WALTER BENJAMIN'S MESSIANIC POLITICS

WALTER BENJAMIN'S MESSIANIC POLITICS:

BETWEEN MARXISM AND MESSIANISM

By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the messianic politics that Walter Benjamin develops in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" by examining the relationship between historical materialism and theology that he proposes in the first thesis. I therefore begin by examining Benjamin's conception of historical materialism in order to differentiate it from Marx's and to elucidate the way in which Benjamin seeks to reorient proletarian praxis. I argue that Benjamin seeks to solve the proletariat's problems of organization (to which Marx's conception of revolution has given rise) by resituating history and proletarian praxis within the frame of a messianic apocalyptic. I then attempt to reconstruct the major features of this apocalyptic by showing the connections between Benjamin's cryptic theological formulations in the "Theses" and the thematically similar formulations scattered throughout some of his other writings (in particular, "Critique of Violence," the "Theological-Political Fragment," and *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*). I clarify the way in which Benjamin's theological messianism enables him to offer a critique of profane politics that eschews the doctrine of progress which has caused the proletariat to forsake its revolutionary vocation. Furthermore, I show how Benjamin's critique of profane politics also specifies a mode of enactment that is messianic in that it orients the subject to activity which participates in history's coming to fulfillment.

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Introduction

This thesis intends to examine the messianic politics that Walter Benjamin develops in the "Theses on the Philosophy of History."[1] My point of departure for this study will be the problems posed by the first of the theses, which reads as follows:

> The story is told of an automaton constructed in such a way that it could play a winning game of chess, answering each move of an opponent with a countermove. A puppet in Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent from all sides. Actually, a little hunchback who was an expert chess player sat inside and guided the puppet's hand by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this device. The puppet called 'historical materialism' is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight (§I).

The relationship between historical materialism and theology that is elaborated in the "Theses" is complex, and while the significance of the first thesis in particular

[1] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), §I.

is widely acknowledged in the secondary literature that deals with the "Theses," the question as to the nature of this relationship remains problematic. This is due to a number of reasons.

The first of these is the somewhat uneasy fit between historical materialism and theology. Historical materialism seems to recommend a mode of analysis that would cash out theological concepts and religious structures in terms of their relation to material conditions. Historical materialism also seems to be allied with a historical teleology that suggests that theology must, like all other superstitions, be overcome. Moreover, historical materialism is allied with a revolutionary politics that would seemingly rather liquidate than be guided by theology. Thus historical materialism seems actively hostile to theology. That Benjamin suggests a partnership between the two seems, at best, problematic.

A second reason why the first thesis proves problematic is found in the fact that the theological hunchback guides the hands of the historical materialist puppet. Most Marxists would likely suggest that this relationship should be inverted if such a partnership were to be taken up in the first place. Benjamin suggests, however, that theology must play the guiding role because if historical materialism lacks this guidance, proletarian praxis will forsake the revolutionary vision that ought to animate it by subscribing to an understanding of history that mitigates the movement's radicalism. Indeed, he suggests that certain elements of the proletariat have already done so, and that the proletariat is suffering as a result of this betrayal.

That the historical materialist puppet should "win all the time" when its play is guided by theology is a third reason why the first thesis poses a difficulty for interpreters. If historical materialism is one of the participants, it seems to follow that the game in question would be related to the class struggle. This suggestion bears itself out in the rest of the "Theses," and its import seems to be that Benjamin is specifying the proletariat's proper mode of engagement in the class struggle by way of theology. But the "Theses" also seem to be directed at the recovery of the past through its "redemption." As a result, the relation between these two tasks—proletarian praxis and the redemption of the past—remains rather unclear, and as a result many commentators tend to bend Benjamin's remarks in a historiographical direction.

Although this thesis will indeed be directed at understanding the sense in which the aims of theology and historical materialism coincide in proletarian praxis, I will proceed by emphasizing the contribution that theology makes in this relation. The often cryptic nature of the remarks Benjamin makes with regard to the messianic has led some commentators to take refuge in—and thereby overemphasize—Benjamin's more directly legible remarks on historical materialism. This thesis therefore attempts to reconstruct the messianic understanding of history within which Benjamin attempts to resituate proletarian praxis. While this history appears to consign the world of messianic actuality and fulfillment to an unapproachable beyond, the reading of Benjamin's messianism offered here will display the permeability of the boundary between the current,

profane age, and that of messianic fulfillment. This permeability manifests itself in the way the immanent world, which is structured by the order of myth and mythic violence, opens, despite itself, to transcendence such that history can be newly understood as the paradoxical appearance of the eternal in time. For the divine manifests itself in divine violence, which recalls the order of nature to the origin that will again be actual in the world of messianic fulfillment, and which is coming to be even in the present age. Resituating political action within this frame gives rise to a mode of enactment that does not obey the rule of mere life which orders life in the profane. Rather it is ordered by the messianic, which is the only ordering that accords with that which is transcendent in humankind.

The three chapters that are intended to deal with the problems posed by the partnership Benjamin proposes in the first thesis and to perform the reconstruction just summarized may be outlined in the following way. The first chapter is intended to delineate Benjamin's conception of historical materialism by distinguishing it from Marx's and, in particular, to show the disjunction between their conceptions of revolution. The second chapter of this thesis elaborates the theological critique of progress and the critique of profane politics that Benjamin sets out in order to counter the anti-revolutionary tendencies that have arisen within proletarian praxis. In doing so, the second chapter brings the "Theses" into conversation with some of his other writings, particularly his

"Critique of Violence"[2] and his "Theological-Political Fragment."[3] The third chapter attempts to describe the way Benjamin unifies proletarian praxis and the redemption of the past by offering an account of Benjamin's "redemptive criticism," and by showing how the way it is practiced in the "Theses" renders visible a truthful way of being a subject, and a mode of messianic politics that is enabled by this form of truthfulness. In developing this account of Benjamin's "redemptive criticism" the third chapter relies significantly on the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" to Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*,[4] and in showing its relation to the "Theses" and Benjamin's task in that work, it refers to the preparatory notes for the "Theses" and to Convolute N from the *Arcades Project*.[5]

[2] Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 277-300.
[3] Walter Benjamin, "Theological-Political Fragment," in ibid., 312-313.
[4] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso, 1998), 27-56.
[5] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1999), 456-488.

Chapter 1:
Walter Benjamin's Historical Materialism

1 Introduction

Walter Benjamin's suggestion that the historical materialist ought to enlist the services of theology would undoubtedly strike the orthodox Marxist as quizzical at best, and as an outright betrayal of historical materialism at worst. For if one takes Marx at his Feuerbachian word, it is the material that conditions the spiritual; theology is part of the ideological superstructure that rises up from the economic base. Thus such a partnership could only be anti-revolutionary, for religious consciousness must be resolved into its economic basis if revolutionary activity is to proceed. In examining the "Theses on the Philosophy of History,"[1] then, it seems that such a Marxist would find ample evidence suggesting that the

[1] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968).

latter judgment—that Benjamin betrays historical materialism—is closer to the truth. Why, then, would Benjamin consistently identify his ideal historiographer as an historical materialist?

Despite the contradictory evidence, when Benjamin announces that his "Theses" are intended "to disentangle the political worldlings from the snares in which the traitors have entrapped them" (§X), it becomes clear that Benjamin conceives his own task as a Marxist one. Benjamin writes his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" as a work that attempts to reorient revolutionary political activity by redirecting the efforts of the historical actors' proletarian movement,[2] whom Benjamin calls "the opponents of Fascism" (§X). The betrayal at stake for Benjamin is not one of historical materialism by him, but of the movement by its leaders. Benjamin therefore undertakes a revision of what might be called Marxist doctrine, recasting the proletarians in the role of avengers rather than redeemers, and refocusing their attention on remembrance and solidarity rather than on theoretical claims and revolutionary strategy. Thus the following questions may be posed: why is this revision necessary? How does Benjamin proceed in performing it? What justifies Benjamin's eccentric reimagining of Marxism? I will address each of these questions in turn.

[2] Benjamin is deliberately ambiguous about the identity of the 'worldlings' to whom he addresses his remarks. This is quite certainly by design, as Fascism is not the only target here; I will discuss this point presently. It would seem that Benjamin directs his criticism towards certain *tendencies* that are shared across party lines; his ambiguity is intended to militate against interpretations which would limit his criticism to that of a particular party. With these misgivings cited, it seems appropriate, due to Benjamin's own allegiance to the "struggling, oppressed class" (§XII) and to his own version of Marxism, and for reasons of brevity, to use the term 'proletariat' to denote Benjamin's addressee.

Despite the fact that Benjamin never held a position with any identifiable politically active group after giving up his position of president of the Berlin Free Students Union and breaking with Gustav Wynecken, the teacher who had provided the impetus for Benjamin's early political activism in 1914,[3] Benjamin remained concerned with political matters throughout his life, if perhaps more on the theoretical level than some others. It was by way of an encounter with a Latvian Bolshevik named Asja Lacis on the island of Capri in 1924 that Benjamin began to identify with Marxism; the works that follow the completion of his 1925 *Habilitationsschrift* entitled *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*[4] (on which Benjamin was working at the time of their meeting) reflect a change in Benjamin's critical orientation; in his 1928 *One-Way Street* (dedicated to Lacis) Benjamin remarks that "the critic is a strategist in the literary struggle."[5] The fact that Benjamin identifies his own task as bound up with the task of the proletariat—namely class struggle (to which Benjamin refers explicitly in §IV)—only strengthens Rolf Tiedemann's claim that it was not only the failure of Social Democracy in Germany, but the treachery of the Communists in 1939-40 that occasioned the composition of the "Theses."[6] The Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression Pact between the Soviets and the Nazis represented a collaboration in

[3] Shoshana Felman, "Benjamin's Silence," *Critical Inquiry*, 25 (Winter, 1999), 214.
[4] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London, UK: New Left Books, 1977). *GS*, I: 203-430.
[5] Walter Benjamin, *GS*, 4:108. I owe this point to Richard Wolin, *An Aesthetic of Redemption* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1982), 119.
[6] This point in Rolf Tiedemann's "Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?" is cited in Ronald Beiner's essay "Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History," *Political Theory*, 12:3 (August, 1984): 433, n.14.

which the worst tendencies of both *bourgeois* and communist politics were given display. Nevertheless, Benjamin does not abandon Marxism. In order to understand just what he is revising, however, an account of the central features of historical materialism and of Marx's accounts of class struggle and the revolution will be necessary.

2 Marx and Historical Materialism

In *The German Ideology*[7] Marx famously "turns Hegel on his head," inverting the relations between the spiritual and material that prevail in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*; Marx resolutely argues that it is the material things that determine the spiritual and not vice versa. In proving this point, Marx offers a quasi-naturalistic phenomenology of spirit's coming-to-be by focusing on the material features of human life that give rise to consciousness. Within this phenomenology the following moments can be discerned:

1) "Man must be in a position to live in order to be able to 'make history'" (GI, 119-120). This involves satisfying material needs (food, clothing, shelter).
2) In the quest to satisfy these material needs, man produces the means to their satisfaction (even if the means is as basic as a stick).
3) The production of the means to the satisfaction of material needs also entails the production of new needs; this is "the first historical act" (GI, 120).
4) The propagation of the species within the bounds of the family leads to the development of new social relationships. These relationships become not only familial, but social—that is, associative.
5) These associative relationships involve cooperation and develop a "productive force" (GI, 121) of their own, which in turn, revolutionizes individual needs by projecting new needs and by developing the means to their satisfaction.

[7] Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978).

The particular configuration of needs experienced within a social group is what can be called their consciousness: "Consciousness is, therefore, from the very beginning a social product" (GI, 122). Arriving thus at the higher (consciousness) from the lower (material needs and relations) justifies Marx's inversion, and a similarly naturalistic argument could be offered (or so Marx's rhetoric promises) in order that we arrive at the highest (what Hegel calls Spirit) independent of religion or speculative philosophy.

Marx therefore offers a comprehensive theory of history that pays particular attention not to speculative premises or dogmas "from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination [but to] real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live...These premises can thus be verified in a purely empirical way" (GI, 113). In keeping with this two-fold inversion (of the object of study and of philosophical method) Marx develops his theory of history by tracing the development of the different forms of ownership and of the division of labour.

Ownership has progressed from tribal to communal and feudal ownership, to the current state of *bourgeois* capitalism. Marx analyzes this progression with reference to the relations of the owners of the means of production to those who work and use them productively in the satisfaction of needs. The division of labour is in evidence in each of the different forms of ownership. In the tribal form, "the slavery latent in the family only develops gradually with the increase of population" (GI, 115) that comes with the growth of the tribe; in becoming the

leader, the tribal chief now becomes the owner of the tribal family's property. Likewise in the slave-owning society, the citizens' concern for their private property causes them to bind together "over against their slaves" (GI, 115). Marx continues: "feudal organization was, just as much as the ancient communal ownership, an association against a subjected producing class" (GI, 117). Two conclusions follow from this history: first, that "the various stages of development in the division of labour represent so many forms of property,"[8] and second, that the history of the struggle between the different classes is the "real basis of ideology" (GI, 140). Put differently, the fates of ideologies are not determined by the unfolding of spirit in history, but by the rise and fall of different classes in history, for ideology is always the production of a material base.

As Lichtheim notes, Marx remained perplexed about the rise of *bourgeois* society; for commentators there remains "the significant question whether Marx was successful in linking the economic logic of the [rise of *bourgeois* society] to its historical environment."[9] In *The German Ideology*, Marx argues that the rise of the *bourgeois* class and capitalism came about purely as a result of technological change. Certain innovations caused production to become much more productive, which led to a change in the relationship between the productive class and those who oversaw production; the feudal guilds were replaced by the

[8] George Lichtheim, *Marxism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 144. Hereafter I will refer to this work as Lichtheim.
[9] Ibid., 158.

bourgeois class, and "with guild-free manufacture, property relations also quickly changed" (GI, 145).

These changes, however, took place within the socio-economic frame that has always prevailed; the different systems of social relations that have come and gone are always subject to the limits set out by the material conditions of life. Historical materialism is the name given to Marx's description of these systems of relations, and it is by way of such material analysis that the demise of the currently prevailing system of relations can be projected. It proceeds along the following lines.

Within *bourgeois* society the *bourgeoisie* own the means of production. However, the means of production are valueless if there are no labourers, and thus the *bourgeoisie* require labourers in order to extract value out of the means of production. Members of the productive class require resources for survival and thus exchange their labour for those resources; the proletarian thus becomes a wage-labourer. Under this arrangement, the *bourgeoisie* receives, for the wages they offer, both the labour of the proletarian and the products that the labourer produces by using the means of production, which the *bourgeois* owner can then sell for a profit.

