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## **'Barbarism? Yes, Indeed': A Barbaric Theorizing of Technology**

**Daniel Mourenza**

*What a beautiful civilization, that brings humiliation and slavery by rail! What progress, communicating slurs, attacks, and the order to machine-gun a people by telegraph! [...] What development! Those roads, those bridges, those aqueducts, those cultivated lands, those dried swamps, those forests lined-up and cleared, those wonderful irrigated fields, all so that a degraded multitude of a sovereign people turned into swine might graze contentedly, applaud at the circus, subsidize crime, and serve in the armed forces in order to enslave their brothers and sisters and contribute to the glory, prosperity and civilization of empires!*<sup>1</sup>

These words were written by the Chilean writer, philosopher and politician Francisco Bilbao in 1864 in his book *The American Gospel*. Bilbao was aware that, for centuries, Latin American peoples had been crushed and despoiled by European colonizers under the banner of 'civilization'. In this fragment, he casts doubt on the apparent progress that European 'technological development' brings to humanity. He knew that the development of technology brought by the 'civilized' corresponds with imperialist objectives and, as such, it does not necessarily imply an advance in human terms. In an earlier book, *America in Danger* (1862), he had already described the 'prostitution' of the word civilization, and its conveyance of contradictory meanings. Thus, he observed with paradoxical irony that 'the *civilized* man calls for the extermination of indigenes and gauchos'.<sup>2</sup> Here he was responding to, among others, the thesis defended by the Argentine intellectual – and subsequently President of Argentina – Domingo Facundo Sarmiento in his influential 1845 book *Facundo: Civilización o Barbarie*. In this text, Sarmiento welcomed the influence of European culture on Argentina in contrast to the barbarism of indigenes, gauchos and local leaders. For him, in Argentina there was a fight between two irreconcilable forces: 'One European, constitutional and civilized; the other, American, arbitrary and barbarian'.<sup>3</sup> Or, in other words, 'a fight between European civilization and indigenous barbarism'.<sup>4</sup> Sarmiento thought that this battle could only be won by civilization, because there was an immutable law by which 'strong races exterminate the weak ones; civilized people supersede savages'.<sup>5</sup> It is no surprise, then, that Bilbao decided to turn the meaning of these words around and, when Napoleon III sent French troops to Mexico in 1862, he exclaimed, 'we must unite to save the American civilization from Europe's barbaric invasion'.<sup>6</sup>

The postcolonial scholar Walter Mignolo argues that the independence of Latin America from Spain and Portugal in the nineteenth century was a central moment in the debate that set the dichotomy of civilization vs barbarism. Sarmiento, he says, was a key figure in the justification of internal colonialism, as one of those intellectuals from colonized areas 'who fought against the "barbarism" of their culture in pro of the European civilization' and 'assumed that the local culture had to be improved by the growing and expanding European civilization'.<sup>7</sup> Although already at work in the Renaissance, the notion of 'civilization' was coined by European intellectuals in the Enlightenment as a self-description of the process that they were helping to create. It could not be separated, however, says Mignolo, from its implicit imperialism, since the concept 'gained a universal scope once Europe began to expand all over the planet and, as such, repressed the already existing self-conceptualization

of highly sophisticated social organizations'.<sup>8</sup> Among these social organizations, he mentions China, the Islamic world, the Inca and Mexico, and claims that it was paradoxical and ethnocentric to assume that Europe had to civilize the world when these other civilizations had been in place for centuries 'before a group of ascending barbarous communities began to posit themselves as a new center of the world, in the name of Christianity and of Europe'.<sup>9</sup> In a similar vein, in *The Civilizing Process* Norbert Elias claims that the concept of civilization is a self-image created by European countries, which is generally used to refer to all those areas in which Western society believes itself superior to other societies: 'The level of *its* technology, the nature of *its* manners, the development of *its* scientific knowledge or view of the world'.<sup>10</sup> For him, this consciousness – or rather self-image – of superiority, that is, of 'civilization', serves 'those nations which have become colonial conquerors, and therefore a kind of upper class to large sections of the non-European world, as a justification of their rule'.<sup>11</sup> According to these authors, therefore, the concept of civilization is intrinsically paired up with European colonialism. The criticism of the binary opposition of civilization vs barbarism thus tends to point out the contradictions of such a dichotomy, indicating that the self-described 'civilized' can be more 'barbaric' than the so-called barbarians.

