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The Author as Traitor

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"It is hard to be a traitor, it is a creative act. It requires relinquishing one's identity, losing face. One must vanish from the picture, remain unrecognized."
(Gilles Deleuze/Claire Parnet)[1]

Walter Benjamin's essay "The Author as Producer" is an attack on the "leftist bourgeois intelligentsia" in Germany of the 1920s and early 1930s. Its primary targets were the *Neue Sachlichkeit*[2] and a movement from the 1910s that has been largely forgotten in German-speaking countries, but whose name sounds surprisingly up-to-date today: the name "Activism" was applied to a discourse in the shadow of Expressionism[3] marked by literature and literary criticism and the loose association of mostly men of letters affiliated with it. This included, for certain periods of their work, such diverse authors as Heinrich Mann, Gustav Landauer, Max Brod and Ernst Bloch. The circle affiliated with the publicist Kurt Hiller had been developing since 1910, specifically under the label "Activism" after 1914. Although Hiller and his circle are hardly remembered today, in 1934 Benjamin could be certain that the figure of Hiller and the associated positions would still be familiar to his recipients. Especially the abusive diatribes and mockery on the part of the Berliner Dadaists against the "Activists" were

characterized by a remarkable vehemence around 1920 and probably still remembered in the mid-1930s due to their verbal brutality.[4]

In "Author as Producer" Benjamin presents Hiller, as the "theoretician of activism", as a classic example of a purportedly leftist intellectual tendency that was actually counter-revolutionary. According to Benjamin, it was revolutionary only in its mentality, but not in its production.[5] This difference between tendency and technique and the neglect of the latter was only *one* of the problems of "Activism", the misleading self-definition another. What was peddled during the First World War and the years following it as "Activism" was, according to Hiller's self-definition, "religious socialism"[6] or - in my interpretation - *vitalist spiritism*[7]. In addition to eloquent appeals to and invocations of the "young breed" ("das junge Geschlecht", Heinrich Mann), of the "New Demotic" ("Neue Volkstümlichkeit", Kurt Hiller), or the people as "sacred mass" ("heiliger Masse", Ludwig Rubiner), the "Activists" focused primarily on the hypostasization of the spirit and the "spiritual" (*Geistige*). The term "spiritual", initially a tactical substitute for "intellectual", was gradually substantiated by Hiller and others and eventually understood as a "characterological type"[8]. From Heinrich Mann's seminal text "Geist und Tat" ("Intellect and Action") to Hiller's manifesto-like "Philosophie des Ziels" ("Philosophy of the Goal") to Ludwig Rubiner's "Der Dichter greift in die Politik" ("The Poet Intervenes in Politics"), the Activism texts[9] wrestle conspicuously often with themes of religion, mysticism and the church. It seems that the spirit that haunts the spiritual here is more of a holy one than Hegel's *Weltgeist*. Hiller himself tends to posit paradise more than revolution and socialism as a utopian goal. "Consecrate yourselves, you spiritual ones, finally - to the service of the spirit; the holy spirit, the active spirit."[10]

The two main aspects of Benjamin's question about the "place of the intellectual" are its position with respect to the proletariat on the one hand and the manner of organization on the other. Benjamin's criticism of "Activism" thus consists primarily in its self-positioning "between the classes". This position *beside* the proletariat, the position of benefactors, ideological patrons, is an impossible one.[11] The principle of the formation of this kind of collective, which assembles men of letters around the concept of "the spiritual" beyond any incipient organizing, is a wholly reactionary one, not only for Benjamin.[12] This criticism is even more evident, if we include not only Benjamin's technical, formal insistence on changing the apparatus of production, but also the *attitude* of the "Activists" that was not at all revolutionary: sometimes their texts are marked by nationalism, are often even anti-democratic, and in Hiller's circle anti-democratic tendencies cannot be interpreted as radically democratic or radically leftist. "Activism does not want a -cracy of the demos, in other words of the masses and mediocrity, but rather a -cracy of the spirit, in other words of the best."[13] Hiller's principle of spirit-aristocracy propagates a dominion of the spirit, meaning a dominion of that which is of the spirit, of the best, finally even of the "new German master house"[14].