Engagement in the task of production, however, leads to the alienation of the worker on multiple levels. Under *bourgeois* capitalist conditions, physical and mental labour are divided (GI, 153), as the only mental labour the worker needs to perform is already completed in the calculation dictating that labour must

be performed. Further, the worker is alienated from his/her own work, as the products of work can not be enjoyed by the worker once the work is completed. Finally, workers are alienated from one another because they are no longer cooperating with others in some shared pursuit. Whereas formerly this alienation was mitigated by the shared bond (of family, tribe, the land, etc), in *bourgeois* society this bond is broken (GI, 153). Marx puts it thus: "with money every form of intercourse, and intercourse itself is considered fortuitous for the individuals" (GI, 154). As a result, individuals become abstract individuals, "put into a position to enter into relations with one another *as individuals*" (GI, 155). Whereas feudalism erected limits and barriers even around the serfs, who had identities by virtue of belonging to a particular lord's realm, capitalism destroys these boundaries in the name of trade, which enables capital to circulate freely; this of course destroys any semblance of social identity that a member of the productive class had, and deepens the worker's alienation.

3 The Task of the Proletariat

This results in a new situation for the productive class in the class struggle. "[Working] individuals must appropriate the existing totality of productive forces, not only to achieve self-activity, but, also, merely to safeguard their very existence" (GI, 155). In the face of the alienation just mentioned, proletarians must band together and appropriate the means of production for themselves. In coming to constitute the proletariat, individuals are motivated by the same motive that spurred on revolutionary classes before them. The *bourgeoisie*, for example,

had needed to rewrite the laws justifying the rule of the feudal lords in order to cope with the new position in civil society they had gained through struggle. In an analogous way, the proletariat must struggle and gain control over the means of production. This is, however, a new moment in the class struggle: "In all revolutions up till now the mode of activity has always remained unscathed...whilst the communist revolution is directed against the preceding *mode* of activity, does away with *labour*, and abolishes the rule of all classes" (GI, 157).

In leaving the mode of activity unscathed, all previous revolutions had left the societal structure necessary for class rule in place; regardless of the *form* of ownership, in each historical era (tribal, communal, etc.) heretofore, some owned the means of production and others used them productively. But simply engaging in the *bourgeois* mode of activity produced a contradiction—namely that the productive class could no longer be identical with itself due to the alienation engendered by productive activity. This contradiction functions as the reason why the productive class must become the proletariat and thus take up revolution as its task; for it is only by way of revolution that the condition that gave rise to the productive class's non-coincidence with itself (namely, labour) can be abolished. Though the proletariat (an alienated and oppressed class) and its revolution (which springs from the proletariat's recognition of its own self-interest) both arise rather humbly, their world-historical significance ought not to

be underestimated. Indeed, it is with these humble origins clearly in view that the messianic aspects of Marx's philosophy can be seen most clearly.

Marx undertakes the above-cited quasi-naturalistic resolution of the spiritual into its material constituents in the interest of disenchanting (among other things) religious consciousness. Such a disenchantment is necessary because "*religious* suffering is at the same time an *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering."[10] Since the real suffering at stake here cannot be mitigated on religion's own terms, religion must be subjected to what Marx calls "irreligious criticism," the principle of which is that "*man makes religion.*"[11] Irreligious criticism has shown that the world within which religious consciousness is at home was invented by man as an expression of his alienation from the world, and is, in the words of Sidney Hook, "an imaginative hypostasization of man's feelings and needs."[12] Marx argues that the task of irreligious criticism "has been largely completed"[13] and that German philosophy currently serves as religion's successor. Philosophy's task, however, remains, and cannot be completed as long as it remains in the hands of the professors rather than the proletariat.

Put briefly, for Marx, two conditions must be satisfied if human self-alienation is to be overcome and the real suffering that is at the root of religious

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[10] Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's* Philosophy of Right, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 12. All italics in original.
[11] Ibid., 11.
[12] Sidney Hook, "The Philosophy of Dialectical Materialism," *The Journal of Philosophy* 25:5 (March, 1928): 115.
[13] Marx, *Critique of Hegel's* Philosophy of Right (see n.10) 11.

suffering is to be addressed. Hegel has done the most to resolve religion's other-worldly truth into the truth of this world by turning from the criticism of religion and theology to the criticism of law and politics. A successful Hegel, however, could only satisfy the first condition, namely that religious consciousness be *unmasked.* Thus Hegel has not gone far enough; the condition that gave rise to religion—namely human self-alienation—still prevails for in Hegel's philosophy, the Prussian constitutional monarchy has simply replaced the divine as the illusory object around which man revolves. Man can only be free from illusions when *material conditions have changed* such that no illusions are necessary. This change is the second condition. Thus, "the immediate *task of philosophy*, which is in the service of history, is to unmask human self-alienation in its *secular form* now that it has been unmasked in its *sacred form.*"[14]

The proletariat can unmask Hegel's secular form of human self-alienation by realizing practically (politically) the freedom Hegel only promised theoretically (in thought). Hegel claims that the realm of freedom is attained by uniting individual reason with universal reason, and that Prussia's bureaucratic civil servants have in fact done so, thereby becoming the universal class, stripped of any partisan interests. Marx, on the other hand, claims that universality is not attained by being stripped of one's interests, for this would leave one without a will to *any* particular goal, never mind a universal one. Indeed, Hegel's bureaucrat will remain (self-)interested (and thus not universal, on Hegel's terms)

[14] Ibid., 12.

and active, or he will become as alienated from the world as the religious ascetic. On the contrary, Marx argues, a class attains universality by having its *partisan* interests coincide perfectly with the interest of all classes.

The possibility of emancipation in Germany lies in the hands of such a class:

> A class must be formed that has *radical chains*...a class that is the dissolution of all classes...which does not claim a *particular redress* because the wrong which is done to it is not a *particular wrong* but *wrong in general*. When the proletariat announces the *dissolution of the existing social order*, it only declares the *secret of its* own existence, for it *is* the *effective* dissolution of this order. When the proletariat demands the negation of private property it lays down as a principle for society what society has already made a principle for the proletariat.[15]

The proletariat gains its status as oppressed class *and* universal class precisely because of its having suffered "wrong in general." Society itself has placed the proletariat on the stage of world history by ordering the relations between the classes such that the proletariat's following its own self-interest will result in the dissolution of the existing social order.

At this point the messianic character of the proletariat and its task comes into focus. The proletariat does not eschew the material world by inventing an imagined one in which there is freedom (religion's kingdom of God), nor does it claim that freedom consists in unity with or contemplation of a world of ideas (Hegel's philosophical freedom); rather, by its very activity, the proletariat dissolves the condition sustaining the currently-operating oppressive social order. Doing so, however, simultaneously negates the condition of the proletariat's own being. The proletariat's emancipation of itself is "a *total loss* of

[15] Ibid., 22-23.

humanity…which can only redeem itself by a *total redemption of humanity*."[16] In bringing the classless society into being, the proletariat dies while simultaneously being raised as the universal class beyond all divisions. The revolution, then, has a structure roughly homologous with the central revelatory event in Christianity, in which the Messiah must be willingly humiliated and crucified in order to be resurrected as the redeemer.

The soteriology implicit in Marx's conception of revolution results, accordingly, in there being fatalistic and voluntaristic readings of the revolution. What seems clear is that capitalist praxis for the proletariat gives rise to communist practice, as the social determination of the worker's being given in capitalism latently brings the social conditions into being which give rise to an alternative kind of consciousness in the proletariat. The moment in which the proletariat acquires class consciousness is the moment when they will to "assert themselves as individuals [and] abolish the very condition of their existence hitherto…namely, labour" (GI, 164).

4 Marx and Revolutionary Strategy

At this point, all that seems to remain for Marx is to offer an articulation of that alternative mode of social being which persists, unacknowledged, in the proletarian, and class consciousness will come into being. If this happy supposition seems somewhat too glib, that is entirely appropriate; when strategizing for revolution things become notoriously complicated. Marx

[16] Ibid., 22.

develops a number of different theories of revolution, each of which is adapted for its particular context. One of the chief points of differentiation among these various adaptations of the doctrine of revolution is whether the revolution would a) violently dismantle the social order with one fell swoop or b) happen through a process of legislation that proceeded rapidly after the communists took power via democratic process, or c) be a yet more gradual process, one in which the communist party would advocate for the legal enshrinement of the mode of social being that is given in proletarian praxis.

Marx analyzed the material conditions in their relation to the different types of revolutions by contrasting the situations in France and Germany in 1843:

> In France partial emancipation is a basis for complete emancipation. In Germany complete emancipation is the *conditio sine qua non* for any partial emancipation. In France it is the reality, in Germany the impossibility, of a progressive emancipation which must give birth to complete liberty. In France every class of the population is *politically idealistic* and...thus the role of liberator can, therefore, pass [from class to class] until it finally reaches the class which achieves social freedom...In Germany, on the contrary...no class of civil society feels the need for...a general emancipation, until it is forced to it by its *immediate* situation.[17]

Thus revolutionary strategy entails both the building of class consciousness and analysis of the material conditions favorable to revolution. In this case, the backwardness of Germany—the lack of a developed parliamentary system, etc.—made it ripe for a *radical* (and likely violent) revolution. In France, by contrast, the *bourgeois* revolution (the French Revolution) was to give way to a communist revolution, which would lead to the promised "complete emancipation." The two revolutions were, for Marx, ultimately part of the same movement; Lichtheim

[17] Ibid.

notes that when they composed the *Communist Manifesto*, "Marx and Engels thought in terms of the revolutionary experience of 1789-94, when moderate factions were displaced by more radical ones."[18] The concern with strategy raises questions as to whether there is any unifying doctrine of revolution underlying all of the different manifestations. If, on the one hand, the unity of the proletariat is predicated on solidarity, and revolution is the single aim at which all proletarian activity is directed, on the other—yet revolutionary activity takes radically different forms, there is a strong tendency to see the approach taken in another context as issuing from a different understanding of revolution itself. If a clear conception of the relation between the core doctrine of revolution and its cultural adaptations is to be maintained, this will require a highly nuanced mode of perception. Without this mode of perception, different interpretations of the underlying doctrine will proliferate, and with this proliferation, the solidarity that binds the proletariat together will disintegrate as the different factions within the proletariat organize themselves around their differing interpretations of the 'true revolution.'

About fifteen years after the *Manifesto*'s publication, Marx began moving away from early formulations (like the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*) which ascribed a pivotal role to thought (the proletariat must *see* its chains as *radical* chains and *understand* the secret of its own existence). According to Leszek Kolakowski, Marx largely abandoned the normative and anthropological

[18] Lichtheim, (see n. 8), 58.

view that characterized some of his early writings, later favoring perspicacious structural descriptions of capital.[19] Though Marx does not offer any clear explanation for this shift (to his credit, he was more interested in doing philosophical analysis than commenting on it), Kolakowski's claims on this point are persuasive: he writes that Marx "had come to the conclusion that socialism would [not] be achieved...by humanitarian sentiment"[20] and for this reason he eschewed doctrines that would encourage notions of class solidarity or utopian ideals such as transcending class enmity. His later works were directed at fleshing out a description of capital that would be capable of structuring all of the cultural adaptations of revolution that find expression within proletarian praxis.

This shift is precisely what was necessary, due to the fact that that the promised revolution was long in coming. That Marx's perspicacious descriptions proved rather impotent in catalyzing revolution suggests that the fit between the two tasks of revolutionary strategy (building class consciousness and analyzing material conditions) is perhaps less comfortable than it may seem, for the latter task only makes manifest the non-coincidence of the proletariat's consciousness and its will. The promise that communism will be an entirely new mode of politics—one in which class rule is abolished—rings somewhat hollow when the vanguard party needs to endure in order constantly to catalyze further revolutionary activity. This is often identified, for instance, by Giorgio Agamben

[19] Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents in Marxism*, trans. P.S. Falla (New York: Norton, 1978, 2005), 215.
[20] Ibid., 217.

as the "the aporia of the party": "the party [is] simultaneously identical to class while simultaneously differing from it...If political action (revolution) coincides perfectly with the egoistic act of the singular individual (revolt), then why is something like a party even necessary?"[21] Moreover, when factions threaten the unity of the proletariat and no clear account of the unifying doctrine of revolution can be offered, it becomes nearly impossible, on the one hand, to build the kind of class consciousness needed to catalyze revolution, and, on the other, to properly denounce degenerate forms of Marxism.

Benjamin views these problems of organization as working themselves out in the aforementioned betrayal of the 'worldlings' to whom he addresses the "Theses." For this reason, Benjamin develops an account of revolution that attempts to draw it closer to the 'egoistic act of a single individual.' He does so by eschewing the economic speculations that would show the necessity of revolution, and denouncing the idealistic visions of utopia that appear at the end of pseudo-revolutionary teleologies. Benjamin roots revolution rather in an understanding of solidarity that is neither humanitarian nor universal; Benjamin's revolution is by the oppressed and for the oppressed of the present and the past.

5 Benjamin on Class Struggle

While Benjamin does argue in the opening thesis that historical materialism should enlist theology, there is a significant caveat: the theological hunchback that pulls the strings guiding the historical materialist puppet must

[21] Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, trans. Patricia Daley (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 32.

remain out of sight (§I). What can this mean? When writing history, one inevitably makes use of a principle of selection, as we have seen with Marx's historical materialism. That principle of selection is utilized in a way that enables the writer to arrange the events in a sequence that shows their relation to one another, and to the end towards which they lead.[22] Benjamin is describing this latter relation (between individual event and the end point) when he discusses the link between happiness and redemption in thesis II, when he writes, "Our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption. The same applies to our view of the past, which is the concern of history." The desire for happiness acts as the spring driving the inner mechanism of an event, and discerning how this is so for particular events is relatively unproblematic provided one has sufficient information.[23]

Redemption's relationship to such events, however, is more difficult to discern. As long as one is writing history—rather than writing a theory of history, or imagining an unrealized future—the end towards which the events written about develop remains mysterious. The theological hunchback, it would seem, would be the only one with a proper handle on redemption's relation to history, but Benjamin's insistence that he remain out of sight suggests that the hunchback

[22] For this reason, insofar as Benjamin is considering what could be called 'profane' history (that is, that history written on this side of Judgment Day by an unredeemed humanity), the chronicler cited in §III, "who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor events" can only be a straw man. Precisely because *nothing* is lost for the chronicler, we can know that the chronicler is not an historian—for the historian must exercise virtues, whereas the chronicler could not fail to reliably cite all of history's moments.

[23] This sort of history is that captured by Benjamin's notion of "pure and pragmatically real human history," which I discuss in chapter 3, section 7.

is not to appear on the stage of world history. And Benjamin's insistence that the theological hunchback partner with the historical materialist puppet suggests that what the hunchback knows—but cannot himself say—manifests itself in the activity of the puppet.