Walter Benjamin makes a similar move in his essay 'Experience and Poverty' (1933), a text in which he implies that capitalism and imperialism are themselves barbaric. The title of this article is borrowed from that essay. At first sight, it might appear to be a mere provocation. 'Barbarism? Yes, indeed' will seem like a direct reaction to the colonialism inherent in the self-conceptualization of civilization by imperialist states and a stance in favour of the other side of this binary opposition, namely: the colonized, the oppressed, the barbarians. Such a stance, however, runs the risk of repeating the same binary argument and, therefore, also the hierarchical relation between the two concepts. The first question that comes into one's mind, then, is whether 'barbarism' can be at all dissociated from its negative meaning and inferior position in this dichotomy. As Maria Boletsi argues, the concept of barbarism has traditionally been used as a negative standard 'against which civilization measures its virtue, humanity, or level of sophistication'.<sup>12</sup> Challenging such an understanding, in her recent book *Barbarism and Its Discontents*, she reclaims the concept of barbarism 'as a creative and critical concept in cultural theory'.<sup>13</sup> Thus, despite its connotations, she suggests that barbarism can be dislodged from its conventional contexts and recast in terms of its critical and transgressive potential.

In order to escape from this hierarchical dichotomy, in this article I will develop a postcolonial critique of technology building upon Mignolo's concept of 'barbaric theorizing'. He argues that theory was denied to the barbarian because it was seen precisely as its negation. Hence, 'barbaric theorizing' cannot be the denial of barbarism for the sake of theory, because it would cancel itself out, but the denial of the denial of barbarism, 'the absorption of the "civilizing" principles into the "civilization of barbarism"'.<sup>14</sup> 'Barbaric theorizing' is not, therefore, says Mignolo, in opposition to 'civilian theorizing', but a displacement and a new departure. This type of thinking would integrate and supersede 'the restrictive logic behind the idea of "civilization" by giving rise to what the civilizing mission suppressed: the self-appropriation of all the good qualities that were denied to the barbarians'.<sup>15</sup> In this way, I want to propose a way of thinking about technology that disassociates technology from the self-conceptualization of civilization by the West, i.e. by imperialist powers. Such a way of thinking will also open up a space in which the barbarians will have the opportunity to imagine new uses of technology which have been constantly repressed by imperialist/capitalist narratives of progress and development. Indeed, by breaking through the binary opposition of civilization vs barbarism, I will argue that these

concepts are deeply inscribed in a linear narrative that takes the exploitation of human labour and natural resources as inevitable. In order to develop this postcolonial critique of technology, I will adopt Walter Benjamin's 'new, positive concept of barbarism'. Although Benjamin can hardly be considered a postcolonial author, his writings on technology and his critique of the concept of progress will prove valuable to such a criticism, as well as for opening up new avenues for thinking about technology. I will thus explore Benjamin's concept of barbarism to dislodge technology from its imperialist associations with various aspects of the civilizing process and its concomitant idea of progress. Then, I will compare Benjamin's definition of technology and his concept of barbarism with Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer's, who also thought that humanity was stepping into a new stage of barbarism. Finally, I will propose a barbaric, postcolonial conception of technology in order to extricate it from its dangerous and ultimately self-annihilating interdependence with the concepts of progress and capitalist development.

### **Technological Development and Progress**

When Benjamin introduced a 'new, positive concept of barbarism' in his 1933 essay 'Experience and Poverty', he took as his starting point the poverty, or rather the bankruptcy, that humanity had reached in different spheres: economically, socially, experimentally and culturally. This situation, wrote Benjamin, had been created because of the enormous and unprecedented development of technology. This was not, however, a critique of technology on moral grounds. On the contrary, he argued that technology provided an excellent opportunity to rethink humanity from scratch. This new humanity should not spring from a world without technology, but in and through a technology that had first been put 'to humane use'.<sup>16</sup> Benjamin's 'new, positive concept of barbarism' thus presents a double move: technology, following imperialist purposes, creates the conditions for its own self-destruction, but at the same time it makes possible the circumstances for articulating a new conception of technology that aims to liberate humanity.

Benjamin's first and most overt conceptualization of technology is developed in the last section of his book of aphorisms *One-Way Street* (1928), called 'To the Planetarium'. His remarks are rather vague and, one could say, unscientific, but they introduce an important critique of the imperialist use of technology. Benjamin argues that for imperialists the purpose of all technology is the mastery of nature and he compares this with the figure of a teacher who educates his pupils threatening them with a cane. Benjamin harshly criticizes this conception and, by contrast, proposes one in which technology is used to improve the relationship that humanity establishes with nature.<sup>17</sup> For Benjamin, in fact, technology is not understood as a mere instrument used by humans to transform nature, but as a space, a medium in which social relations, as well as relations between humans and the natural environment, are played out. In an earlier text, 'Outline of the Psychophysical Problem' (1922–23), Benjamin argued that technology unites humans into a collective body, the body of humankind. For him, it is by virtue of technology that humanity can 'draw nature, the nonliving, plant, and animal, into this life of the body of mankind'.<sup>18</sup> This argument is repeated in 'To the Planetarium', where Benjamin writes that '[i]n technology, a physis is being organized' which is, in turn, changing the way in which humans organize themselves, no longer necessarily in nations and families.<sup>19</sup> The argument reappears in 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' (1929), where Benjamin claims that '[t]he collective is a body' and, he repeats, a 'physis [...] is being organized for it in technology'.<sup>20</sup> In this text, he also presents technology as the medium in which his conception of revolution