Such an unequivocal "mentality" inevitably leads to the question of why Benjamin was even willing and able to sell the authors of "Activism" as *left-wing* bourgeoisie at all. I suspect that has to do not only with Benjamin's text-immanent intention, which I will come back to later, but also and especially with the broader activities of a second branch of "Activism". Although this branch rarely referred to itself as "Activism", its organ, the weekly paper the "Aktion", substantially influenced leftist intellectual and radical leftist movements in the German-speaking region in the 1910s.[15]

Although the "Aktion" and its protagonists were not activists in today's sense either, they were certainly more politically and pointedly active than Kurt Hiller's circle. In its early years until the start of the war, the "Aktion", alongside the "Sturm", was the leading Expressionist periodical with a clearly anti-militarist tendency. During the war it was the only oppositional literature and art periodical, avoiding censorship with astonishing mastery using veiled writing and other means, and after the end of the war it increasingly became an organ of the radical leftist opposition with a close relationship to Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. Its publisher and editor-in-chief, Franz Pfemfert, radicalized himself and the paper in several surges from its founding in 1911 into the revolutionary war and post-war period, through the Spartacist uprising and the soviet republic.

Whereas the literary activism associated with Hiller was otherwise marked by a relatively diffuse will to change, from the beginning Pfemfert linked Expressionist literature and contemporary cultural politics in the "Aktion" with (historical) social-revolutionary texts to form a singular combination. The focal point of the paper was its anti-militarist critique, which particularly examined the war-mongering function of the liberal press and the Social Democrats and the affirmative stance of writer-colleagues within the framework of events leading up to the war. It also published early social-revolutionary texts, anarchist texts from Russia, essays by Lassalle and Reclus. Texts by the later Dadaists Hugo Ball, Hans Richter and Raoul Hausmann were also published in the "Aktion".

As people involved in earlier associations (the newspaper "Demokrat" and the Democratic Association) gradually left for ideological reasons, in the early years the "Aktion" drew more and more authors and subscribers. At least until Pfemfert distanced himself from Hiller in 1913[16], the "Aktion" was something of a

gathering point for the men of letters who were later to assemble under the label Activism with Hiller. Hiller's spiritist ideas were reason enough for Pfemfert to put an end to the cooperation in the paper's third year. Contrary to Hiller's reactionary rejection of democracy, Pfemfert's anti-authoritarianism saw itself as propagating soviet democracy; the absolute pacifism of Hiller's logocracy (the revolution of words) was countered by Pfemfert with an anti-militarism that became increasingly revolutionary and concretely soviet-communistic during the course of the war; contrary to Hiller's German nationalism, Pfemfert's position was anti-national and anti-antisemitic.

In the first months of its publication, specifically from No. 3 to No. 16, the "Action" was published with the programmatic subtitle "Publication Organ for the Intelligence of Germany". Even though this subtitle quickly disappeared again, the paper increasingly assumed organizing functions for a mixed association of artists and intellectuals throughout the decade. Whereas the literary-activist circle around Hiller comprised - as Benjamin correctly describes it - an "arbitrary number of private existences without offering the least grounds for organizing"[17], Franz Pfemfert was the pivotal point not only for the "Aktion", but also for a number of other attempts at an "organization of the intelligence". Following the start of the "Aktion" as a weekly paper on 20 February 1911, the publishing company was founded in 1912. To begin with, Pfemfert published Expressionist literature; this was expanded beginning in 1916 with the "Political Action Library", including revolution texts by Lenin, Marx, Liebknecht and others. Finally, Pfemfert also recognized the necessity of a concrete location, a public sphere outside printed material, and opened the Berliner "Action Book Shop" in 1917 together with his wife Alexandra Pfemfert and her

sister [hat die Schwester auch einen Namen?], which was open for exhibitions and events.

One of the anti-militarist agitation actions against conscription in 1913[18] even turned into an early instance of communication guerrilla: to create a broader base for protests against an extension of the powers of the Wehrmacht in Berlin, Pfemfert faked the declaration of a bourgeois anti-national association, "To the German Reichstag", against the new military laws. This declaration was propagated not only through the "Aktion", but also with flyers, which ultimately led to an actual demonstration through the aspect of media counter-information. Since conscription was being debated in France at the same time, the action was extended there to a parallel French declaration under the direction of the later Nobel Prize winner for literature, Anatole France.[19] This may be regarded as an attempt to internationalize anti-militarist resistance, which also used media guerrilla means to fight for an expansion and international organization of anti-national structures; with little success, however, as history shows.