If the historical materialist's task is not a 'theological' explication of the relation of an historical moment to the goal of the historical dynamic, it is to take note of the particularities of events in the material history and to relate them to that end to which he *does* have access, namely to happiness. And this involves taking particular note—in Marxist fashion—of the material conditions that bear on one's happiness. It is at this point that the Benjamin's historical materialism is most true to its Marxist roots. Benjamin's historical materialist constantly keeps in mind an event's relation to the ongoing struggle between the classes; this struggle "is always present to a historian influenced by Marx"(§IV). A failure to keep this struggle in mind leads to one's becoming complicit in the ongoing victory of the powers that be over the oppressed, struggling classes, whom Benjamin calls "the depository of historical knowledge" (§XII) (*das Subjekt historischer Erkenntnis*).

Benjamin calls the party opposed to this oppressed, struggling class alternately the victors or the ruling class, and this class has its own method for documenting the historical past, which Benjamin calls 'historicism.' With regard to method, Benjamin has this to say about historicism:

> Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It

> became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years (§A).

Historical causality is certainly one of the features of any history. At the same time, however, a rigorously causal account can gloss over and thereby misrepresent moments of indeterminacy within the sequence. Moreover, casting an event in the role of cause (of other events) preemptively can forsake the internal dynamics of that event. These forms of misrepresentation may be unintentional, but note must be taken of the fact that the intentionality of the author is always in play in the writing of history. Thus the historiographer's own intentions always color the events represented in a given history (the historian's intention being one of the events that may be separated from the historical event by thousands of years). History is always written by a historically constituted subject for a historically constituted public and the consciousness of both is influenced[24] by the subject's mode of social being.

History writing is itself caught up in the historical dynamic. Benjamin views historicism as a particularly malign form of historiography precisely because of the role it plays in that dynamic; it is the tool of the ruling class. Benjamin names Fustel de Coulanges among the historicists, as his methodological injunction—"that [one] blot out everything [one knows] about the later course of history" (§VII)—gives rise to a form of empathy that renders the

[24] I do not say 'produced' or 'determined' because I do not want to overstate the vulgar Marxist influence (on Benjamin's thought) here. Despite the fact that Benjamin does not necessarily follow Marx's account of the material origin of consciousness, however, he does at one point remark "Reflection shows us that our image of happiness is thoroughly colored by the time to which the course of our own existence has assigned us" (§II).

past mute precisely because it makes the course events have taken seem necessary. It may be that the victors have ensured that history has taken a particular course, but it does not follow from this that history is adequately known by leafing through the catalogue of history's 'greats'.

> Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment (§VII).

Cultural treasures (*Kulturgütern*) are objects pillaged by victors, taken up and subsumed within the narrative of the victors' own self-glorification. Historicism makes a "cultural treasure" of history by stringing the events of history into a causal sequence that can only lead to the victors' hegemony.

The "eternal image of the past" (§XVI) supplied by historicism helps to make the decisions involved in the maintenance of what the ruling class calls civilization seem entirely routine. In this way "historicism culminates in universal history" (§XVII). Benjamin continues: "Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its method is additive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous empty time" (§XVII). The former contention seems somewhat dissonant with Benjamin's other remarks, as it seems that his intention in the "Theses" is to highlight how *interested* historicist historiography is. However, if this remark is more about highlighting the way historicist universality comes at the expense of the unique in history, this becomes more readily understandable.[25]

[25] In this account, I ignore the significance of Benjamin's description of "homogeneous, empty time" (§XVII) which may be the true reason for his moment of theoretical weakness (namely,

The so-called objectivity of historicism is its most dubious feature, for in this way it not only conceals the unrealized potentialities in past moments (which, as we shall see, remain to be rediscovered by the historical materialist), but it correlatively conceals the significance of the present moment in the struggle.

The historical materialist's mode of historiography is likewise part of a mode of political practice, but its position in the struggle is always that of resistance to, rather than endorsement of the status quo. For the historical materialist "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (§VII). The possibility of an historical document's failing to be complicit in such barbarism depends on the possibility of a mode of historiography that gives full play to the uniqueness of an historical event, and to the unrealized potentialities present in it. This is not to be accomplished by going over the same ground as the historicist—only this time using the academic's fine-toothed comb, learning the names of the losers of battles in addition to the victors, etc. Rather, it is accomplished by evoking the revolutionary spirit of past events directly in the ongoing practice of resistance.[26]

In thesis XIV, Benjamin cites an example (lifted straight out of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*,[27] it bears noting) of Robespierre: "The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome incarnate. It evoked Rome the way fashion evokes

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describing historicism as lacking theoretical armature). I will return to this theme in the second chapter.

[26] Chapter 3 will unpack the philosophical point that Benjamin makes by focusing on practice in this way.

[27] Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, ed. C. P. Dutt (New York: International Publishers, 1977), 15-16.

costumes of the past." Robespierre thereby "blasted [Rome] out of the continuum of history." Benjamin further clarifies: "The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action" (§XV). A past event, in the hands of an historical materialist, becomes the means to the declaration of what might be called a state of exception wherein the prevailing material conditions are suspended—a state that is all the more exceptional because it is not declared by the sovereign. As Marx puts it, "the heroes as well as the parties and the masses of the old French Revolution, performed the task of their time in Roman costume and with Roman phrases, the task of unchaining and setting up modern *bourgeois* society."[28] There is no generation that does not have such a task for its time; this seems to be part of what Benjamin is intimating when he writes, "like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply" (§II). The historical materialist's task is to remain aware of this claim, and thus to relate to history in a way that renders it useful to this end. Benjamin's historical materialist historiography is not superior to historicist historiography because it is more accurate—i.e. more true to its object. Rather, it is superior because it is more appropriate to the human condition—i.e. a more truthful way of being a subject.

6 Benjamin's Revolution

[28] Ibid., 16.

This kind of anthropological/ethical claim about historical materialist engagement is largely absent in the later Marx, and taking note of this fact is important as we begin to flesh out the deep differences between Benjamin's historical materialism and Marx's. Marx's historical materialism, as noted above, goes hand in hand with a projection of the demise of the currently prevailing system of material relations. Revolution, in turn, is directed towards bringing this projected demise to fulfillment, with the aim of constructing a new set of (communist) institutional structures around the material conditions to which capitalist has given rise. This task is to be carried out by the proletariat, and when complete, humankind will be on a new historical plane, having eliminated the central feature of the historical dynamic, class struggle.

Benjamin's historical materialism, by contrast, does not come with the economic theoretical armature that seems so crucial for Marx. Indeed, it seems that Marx's history of the different forms of ownership contains many of the elements of historicism that Benjamin militates so strongly against.[29] Benjamin's historical materialism looks backward for the sake of the present rather than around, analyzing the existing relations in order to look forward to their

[29] Benjamin saw the limits—and virtues—of Marx's approach very clearly. In a note to the "Theses," Benjamin writes, "[Marx] realized that the history of capital could be constructed only within the broad, steel framework of a theory." "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History,'" *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, trans. Howard Eiland and Edmund Jephcott, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2003), IV: 406. *GS*, I: 1241. Despite his claim that Marx's history is not genuinely historical, he argues that "humanity's interests are better looked after [by Marx because] it is more difficult to honor the memory of the anonymous than it is to honor the memory of the famous."

overcoming. Accordingly, what the proletariat wins through the class struggle is *not* a dominant position:

> It is not in the form of spoils which fall to the victor that [spiritual things] make their presence felt in the class struggle. They manifest themselves in this struggle as courage, humor, cunning and fortitude. They have retroactive force and will constantly call in question every victory, past and present, of the rulers.

The temporal language Benjamin uses in this passage makes clear that while the struggling, oppressed class with whom Benjamin allies the historical materialist gains some legitimacy for its own perspective, does not become the victor by way of class struggle—for if this were the case, the spiritual things won via and manifested in the class struggle could only function in calling the proletariat's *own victory* into question. On the contrary, any sort of success in the class struggle comes with dangers for the proletariat that are analogous to those threatening history. "The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it" (§VI).

The conformism that comes with success is precisely what Benjamin sees as lying at the root of the betrayal he mentions—that on the part of Social Democracy (§XI)—and at the root of the betrayal he does not mention, namely the Soviets' betrayal of the proletariat via their Treaty with the Nazis.[30] This

[30] The significance of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact for the occasion of the "Theses" will be explored in the second chapter, but a brief excursus is justified here. Ronald Beiner notes that "the 'Theses' were written in early 1940, after Benjamin had been released from an internment camp in France. Only several months later Benjamin would be on the run from the Gestapo, as the Nazis occupied France." "Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History," *Political Theory*, 12:3 (August, 1984): 431. The significance of this biographical note is clarified in thesis VIII: "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule… One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it

conformism arises precisely because of the confidence the Social Democrats have in the future they see as lying before them (Benjamin cites Wilhelm Dietzgen's particularly extravagant utopian projections in §XI); and it is appropriate to see the historicist tendencies of Marx's epigones (the Social Democrats, et al.) as leading to such confidence.

What is necessary, then, is not a "revolution [that] consists in 'a transformation… of the state or society…a *political* or *social* act' that has the creation of new institutions as its goal;" rather, what is necessary is a "revolt [that] 'is an uprising of individuals…without regard for the institutions that develop out of it."[31] Accordingly, the motivational underpinnings for such a revolt cannot be confidence in theoretical premises—regardless of whence they derive—but the desire for vengeance on behalf of the oppressed generations that have gone before. The proletariat, Benjamin writes, appears in Marx "as the last enslaved class, as the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of the generations of the downtrodden" (§XII). The Social Democrats, however, have silenced this vengeful voice in Marx:

> Social Democracy thought fit to assign to the working class the role of the redeemer of future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This training made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are

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as a historical norm." In making their treaty with the Nazi's, the Soviets could be numbered among those who treat Fascism as an historical norm. This makes them thoroughly complicit in the oppression that Benjamin and millions of others like him experienced. The Soviets could thus have learned from Benjamin's conception of the class struggle and from Benjamin's understanding of history, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

[31] Agamben, *The Time That Remains* (see n. 21), 31-32. Benjamin does not himself make this distinction, although I think it does capture something important about his understanding of revolution. I also would follow Agamben (as will become apparent, presently) in arguing that Benjamin's revolution/revolt "plays on the absolute indiscernability between revolt and revolution" (33).

> nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren (§XII).

Benjamin argues that Blanqui and Marx stand together in opposition to the Social Democrats' understanding of the world-historical significance of revolution. "Within three decades [the Social Democrats] managed virtually to erase the name of Blanqui, though it had been the rallying sound that had reverberated through the preceding century"(§XII)—as they find the Blanquian desire for liberation "objectionable" (§XII).[32] It is precisely this desire for liberation—ultimately aiming at happiness, which, we will recall, is the only end to which the historical materialist can relate historical events—that binds the past and present generations of the proletariat together.

This debt to past generations is part of the claim that cannot be settled cheaply (mentioned in §II). Even if the present generation succeeded in attaining victory in the class struggle, this would do nothing to redress the wrongs done to past generations. For this reason, the happiness of the present generation cannot be an unalloyed happiness. At the same time, however, failure to participate in the struggle for liberation would be to betray those who have gone before—for

[32] Christian Lenhardt writes in his essay "Anamnestic Solidarity," *Telos* 25 (Fall, 1975): 137, that "one will search in vain for even the most tentative endeavor by Benjamin to [textually] substantiate this thesis" (namely, that Blanqui and Marx stand together against the Social Democrats). The fact that Benjamin lifts the Robespierre example out of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*, however, may suggest that Benjamin is also relying on the appraisal of Blanqui's significance that Marx offers there: "May 15 had no other result save that of removing Blanqui and his comrades, that is, the real leaders of the proletarian party" (23). The way in which Benjamin cites Marx's conception of revolution seems to share a number of the features (and motivations) in common with that performed by Karl Kraus, who "discovere[d] in quotation the power not to preserve but to purify, to tear from context, to destroy; [this is] the only power in which hope still resides that something might survive this age—by being wrenched from it." See Benjamin, "Karl Kraus" *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 271. I will return to this mode of citation in chapter 3.

failing to struggle can only lead to one's becoming a tool of the ruling class. Thus Benjamin remarks, "only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins" (§VI). Fanning the spark of hope in the past is precisely the exercise of man's "*weak* Messianic power" (§II), which is *weak* in that it lacks a full measure of those capacities that the Messiah's exercises fully: "The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of the Antichrist" (§VI). The Messiah can fully redeem and fully subdue, whereas the members of the present generation, because they stand within the frame of history rather than in the Apocalyptic judgment seat, can only struggle and resist through remembrance.

The appropriate mode of historiography for the historical materialist maintains its reference to theology negatively, as it were. The lesson that the Social Democrats' betrayal teaches is that if the goals pursued within the historical dynamic are charged with redemptive significance and one grows confident that one is "moving with the current"(§XI), the revolutionary impetus will be lost; there is a strong tendency to mistake one's happiness at a (perhaps very legitimate and substantial) improvement in material conditions for redemption. A resolute insistence on the distinction between the two and a correlative critique of the profanity of those forces that are taken to responsible for driving world history[33] enables a mode of proletarian practice that is superior in that it does not succumb to the flattery of the ruling class (which would lead to

[33] This critique will be explored in chapter 2.

the conformism that threatens in theses V and VI, and which already characterizes the Social Democrats).

This insistence on the necessity of resistance via remembrance of the past, which renounces the false hope that arises from trust in the redemption offered by the immanent forces of history also functions in unifying the various factions that develop within the proletariat. For these factions develop because proletarians become stakeholders in the creation of new institutions and cite a list of accomplishments rather than imminent dangers when asked about the current state of the class struggle. If the revolutionary sees the present moment not as another moment during which one only needs to perform routine maintenance on an already running machine, but as a chance to fight for the oppressed past that perpetually threatens to drop from view. For, as Benjamin puts it, "every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably" (§V). If this is kept in mind, no satisfaction will be taken in the creation of any new institution and the revolutionary fervor will not slacken.