as ‘bodily innervations of the collective’ takes place, that is, a positive, nervous discharge that runs through and unites this collective body.<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere, Benjamin describes revolutions similarly as ‘efforts at innervation on the part of the new, historically unique collective which has its organs in the new technology’.<sup>22</sup> Under imperialist notions of technology, however, this adaptation of technology into the body of humankind is becoming more precarious. Instead of being used to unite human beings in this collective body and help them to pursue happiness, technology is used to exploit other human beings. For that reason, in ‘Theories of German Fascism’ (1930) Benjamin argues that technology was developed enough to master the social forces of society; however, German society was not mature enough to make technology its organ and used it instead as a destructive, cultic power, understanding technology as ‘a fetish of doom’ instead of ‘a key to happiness’.<sup>23</sup>

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944–47), Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno give a similar definition of technology. For them, however, this conception of technology, whose purpose is to dominate nature, does not come from imperialism, but more generally from the Enlightenment. They argue that the programme of Enlightenment was to disenchant the world and liberate men in order to establish their sovereignty. In this way, enlightened thought was directed towards deriving knowledge from nature. Nevertheless, as the only thing that humans wanted to learn from nature was how to dominate it, they ended up separating themselves from nature and objectifying not only nature, but also each other. Faced with either ‘their subjection to nature or the subjection of nature to the Self’, humans chose the latter, but at the same time denied that they were themselves nature.<sup>24</sup> Within this paradigm, technology was conceived as the means to control and master both nature and other human beings. In this way, Horkheimer and Adorno argue, humans destroyed the subject in whose service this domination was undertaken.<sup>25</sup> Eventually, the project of Enlightenment turned against itself. Technological development, which was supposed to serve human beings in the pursuit of liberating themselves, became a way of subjecting humanity to this exploitative relationship.

The nuances of this argument concerning technological development are drawn out by Benjamin in ‘Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian’ (1937). Here, especially, he criticizes the reception of technology in the nineteenth century. He laments the ‘positivistic and undialectical separation between the natural sciences and the humanities’ and accuses positivism of understanding technological development only as the progress of the natural sciences, overlooking the fact that this development has been thoroughly conditioned by capitalism.<sup>26</sup> He thus blames those writers, such as the Saint-Simonians, Maxime du Camp and Ludwig Pfau, who uncritically praised new technologies, because they ignored that technology serves society ‘only by producing commodities’.<sup>27</sup> He also criticizes Friedrich Engels and the German Social Democrats for embracing this understanding of technology as ‘scientific rationality’. Benjamin, indeed, makes it clear that ‘technology [...] is obviously not a purely scientific development. It is at the same time a historical one’.<sup>28</sup> However, the positivists among the Social Democrats failed to account for the fact that the ‘questions that humanity brings to nature are in part conditioned by the level of production’.<sup>29</sup> Benjamin accuses them of failing to notice that technological development was conditioned by capitalism, which not only implied the progress of natural science, but also ‘the concomitant retrogression of society’.<sup>30</sup> For Benjamin, technology does not contain an objective rationality, but rather embodies features of the contemporary mode of production. And, insofar as this technology has been conceived under and for capitalist purposes, it will reproduce the same forms of exploitation. For that reason, Benjamin argues that Social Democrats never understood the destructive side of technological development and thus the

process of adaptation of the proletariat to technology became more and more precarious. The failure to see this ‘destructive side’, that is, the destructive energies of technology, characterizes for Benjamin the bungled reception of technology in the nineteenth century.

Benjamin also criticizes the influence of Darwinism on the development of a socialist conception of history. It is because of this influence, he claims, that ‘development’ acquired the connotations of an evolutionary view of history, at the same time assuming deterministic traits. According to this deterministic concept of history, the victory of the Social Democrat Party became inevitable. The Italian socialist Enrico Ferri went as far as to claim that the principles and the tactics of Social Democracy should be based on natural laws.<sup>31</sup> Benjamin argues that this deterministic vision of history is paired up with an unconditional optimism, since it presupposes the triumph of socialism and the liberation of humanity. This vision, however, also positively accepts the development of technology, as it is part of the same deterministic logic. According to Benjamin, the idea of progress adopted by Social Democracy originates from the French mathematician, philosopher and abolitionist politician Nicolas de Condorcet, who in his 1795 *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* laid out the progress of the human race from barbarism to the Enlightenment and argued that the development of the natural and social sciences would lead to a more just and free world, as well as to the infinite perfectibility of humankind.<sup>32</sup> The concept became central for the Enlightenment and had a strong influence not only on the bourgeoisie, but also on the proletariat, since it awakened in them the illusion of the inevitability of a socialist society. For Benjamin, such a vision was misleading, because it ignored the destructive side of this development.

