquished and inability to conceive alternative prin-
ciples of construction outside the overpowering «conform-
ism» (Thesis 6) of the dominant tradition — these are the
methodological aporias against which Benjamin warns the
historian who is engaged in the recovery of the «true image
of the past» (Thesis 5). «The good news that the historian of
the past brings with a beating pulse», he says in a fragment
originally intended for Thesis 5, «comes out of a mouth that
perhaps, even as it opens, speaks in a void»87. That is to say,
the announcement («good news») of those different and
alternative contents that the oppositional historian retrieves
with compassion and emotional sharing («beating pulse») is
in danger of actually disappearing in the gulf of history (a
«void» or «empty time») the very moment (which is always a
time too late) he is about to narrate the past («even as
[his mouth] opens») by unfolding it according to the princi-
ples of historicism. The bafflement of «Angelus Novus» —
staring agape at the ruins of the past and the wrecks of hu-
manity, compassionately and cognitively involved in the re-
constructive work of history, and yet ultimately unable «to
awaken the dead and join together what has been shattered»
(Thesis 9) — is an emblematic example of the limited power

86 Thierry, Lettres sur l’histoire de France (1827, revised and expanded 1829), in Œuvres d’Aug. Thierry, Bruxelles, Hauman et Comp.ie, 1839, p. 494.
87 Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften, 1, 3, pp. 1247-48.
of the sympathetic/antipathetic approach. Blown away by the storm of progress, «the angel of history» feels and understands, but cannot act. Thus his adversarial stance — based, at bottom, on the historicist faith that the «truth» can always be restored even when «altered or misconstrued» by the oppressor88, or that the «authentic image» of the past can always be «revived» even when «wholly swallowed» by «Oblivion»89 — proves inadequate to redeem and rearrange the debris of bygone time and life into history.

In fact, this faith mystifies the idea of redemption itself, weakening the praxis of the adversarial historian in the political present. And it is in the light of this tough-minded realization that Benjamin’s critique of the redemptive impulse of the historian of the vanquished stands out more clearly. He knows that redemption works not so much through reappropriation and totality (two tenets of both historicist and dialectical thought) as through exclusion and partiality. «Not only does the Messiah come as the redeemer», Benjamin states; «he also comes as the vanquisher of the Antichrist» (Thesis 6). If it is true that the redeemer must resuscitate the dead and reclaim all the images of the past (the lost ones as well as those that threaten to disappear irretrievably, even as the historian’s mouth opens), then it is also true that he has an adversary or «enemy» to fight against and subdue. That is why «the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past», Benjamin adds, «is given only to that historian who is pervaded by the idea that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins». And as «this enemy has not ceased to be victorious», his tri-

88 Thierry, Autobiographical Preface, p. xii.
89 Carlyle, Past and Present (1843), in The Works, X, p. 129.
umphs must always be viewed with suspicion as much as
his domination must constantly be opposed (Thesis 6, Beniamin’s emphasis). Only antagonism and conflict can
work against the deceiving prospects of a total and totaliz-
ing redemption. As such, they are essential to the histo-
rian’s task of establishing what is historical, namely what is
historically alternative, and therefore worth salvaging in the
present time of praxis. And to assert their importance in
such a task, not only does Benjamin «call in question any
victory ever achieved by the rulers» (Thesis 4), as Thierry,
Manzoni, and others had somehow and more or less effec-
tively done, but he also qualifies the salvific mandate of
«the struggling, oppressed class», viewed as the last political
descendant of the vanquished peoples, hence as the «sub-
ject of historical knowledge»:

The subject of historical knowledge is the struggling, oppressed
class itself. In Marx, this appears as the last enslaved class, the
avenging class, that brings to an end the work of liberation in
the name of generations of the defeated. (Thesis 12)

It is exactly this «work» that the materialist historian must
reassert to demystify the «role» that the vanquished have
often been assigned by their various spokesmen – the «role
of the redeemer of future generations» (Thesis 12, Benjamin’s
emphasis). Benjamin here builds upon the example of his-
toricist counter-traditions so as to strike at the heart of
what he envisioned as one of their most restrictive ideo-
logical aporias: namely the instrumental transcendence of
the past by an oblivious present, all too oriented towards
the future. At «this school» of futurity – whether run by the
Romantics, the Social Democrats, or the genteel anti-
fascists on the eve of World War II – the “avenging class” lost “the sinews of its greatest strength”:

At this school, that class forgot both its hatred and its will to sacrifice. Both are in fact nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors, and not by the ideal of liberated grandchildren. *(Thesis 12)*