7 Conclusion

The fact that Benjamin's historical materialism registers as an incisive critique of Marx's own is made plain when juxtaposed with Marx's commentary on the way Robespierre and others made revolutionary use of the past:

> The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped off all superstition

> with regard to the past....In order to arrive at their own content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead.[34]

Drawing on the future for the poetry of the revolution often proves deceptive precisely because projecting the future necessarily involves reference to the present—and determining just what aspects of the present will be prove determinative in the future is difficult at best. Ironically, it may be that Marx's confidence that all religious superstition could be stripped off that left him vulnerable to a philosophical superstition of the first order. The Hegelian system is Marx's point of departure, and though Marx's premises may be empirical rather than speculative, the similarities between the two systems are striking. As Avineri notes,

> Turning the possibility of human redemption into an historical phenomenon about to be realized here and now secularizes the Hegelian synthesis that saw the dialectical tensions resolving themselves in the present generation and finding their *Aufhebung* in an apotheosis through which the historical process would achieve its ultimate height.[35]

When redemption is transposed into the historical dynamic, this charges the present with great eschatological significance. It promises a radical reordering, and human action is evaluated according to its relation to this reordering. The problems of organization suggest that the hope for such a radical reordering may be deceptive insofar as it locates the messianic force which would enable the radical reordering strictly within human agency. This does not mean that this force does not appear in history.[36] Rather, it means that if the problems of

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[34] Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, 18.
[35] Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1968) 250.
[36] Indeed, in a note to the "Theses," Benjamin writes, "the historical materialist...performs a sort of spectrum analysis. Just as a physicist determines the presence of ultraviolet rays in the solar

organization that arise from Marx's immanent understanding of redemption—which results in his brand of secular messianism—are to be overcome a revision of Marx's account of revolution will be required. To this effect, Benjamin writes, "Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train—namely the human race—to activate the emergency brake."[37]

In performing the required revision, Benjamin would likely have taken courage from a passage in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* that follows shortly after the one just cited:

> Bourgeois revolutions...storm swiftly from success to success...but they are short-lived...and a long crapulent depression lays hold of society before it learns soberly to assimilate the results of its storm and stress period. On the other hand, proletarian revolutions...criticize themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually...deride with unmerciful thoroughness the inadequacies, weaknesses and paltriness of their first attempts.[38]

The gesture Marx makes by insisting on this self-critical posture makes legitimate a radical re-interpretation of Marxism itself.[39] Benjamin can read even the Russian *communist* revolution as failing to differ substantially from the *bourgeois* revolutions that Marx decries; it is another revolution with short-lived effects, and has given rise to a long crapulent depression. For if the Soviets make a pact with

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spectrum, so the historical materialist determines the presence of a messianic force in history." Walter Benjamin, "Paralimpomena," (see n. 29), 402. *GS*, I: 1232.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, 19.

[39] Benjamin would have been encouraged in such an effort—and such an interpretation—by Georg Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), one of the first Marxist books of which Benjamin made a detailed study according to Richard Wolin, *An Aesthetic of Redemption* (see n.5), 86. Lukcs writes, "Orthodox Marxism...does not imply the uncritical acceptance of the results of Marx's investigations...On the contrary, orthodoxy refers exclusively to *method*" (1).

the Fascists, they, too have been caught up in the victors' history.[40] Benjamin can thus write as the herald of the "real" proletarian revolution. The Social Democrats can no longer lay claim to this title, for by now they are so completely integrated into the uncontrollable apparatus of progress that they no longer offer any resistance against Fascism (§X). Hence the necessity of the "Theses."

The revision of Marx's doctrine of revolution that has been outlined in this chapter could be called the "profane" aspect of Benjamin's task in the "Theses." This task is profane in that it is directed at the realization of a certain kind of effect in history (overcoming the problems of organization), it seeks to do so in terms that are fully intelligible by the movement's own lights (these problems are well-acknowledged), and, in doing so, it takes the legitimacy of the goals around which proletarian praxis is organized, to a certain extent, as given (Benjamin is indeed attempting to catalyze a certain kind of revolution). The critique of proletarian praxis that Benjamin offers, however, arises from a theological critique that opposes equally certain degenerate aspects of Marxist practice and the more manifestly problematic politics of the victors. This critique is necessary because the proletarian movement stands under the threat of becoming an inauthentic tradition whose liberating potential decays through entrenchment and ossification. Engagement in this profane task requires that Benjamin offer an account of the way in which this decay takes place. The explication of how it might be resisted requires that Benjamin describe a mode of politics that, while

[40] See n. 30, above.

being subject to the same threats as any other politics, resists them by relying on a transcendent force which cannot be monopolized or manipulated by the forces that threaten to turn proletarian praxis anti-revolutionary. In the next two chapters I will explore this divine aspect of Benjamin's task, which stands alongside its profane aspect.

Chapter Two:
Benjamin's Theological Critique of Progress:
On Divine and Profane Politics

1 Introduction

The answer the first chapter provided to the question 'what is the nature of the partnership between historical materialism and theology?' remains, as it stands, one-sided—and necessarily so, since it considered the relation primarily from the perspective of historical materialism. As a result, the following question stands in need of explication: why must the historical materialist puppet (marionette) be guided by the theological hunchback—and not vice versa—if the chess-playing automaton (§I) is to win all the time?

The first chapter discussed the way historicism's 'additive' (§XVII) method arranges the events of history in a causal sequence "like the beads of a rosary" (§A) and identified the historical materialist's task as that of "blasting [the

past event] out of the continuum of history" (§XIV). The task of this chapter is to explore the critique of progress that is the necessary complement to the historical materialist's activity. The theological character of this critique and of Benjamin's more general resistance to historical teleology—whether the latter is underwritten by Marx's economic theory, by the utopianism of the Social Democrats, or by the technocratic politics of Fascism—will become evident through an exploration of the contrast Benjamin develops between the profane and the political on the one hand, and the messianic and the divine on the other. To this end I will examine some of Benjamin's earlier writings that situate different kinds of political action relative to the profane or divine ends towards which they are directed. Specifically, I will examine the "Theological-Political Fragment,"[1] a pair of fragments entitled "World and Time,"[2] and "Even the Sacramental Migrates into Myth,[3] and Benjamin's essay "Critique of Violence."[4] This discussion will elucidate the nature of the partnership between theology and historical materialism by revealing the profane and messianic aspects of the revolutionary activity of the proletariat.

2 The Failure of Revolutionary Politics

[1] Walter Benjamin, "Theological-Political Fragment," in *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 312-313.
[2] Walter Benjamin, "World and Time," *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1996), Vol. I, 226-227.
[3] Walter Benjamin, "Even the Sacramental Migrates into Myth," *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1996), Vol. I, 402-403.
[4] Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Reflections*, (see n.1).

Benjamin's critique of progress is most clearly on display in the *Theses* when he is discussing the particular nature of the "snares" in which the "political worldlings" for whom he writes have been entangled (§X). With the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression Pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, "the politicians in whom the opponents of Fascism had placed their hopes are prostrate and confirm their defeat by betraying their own cause" (§X). His remarks register a critique of the politicians from both regimes: "[their] stubborn faith in progress, their confidence in their 'mass basis,' and, finally, their servile integration in an uncontrollable apparatus have been three aspects of the same thing" (§X).

There is a manifest tension between these 'aspects' and the articulation of the proletarian task that Benjamin offers (and which I outline in chapter I, sections 5.3-6.1). The latter two aspects in particular (the politicians' "confidence in their mass basis [and their] servile integration"), may be said to elide the necessary gestures of withdrawal from and critique of the dominant mode of politics that characterizes proletarian praxis. For 'mass basis' is a criterion used to make legitimate the actions of a party that stands at some remove from its members, a party that represents its members and acts for them rather than one which acts together with them. Correlatively, the politicians' "servile integration" follows directly from the lack of an alternative political form; if the proletarian movement has become something on the order of an interest group which seeks concessions from an already operative political apparatus, the revolutionary character of that

movement has been lost because the claim to universality that would buttress that movement's call for a radical reordering has been renounced.

Having identified these three tactical missteps, Benjamin then moves on and focuses his attention on the economic views of the Social Democratic politicians who have betrayed the movement in Germany. Marx himself had recognized that the adoption of certain doctrines by those integrated into the "uncontrollable apparatus" (§X) will tend towards the uninterrupted functioning of that apparatus. It was Marx's virtue, according to Benjamin, to attend to the high cost of that uninterrupted functioning, for his *Critique of the Gotha Program* already denounces a conception of labor significantly similar to the one that enabled the Social Democrats to resurrect among the workers a secularized Protestant ethics of work (§XI). According to the conception of labor offered by (Social Democrat) Josef Dietzgen work is to be "the savior of modern times;" Dietzgen flatters the workers and thereby directs their attention away from the crucial historical materialist question, namely "how [labor's] products might benefit the workers while still not being at their disposal" (§XI).

The salvific function of work lies not in the liberation of the workers themselves, but in the mastery and exploitation of nature. In this way, the German working class (which, it bears noting, is the name Marx uses for that class which has not yet become the proletariat[5]) acquired "the notion that it was

[5] Giorgio Agamben appropriately notes that Marx only *strategically* identified the proletariat with the working class. For to identify the two in an identitarian way—such that the working class could claim certain prerogatives and rights for itself *as proletariat*—would cause the proletariat to lose its revolutionary vocation in a way analogous to the way Benjamin suggests has occurred

moving with the current," and came to regard "technological developments as the fall of the stream with which it thought it was moving. From there it was but a step to the illusion that factory work...constituted a political achievement" (§XI). If work itself is "the source of all wealth and culture," and the subject possesses nothing other than his labor power, the subject will indeed, as Marx predicted, become servile—little more than a cog in technology's wheel. Holding such illusions undoubtedly enables technological progress, but it also contributes to "the retrogression of society" (§XI) by suggesting that something other than human liberation ought to be the political achievement towards which society strives. Fascism unites nationalistic pride with pride in the efficiency of technological apparatus and success in the mastery of nature and it therefore has an interest in promoting the vulgar-Marxist conception of labor that the Social Democrats have adopted, precisely because of the way it enables their integration into state machinery.

For Benjamin, the illusory nature of the goal that the Social Democrats recommend for the proletariat can be seen most easily in that it assigns to the proletariat a new role in the class struggle, along with a new set of virtues that are appropriate to discharging that role. As mentioned in the first chapter (section 6), the spirit of sacrifice that corresponds to a desire for redress on behalf of one's enslaved ancestors is exchanged for an ultimately vacuous and ineffectual hope

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here, that is, by becoming integrated into the ascendant party. In both cases, the working class becomes a stakeholder in the victors' dominance, whether, as for Agamben, by way of their becoming an interest group with certain rights or, as for Benjamin, by way of their becoming the flag-bearer for Fascist technocracy (as we shall see presently). See Agamben's *The Time that Remains*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 31.

for liberated grandchildren (§XII). This latter hope is vacuous and ineffectual because it relies on Social Democratic theory, which is formed by an understanding of progress that, Benjamin remarks,

> [does] not adhere to reality but made dogmatic claims. Progress as pictured in the minds of Social Democrats was, first of all, the progress of mankind itself (and not just advances in men's ability and knowledge). Secondly, it was something boundless, in keeping with the infinite perfectibility of mankind. Thirdly, progress was regarded as irresistible, something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course. (§XIII)

Though Benjamin does not pause to engage in the critique of each of these "controversial predicates" to which he says they are open (§XII), it will serve our purposes to do so.

3 Progress

Progress presupposes a subject that progresses, and that that subject possesses a condition that admits of change. Moreover, that condition must have a character that would, if the subject should engage successfully engage its proper aspect, admit of retrospective appraisal as improved with respect to some goal. But this presupposes a) that the subject is *able to determine* what the proper aspect of the condition is by way of some method, and b) that the subject is *able to have an effect* on that determinative aspect of his condition. If the former requirement (a) is lacking, the subject's progress will be spuriously related to the subject's own action and thus far from steady, much less "boundless" (§XIII), and though this would not preclude the subject from retrospectively appraising his situation as improved, it would certainly call into question the legitimacy of any hope in any future progress. If the latter requirement (b) is not met, the subject's position becomes somewhat tragic, perhaps particularly so if the former

requirement *is* met. In such a case (a without b), the subject will be best served by managing those aspects that are under his control and that bear on the elusive determinative aspect, though this does not ultimately mitigate the tragic character of the subject's condition.

If the progress under consideration were to be that of an individual with a clearly defined goal and a clear knowledge of the condition in which he found himself, then giving an account of the desired progress would be relatively easy. But this is not the case. If the progress under examination were to pertain to this or that society, or even of this or that aspect of this particular society, certain identifiable criteria could be selected and deployed in order to determine the extent to which progress was in evidence. But for the Social Democrats, the progress under consideration is "the progress of mankind itself (and not just advances in men's ability and knowledge)" (§XIII). In order to consider this sort of progress, "humankind itself" must have become a subject—that is, it must have bound itself together as a single society. But how could this have taken place?[6] The progress of humankind itself is not, in the instance under consideration, mediated by the revolutionary activity of the proletariat, so the subject's condition must be one in which the class antagonism that was so central for Marx and Benjamin has either been overcome or has been determined to be inconsequential.

[6] This seems to have been just what is at stake in the disagreement between Hegel and Marx with regard to the identity of the Universal Class as discussed in the first chapter (see section 3). While they disagree as to the motivational underpinnings that could give rise to a universal society, they agree that the agency of some universal class will be necessary, and that the revolution that the agency of this class effects has world-historical significance.

It bears noting that Benjamin resists the latter a determination perhaps even more strongly than Marx once did. While Marx calls Hegel's judgment that the Prussian bureaucracy has already attained the status of universal class into question, he nonetheless claims that class antagonism will admit of *aufhebung*—though, of course, through the revolutionary activity of the proletariat. Benjamin's proletariat, by contrast, engages in revolutionary activity not with the utopian hope of constituting a new humanity, but with the hope of resisting the ruling classes—that is, resisting those who would falsely set themselves in the Messianic judgment seat.

The Social Democrats unwittingly yield this seat to the Fascists by sharing with them the belief that progress is "something boundless, in keeping with the infinite perfectibility of mankind" (§XIII). It is at this point that the historicist character of the Social Democratic analysis of society becomes clear. If historicism is to give "the 'eternal' image of the past" (§XVI), it requires objects of analysis that are not historically constituted or whose historically constituted aspect is accidental rather than essential to the object. In order for mankind itself to be the object of analysis, then, its pan-epochal stability must be presupposed. This, in turn, involves glossing over the problematic aspects of humankind. Chief among these problematic aspects is humankind's division against itself, politically, socially, even individually. The historical materialist historiographer makes the particular shapes these internal divisions have taken into one of his chief objects of analysis. Because these divisions serve to highlight humankind's

historically constituted aspect, the historical materialist will be loathe to hold the presupposition that grounds historicism. The narrative that 'eternally' frames the past era as that of mankind's immaturity and the movement toward the present as that of ever-increasing perfection will therefore appear to the historical materialist as one which "[does] not adhere to reality [*wirklichkeit*] but [as one which makes] dogmatic claims" (§XIII). It will appear thus because the historical materialist's attention to material conditions necessarily historicizes the objects of its analysis, and this correlatively yields multiple "humankinds." One could say that where the historicist sees a single humankind that progresses boundlessly, the historical materialist sees a plurality of spatio-temporally indexed humankinds in different interrelated societies.

