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Article:

Verovšek, P.J. (2021) *The moment of rupture: Historical consciousness in interwar German thought*. *Contemporary Political Theory*, 20. pp. 25-28. ISSN 1470-8914

<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-020-00420-6>

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/s41296-020-00420-6>

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Review

The Moment of Rupture: Historical Consciousness in Interwar German Thought

Humberto Beck

University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2019, 232pp., ISBN: 9780812251593

A hundred years after its foundation on 9 November 1919, the culture, politics, and intellectual legacy of the Weimar Republic continue to attract the attention of scholars across the humanities and the social sciences. Despite its tragic end with the Enabling Act of 1933, which led to the establishment of the Nazi dictatorship under Adolf Hitler, this period of German history is full of counterfactual possibilities, as the rupture created by the First World War and its aftermath left the collective societal impression ‘that the unimaginable had occurred and that nothing could be excluded’ (Michael Makropoulos, quoted on p. 71).

Humberto Beck’s book examines the intellectual legacy of Germany from 1914 through 1940 by focusing on the unique form of historical consciousness that arose during this period. In light of the dramatic events that characterized Weimar, including a failed revolution, famine, economic collapse, general strikes, and repeated *Putsch* attempts, Beck argues that it is defined by a distinct form of temporality organized around the instant or ‘blink of an eye’ (*Augenblick*).

Beck defines the instant as the subjective perception of the shortest span of time, which cannot be further divided, yet still has an internal duration of its own. Although this concept has a long legacy in the history of philosophy, *The Moment of Rupture* argues that interwar Germany experienced ‘the formation of a distinct *regime of historicity* that adopted the figure of the instant as a wide-ranging formula for the configuration of that epoch’s forms of temporal experience’ (p. 10, emphasis in original). Beck traces how key German thinkers of this period turned to what he calls the ‘instantaneist chronotope’ in order to make sense of the discontinuity of the time and ‘the ensuing experience of an immediate and fragmentary present seemingly dislocated from anything in the past’ (p. 11).

The rhetoric of instantaneity—and the conceptual framework of historical consciousness to which it gave rise in this period—was not invented *ex nihilo* between the beginning of the First World War and the onset of the Second. On the contrary, it has deep roots in the modern intellectual tradition. In Chapter 1 of *The Moment of Rupture*, Beck traces conceptual reflection on the instant back to Goethe’s poetry, the French Revolution’s historical self-understanding of itself as representing a new beginning, and early Romanticism, as well as to the philosophical reflections of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. In Chapter 2, he expands his analysis to the aesthetic dimension, focusing on the poetry of Charles Baudelaire and the artistic *avant garde* of futurism, Dadaism, and surrealism.

While these intellectual precedents are important and interesting in their own right, *The Moment of Rupture* truly hits its stride in Chapters 3 through 5, when Beck turns his attention to three of the primary exponents of the new instantaneist regime of historicity of interwar Germany: Ernst Junger, Ernst Bloch, and Walter Benjamin. He argues that these three thinkers define a key juncture in the historical consciousness of Weimar by building on the modern intellectual

tradition of instantaneist thinking and applying it to their own experiences. Despite their aesthetic, political, and philosophical disagreements, Beck argues that Junger, Bloch, and Benjamin are united in their attempts to theorize and make sense of the unique '*actuality of the now*, the time when history is completed not in a process, but in its very interruption' (p. 14, emphasis in original).

In addition to emphasizing their contributions to their shared experience of the instantaneist regime of historicity, each of these chapters also brings out the key individual contributions of Junger, Bloch, and Benjamin, respectively. For example, Beck focuses on the role of the *Fronterlebnis* (front experience) in shaping the nationalistic and militaristic historical consciousness of Junger's work. Concentrating on the terror and horrors of the battlefield, where calm turns into chaos and life into death in the 'blink of an eye,' Junger transposes these experiences of the industrialized warfare to everyday life in interwar Germany.