Whereas Hiller's "Activists" increasingly invoked the party of the spirit[20], the German spirit[21] or the spiritual[22], Pfemfert founded the Anti-National Socialist Party Group of Germany (ASP) as early as 1915. The tiny anti-capitalist, anti-national, socialist party was "covertly active" until the end of the war, entering the public sphere on 16 November with a manifesto in the "Aktion". The party never grew beyond the status of a special interest group of a few dedicated artists, yet the reversal of the conventional relationship between party and newspaper appears to be an interesting constellation: instead of a party founding its publicizing organ, the newspaper founded the organization of a party in an ongoing process. Although the collectivity and the quantity of the distribution of endeavors revolving around the

"Aktion" may be debated, Benjamin's question about organizing must certainly be answered positively in Pfemfert's case as the process of organizing leftist intellectuals in the second half of the 1910s, especially because of the aforementioned attempts to work on organizational linking and articulation in association with the "Aktion" and going beyond the paper.

The whole spectrum of German "Activism" appears to be quite a disparate arrangement that is fed - roughly outlined - from a right-wing activism of the spirit, which sometimes slipped into the margins of antisemitism[23], racism and proto-fascism[24], as well as from a left-wing activism of the "Aktion", which from its basis as a literature magazine became increasingly radicalized and turned into an agitation platform for radical leftist politics. Especially in the first half of the 1910s the actors frequently alternated between the unraveling camps, and naturally there were "activisms" of all kinds to the right of Hiller as well. Returning now to Benjamin's essay, which was based on the draft for a lecture in Paris from April 1934, the answers to the question of why this late attention is devoted to Hiller in particular may be found in the context of this lecture.

Benjamin uses the foil of "Activism" mainly to criticize recognized leftist, but purely content-focused, agitational strategies, in other words primarily socialist realism, in a communist context. At the Paris Institute for the Study of Fascism, a sham organization that was controlled by the Comintern, he would have found himself on thin ice with this, as he was well aware[25]. Even before Stalin's cultural politics, such diverse positions as Lenin's, Bogdanov's and Lunacharsky's were all, despite their very different ideas of proletarian culture, oriented to the production and presentation of proletarian *contents*. Even in Germany, in the socialist circles of the 1920s and the 1930s, there was a line of giving precedence to

revolutionary contents over form. Benjamin's attitude, which focused primarily on the technique and organizing function of art practice, was the exception. Particularly before an audience that was skeptical about formal considerations, Hiller's partly reactionary position was excellently suited as a negative point of approach. Even though he represented something completely different from the content-fixed position of socialist realism, in Benjamin's lecture Hiller represents the position of being fixed on content, writing sentences such as these: "But in truth, all truly great art works [...] were great not because of the perfection of what was specifically artistic about them, but rather [...] because of the sublimeness of their What, their Idea, their Goal, their Ethos. [...] If one takes away from one of them its content, its idea, its morality, so that only what is 'designed' remains, what remains is worthless!"[26] Hiller's attitude is just as clearly idealist as it is anti-formalist: "Form, though, as such, is empty"[27], "what remains essential is what is designed"[28]. In the position of the German "Activists" there were echoes of a debate that was also familiar from Soviet cultural politics, yet because of its idealistic orientation, it was impossible to link this position with materialist cultural politics. In this way, the discourse associated with Hiller also became a suitable foil in terms of content, which Benjamin could use to highlight the practices of Bert Brecht and Sergei Tretyakov as positive counter-examples of changing the production apparatus.