In 1847, Karl Marx already warned against overlooking the fact that there is always a dialectical relation between a positive and a destructive side in historical development. Thus, in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx not only recognizes that progress and scientific and technological development are not always positive, but also that the destructive side of this development has a positive aspect – as Benjamin does with barbarism. Drawing on Pierre-Joseph Proudhon’s theory, Marx acknowledges that there is always a *good* and a *bad side* in every economic relation, as well as in history. Proudhon, however, wants to preserve only the good side and dispense with the bad side of this relation. Marx harshly condemns Proudhon’s view because, he argues, the solution to social problems cannot come by attempting to suppress or mitigate ‘the bad side’ of the existing reality and, therefore, its antagonisms. For him, it is precisely the bad side that makes change possible, since it provides the basis for class struggle. Thus, Marx criticizes Proudhon for seeing ‘in poverty nothing but poverty, without seeing in it the revolutionary, subversive side, which will overthrow the old society’.<sup>33</sup> Marx detected, therefore, a revolutionary and subversive side in poverty; a poverty which was created precisely by social antagonisms. As I will show in the next section, Benjamin also based his programme of ‘a new, positive concept of barbarism’ on such a poverty.

### **A New, Positive Concept of Barbarism**

Benjamin accorded a political function to the destructive side of progress in many essays from the early 1930s – such as ‘The Destructive Character’ (1931), ‘Karl Kraus’ (1931), ‘Mickey Mouse’ (1931) and ‘Experience and Poverty’ (1933). The latter begins with a reflection on the power of proverbs and tales to pass on experience from generation to generation. Benjamin notes – in an argument that he will resume in ‘The Storyteller’ (1936) –

that few people are now able to tell stories and that the teachings of older generations are no longer appreciated. He suggests that experience has fallen in value and this is first and foremost because of the atrocious events of the First World War. Soldiers came back from the battlefield silent, 'poorer in communicable experience', unlike soldiers in older wars, who told and sang their heroic deeds.<sup>34</sup> Experience, he suggests, has been disrupted not only on the battlefield – where technological and positional warfare have already contravened strategic experience – but also in the everyday, physical experience of civilians, whose long, vital experience (*Erfahrung*), acquired through the years and handed down from older generations, no longer holds any value. Referring to his own generation, Benjamin pictures this situation as follows:

A generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcars now stood in the open air, amid a landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds and, at its center, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body.<sup>35</sup>

This loss of experience, which Benjamin translates as 'a completely new poverty', is the result of the unprecedented development of technology in his lifetime. He argues that this development led to a divorce of culture from experience, which brought about a poverty not only of culture (*Kultur*), but also of human experience in general. Benjamin, rather than mourning this loss, claims that we have to admit our bankruptcy and accept that we are now in 'a new kind of barbarism'. In other words, Benjamin sees in this situation the 'revolutionary, subversive side' of the poverty that Marx referred to. After acknowledging this, Benjamin introduces his programmatic argument: 'Barbarism? Yes, indeed. We say this in order to introduce a new, positive concept of barbarism'.<sup>36</sup> He thus suggests that this poverty of experience forces the barbarian to start from scratch, as a constructor who has to make a new start from a *tabula rasa*. In other words, this new, positive concept of barbarism benefits from a rupture with the past, freeing itself from the fetters of bourgeois development and disrupting the immutable course of progress.

The first barbarians he names are the philosopher Descartes and the scientist Albert Einstein, who created their own philosophical and scientific systems by means of creating a *tabula rasa* and starting from the beginning, instead of following on from the most recent developments in their respective fields. But Benjamin also identifies modern barbarians in the fields of art and literature: the painter Paul Klee, the architect Adolf Loos, the poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht and the writer Paul Scheerbarth. In their works, these barbarians reject the traditional image of man coming from the Renaissance, basing instead their creations on 'the naked man of the contemporary world who lies screaming like a newborn babe in the dirty diapers of the present' or on human beings transformed 'into completely new, lovable, and interesting creatures' by new technologies.<sup>37</sup> Benjamin clarifies that the barbarians he calls for are not ignorant and inexperienced, they just make a determined use of their poverty. Against the wealth of the tradition of humanism and the 'oppressive wealth of ideas that has been spread among people' (Benjamin mentions the revival of astrology, chiromancy, vegetarianism, scholasticism, spiritualism etc.),<sup>38</sup> he advances an impoverishment of thought – akin to the one he perceives in Brecht – in order to meet the impoverished reality of everyday life. Benjamin thus proposes a rupture with tradition in order to disrupt cultural and technological development and open up new opportunities for rethinking society and technology. Marx criticized the bourgeoisie for seeing in the relations of capitalist production, the creation of wealth and productive forces, the workings of natural, and hence eternal, laws.<sup>39</sup> He attributed this to 'the fact that the bourgeois man is to them the

only possible basis of every society'.<sup>40</sup> On his part, Benjamin wants to unmask and ultimately disrupt such a narrative of naturalized or organic development and, in so doing, base the new society on an impoverished human deprived of experience: a barbarian.