The historicist's claim that progress is "irresistible, something that automatically [pursues] a straight or spiral course" (§XIII) must register, for the historical materialist, as an ideological one. Each society has its particular goods which it pursues and with respect to which progress is possible. This much the historical materialist would find unproblematic (though Marxists may disagree among themselves regarding the extent to which these goods are determined by the means of production). The Social Democrats become complicit with those Benjamin calls the victors, however, in subscribing to the historicist vision of history which is predicated on the claim that the goods valued by those now in the ascendant have trans-historical significance, which, not incidentally, would underwrite the victors' claims to messianic agency; 'these are the goals all

humankind has always pursued, and we will be the ones to realize them.' In this way, the Social Democrats make even the working classes see themselves as reaping the rewards of history as its heirs, or as bringing history to fulfillment in a messianic fashion, rather than as the vengeful children of "enslaved ancestors" (§XII). The false consciousness that the historicist vision induces in the working class makes the ideological nature of Social Democratic theory manifest. For the historicists underwrite the claim that progress is irresistible by supplying a vision of history that assigns to the working class a role that makes them complicit in rather than resistant to the victors' dominance.

Benjamin suggests, however, that even historical materialism may not be able to provide adequate resistance against the victors or an adequate critique of the historicist vision of history. Having enumerated the three predicates just discussed, he elaborates: "When the chips are down, criticism must penetrate beyond these predicates and focus on something that they have in common" (§XIII). It is at this point that the necessity of the theological hunchback's guidance of historical materialism begins to become visible. While historical materialism may appropriately emphasize the importance of paying attention to material conditions and may be capable of unmasking certain claims as ideological, its effect may be blunted due to the effect of strategic alliances with parties such as the Social Democrats. Historical materialism's practitioners may come to share presuppositions with historicism that would make them vulnerable to the conformism characteristic of the victorious. This degenerate historical

materialism would be incapable of leveling critique commensurate with the proletariat's revolutionary task.

4 Homogeneous, Empty Time

In order to perform such a critique, Benjamin claims that the proletarian critic must recognize that "the concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous; empty time" (§XIII). Ironically, this concept of time seems to be shared by those who regard history as inconsequential for political action—the latter being an arena within which small-scale problem-solving takes place—and those who regard history as moving dialectically as the result of political action. Historicism is served equally well by either approach. For in both cases the subject effectively disappears when confronted either with the immensity of what has gone before and what will come after or with the power of the dialectic itself. In either case time runs its course unopposed—whether because humankind needs no redemption or because the redemption of humankind is assured by the dialectical movement itself. In both cases time registers in the occurrence of an event as nothing more than an indexation of the moment, i.e. as that event's necessary precondition.

If time registers thus, the indeterminacy and possibility that characterize the subject's experience of the moment *as agent* is lost. The danger that this possibility represents for the uniqueness and the specificity of an historical moment is played out in the historicist's representation of the past. Historicism is

charged with the task of explaining an event in a way that situates it relative to those goods (the *only* goods, according to the victors) that have (ever) been pursued throughout history. Because a sense for the value of those particular goods has developed over time, and because a society has organized itself around their recognition, historicist history will, insofar as it situates events relative to them, remain intelligible and have a kind of explanatory force.

This particular mode of historiography is dangerous, though, because it glosses over a number of crucial questions—questions as to whether the historical author of the event in fact recognized the goods in question, whether the relation of his action to the goods in question was clear to the actor, whether the actor was motivated by alternative goods, etc. These are precisely the questions that go into constituting the particular space of reasons within which an agent acts. Depending on the degree to which the situation is familiar to the agent, and that the action is habitual for him, there will greater or lesser degrees of indeterminacy in the moment of the actor's action. All actions nevertheless retain the antecedent *subjective* conditions that historicist historiography glosses over due to the fact that it assumes the universality of a particular set of goods. For even though an action may have become routine and habitual and the agent that is its author may have, at a previous moment, subscribed fully to the goods that conventionally structure that action, it remains in principle possible that the action may become problematic for the acting subject at a subsequent moment—perhaps even in the performance of that habitual action. In the moment of this newly problematized

action, the subject will again experience the moment as fraught with unrealized possibilities, and itself and its happiness as standing in a newly indeterminate relation.

Historical materialism has its own particular way of renewing this indeterminacy. Indeed, if the habitual action in view were the performance of factory work, i.e. churning out one product after another while owning none of the products, a historical materialist description of such work may give rise to class consciousness in the worker. The worker would become a proletarian by asking, 'how can this exploitative relationship, which alienates me from my mental life, my physical labor, and my fellow worker, bring me happiness?'[7] While he sees historical materialism as thereby exposing a particular form of injustice, Benjamin stops short of declaring historical materialism capable of initiating a just relationship between worker and owner. Members of the proletariat may seek happiness, and may exact vengeance upon those who were masters over their enslaved ancestors in pursuing it, but this does not give rise to a new relation unconditioned by partisan interests, class struggle, and violence. Indeed, it may seem a rather remarkable fact, given Benjamin's obvious championing of historical materialism, that neither "justice," nor "right," nor any of their cognates appears anywhere in the *Theses*.

5 The Limits of Profane Politics

[7] For a discussion of alienation, see chapter I, section.2.

Though one may explain this fact by saying simply that Benjamin does not frame his discussion in terms of justice because of his claim that "theology…is wizened and has to keep out of sight" (§I), the import of this explanation is limited. Numerous questions remain, such as: what is the character of historical materialism such that it cannot initiate a just relation between the classes? On the basis of what alternative conception of justice is this judgment made? And, anticipating the answers to these questions, we may ask, how does theology enable a mode of political activity that resists the violence of all human politics and the historicism to which it leads? I will address each of these questions by considering the account Benjamin develops of the limits of the political in the early writings cited above.

In the "Theological-Political Fragment," Benjamin develops a contrast between profane politics and the Messianic and attempts to show their relation. History is profane in itself, as it stands in need of consummation, completion and redemption. These tasks can only be performed by the Messiah, who thereby creates history's relation to the Messianic. A corollary of this is that "nothing historical can relate itself on its own account to anything Messianic" (TPF). Historically, two major attempts at realizing a relation to the Messianic have been made; the first of these is theocracy, which attempts to structure a worldly order based on the idea of the Divine Kingdom, and the second of these sets the Kingdom of God as the *telos* of the historical dynamic.

These two errors are mirror images of one another. I will address the latter error first. The latter attempt to create a relation between history and the messianic is predicated on the assumption that the Kingdom of God can be set as history's goal. This assumption holds that the historical dynamic is structured in such a way that the passing away of subsequent forms of order leads inevitably upwards towards the Kingdom. Upon the realization of the Kingdom history will come to an end and humankind will live in harmony. If the shape of the Kingdom cannot be discerned based on any particular historical order, however, how can it be shown or recognized that the Kingdom has come? Or, more pointedly, what is to prevent a good rhetorician from declaring that the Kingdom has already come? It bears noting that the "Theological-Political Fragment" was written shortly after World War I, which functioned for Benjamin and many others of his day as the death blow for such idealistic arguments. It follows from Benjamin's insistence that only the Messiah can create the relation between something historical and the Messianic that "from the standpoint of history [the Kingdom of God] is not the goal of history but the end" (TPF). Benjamin's use of "end" rather than "*telos*" in this distinction (end versus goal), suggests that the former has an apocalyptic resonance in this connection. For whereas a *telos* is realized as the result of an immanent process, an "end" interrupts the immanent process, having been declared by a transcendent authority.[8]

[8] On this point Edmund Jephcott's earlier (1978) translation of the "Theological-Political Fragment," which appears in *Reflections* (see n. 1), which translates the German "Ende" as "end," is to be preferred over the more recent one, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press,

The error of theocracy attempts to create a relation between history and the messianic by seeking to realize an order within history that corresponds to the Divine Kingdom. Insofar as this order is properly realized and does indeed correspond to the order that prevails in the Divine Kingdom, it can claim to have warrant for wielding the transcendent authority that, in the case of the just-cited dialectical-historical version of pseudo-messianic politics, irrupts within the immanent process, declaring history's end. The theocrat will argue that the necessary correspondence between the divine and theocratic orders can be sustained as long as right relations prevail between the different levels of authority. This, however, would require that those within the various levels be content with the station to which they have been assigned. Historical succession therefore jeopardizes the stability of any such order, for the criteria used to judge who is worthy of promotion to a higher level of authority will necessarily vary, as the means by which candidates acquire the merit warranting promotion will differ from case to case. A further objection, one that is logically prior to the one just offered would ask how such an order could be constructed in the first place. For the challenge of discerning who might bear legitimate authority within such an order may prove insuperable. Thus we might summarize both of these objections thus: as long as those who construct and exist within such an order do not possess the virtues necessary to perform their tasks innately but must acquire, retain,

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2002), Vol. III, 305-306. Though the latter edition does note the German word parenthetically, it translates "Ende" as "terminus," which strips the apocalyptic resonance from the text entirely. One need only notice the replacement of "profane" (in the earlier text) with "secular" (in the later text) as a translation for "das Profane" to see that the tendency to avoid the theological ring to Benjamin's formulations in the later translation is more widespread.

exercise them, and be recognized as possessing them in appropriately varying degrees, such an order will be unstable.

6 Profane Politics, Happiness, and Desire

It is appropriate then, that the biblical narrative of the Fall begins with the rebellion of Lucifer—for it is precisely his unwillingness to remain in that order of angels to which he was assigned that marks the end of the paradisiacal state. The end of the paradisiacal state introduces both finitude and temporal succession, which opens the fissure between the historical and the messianic that dooms both of these forms of pseudo-messianic politics. Benjamin explains why the two above-cited attempts to realize a relation with the messianic were destined for failure. "The order of the profane should be erected on the idea of happiness" (TPF). The category of the profane traverses all (pre-apocalyptic) political orders, as it is only to the extent that the goods around which a political order organizes itself lead to happiness that that political order has stability. The fact that different societies organize themselves around different goods bears witness both to the multiple possible forms of happiness and to the extent to which a subject's happiness admits of political management.

The historical materialist must be aware that members of different profane political orders enjoy different forms of happiness, for it is his task to take note of these different forms and of their function and historical adaptations. But this awareness will by no means guarantee that the historical materialist will grasp the crucial distinction, which lies not *within* the field of profane politics, but beyond

it, in theology. The manifold differences between profane forms of happiness are less important than the crucial disjunction, which lies between the happiness of those in the former, paradisiacal state and those who inhabit profane political orders. For all forms of profane happiness serve to underwrite the political powers that set about organizing society around the particular goods that bear on that happiness. It is only thus that happiness can serve as the order on which the profane can be erected. One might therefore read Michel Foucault's major works as an extended description of precisely this political transaction; state power is maintained through the enactment of social conditions (e.g. those surrounding the hospital, the prison, etc.) and through the promulgation of knowledges (the human sciences) that define and enable the pursuit of a certain form of human happiness. Foucault may thus be taken to have carried out the kind of pre-theological historical materialist analysis that Benjamin had in mind.

The state has an interest in organizing society around goods that political subjects will recognize. Furthermore, the state has an interest in constructing forms of happiness that are reliably able to motivate political subjects, lest the form of happiness that the political subject enjoys end up undermining rather than supporting state power. The goods around which the society of a profane political order will be organized will therefore have a particular character such that they a) will be recognizable by and b) will reliably motivate the subject of that order. Physical well-being is one such recognizable and motivating good, as are safety from threats to property, and access to forms of pleasure.

The kind of glory that accrues to one who exercises dominion in space and over time is another such recognizable and motivating, though ultimately profane, good. In "World and Time" (W&T), Benjamin names "the problem of Catholicism" as "that of the (false, secular [*falschen, irdischen*]) theocracy" (W&T). Benjamin argues that although Catholicism claims divine power as its basis, it in fact has "domination as its supreme principle" (W&T). Divine power cannot serve as the basis for a worldly politics because the latter makes the happiness of the earthly subjects who constitute it into its primary concern. Catholicism's version of theocracy drifts toward a hypocritical and ultimately secular form of political order by virtue of the fact that it insists on enacting (or claiming to enact) a form of divine rule, the nature of which is ultimately determined by the character of the happiness of the subjects who are served by this enactment. In truth, Benjamin argues, such political orders do not serve the best interests of the political subjects who constitute them. For in receiving what they will recognize as good and will reliably desire, they receive just that which Benjamin offers as his "definition of politics: the fulfillment of an unimproved humanity" (W&T).

Divine power would demand a mortification of profane desire. Divine power will therefore be at odds with worldly politics, for despite the fact that abiding by God's command would lead to humanity's improvement, worldly politics demands, above all else, stability and endurance. The precarious, occasionalistic nature of divine power's appearance in the world puts it at odds

with worldly politics: "where divine power enters into the secular [*irdische*] world, it breathes destruction" (W&T). Basing one's political platform on such a power would therefore be misguided at best, for the sovereign who would attempt to monopolize and impose such a power on a political subject would find that divine power breathes destruction on whomever it pleases. This is not to say that divine power is capricious. On the contrary, it has its own order. This is only to say, rather, that the success of any human attempt to enact theocratic rule within profane history hinges on its having access to a form of grace unmediated by God's will and election. Theologically considered, this attempt would fail because such grace would be unworthy of the name, for grace is extended precisely in order that God's will would be all in all. Anthropologically considered, this attempt would fail because the relationship between profane humanity and the Divine continues to be characterized by the rebellion that is crucial in the Fall narrative—and this extends equally to those members of humanity that are sovereigns.

In a fragment entitled "Even the Sacramental Migrates into Myth,"[9] Benjamin considers the relationship between profane desire and the grace that is extended through the sacrament of marriage, which ought, according to Benjamin, to discipline erotic desire such that it would lead up to the divine. Benjamin considers the following (quite certainly autobiographical) situation:[10]

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[9] See n. 3, above.

[10] This situation is significantly similar to the one described in Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, trans. Judith Ryan (New York: Suhrkamp, 1988). In the narrative, an aristocrat named Eduard is married to his first love Charlotte. When they are joined at their country estate by his friend, the

> Two couples become acquainted; the bonds uniting them are loosened. Two of them...are mutually attracted to each other. Very soon the other two also enter into the most intimate relationship...To the best of their ability the former spouses promote the new relationship of the couple now turning away from them.

In such a situation, the divine, sacramental power of marriage is "exposed within itself," as the new relation of the mutually attracted couple—which is precisely that of a married couple, i.e. that of love—relates parasitically to the sacrament of marriage. "The spirit of the Black Mass lives here again: the sacrament takes the place of love; love replaces the sacrament." The revealed sacrament of love, namely marriage, is inverted into its opposite by the power of the "mythical, natural forces" according to which the couple that turns away from their former spouses act.