Let's stay with this negative foil for a few more sentences and examine the question that was central for Benjamin, the position of the "author as producer" or, more broadly, the position of intellectuals and artists: in the distinction between "universal" and "specific intellectuals"[29] developed by Foucault, Hiller's position would be that of a representative of the universal. The spiritual

thus corresponds to a universal truth, the carriers of which, the spiritualists, represent a universality denoting the conscious and developed form of the unconscious universality of the proletariat. Here the spiritualists would be the widely visible role models, exemplary and illuminating, rising out of the dark form of the proletariat. Foucault describes the universal intellectual - this also corresponds to the example of Hiller's literary "Activism" - using the example of the *writer* and the threshold of writing as the sacralizing feature of the intellectual.

This figure, which implies speakers articulating the mute truth of others, must necessarily come under fire in emancipatory, egalitarian contexts. The contents, according to Benjamin, and the political tendency have a counter-revolutionary function, as long as the instruments, forms and apparatuses of production, in other words the relationship of the "spiritual" as universal intellectual to the proletariat remains unchanged. Benjamin uses not only the example of "Activism", but also that of *Neue Sachlichkeit* to describe how even photographs of misery become an object of enjoyment, how the artistic processing of a political situation is able "to achieve ever new effects for entertaining the audience"; in other words, how the bourgeois apparatus of production and publication is able to assimilate and even propagate revolutionary themes with the help of the figure of the artist/intellectual next to/over the proletariat.[30]

Writing work in the position of a bearer of the law and fighter *for* justice, *for* the proletariat, is a presumption; the place of the universal intellectual is an impossible one. If the intellectual's solidarity with the proletariat can always only be a mediated solidarity, then the intellectual, who has become a *bourgeois* intellectual due to social and educational privilege, must become, according to Benjamin, a "traitor to his original class"[31]. This

necessary betrayal consists in the transformation of his position, from someone who *supplies* the production apparatus with contents, as revolutionary as they may be, to an engineer who *changes* the production apparatus, who, as Benjamin formulates it, "sees his task in adapting it to the purposes of the proletarian revolution".[32]

For a renewal of this demand that Benjamin poses, that of changing the production apparatus rather than supplying it, it seems to me that both aspects are equally important: the first part of the demand, *not to supply* the production apparatus, could be updated with the help of Deleuze's criticism of representation, especially the criticism of the framework of media representation and the function that intellectuals and artists carry out within this framework. The second part of the demand, namely that of *changing* the production apparatus, is found in an expanded form in Foucault's exhortation to specific intellectuals to constitute a new politics of truth. There are echoes of Benjamin's figures and terminology in both Deleuze and Foucault: with Deleuze it is the topos of betrayal, with which the intelligentsia leave their class[33]; with Foucault it is the "specialist", which Benjamin in turn took over from the terminological toolbox of the Russian productivists.

Contrary to Foucault's assumption of the disappearance of the great writer, the universal intellectual, ever new metamorphoses of this type have emerged in recent decades, still in the pose of the autonomous artist and thinker, but in fact in heteronomous subordination to structures, in which their figures fulfill certain functions.[34] Contrary to this pseudo-revival of the classical bourgeois, the universal intellectual, who is questioned about everything and also has something to say about everything, especially on the surface of the media and instrumental think-tanks, the point is not to continue supplying these media and

politics with ever new contents, but rather to refuse to supply, to vanish from the machinery of the spectacle, to betray the spectacle.

To a certain degree, to the extent that intellectuals are involved in this spectacle, this also implies a betrayal of oneself. Going beyond Benjamin's classical Marxist formulation, the movement of the "betrayal of the bourgeois class" could generally be described in the words of Deleuze/Parnet as the position of a "traitor to one's own empire, one's gender, one's class, one's majority"[35]. Betraying one's original bourgeois class and adapting the production apparatus to the proletarian revolution today would primarily mean dropping out of the framework of representation. What can be aligned to the grid of possible images and statements is only that which is a priori acceptable , and what is acceptable is susceptible to recuperation a priori. To counter the mechanism of the media spotlight, which is capable of assimilating contents today much more radically than the reportage of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* was able to do, it is necessary to vanish from the picture, remain unrecognized, hide the traces of prominence. The key to change is not found in the battle of intellectuals for hegemony in the mainstream media, but rather in refusing to take part in this show battle, rejecting the role of commentators and suppliers of keywords in the framework of the media spectacle. Disrupting this relationship, preferably developing a form of disturbance through these kinds of disruptions, this is Deleuze's adaption of the demand to not supply the production apparatus: "Creating has always been something different from communicating. The key thing may be to create vacuoles of noncommunication, circuit breakers, so we can elude control."[36]

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[1] Deleuze/Parnet, Dialoge, 53

[2] In a segment of an older text from 1931, which Benjamin himself cryptically cites as a quotation from an "understanding critic" in the "Author as Producer", the target for his attacks on "the proletarian mimicry of the decaying bourgeoisie" is the poetry of Kästner, Tucholsky and Mehring. Cf. Benjamin, Gesammelte Werke, III, 280f.