Though aimed, in particular, at the Social Democrats’ enervation of class consciousness, this critique is so inclusive as to cast light on both the achievements and the shortcomings of the adversarial view of history at large. Franks versus Gauls, Longobards versus Romans, Normans versus Saxons, Anglo-Normans versus Irish – through all these racial oppositions, the antagonistic historian managed to focus his ideological call as the heir of the conquered, removing the armour-plated master on horseback from the foreground of the historical scene and replacing him with the servants who “reared the war horse of the noble” or “joined the steel plates of his armour”[^90]. He thus allowed the sons of the oppressed (to repeat) not only to become aware of plebeian counter-genealogies but also to reassess their active role in the historical process, namely to recast themselves as protagonists of their own epics on one side, and of the class struggles of the day on the other. Through the progressive movement of history itself, however, the antagonistic historian may be said to have risen above his “inimical reminiscences”, “irreconcilable projects”, and “opposing spirit”, progressively losing his focussed perspective of the past among the stretching horizons of the future. The

past, and therefore the work of history itself, thus came ultimately to be employed to open up prospects of emancipation and advancement for the descendants of the vanquished as well as for their progeny, the potential inhabitants of a liberated and reconciled nation, summoned in advance to fulfill the universal expectations of a common humanity. «As we still look at this society of the modern age», says Thierry at the end of his _Letters on the History of France_, «struggling with the debris of the past, debris of conquest, feudal seigniory, and absolute monarchy, we should not be anxious about it; its history, he confidently adds, «assures us of the time to come». This historical confidence about «l'avenir» rested on what he envisioned, as pointed out earlier, as the «gradual and irresistible course of social perfectionnement».91

This idea of progress _qua_ progress of mankind towards a general and universal betterment – a ‘Golden Age’ that, as Saint-Simon, Thierry, and others believed, lay in the future and not in the past – may be said to have weighed heavily upon historicist counter-traditions at large, from the Romantics themselves through the «Social Democrats» and «the opponents of Fascism» in Benjamin’s own time. «[Fascism] has a chance», Benjamin says, meditating on the repeated failures of those counter-traditions, «partly because its opponents, _in the name of progress_ , treat it as a historical norm» (Thesis 8). The avenging class, instead, must struggle not so much «in the name of progress» as «in the name of generations of the defeated». That is why he is even sharper when he comes to expose the inadequacy of the «Social

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91 Tierry, _Lettres sur l'histoire de France_, pp. 539, 494.
Democratic theory of progress, viewed as one of the climactic embodiments of the nineteenth-century historicist tradition, and therefore as a compendium of its severest limitations. «Progress, as pictured in the minds of the Social Democrats», he says in Thesis 13, was «the progress of mankind itself»:

It was [...] something endless (in keeping with the infinite perfectibility of mankind) [...] [and] essentially unstoppable (as if automatically pursuing a straight or spiral course).

From Thierry’s vision of «the gradual and irresistible course of social perfectionnement» to the Social Democrats’ idea of an «endless» and «unstoppable» progress, in accordance with «the infinite perfectibility of mankind», or to the anti-fascists’ fights «in the name of progress», the oppositional view of history came paradoxically to be drained of its critical function and conflictual thrust. For Benjamin this was a sign of ideological impoverishment and political weakness, that «weakness» (in Marx’s words) that «fancies the enemy overcome when he [is] only conjured away in imagination, and [loses] all understanding of the present in a passive glorification of the future»92. In fact, Benjamin may be said to have tried to rectify the world-view of historicist and utopian counter-traditions alike exactly by liberating the present time (the time of history writing as well as that of human action and praxis) from such a «passive glorification of the future». Thus he reminds the avengers of

the conquered and of their heirs that historical conscious-
ness – on this side of the compass, against the golden
realms of times to come – must always and necessarily be a
consciousness of the past and not of the future. This is the
awareness of a long «tradition of the oppressed», as he also
puts it, whose function is to teach the spokesmen of the
struggling class and the struggling class itself «that ‘the state
of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception»
(namely a temporary condition which, at some brighter pe-
riod, in some raceless or classless society of Utopia, shall be
done away with and left behind), «but the rule» (namely the
essential condition of the enslaved classes in history) (Thesis
8). That is why a truly redemptive historical consciousness,
qua class consciousness, must not indulge in visions of fu-
ture liberation and reconcilement but must be trained, as it
were, «in remembrance» (Thesis B) so as to be unremittingly
kept alert and alive by that «hatred» and that «will to sacri-
ifice» that the ruled classes have often and all too cheaply
been made to forget. Hatred and will to sacrifice. These are
the materialist counterparts of the Romantics’ «antipathy of
race» and «touching endurance of sufferings»93. Shorn of the
promises and prophecies of times to come, and therefore
radicalized and reinvigorated, they must thrive again, for
Benjamin, not so much on the oblivious expectation of a
future deliverance (the mystifying «ideal of liberated grand-
children») as on the unfailing memory of past bondage –
that painful though ineffaceable «image of enslaved ances-

93 Thierry, Sur la conquête de l’Angleterre par les Normands, à propos du roman
d’Ivanhoe (1820), in Dix ans d’études historiques, trans. On the Conquest of
England by the Normans, à propos of the Novel of Ivanhoe in The Historical Es-
says, p. 55.
tors» that alone is, and must be, in a world still strewn with victims, the anchor and source of the history of the vanquished.