Myth is that order that prevails in the natural, pre-theological world.[11] The couple that turns away acts according to the forces at work in this order in that by acting—indeed, by acting *naturally*—their actions appear as those which nature demanded of them. Their happiness does not derive from their innocence, but from their having satisfied nature's demand. In doing the latter, however, they are

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Captain, and Charlotte's niece, Ottilie, Eduard and Charlotte each find themselves attracted to the houseguest of the opposite gender. Much of the substance of this fragment appears in a preparatory note for Benjamin's essay "Goethe's 'Elective Affinities,'" *GS*, I:838. The full version of Benjamin's essay appears in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, trans. Stanley Corngold (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1996), Vol. I, 297-36 and *GS*, I: 123-202.

[11] It is important that 'pre' not be understood as designating a strictly temporalized (which would be what Benjamin would call an historicist understanding of this) relation between the order of myth and the theological order. Indeed, Benjamin uses the category of myth to describe a *present* possibility, one whose key features may be characteristic of political orders that come to be long after the *historical* "age of myth" has come and gone. Richard Wolin therefore misses the mark when he charges that "Benjamin runs the risk of de-historicizing the usage of [the] category [of myth]" in "Goethe's Elective Affinities." Wolin, *An Aesthetic of Redemption* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 56.

tempted to "the most grievous offense, *hubris*."[12] Their action therefore threatens to enmesh them in a network of guilt. To the extent that they succumb to this temptation and rail against their integration into the natural order of causes, they will be declared guilty by the gods, who will strike at that in the subject which can exist within the order of myth, namely the mere life that is in him. Within myth's economy, guilt serves to inculpate and death serves to expiate; this mechanism maintains the order of nature, with its rhythms of coming to be and passing away.

The mechanism that operates within this order does indeed have the capacity to structure human desiring in a way that leads to the development of virtues like temperance and prudence. This order also has its own kind of temporality in that guilt passes down from one generation to the next; guilt could be described as a substance that continues to accrue (thereby introducing a certain linearity to the order of myth) despite the total passing away of natural life. But this temporality is not structured by "an autonomous time, but [by one which] is parasitically dependent on the time of a higher, less natural life."[13] Likewise the moral order of myth—i.e. that order of human things that attempts to conform to the rhythms of nature—stops short of giving display to that which transcends the immanent, natural order, and for that reason it is incapable of structuring human desire in a way that accords with the transcendent in human desiring.

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[12] Walter Benjamin, "Fate and Character," *Illuminations*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 306. A fuller thematization of the mythic and of its network of guilt appears in Werner Hamacher, "Guilt History: Benjamin's Sketch 'Capitalism as Religion,'" *Diacritics*, trans. Kirk Wetters. 32 (Fall 2002): 81-106.

[13] Walter Benjamin, "Fate and Character," in *Illuminations* (See ibid.), 308.

The relations between the immanent and transcendent in human desiring may be thematized by putting them in the terms of the example just considered. The lover's desire for his beloved ought to consummate in the sacramental relation of marriage, for this would accord with both the transcendent in human desiring and the authentic mode of temporality, which is fateless (*schicksallos*). Here, however, the sacramental relationship stands in the way of the consummation of a new love relationship, which, ostensibly, would lead to the lover's happiness. If the prior sacramental relationship were to dissolve, however, the profanity of the subsequent relation would likewise manifest itself, as the advent of the sacrament in the subsequent relation would effectively put an end to the happy love relationship that is its occasion. It is in this sense that "in happiness all that is earthly seeks its downfall, and only in good fortune is it destined to find it" (TPF). The "good fortune" Benjamin mentions, then, is meant ironically. In truth, it would be better if all that is earthly were frustrated—that it would only find bad fortune. Why? Not in order that the couple would be prevented from enjoying a merely immanent happiness; it is callous indeed to wish misfortune upon another simply because their finding happiness would threaten to integrate them into the moral and temporal economy of myth. Rather, it would be better if all that is earthly were frustrated in order that their desiring would not find its downfall but its transfiguration.[14] It would be better because

[14] This argument stands in opposition to that advanced by Richard Wolin in *An Aesthetic of Redemption*, (see n.11), 52: "According to Benjamin, the sphere of natural life where mythical forces hold sway can be surmounted *only through death*. Death represents the overcoming of man's 'natural' earthbound life, and his elevation to a state of communion with divine life." This

this might expose the sense in which the lovers *already* participate in the order of myth—and in order that they might escape this order. For the lovers' desire here is not disciplined by a sacrament, but by a custom, which is part of the mythico-natural order to which all political orders give display. While political orders may shape the forms of happiness that are characteristic of their subjects, it by no means follows that this shaping will amount to or result in an improvement of the latter. It is in this sense that politics is "the fulfillment of an unimproved humanity" (W&T).

To return to the question posed above in section 5, then, historical materialism, as the discourse that (both) serves (and shapes) the happiness of the working class become proletariat, will remain profane in its essence insofar as it lacks theological guidance due to the fact that its stability depends on its relation to that happiness. It remains just as incapable of establishing a just relation between the classes as does any other profane politics by reason of the fact that if it were to attempt to do so it would be attempting to relate something historical to the Messianic.

7 Happiness and Redemption

The question that immediately follows from this, however, is: On the basis of what alternative conception of justice is the judgment made that all human

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interpretation only holds if "Fate and Character" is understood as being written in Benjamin's own voice rather than as an immanent critique of the concepts of fate and character. Numerous textual points within "Fate and Character" would suggest otherwise, chief among them being the "autonomous time" to which Benjamin makes reference. More decisive against Wolin's argument, however, is the dissonance to which his position leads when "Fate and Character" and "Critique of Violence" are read together, as the analysis of the latter text (below) will show.

politics are profane and thus incapable of realizing the just state? Discussing what is at stake in the qualifier—pretheological—which was used above in describing the mythico-natural order that is at odds with the messianic, and which was used above to describe the kind of analysis performed by Foucault will help in answering this question. Despite the fact that theology remains largely out of sight in the account of desire that Benjamin offers in the "Theses," certain glimpses of the theological dwarf are available, often precisely by way of the movements of the historical materialist puppet. After he takes note of the three "controversial" predicates that were discussed above, Benjamin remarks, in the "Theses," that "criticism must penetrate beyond these predicates and focus on something they have in common" (§XIII). Similarly in the "Theological-Political Fragment" Benjamin seeks to penetrate beyond the changing appearances of happiness within the profane to see what they have in common.

Benjamin takes up this task by stating, "The relation of the [profane order] to the Messianic is one of the essential teachings of the philosophy of history" (TPF). In interpreting this remark, I would suggest that Benjamin means little more here by "the philosophy of history" than the analysis of the coming to be and passing away of political orders, with their attendant forms of happiness. Benjamin sees the analyst as having access not only to the logic of the relationships between successive political orders but to the inner logic that animates their rise and fall.

That inner logic is on display when one considers the relationship between political subjects in the present generation and those that are yet to come. Benjamin quotes Lotze in thesis II: "'One of the most remarkable characteristics of human nature… is, alongside so much selfishness in specific instances, the freedom from envy which the present displays toward the future.'" Having noted the historically constituted character of "our" image of happiness, he continues: "The kind of happiness that could arouse envy in us exists only in the air we have breathed, among people we could have talked to, women who could have given themselves to us." Formally stated, the pleasure that leads to the happiness of a subject S_2 at moment T_2 will not arouse the envy of a subject S_1 at a past moment T_1 precisely because S_1 does not have access to the pleasure that will become available at T_2. Only if S_1 and S_2 have access to the same *unsharable* pleasure at some time T can the happiness the one subject enjoys arouse envy in the other. Thus we may summarize by saying, first, that envy-arousing happiness is inseparable from its historical constitution; it passes away with the moment of its historical possibility. And second, envy-arousing happiness must be unsharable; it must be finite in character. The fact that these two characteristics—temporality and finitude—condition envy-arousing happiness is not accidental. Indeed, it suggests that the mode of happiness that Benjamin is discussing in thesis II is that of the political subject in its profane aspect. Profane desire acquires its character because of the nature of its object; even if one's possession of an unsharable good

does not arouse the envy of a member of a past generation, it does not function in leading one's desire out beyond its immanence toward perfection.

Benjamin suggests that desire, precisely because it is not merely immanent, opens to the transcendent. Immediately after this discussion of envy-arousing happiness Benjamin remarks, "In other words, our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption." The remark is intended to clarify Lotze's observation, noted above. Benjamin's remark therefore suggests that the present's freedom from envy relative to the future shows that in each moment, and despite its profanity, humanity strives for a mode of happiness that would consist in its redemption. This (redemption-seeking) mode of happiness attends the seeking of all forms of happiness, even if this is seldom acknowledged.

Benjamin illustrates this by considering the sense in which the same relationship holds between present and future generations, on the one hand, and present and past generations, on the other; "just as our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption," so "the past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption" (§II). The same modalities of desire are active throughout history: "Doesn't a breath of the air that pervaded earlier days caress us as well? In the voices we hear, isn't there an echo of now silent ones? Don't the women we court have sisters they no longer

recognize?" (§II).[15] It is on this basis that the "secret agreement between past generations and the present one" can be recognized. Recognizing this "secret agreement" allows one to see that human desire issues in activity that is still able to register on the "temporal index by which [the past] is referred to redemption"(§II), despite the transitoriness that attends its profane aspect and despite its passing away.

The account the "Theological-Political Fragment" offers of the relation between the messianic and profane orders will further clarify the relationship between these two aspects of human desire. Benjamin attempts to represent the relationship between the profane and the messianic figuratively: "If one arrow points to the goal toward which the profane dynamic acts, and another marks the direction of Messianic intensity, then certainly the quest to free humanity for happiness runs counter to the Messianic direction" (TPF). The happiness that profane politics attempts to liberate humanity for is a happiness that is fully intelligible by immanent standards. On its own, it therefore bears no relation to anything transcendent. Even if the most noble task of profane politics were accomplished—say, if the vengeful proletariat were to succeed in exacting vengeance on those who were masters of their enslaved ancestors in pursuit of happiness, this in no way undoes the past slavery of their ancestors. The enslaved ancestors therefore rightly do not envy the coming generations, for the redress

[15] These three sentences do not appear in the translation of the "Theses" that appears in *Reflections*. I therefore cite Harry Zohn's newer translation of the "Theses" as it appears in "On the Concept of History," *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, trans. Harry Zohn (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2003), Vol. IV, 390.

that the victorious proletariat wins is neither properly its own, nor that of those who have gone before; the melodies sung at a victory parade attended only by the living ring hollow. When the Messiah sits in the judgment seat, by contrast, all humanity attends his victory. Thus temporal succession jeopardizes any claim that profane happiness coincides with redemption.

8 The Relation of the Profane and the Messianic

Benjamin continues: "but just as a force can, through acting, increase another that is acting in the opposite direction, so the order of the profane assists, through being profane, the coming of the Messianic Kingdom" (TPF). How does this seemingly paradoxical relation work? Ironically, the success an order has in sustaining itself and extending its reach only serves to point more directly to its profane aspect. Borrowing the image from thesis VII will serve us well here. The victor carries the spoils of war among the people, and celebrates the new era that has dawned, in which he and his subjects may enjoy possession of the cultural treasures that have been captured. The victor's glory is inseparable from his having taken possession. But in order for the victor to be celebrated, the people must desire that which he bears, whether that be the victory itself or its spoils. Such a victor cannot bear a new economy of desire, for if he were to do so, he would be rejected and humiliated rather than celebrated. The messiah therefore stands in opposition to the victor in bearing a victory that interrupts possession and glory in mastery, one which does not satisfy desire, but which transfigures it.

This messianic and transfigurative possibility may be illustrated by considering a modality of desire that Benjamin does not develop in "Even the Sacramental Migrates into Myth," but which remains true to the terms laid out in the fragment. The problem of a *happy, sacramentally ordered, love relationship* depends on the realization not of a profane love, but of a happiness that has been re-formed and re-ordered by the sacrament such that it remains immediate to the sacrament. In such a case, the sacrament will continue to manifest itself destructively in the residual profanity of that love relationship by calling the subject's natural desire into question. The sacrament functions here in mediating what Benjamin calls "divine violence". Happiness will nonetheless arrive, but only, as it were, through the back door. The profane, by being profane, therefore assists the coming of the messianic kingdom by giving display to the messianic despite itself. "The profane…although not itself a category of the Kingdom, is a decisive category of its quietest approach" (TPF), precisely because in falling away from the Messianic and in seeking its own downfall through its realization, the profane displays its own inner nature in contradistinction to that of the Messianic.

In "World and Time" Benjamin offers a description of the relations between the profane and the Messianic that takes up the theme of the destructive reordering that takes place by way of divine manifestation again. Benjamin's guiding principle in his assessment of the problem with Catholicism as being that of (false, secular) theocracy is, "authentic divine power can manifest itself *other*

than destructively only in the world to come (the world of fulfillment)" (W&T).[16] This is so because "in its present state, the social is a manifestation of spectral and demonic powers, often...in their greatest tension to God, their efforts to transcend themselves." Such self-transcendence would involve the powers attempting to secure their own position in a way that would make them impregnable to divine violence.

Nature itself, however, would not allow the powers such security. "Nature is Messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away" (TPF). Those who engage in the task of world politics strive after such passing, only to have their object elude them. With respect to their attainment, Benjamin writes, their "method must be called nihilism" (TPF). With respect to the eternally transient orders that they nevertheless erect, Benjamin considers Catholicism—an order that displays the characteristics of all such orders—as "the process of the development of anarchy" (W&T). The order that characterizes profane politics will remain unstable because it depends on its relation to a happiness whose construction will be eroded by time, on the one hand, and divine violence on the other. Indeed, at this point an important corollary of Benjamin's "guiding principle" comes into view, namely, that authentic divine power *does* manifest itself destructively prior to the apocalypse. How this is so, and how this gives rise to the new economy of desire will be illuminated by way of a discussion of the contrast Benjamin develops between the profane and divine aspects of law.

[16] Italics in original.