In contrast to claims that modern experience was deadened by the forces of science and secularization, Junger argues that 'the conditions of technological society had not suppressed the occasions for these experiences of suddenness; it had multiplied them' (p. 81). In so doing, it offered individuals the opportunity to experience in everyday life the instantaneous moments of 'greatest revelation' (Junger quoted on p. 79), which had previously only been available on the battlefield. Thus, rather than bemoaning the total mobilization of modern society as the end of authentic experience, Junger reveled in it as containing the possibility for the renewed creation of meaning through adherence to hierarchical and communitarian values.

Although Bloch and Benjamin both disagreed with Junger's conservative vision, they accepted his focus on the revelatory potential of the instant. However, instead of drawing on *Front-Denken* (front thinking), they based their utopian visions on the Jewish tradition of messianic thinking, in which the revolutionary event that redeems the world is not the product of progress, but comes 'from *outside* of history' and 'disrupt[s] its regular flow' (p. 97). Both also drew extensively on Marxism, but did so in unorthodox ways. Thus, instead of looking to the future, Beck notes that 'in Bloch's approach utopia can manifest itself as an experience in the everyday' through instantaneous perceptions that 'confirm, in themselves, the coming of a better future' (p. 104). In contrast to Bloch's focus on 'the darkness of the lived moment' (p. 98), Benjamin looks to the nonsynchronous historical event, in which the messianic possibilities of the past are 'unsealed by its vibrant association with the present' (p. 137) and allow for the actualization of its unrealized possibilities through the 'irruption of the absolutely new in history' (p. 141).

As this brief, superficial summary makes clear, this is a fascinating, suggestive book. It is part of a broader movement in recent scholarship, which includes my own work (Verovšek 2020), that examines the effects that ruptures or breaks in historical time have had on key political developments in the twentieth century. The intellectual framework of *The Moment of Rupture* successfully demonstrates the importance of the instantaneist chronotope and shows how it emerged from the history of philosophy to take center stage in the interwar Weimar Republic. Each of the three chapters on Junger, Bloch, and Benjamin is informative and stimulating in its own right. They will be of interest both to specialists working on these thinkers, and to teachers as background reading on their work.

The short conclusion to this book does a good job of showing how this new chronotope organized around the instant helps to push back against the more typically modern historicist regime, in which the future is ‘synonymous with the experience of unforeseeable “newness”’ (p. 155). Drawing on Reinhart Koselleck (2004), Beck argues that interwar Germany’s new instantaneist historical consciousness differs from historicism, because it is not mediated by the temporal duration required for progress, transition, evolution, or reform. He also distinguishes this approach from presentism, noting that it ‘tends towards vital activism and decisive action, while presentism features a passive sense of the present and a feeling of historical stagnation’ (p. 157).

Despite the book’s many strengths, the final chapter is somewhat disappointing, as it neither reflects on the unrealized emancipatory potential of the regime of instantaneity nor on its historical unravelling. It also says little about how and why regimes of historicity change, nor does it bring the narrative up to the present by examining the downfall and afterlife of this form of historical consciousness.

Finally, I would have been interested in what Beck sees as the possible benefits of this chronotope. Over the course of the postwar period, we have lost the instantaneist sense of the power of what Benjamin refers to as the ‘messianic present.’ While we can be thankful that our lives are not defined by the kinds of ruptures that characterized interwar Germany, the victory of liberal democratic capitalism in 1989 also seems to have eliminated the historicist belief in progress and the possibility of change. Although events since the turn of the millennium have made it clear that the ‘end of history’ was an illusion, it is unclear what has replaced this regime of historicity.

Unlike Junger, Bloch, and Benjamin, who maintained faith that fundamental change could be brought about in an instant, today we seem resigned to the fact that resolution seems almost impossible. In this light, it is a shame that *The Moment of Rupture* does not draw out any lessons for the present from the historical consciousness of interwar Germany.

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