The concept of barbarism reappears years later in the essay on 'Eduard Fuchs' precisely to criticize the way in which history, and especially cultural history, is positively told, focusing only on the good side of such a development. In this essay, Benjamin claims that there is always a dark side in the lineage of both art and science which a historical materialist should never overlook:

The products of art and science owe their existence not merely to the effort of great geniuses who created them, but also, in one degree or another, to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.<sup>41</sup>

On the one hand, this fragment does nothing more than introduce a basic tenet of historical materialism, that is, human creations are always conditioned by the historical – i.e. economic, social, political – context in which they are produced. On the other, however, it also claims that the development of culture, an area in which Benjamin includes both art and science, has always been based on exploitation. In other words, culture also progresses on the 'bad side' of history. For that reason, the development of culture must be understood not only positively, but also negatively, i.e. as a document of barbarism. Benjamin repeats the same idea in a more famous passage from thesis VII in 'On the Concept of History' (1940):

There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is never free of barbarism, so barbarism taints the manner in which it was transmitted from one hand to another. The historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from this process of transmission as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.<sup>42</sup>

Here, Benjamin introduces the inextricability of the terms barbarism and culture (*Kultur*). He argues that the way in which culture is transmitted and handed down cannot be separated from the destructive side of history and, therefore, has also to be thought of in terms of its opposition, i.e. barbarism.

Maria Boletsi notes that, in 'Eduard Fuchs' and 'On the Concept of History', when referring to barbarism Benjamin uses the word *Barbarei*, whereas in 'Experience and Poverty' he uses the neologism *Barbarentum* instead. She argues that Benjamin chooses this new term in order to separate it from its usual meaning. As such, *Barbarentum* stands as a word 'invested with the potential to disrupt the workings of "Barbarei" in language and in the social and political world'.<sup>43</sup> With this new concept, therefore, Benjamin does not pose barbarism as a mere opposition to civilization, and therefore as a simple antagonistic position to bourgeois culture and Western civilization, but as a third term that disrupts this binary opposition and renders it useless.

Like Benjamin, Horkheimer and Adorno thought that humanity was 'sinking into a new kind of barbarism'.<sup>44</sup> This was, indeed, the focus of their inquiry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The answer they reach is that the Enlightenment is ultimately self-destructive. As I argued earlier, in the Enlightenment project humans, because of their lust for mastering nature, deny that they are themselves nature. In this way, humans eventually turn this domination against

themselves, betraying the very project of establishing human sovereignty which was at the core of the Enlightenment. It is for this reason that Adorno and Horkheimer claim that the Enlightenment tends towards the sacrifice of the self and that civilization is nothing other than the history of the introspection of this sacrifice. Nevertheless, Adorno and Horkheimer did not want to reject the principles of the Enlightenment entirely, because for them ‘social freedom is inseparable from enlightened thought’.<sup>45</sup> They propose, instead, a reconsideration of the Enlightenment; as they put it, in a reflexive way, ‘the Enlightenment *must consider itself*’.<sup>46</sup> According to them, the Enlightenment needs to accommodate reflection about its destructive power – and about the destructive aspects of progress – in order to be faithful to its own principles.

Benjamin, very aware of the destructiveness of progress, argues instead for a radicalization of the poverty that bourgeois civilization has introduced and calls for an impoverishment of thought in order to meet the poor situation of social reality. As Sami Khatib argues in his article in this issue, the destructive, cathartic movement of ‘thinking poorly’ has constructive dimensions. Khatib thus claims that the positive barbarians defended by Benjamin ‘*accelerate* the process of their object’s decomposition while *decelerating* the creative-destructive explosion of a technology that modern capitalism has generated without having developed the necessary technique to master it’.<sup>47</sup> In this way, Khatib suggests that the strategy is neither accelerationist nor decelerationist. Such a movement aims to speed up bourgeois civilization’s self-destruction, but at the same time attempts to put a brake on the very dangerous deployment of technology by capitalism and imperialism ‘without giving up on technology’s utopian space’.<sup>48</sup>

This ‘emergency brake’ activated by humanity that Benjamin famously associates with revolutions in the paralipomena to the theses ‘On the Concept of History’ (1940) had been introduced years before in ‘Fire Alarm’, a section from *One-Way Street*. There, Benjamin presents the technological and economic development led by the bourgeoisie as being on a course for catastrophe. In other words, he sees bourgeois civilization and technological development as self-destructive. For him, the high rates of unemployment and economic inflation in Germany and the use of poison-gas warfare in the First World War were signs of the catastrophic ‘end of three thousand years of cultural development’.<sup>49</sup> For that reason, Benjamin claims that an emergency intervention must be performed, otherwise, everything will be lost.