Law, as that political institution which aims at providing a mechanism whereby the competing interests of citizens can be reconciled with one another, is chief among the efforts at self-transcendence undertaken by the "spectral and demonic powers" that characterize the social. But not all laws are created equal. Benjamin therefore argues, "we would be wrong to speak of a profane legislation decreed by religion as opposed to one required by it. The Mosaic laws, probably without exception, form no part of such legislation" (W&T). The distinction between 'decreed' and 'required' arises from the nature of religion in its historical appearance. Any law must be declared (decreed) to those who are subject to it. It thereby initiates a new relation between the subject of law and its author, and this transaction often registers for those subject to the new law as violent. The profane aspect of Mosaic Law—namely, its declaration—is *required*, given that it must appear historically. This aspect, however, forms no part of that which is *decreed* by religious law. "[The Mosaic laws] belong to the legislation governing the realm of the body in the broadest sense...and occupy a very special place: they determine the location and method of *direct* divine intervention." (W&T). The Mosaic laws cannot fail to address the activities of the body. But despite the fact that the body passes away, there is an aspect to its motions that is not determined by this finitude. "Just where this location [i.e. that of direct divine intervention] has its frontier, where it retreats, we find the zone of politics, of the profane, of a bodily realm that is without law in a religious sense" (W&T). Here we have an opposition between Mosaic, divine law, which governs the bodily

realm through religion, which mediates divine violence, and the profane, political law, which governs the bodily realm in its finitude, by mediating what might be called mythical violence, since myth is that order that prevails in the pre-theological world, that is, the world in its passing away. The nature of this opposition may be explored by raising the following question: if Benjamin's guiding principle is that authentic divine power can manifest itself *other than destructively* only in the world to come, and yet divine intervention can be mediated by Mosaic law—that is, prior to the world to come, how can Mosaic law be an expression of divine violence?

9 Profane Politics, Law and Violence

Benjamin poses this question when he asks "whether there are no other than violent means for regulating conflicting human interests" (CoV, 287), in his 1921 essay "Critique of Violence." To anticipate, he answers in the affirmative, but only after exploring the nature of that law which is erected on the order of (profane) happiness and must therefore rely on violence for its institution, maintenance, and efficacy. At the outset of the essay, Benjamin identifies the relationship between law and justice as that of means and ends. Violence is a means employed by law in pursuit of justice. This understanding is shared by both natural law and positive law. "Natural law attempts, by the justness of ends, to 'justify' the means" (CoV, 278). Natural law understands seeking natural ends to be necessarily just, and law to be directed at safeguarding access to such ends. Violence can therefore be used legitimately as long as one only thereby seeks

natural ends. In this way the justness of the ends justifies the means. By contrast, "positive law [attempts] to 'guarantee' the justness of ends through the justification of the means" (CoV, 278). Positive law makes a preemptive distinction between sanctioned and unsanctioned violence. This distinction derives from positive law's understanding that all violence has an historical origin.

Positive law contends that if it has an historical origin, it is, in principle, preventable. For this reason the legal system tries to erect "legal ends that can only be realized by legal power," in order to correct a situation in which "individual ends could be usefully pursued by violence" (CoV, 280). In order for this transaction to be successful, the ends that positive law enacts must bear a close resemblance to the ends sought by political subjects (whether the latter be natural or those which arise from membership in an alternative political community). For the fact that legal ends are *not* identical with the ends political subjects would otherwise seek may make them unacceptable to said political subjects. It will suffice to note here that positive law makes necessary reference to those recognizable and motivating goods that structure the (profane) happiness of the political subject. Positive law will claim, as the ground of its legitimacy, that by ensuring that the use of means is always already governed by the distinction between sanctioned and unsanctioned violence, it can guarantee the justness of ends.

This discussion of the conditions by which positive law might be successful in replacing natural (or alternative) ends with legal ones clearly reflects the fact that positive law regards extra-legal violence as a threat. Benjamin asks, however, whether law fears such violence for the sake of the ends law protects or for the sake of its own role in protecting those ends? Benjamin suggests the latter and moves to a consideration of the example of the revolutionary general strike in contradistinction to the political strike, since the reason why law fears extra-legal violence "must be especially evident where its application, even in the present legal system, is still permissible" (CoV, 281). The right to the political strike is legally guaranteed, and it is characterized by the strikers' willingness to return to work should certain conditions be met. This type of strike remains violent, however, in that it is a form of extortion. The revolutionary general strike, by contrast, "[sets] itself the sole task of destroying state power…for it takes place…in the determination to resume only a wholly transformed work, no longer enforced by the state" (CoV, 291-92). When the state "takes emergency measures" in such a case, "since the right to strike was not 'so intended'" (CoV, 282), the violence of the law itself becomes evident.

Law must take such measures because extra-legal violence, like legal violence, has a lawmaking function. Through the strike, the revolutionary proletariat threatens to enact an end—a "wholly transformed work"—that is heterogeneous to the legal order, and this threatens not only the current form of work—an end that law must protect—but also law's own relation to that end.

Even if law is successful in quelling the proletarian uprising, however, this victory will only affirm that "violence crowned by fate…is the origin of law" (CoV, 286). Benjamin means by this that only fate decides whether the violence of the currently prevailing legal order will prevail over that of the proletarian uprising. As Benjamin puts it, "from the point of view of violence, which alone can guarantee law, there is no equality, but at the most equally great violence" (CoV, 296). The nature of law's guarantee therefore ensures law's downfall, since "all law-preserving violence, in its duration, indirectly weakens the lawmaking violence represented by it, through the suppression of hostile counter-violence" (CoV, 300). Put differently, the force required to maintain law comes more and more to resemble the threat (lawlessness, say) in the name of which the prevailing system of law was itself enacted. This guarantees that one regime will replace another. We might read this as another illustration of the way the profane assists, by being profane, the coming of the messianic kingdom.

Benjamin therefore argues that legal violence is fundamentally identical with the manifestations of mythical violence (CoV, 296). The character of the latter is illustrated with reference to the legend of Niobe, who declared herself the happiest of mothers, and too strong even for fortune to subdue; her "arrogance…challenges fate—to a fight in which fate must triumph, and bring to light a law only in its triumph" (CoV, 294). The anteriority of violence to law is crucial here: "it may appear that the action of Apollo and Artemis is only a punishment. But their violence establishes a law far more than it punishes for the

infringement of one already existing" (CoV, 294). Mythical violence arises as a mere manifestation of the gods in response to a challenge which threatens their power. Thus, "at the very moment of law-making, [mythical violence] establishes as law not an end unalloyed by violence, but one necessarily and intimately bound to it, under the title of power" (CoV, 295). The power exercised by the gods in manifesting the new law (the law that retroactively declares Niobe guilty) is just that violence exercised by a conquering military force. Such violence arises not in the name of a law—that is, as law-preserving violence—but as an immediate manifestation of law itself.

Benjamin then asks, "How would it be...if all the violence imposed by fate, using justified means, were of itself in irreconcilable conflict with just ends, and if at the same time a different kind of violence came into view?" (CoV, 293). Awareness of this irreconcilability with just ends would arise from the fact that legal ends are the expression not of legitimate force but of pure power. If such a divine mode of end-making were possible, that is, one that would issue from the "different kind of violence" Benjamin has in mind, a new relation to the category of justice would be initiated. This justice would not be that which is secured by the mechanisms of profane law. That is to say, it is not a justice authenticated by juridical standards that find their ultimate ground in that which profane political subjects can be relied on and/or motivated to desire. Rather, it would be a mode of justice that would "call a halt to mythical violence" (CoV, 297) by opposing the violence which prevails within the immanent with a violence that issues from

the transcendent, and which thereby revokes the claims to ultimacy that mythical violence makes for itself.

10 Divine Law and its Subject

Benjamin offers this account of the way divine violence confronts and opposes its antithesis:

> If mythical violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood. (CoV, 297)

Divine violence is indeed violent, and it irrupts within the profane order destructively. But whereas mythical violence secures itself through sacrifice, divine violence merely accepts sacrifice in order to reorder the living through it (CoV, 297). This means that divine violence is capable of reordering the ethical subject in a way that registers as a critique of profane politics despite the fact that it is not politically universalizable.

This is paradigmatically true of the Mosaic Law, which meets the question 'May I kill?" with the irreducible commandment "Thou shalt not kill" (CoV, 298). This law, however, does not confront its subject in a way identical to that in which profane law confronts its subject. With Mosaic Law, "the commandment precedes the deed...but...the injunction becomes inapplicable, incommensurable once the deed is accomplished" (CoV, 298). Profane law, by contrast, is constructed to deal with cases fully commensurable with it. This law preserves itself through its exercise of violence and justifies this by making reference to what the deed does to the victim, or perhaps to some doctrine of 'sanctity of life'

(CoV, 298). Profane law reorders the legal subject's desire by threatening the life of the transgressor. The use of this mechanism, however, precludes profane law from raising the subject from mere life to moral life, for in striking at the life of the transgressor, it only redoubles the transgressor's attachment to that which is passing away in him.

Because existence is the precondition for the enjoyment of the other goods that lead to profane happiness, this mechanism often succeeds. When it does so, it leads, as mentioned above, to the development of virtues like temperance and prudence. At the same time, however, the use of this mechanism arouses a rebellious passion in the transgressor, who comes to desire that which is forbidden precisely because it is forbidden. For that which is forbidden acquires a quality it did not possess prior to its being forbidden, namely, that if it should be possessed, that possession would also represent the possessor's triumph over that power which forbade him possession. The violence borne by law is all that stands in the way of the realization of the transgressor's natural desire. The fact that the transgressor may escape such violence, or may bear violence in himself that may be victorious over that borne by law furnishes the transgressor with grounds for rebellion, precarious though they may be. This is precisely the inner truth captured by natural law theory (though the Leviathan would make the grounds for such rebellion precarious indeed). The subjects of such a law, however, will be characterized either by fearful servility or by willful arrogance that glories even in

being overcome by law's power; in either case, the subject obeys the rule of mere life.

Not so with divine law. Divine law does not provide a juridical criterion that would enable the kind of decision rendered by a human judge which, it bears noting, is ultimately granted its legitimacy by way of its reference to the profane desire of political subjects. Rather, divine law always remains heterogeneous to the transgression. The injunction becomes inapplicable, incommensurable once the deed is accomplished. With divine law, "neither divine judgment, nor the grounds for this judgment, can be known in advance" (CoV, 298). With divine law, "neither divine judgment, nor the grounds for this judgment can be known in advance" (CoV, 298). Furthermore, "no judgment of the deed can be derived from the commandment" (CoV, 298). Divine law must therefore reorder the subject in a different way. Divine law's judgment on the transgressor—i.e. God's wrath on the transgressor—manifests itself in the transgressing subject through that subject's own recognition that, by transgressing, he has descended from moral existence—an existence ordered by the command—to one of mere life. "The reason for the commandment [is to be sought] no longer in what the deed does to the victim, but in what it does to God and the doer" (CoV, 298-299). Just as justice is its own reward, so here transgression is its own punishment.

The commandment therefore unmasks the fallacy of profane law, which holds existence higher than a just existence and expresses this fallacy by striking at the life of the transgressor. Divine law remains autonomous, offering not a

juridical criterion, but a "guideline for the actions of persons or communities who have to wrestle with it in solitude and, in exceptional cases, to take on themselves the responsibility of ignoring it" (CoV, 298). This accords with Benjamin's argument that "the divine manifests itself...only in the community, nowhere in 'social organizations.' Such manifestations are to be sought, not in the sphere of the social but in perception oriented toward revelation and, first and last, in language, sacred language above all" (W&T). Revelation sweeps away the rule of myth, and the Mosaic law is to be understood precisely as revelation, for only thus can it exercise this function. By cultivating an awareness of the order that prevails between the divine and the subjects of divine law as that order is given in revelation, the subject attains freedom from the order constructed by myth. The subject thereby attains the freedom that can only be attained *through obedience* to the command, which manifests itself in the divinely-ruled subject by destroying the base motivations that otherwise hold sway within the human subject in its profanity.

This initiates a new relation to the category of justice in the subject of divine law, for "justice is the principle of all divine end making" (CoV, 295). Divine law determines its subject only to those ends that are in accord with this principle, and unallied with "power" which is "the principle of all mythical lawmaking" (CoV, 295). The subject may thus participate in God's opposition to myth and its violence by participating in the messianic economy of desire that is initiated by divine law. Participation in this economy is at all points dependent on

the evental irruption of divine violence within the historical, for it is only thus that the relation of the historical to the messianic can be created.

11 Divine Violence and the Perception of Origin

Benjamin suggests that in the reordering of the ethical subject "a new historical epoch is founded" (CoV, 300), for this constitutes a break in the rule of myth within the historical. Thus one might see the coming age arriving even in the gesture made by the revolutionary activity of the proletariat, for "the divine manifests itself in [the powers of the social] only in revolutionary force" (W&T). Indeed, Benjamin writes, "If the rule of myth is broken occasionally in the present age, the coming age is not so unimaginably remote that an attack on law is altogether futile" (CoV, 300). an attack on law may participate in the coming of the new age, for in catalyzing the overcoming of the currently prevailing order, revolutionary force may participate with divine violence in laying bare the mythical foundations of that order. It would be an egregious miscalculation, however, to see revolutionary force as arising directly from a divine agency, for this would fail to reckon with the character of human action within the historical, which, while being constructed within the immanent, aims at the transcendent—often despite itself. We therefore must say that, like all forces that arise from human agency, revolutionary force has a dual aspect.

The profane aspect of revolutionary force is on display in its intention to instantiate a new set of conditions which are more conducive to the pursuit of a profane happiness. In order to see its divine aspect, however, we will be well

served by examining the image of the angel of history that Benjamin offers in thesis IX:

> A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

The destructive power of revolutionary force has the power to sweep away the debris that history continually piles at the feet of the angel of history. This debris is precisely all that is profane in nature seeking its downfall and in 'good fortune' finding it, to put it in the language of the "Theological-Political Fragment." To put it more directly, the lesson the philosophy of history teaches is this: insofar as the desire that animates the revolutionary force to overcome the currently prevailing order is a profane desire, it will only lead the revolutionary force to instantiate its own mythical order. This, in turn, guarantees that the revolutionary force's own, new order will itself be overcome by a subsequent order, despite the 'good fortune' that the revolutionary force seems to experience in being successful in overcoming the prior order and instantiating a rule which accords with its own profane desire. The debris at the feet of the angel of history, then, is the accumulated ruins of these successive mythical orders. That these ruins will accumulate is guaranteed by the nature of these orders (their profanity). This pretheological revolutionary force fails to grasp the messianic aspect of its own operation, however, for it does not adequately reckon with the sense in which

human desire aims not only at happiness, but at redemption. In its divine aspect, revolutionary force aims not at a happiness that is for itself, but at a happiness that, in being *for all*, is the first genuine happiness. Revolutionary force participates with divine violence in sweeping away the debris of history by renouncing the forces of myth as they operate both in the previously prevailing order, and in the ordering of its own collective action, for it is only through the refusal of a profane happiness that redemption's ordering may come to bear.

This 'sweeping away' takes place in order that a perception of the origin may be restored. It is for this reason that Benjamin cites Karl Kraus's aphorism "Origin is the goal" (§XIV). The restoration of this perception demands a dramatic revision of the way political action is understood, it demands an understanding that is commensurate with the understanding of the relation of political action to the historical dynamic that follows from this perception. Historical progress with respect to those goals defined by a profane politics now appears deceptive, and particularly so if it is claimed that the realization of those goals has redemptive significance. Indeed, if legal ends—that is, those protected by law—are bound up with mythic violence, it is not their realization but their destruction, or, failing that, at least their resistance, that would register as progressive.

