Patrick H. Hutton, *Walter Benjamin: A Humanist in the Crisis of the Interwar Years*

I am writing an intellectual biography of Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), a Jewish-German essayist, literary critic, and philosopher of history who came of age during the interwar years. Of modest reputation in the literary world of his times, he has become one of the most lionized intellectuals of our own. A would-be Zionist and a disillusioned Marxist, he fled his native Berlin in the face of Nazi persecution and took refuge in Paris in the mid-1930s. He committed suicide on the French/Spanish border in 1940, in despair over escaping the Nazi dragnet. His life has since become the subject of some romance, as exemplified in the novel by Jay Parini, *Benjamin’s Crossing* (1997).

As a humanist with deep roots in the European intellectual tradition, Benjamin was a perceptive critic of its early-twentieth century dilemmas. He identified a number of key issues associated with a crisis of identity in his times, among them the dissolution of the grand narrative of the modern history of Western civilization; the waning of the French revolutionary tradition, the obsession with memory in an age uncertain about its present and future identity, and the changing nature and function of art in the dawning age of media. My project is an attempt to place the man who explained the breakup of the high culture of “modern” Europe within the context of a “postmodern” temper whose coming he anticipated. In this way, it relates directly to the ASU Humanities Research Institute’s agenda for the coming year’s work: the humanities in times of crisis.

My interest in Benjamin focuses on his insights into the historical trends of his times, particularly his ideas about the acceleration of time, the status of the historian’s narrative in light of the demise of historicism, and the redemptive power of memory. Though devoted to the political Left, Benjamin arrived at a conception of history that departed from its once great faith in the idea of progress. He saw the present age in light of its precarious realities. As a critical moment in history, however, it offered possibilities for invoking old memories in inspiring ways. This insight served as the basis for his widely cited essay “Theses on the Philosophy of History” [1940]), composed in the last year of his life.

Reference points for my research into Benjamin’s ideas about history include: his admiration for Auguste Blanqui, the famous nineteenth-century insurrectionist; his reading of Marcel Proust for appreciation of the power of involuntary memory; and his identification with German intellectuals in the era of the French Revolution who were sympathetic to its goals.

My project on Benjamin complements my recent biography of Philippe Ariès, a French cultural historian famous for his work in the history of mentalities. While hailing from opposite ends of the ideological spectrum, both made highly original contributions to ways of thinking about history, based on their prescient insight into the cultural issues of their times.