Following on from the previous argument but also proposing a new project, in ‘Experience and Poverty’ Benjamin argues that within the self-destructive movement of bourgeois civilization lies an opportunity to break with the logic of progress and start from scratch, but only if technological development is brought to a halt. From the tabula rasa of this new stage of barbarism, technology can be rethought and redesigned, challenging the exploitative and self-destructive logic which is inherent to the imperialist conception of technology that arrives in couple with the Enlightenment.

### **Paul Scheerbart**

The two conceptions of technology that Benjamin describes – that is, one imperialist and self-destructive, the other utopian and liberating – are illustrated by the hyperbolic creations of two figures that recurrently appear in his writings: Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Paul Scheerbart. In the second version of ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological

Reproducibility' (1936), Benjamin cites Marinetti's Manifesto for the Colonial War in Ethiopia, where he finds *with merit clarity* what an imperialist conception of technology is. There, Marinetti embraces the destruction created by technological warfare for its aesthetic quality. Or, as Benjamin puts it, he experiences the annihilation of humanity 'as a supreme aesthetic pleasure'.<sup>50</sup> Benjamin reads this deployment of technology as a discrepancy between the means that humans have developed to produce technology and its inadequate use. Humankind's collective body thus shows that it is not mature enough to master technology, that is, to master the correct relationship between human beings and nature through – or in the medium of – technology. In this sense, Benjamin understands imperialist wars as '*an uprising on the part of technology, which demands repayment in "human material" for the natural material society has denied it*'.<sup>51</sup> This use of technology, employed to master other human beings, ends up therefore turning against humans themselves, who pay for the consequences of such a misuse.

The German author and science-fiction writer Paul Scheerbart represents the other side of the coin. According to Benjamin, in his creations Scheerbart successfully devised the image 'of a humanity which had deployed the full range of its technology and put it to humane use'.<sup>52</sup> As he argues in his short text 'On Scheerbart' (1939-40), such a state of affairs could only be achieved if two conditions are met:

First, people should discard the base and primitive belief that their task was to 'exploit' the forces of nature; second, they should be true to the conviction that technology, by liberating human beings, would fraternally liberate the whole of creation.<sup>53</sup>

Unlike the Enlightenment, Scheerbart understands that technology's aim is to emancipate not only human beings, but the whole of creation itself. In this way, Scheerbart and his creatures would not make the mistake of denying that they are nature and, consequently, would not use technology for the purpose of mastering nature. Thus, in his books, technology is not deployed as a mere instrument to produce wealth, but as a medium in which the entire world is transformed. In *Lesabéndio*, for example, technology and nature are not mutually opposed. As Christina Svendsen argues, the inhabitants of the planet Pallas 'are not alienated because they do not make the faulty distinction between technology and nature' or 'draw a rigid dichotomy between technology and themselves, or themselves and the natural world around them'.<sup>54</sup> Technology, as they use it, transforms them and the whole cosmic environment in which they live, without imposing hierarchies or relations of exploitation.

Something similar can be found in Scheerbart's *Glass Architecture* (1914). He wrote this book because he thought that culture grows in relation to the environment in which it is formed. He felt that culture was unable to rise to a higher level because humans lived for the most part in closed rooms. For that reason, Scheerbart proposed an architecture based on coloured glass: 'The new environment, which we thus create, must bring us a new culture'.<sup>55</sup> Glass architecture would bring, then, a new culture which would 'completely transform' and improve 'mankind in ethical respects'.<sup>56</sup> Benjamin introduces Scheerbart's glass architecture in 'Poverty and Experience' along with Adolf Loos and the architecture of the Bauhaus as 'spokesmen of a new poverty'.<sup>57</sup> Glass buildings, says Benjamin, stand in opposition to the bourgeois interior, because in the rooms of those glass buildings 'it is hard to leave traces'.<sup>58</sup> As such, they are enemies of secrets and possession. The poverty of these creations lies in the fact that they are not based on the image of the bourgeois self – and his wealth in every respect – but instead on the person that has nothing, and therefore nothing to hide.

Accordingly, this person, or creature, cannot represent tradition and be inscribed in the continuum of civilization. They are, in other words, barbarians.

For that reason, says Benjamin, Scheerbart does not base his works on European bourgeois men, as Jules Verne does, but on creatures that reject humanlikeness and transform their bodies through technology. Scheerbart is interested, therefore, 'in inquiring how our telescopes, our airplanes, our rockets can transform human beings as they have been up to now into completely new, lovable, and interesting creatures'.<sup>59</sup> Scheerbart's creatures also make a break with language. In the novel *Lesabéndio*, for example, Pallasians are given their names after the first sounds they pronounce when born (Dex, Labu, Lesabéndio, Bombimba). Benjamin compares these 'dehumanized' names to those that Russians gave to their children after the Revolution (October, Pyatiletka, Aviakhim). For him, both stress the arbitrary, constructed nature of language and, in this way, disrupt organic language.<sup>60</sup> When Benjamin argues that the Soviet names or Scheerbart's 'stellar Esperanto' – as he calls it in 'Karl Kraus' – disrupt organic language, he does not mean that language evolves naturally.<sup>61</sup> It rather emphasizes that language is itself cultural, indeed arbitrarily constructed. Language, and the way it evolves through culture, is however naturalized. The same happens with technology. As Benjamin argues, although technology develops historically and therefore culturally, technological development often appears as a natural phenomenon, dressed in scientific objectivity and progress. A barbaric intervention into such a development would thus mean a disruption of its organic, natural façade, revealing its historical, cultural and ideological constructs, as well as its intrinsic pairing with civilization, imperialism and capitalist exploitation.