[3] Ursula Baumeister (Die Aktion 1911-1932, 43) defines Activism as an aesthetic program and radical cultural wing of Expressionism.

[4] Raoul Hausmann reviled the "Activists" roughly as "henchmen of the moral idiocy of the constitutional state" and suggested drowning "these snotty-nosed drips" in the "filth of their so horribly serious six-volume works" (quoted from Scholz, Pinsel und Dolch, 345).

[5] Walter Benjamin, Der Autor als Produzent, 689

[6] Rothe, Aktivismus, 18

[7]Translator's note: The word *Geist* in German, which is the focal point of Hiller's ideas here, can mean spirit, mind, intellect, ghost. In this translation preference is given to the word spirit, although intellect is more frequently used in older, related translations. In this case, spiritism has nothing to do with the esoteric movement of the late 19th century.

[8] Walter Benjamin, Der Autor als Produzent, 690

[9] Cf., for instance, the informative text collection "Der Aktivismus 1915-1920", whose publisher Wolfgang Rothe called

"Activism" an "expression of the German spirit that calls for respect" (21) in his introduction in 1969 in comparison with the 1968 movement.

[10] Hiller, Philosophie des Ziels, 42

[11] Walter Benjamin, Der Autor als Produzent, 691

[12] Walter Benjamin, Der Autor als Produzent, 690

[13] Hiller, Verwirklichung des Geistes im Staat, quoted from Rolf von Bockel, Kurt Hiller und die Gruppe Revolutionärer Pazifisten (1926-1933), 25

[14] Hiller, Philosophie des Ziels, 53

[15] Benjamin was certainly familiar with the "Aktion", since he also published articles there. In addition, the publisher of the "Aktion", Pfemfert, had already bin the publisher of the "Anfang", the newspaper of the youth movement that Benjamin had been involved with in the early part of the decade.

[16] Cf. the two Pfemfert articles in the third year fo the "Aktion": "Die Wir des Doktor Hiller", Die Aktion 1913, 637f. and "Der Karriere-Revolteur", Die Aktion 1913, 1129-1136

[17] Benjamin, Der Autor als Produzent, 690

[18] Baumeister, 102f., describes Pfemfert's strategy as the "creation of a counter-public sphere on conscription".

[19] Baumeister, Die Aktion 1911-1932, 103

[20] Heinrich Mann, Das junge Geschlecht, 97

[21] Hiller, Philosophie des Ziels, 39

[22] Hiller, Philosophie des Ziels, 43

[23] Cf. for instance, Hiller, Philosophie des Ziels, 52

[24] Hiller, Philosophie des Ziels, 53

[25] As explained in the commentary for the Benjamin edition, for unknown reasons the lecture probably did not take place. See also Fuld, Benjamin, 235

[26] Hiller, Philosophie des Ziels, 33

[27] Hiller, Philosophie des Ziels, 33

[28] Hiller, Philosophie des Ziels, 45

[29] Foucault, Die politische Funktion des Intellektuellen, cf. also Deleuze/Foucault, Die Intellektuellen und die Macht

[30] Benjamin, Der Autor als Produzent, 692f.

[31] Benjamin, Der Autor als Produzent, 700f.

[32] Benjamin, Der Autor als Produzent, 701

[33] Benjamin quoted from Fuld, Benjamin, 226

[34] See, for instance, Bourdieu's concept of the media intellectual and my conclusions in Raunig, Wien Feber Null, 63-77

[35] Deleuze/Parnet, Dialoge, 52

[36] Deleuze, Unterhandlungen, 252