## Conclusion

At this point, we might wonder what a 'barbaric theorizing' of technology would mean for us today. As I suggested at the beginning of the article and explored throughout the essay, among the qualities that are denied to barbarians we can find a way of thinking that avoids the exploitative relation of humans to nature and to themselves. In this way, a barbarian, postcolonial critique of technology should question and disrupt the organic development of technology in order to foster a non-hierarchical relationship among humans and with nature.

The relationship of humans to technology is an issue that has been thoroughly reconsidered in recent scholarship. This critical revision has come from a crisis in the humanities, which has led them to reconsider the focal point around which much theory revolves. Different currents of thought – such as feminism, postcolonial theory, animal studies, environmentalism and posthumanism – have challenged and attempted to de-centre the model of the human based on the Cartesian subject, usually depicted as a white, European, male individual. As Rosi Braidotti famously put it, 'we are not all humans if by humans we understand the creature familiar to us from the Enlightenment and its legacy'.<sup>62</sup> This premise of posthumanism should be adopted as a point of departure for any postcolonial critique of technology, since from this shift in our theoretical understanding of the human, alternative, non-hierarchical conceptions of technology may be developed. Posthumanism has already questioned these assumptions, calling for a different relationship with technology. However, the details of this new relationship remain under-developed, not least because many authors are reluctant to see the development of science within its own context – and therefore conditioned by neoliberalism. Transhumanism, for example, has been very much criticized because in it 'technology becomes a hierarchical project, based on rational thought, driven towards

progression'.<sup>63</sup> In other words, transhumanism embraces science and technology uncritically, without considering that they may embody the same relations of exploitation as the society that produced them. Other, more critical variants of posthumanism have identified how technology is used to exploit nature and other human beings, creating hierarchies and relations of dependence. However, the kinship between technology and civilization, with its inherent colonialism, has seldom been addressed. This has stifled the emergence of radical ways of thinking about technology. A 'barbaric theorizing' of technology should therefore radicalize the crisis of the humanities to the point of reconsidering human-technology relations from scratch.

We must return now to the question that opened the article. Can barbarism provide us with a new perspective for theorizing and conceiving technology beyond the self-repressive logic of the Enlightenment? If we want to answer that question, we should also ask whether, contrary to what Adorno and Horkheimer argue, social freedom can be separated from enlightened thought. Mignolo's programme of 'barbaric theorizing' does not, in fact, dispense with the 'good qualities' of the Enlightenment. He still believes in the retention of some civilizing principles. Nevertheless, his programme also requires the intervention of a figure external to civilization, a barbarian. Such a figure is particularly important in acting as a corrective to Adorno and Horkheimer's Eurocentric programme. For them, both the Enlightenment and civilization, which are mostly used as synonyms in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, are European phenomena.<sup>64</sup> In light of the colonialism implicit in this concept, it would be more positive to reconsider the Enlightenment and its self-destructiveness not only by itself, but also by barbarians. Mignolo, in fact, believes that 'the self-restitution of barbarism as a theoretical locus' could offer 'valuable correctives to the abuses of post-Enlightenment reason, science, and disciplinarity'.<sup>65</sup> The intervention of an outsider, a barbarian, would therefore redress the abuses of technology, made in the name of civilization.

A 'barbaric theorizing' of technology should, then, radicalize the existing crisis of what we understand as human. Technology should no longer be constructed around the image of the enlightened subject, but around the barbarian. The possibilities for social freedom that technology may afford humanity only become possible if technology is thought from a radically different perspective, beyond the parameters that have guided its conception and use to date. If the Enlightenment needs to be reconsidered, it is better reconsidered from the outside, from the perspective of barbarism. A 'barbaric theorizing' will help us, then, to identify and critique the damaging nature of imperialist imperatives and, eventually, interrupt the destructive nature of capitalist-led technology. Benjamin's programme, however, is a dangerous one. The acceleration of the self-destructiveness of technological development runs the risk of annihilating all humanity. As Benjamin suggested in 'Fire Alarm', the economic and technological development of the bourgeoisie is leading to a catastrophe. A radicalization of this development could speed up the catastrophic end of humanity. For that reason, Benjamin understood class struggle as a technical task on the part of the 'true politician' who must think in tempos. In this case, a technical intervention to stop the destructiveness of capitalist development must be made before it is too late – providing at the same time, and with the ecstasy of the revolutionary moment, a new (barbaric) conception of technology, as a medium in which fairer relationships between nature and humanity can be played out.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Bilbao, *El autor y la obra*, 742. I am grateful to Danny Evans for his help with this translation. The original reads: ‘¡Qué bella civilización aquella que conduce en ferrocarril la esclavitud y la vergüenza! ¡Qué progreso, el comunicar una infamia, un atentado, una orden de ametrallar a un pueblo por medio del telégrafo eléctrico! ... ¡Qué adelanto! ¡Esos caminos, esos puentes, esos acueductos, esos campos labrados, esos pantanos disecados, esos bosques alineados y peinados, esas magníficas praderas bien regadas, para que pastoree contenta la multitud envilecida del pueblo soberano, convertido en canalla humana, para aplaudir en el circo, para sufragar por el crimen, para servir en los ejércitos, para esclavizar a sus hermanos, para contribuir a la *gloria* y prosperidad, y civilización de los imperios!’. Italics in the original.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 528. My own translation. The original reads: ‘El *civilizado* pide la exterminación de los indios o de los gauchos’. Italics in the original.

<sup>3</sup> Sarmiento, *Facundo: Civilización o barbarie*, 129. Quoted in Fernández Retamar, “Algunos usos,” 304. My own translation. The original reads: ‘La civilizada constitucional europea; la otra bárbara, arbitraria, americana’.

<sup>4</sup> Sarmiento, n135. Quoted in Retamar, “Algunos usos,” 304. My own translation. The original reads: ‘la lucha entre la civilización europea y la barbarie indígena’.

<sup>5</sup> Sarmiento, *Obras*, XXXVII, 195. Quoted in Retamar, “Algunos usos,” 308. My own translation. The original reads: ‘las razas fuertes exterminan a las débiles, los pueblos civilizados suplantán en la población de la tierra a los salvajes’.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Retamar, 323. My own translation. The original reads: ‘debemos unirnos para salvar la civilización americana de la invasión bárbara de Europa’.

<sup>7</sup> Mignolo, “Globalization,” 34.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 33. Here Mignolo uses the term in the plural, which Raymond Williams argues was not used until the nineteenth century and then becomes ‘a relatively neutral form for any achieved social order or way of life’. *Keywords*, 59.

<sup>10</sup> Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, 5. Italics in the original.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>12</sup> Boletsi, *Barbarism and Its Discontents*, 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>14</sup> Mignolo, “Globalization,” 45.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>16</sup> Benjamin, “On Scheerbart,” SW4, 386.

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin, “One-Way Street,” SW1, 487.

<sup>18</sup> Benjamin, “Outline of the Psycho-physical Problem,” SW1, 395

<sup>19</sup> Benjamin, “One-Way Street,” SW1, 487

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin, “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” SW2, 218.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (Second Version),” SW3, 124, n10.

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin, “Theories of German Fascism,” SW2, 312 and 321.

<sup>24</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, 32.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>26</sup> Benjamin, “Eduard Fuchs,” SW3, 266.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>32</sup> It is interesting to note here that, according to Raymond Williams, the concept of civilization from the eighteenth century was paired up with ‘the general spirit of the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on secular and progressive human self-development’. *Keywords*, 58.

<sup>33</sup> Marx, *Poverty of Philosophy*, 141.

<sup>34</sup> Benjamin, “Poverty and Experience,” SW2, 731

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 732.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 733.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 732.

<sup>39</sup> Marx, *Poverty of Philosophy*, 135.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>41</sup> Benjamin, “Eduard Fuchs,” SW3, 267.

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- <sup>42</sup> Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," SW4, 392.
- <sup>43</sup> Boletsi, *Barbarism and Its Discontents*, 126.
- <sup>44</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, xi.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, xv. Italics in the original.
- <sup>47</sup> Khatib, "Barbaric Salvage: Benjamin and the Dialectics of Destruction," 150.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>49</sup> Benjamin, "One-Way Street," SW1, 469.
- <sup>50</sup> Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (Second Version)," SW3, 122.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 121. Italics in the original.
- <sup>52</sup> Benjamin, "On Scheerbart," SW4, 386.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>54</sup> Svendsen, "Translator's Introduction," ix.
- <sup>55</sup> Scheerbart, *Glass Architecture*, 41.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 74 and 63.
- <sup>57</sup> Benjamin, "Poverty and Experience," 734.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 733.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>61</sup> Benjamin, "Karl Kraus," SW2, 456.
- <sup>62</sup> Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 1.
- <sup>63</sup> Ferrando, "Posthumanism," 28.
- <sup>64</sup> In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, civilization always appears to be paired up with the following adjectives: 'bourgeois civilization' (xi), 'Western bourgeois civilization' (xvi), 'enlightened civilization' (xvii), 'European civilization' (13) and 'Christian civilization' (110).
- <sup>65</sup> Mignolo, "Globalization," 51.

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