Hence the significance of revolutionary political activity. Such activity may not gain control of the "uncontrollable apparatus" (§X) into which the Social Democrats have become integrated, and this may be preferable, for if it were to be

successful, the revolutionaries would undoubtedly be tempted by the deceptive urge to attempt to realize a relation between something historical and the messianic. Such revolutionary activity may succeed in arresting the progress of this apparatus, and in doing so, both question its legitimacy and give display to the true relation of politics to the messianic, which is given in the messianic aspect of its own activity. In such a case, however, the extent to which that subject does not (even unwittingly) thereby participate in a new form of mythical violence may be undecidable, due to the fact that "the expiatory power of violence is not visible to men" (CoV, 300). Justice remains a thoroughly eschatological category, since "only mythical violence, not divine, will be recognizable as such with certainty" (300).

What would be yet more progressive, therefore, would be the perception of the "origin" of the problem of human political action within the historical—that problem being displayed most clearly in the fact that that human action has this dual aspect character. Benjamin depicts the origin of this problem—though somewhat cryptically, again, since theology "must remain out of sight"—in thesis IX. The storm of progress is that which continually piles up wreckage upon wreckage at the feet of the angel of history. It is also the force that prevents the angel from playing a directly redemptive role within history, for if the storm were not caught in the angel's wings, the angel would "awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed" (§IX). If we are to interpret this, the most theological of the theses, properly, it is important that we reckon with the

significance of the fact that in Benjamin's image, the storm of progress has its origin in Paradise.

It is in Paradise that the narrative of the Fall of humankind takes place, and in that narrative that humankind brings precisely the economy of desire that Benjamin calls profane into being. The first sin gives rise to the quality of sinfulness in humanity, for although humanity acquires the knowledge of good and evil by eating the fruit, at that moment it also comes to possess the concupiscence which makes it impossible for the individual to be determined only toward the good. This disorderly desire necessitates the construction of the order of myth, which attempts to suppress the particularly dangerous manifestations of this desire. But the law that this order constructs inevitably misses its object. It also serves latently to obscure the natural. Indeed, the leaves out of which Adam and Eve construct their garments perform precisely this function as part of the order of myth. Within the order of myth their own origin (as part of the plant in its originary created state) is obscured, and this is so precisely because the leaves now serve in obscuring the naked bodies of Adam and Eve. The leaves are no longer called by their original names, but are, in being used for a new purpose, new objects (clothing). Only theology can take criticism back beyond the confusion of tongues that, while revealed at Babel, originates in Paradise.

In Benjamin's literary criticism this gesture, by which the critic looks back beyond the confusion of tongues, takes place through what is called "redemptive criticism." In this thesis, Benjamin performs this sort of criticism by describing

the origin of the problem of political action. But there remains the question as to how this criticism could come to inform the political problematic in which the proletariat engages. Can the desire of the proletarian receive an ordering that would raise the proletarian beyond mere life, and can the proletariat enact a politics that escapes from the order of myth, with its law, and its sacrificial economy?

What therefore remains to be explored is the hermeneutic by which the messianic trajectory—which points in the direction opposite that of the profane dynamic—can be traced—and this precisely within the aegis of proletarian praxis. How can proletarian praxis become messianic? In order to engage this question an investigation of the mode of perception proper to the revolutionary party, and of the nature of messianic enactment will be in order. For it is by way of such an investigation that we can understand what Benjamin means by our generation's "*weak* messianic power" (§II), and the nature of the claim that the past can make on that power. I will turn to these tasks in the next chapter.

Chapter 3:
On the Redemptive Criticism of Politics:
The Messianic Enactment of the Proletariat

1 Introduction

The question of historical redemption is consistently linked with that of messianic politics throughout Walter Benjamin's writings, and particularly in the "Theses on the Philosophy of History." The "Theses" suggest that history is perpetually being brought to fulfillment, but that the powers of fascism threaten to make it impossible to maintain a consciousness of this—though this is the condition of a genuinely historical consciousness. Historicism functions as the minion of fascism, for its hermeneutic attempts to present the historical event strictly in its immanence, and thereby to preclude reference to the temporal index by which the past is referred to redemption (§II). The claims historicism makes

for itself—that its hermeneutic is objective and exhaustive—must be renounced by the historical materialist, for they are predicated on an account of the subject's relation to truth that evades the claim that truth, which is divine, makes on the subject. In attempting to conform historical understanding to scientific representation—and thereby stripping the subject of the resources necessary for resisting the victors' dominance—historicism leads as much to an inauthentic mode of being as it does to a false representation of the past. If this is to be avoided, it is crucial, then, that the historical materialist historiographer attain to a conception of history that is bound up with a messianic mode of praxis.

In order to show how the brief and rather cryptic remarks Benjamin makes in the "Theses" with regard to the subject's relation to the past can lead to the development of a historical hermeneutic that is based on a more truthful way of being a subject, I will draw the "Theses" into conversation with "Convolute N" of the *Arcades Project*,[1] with what the editors of the fourth volume of the *Selected Writings* have called the "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History,'"[2] and with Benjamin's *Habilitation* thesis, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*.[3] A preliminary examination of the "Theses" materials will lead to a number of

[1] Walter Benjamin, "Convolute N," *Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1999), 456-488.
[2] Walter Benjamin, "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History,'" *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, trans. Howard Eiland and Edmund Jephcott, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press 2003), Vol. IV, 401-411. *GS*, I: 1223-1259.
[3] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso, 1998). *GS*, I: 203-430. There has been much debate as to how to translate the German *Trauerspiel*. For his title, Osborne chooses "tragic drama" though he notes in the Translator's Note (5) that the more literal "mourning play" would be preferable. Throughout the text of his translation, however, he consistently uses the German term, and I will do likewise in my text.

questions that will be helpfully clarified through a discussion of the account of historico-philosophical representation that Benjamin develops in the *Trauerspielbuch*. I will then return to a discussion of Benjamin's conception of messianic time in the "Theses" and of Benjamin's political messianism.

This examination will demonstrate the importance of theology's contribution to the historical materialist historiography that Benjamin develops in the "Theses." For the latter cannot be properly understood unless it finds its place in proletarian praxis, which, according to Benjamin, needs to be characterized by a mode of messianic enactment that remains receptive to the transcendent and pre-given force of truth, which disdains confinement to any historical continuum. What is at stake, then, in the proper relation to the past, is the subject's proper orientation to the current moment and to the mode of enactment in which the subject is participating. For at each moment the subject faces the danger of participating in the order of myth the power animating which threatens to turn messianic enactment into its opposite. In order to resist this tendency, the past can serve to orient the subject by coming into a constellation with the present moment such that the messianic figure of the enactment of the past historical actor becomes legible. It is in this way that the past may come to fulfillment in the present moment.

2 Historiography and the Appropriation of the Past

Although our first chapter outlined many of the key features of the historical hermeneutic that Benjamin develops in the "Theses," let us to recall

them here as an entrée to the discussion of the more enigmatic features of this hermeneutic. This hermeneutic is helpfully contrasted with that expressed in historicism. Historicism seeks out causal connections between historical events, and, in arranging these events sequentially, claims to have represented the length and breadth of history. This mode of historiography enables the historian to render the past event, at least by all appearances, fully formed for the consumption of the contemporary political subject. This is possible because, as the historian influenced by Marx will point out, the criteria held by the contemporary political subject are historically constituted, and significantly related to the subject's membership in a particular political community. Historicism, however, takes advantage of this fact, and in making the past ready for consumption by the contemporary subject, makes the past innocuous.

How so? Fustel de Coulanges' suggests that in order to secure objectivity for one's account of history one need only "blot out everything they know about the later course of history" (§VII). This, however, does nothing to disturb the subject's possession of those criteria supplied by the subject's membership in a political community. Indeed, "blotting out" this knowledge will still lead the subject to desire the victors' victory because the contemporary political subject comes to possess the criteria operative in his reading of the past by way of his identification with the goods around which his political community is organized. Two conclusions follow from this: politically, it must be noted that the empathy which is central to historicist historiographical method is empathy with the victor,

that "invariably benefits the rulers" (§VII). A second conclusion, with regard to truth, can be put thus: because a) the historicist plays the historiographical game within an arena governed by rules set by the rulers, and b) no ruler rules in perpetuity, the histories written by subsequent generations will be significantly different. This means that the claims to truth made within historicism will ring rather hollow when they resound in contexts no longer governed by the rules under which the history was written. Ironically, then, the historicist's claim, that "the truth will not run away from us" (§V), is contradicted at every moment; the truth escapes from historicism all the time. For the way in which historicist historiography captures the historical as the historically understood does not lead to a confrontation with the demand the historical makes of the subject. Rather, historicism blunts the force of this demand through the exercise of an intentionality that seeks a truth in the past that is commensurate with the stability of the prevailing political order.

Benjamin does not suggest that the anti-historicist, historical materialist historiographer is somehow able to escape his own historically-constituted nature or that of his audience, nor does he suggest that his history is not, like historicist history, caught up in the historical dynamic. Indeed, Benjamin readily acknowledges that the events of the present function in providing the historian with first intention for the terms used in the history he writes (AP, N11,3). The difference consists, rather, in that whereas historicism seeks (causal) explanations for how things became the way they are, the historical materialist historian seeks

questions as to why things must be the way they are now, and as to how they might be different.[4] In rendering the past for the present, the historicist casts the past event in the role of cause (§A). But this approach shears off the radical differences between the material conditions that surrounded the past event and those that prevail in the present such that it can present "the 'eternal' image of the past"(§XVI); history can thus appear as a smooth continuum leading to the present. Benjamin's historical materialist historian, then, is charged with noticing the gaps and interruptions in history, with recovering that which historicism smoothes over, and with giving voice to those unrealized potentialities that lie dormant in the past.

Engagement in proletarian praxis cultivates the historical materialist's awareness of these interruptions because class struggle always remains a present reality (§IV). The dangers of the present moment therefore frame the historical materialist's approach to the past. Benjamin quotes an aphorism from Nietzsche's "On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life" in thesis XII, "We need history, but our need for it differs from that of the jaded idlers in the garden of knowledge." This need differs in that although "nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history" (§III), the image of the past that would prove vital for one's *own* engagement with the present may indeed be lost. Benjamin writes, "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes

[4] As we shall see below, even this may be too passive a formulation of the historical materialist historiographer's relation to the past.

up at a moment of danger" (§VI). To engage in proletarian praxis is to grasp onto the "true picture of the past" as it "flits by" (§V) [*huscht vorbei*]. Only in this way can the subject bring to actuality the revolutionary possibilities that lie dormant in the past.

In order to specify the kinds of revolutionary possibilities that are in view here, and to show the sense in which historical representation is bound up with the political task, it will serve us well to recall the discussion of Robespierre and the French Revolution in thesis XIV that was also explored in chapter I, section 5. In setting up *bourgeois* democracy, Robespierre and his fellow revolutionaries "evoked Rome the way fashion evokes costumes of the past" (§XIV). In the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx had written, the "gladiators" of *bourgeois* society

> found in the stern classic traditions of the Roman republic the ideals and the form, the self-deceptions, that they needed in order to conceal from themselves the narrow bourgeois substance of their own struggles, and to keep their passion up to the height of a great historic tragedy.[5]

The mode of appropriation that is on display here is highly specific. A dress-maker would be loath to simply reproduce a dress worn in a previous generation as if it were an original design, for doing so would draw the charge of antiquarianism rather than fashion due to its failure to reckon with the impossibility of recovering the former context. While the past provides an indispensable catalogue of models which are available for (the dress-maker's) use, the historical actor's own activity requires the making present of the past. The result of this 'making present' will be the appearance of a remnant of the old

[5] Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, ed. C. P. Dutt (New York: International Publishers, 1977), 16.

in the present context, and, at its best, this will function in reshaping the present precisely because the remnant bears within itself the traces of those conditions that prevailed in its origin. The coming into relation of the past and present may cause a given aspect of the present context to appear in a new light such that prevailing valuations and possibilities are reordered. To put this in terms amenable to Marx's account of the revolutionaries' evocation of Rome, although its traditions had been lost, and its order had disintegrated and given way, historically, to feudalism, Roman ideals held promise for Robespierre et al. The measure of self-deception they exhibited served to enable their overthrow of the oppressive conditions to which feudalism assigned the *bourgeoisie*. They found canonical leverage in Roman republicanism, for it had been a form of government that had once offered freedom to citizens and it supplied the revolutionaries with the grounds for their claim that such a freedom could be brought to actuality again.

Robespierre's mode of historical appropriation capitalizes on an affinity between present social relationships and those that prevailed in ancient Rome and holds up Roman ideals with the aim of realizing its own particular goals. It draws the past into a relation with the present in an exemplary manner in that does not monumentalize or attempt a point by point reenactment of the past. Benjamin writes, "For the image of the past that threatens to disappear from view will prove irretrievable for the present that does not recognize itself as intended in that

image" (§V).[6] Robespierre saw the French Revolution as intended in the image of ancient Rome. Rather than being pacified, he was spurred on by the image of Rome precisely because Rome presented modes of freedom and previously actual that were therefore potentially possible in his present. Robespierre's need for history differed from that of the "jaded idlers in the garden of knowledge" (§XII) in that he found himself "singled out by history" (§VI) and thus charged with the responsibility to act. Robespierre's encounter with the past enabled him to be cognizant of the modalities of action that attend revolutionary moments.

3 Past and Present vs. "What-has-been" and "Now"

Three attitudes that may be thought to structure the subject's encounter with the past must be ruled out at this point. The first may have already been ruled out. This would be the impression that the historian, in approaching the past is seeking the "timeless truth" about the past. Indeed, since Benjamin's approach is concerned with avoiding the approach to the past taken by the "jaded idlers," his rejection of this approach should be obvious by now. A second, closely related, attitude would be that which approaches the past with a conservative impulse or an attitude of veneration. This attitude is to be distinguished from the first one in that it freely admits the relativity of its historical representation to the historically constituted categories of understanding that are employed. This attitude proves problematic in that it leads either to quietist traditionalism when employed by the oppressed. Or, when employed by those in power, it leads, at

[6] My translation.

best, to triumphalist republicanism or, at worst, to fascism. Both of these modalities fall away from the political radicalism demanded by historical materialism, and adapt themselves to the rule of the victors.

A third attitude that Benjamin also rules out, however—and one which Benjamin's description of Robespierre looks, at first inspection, rather close to—is that which is held by Marxism. Benjamin counters thus: "Truth is not—as Marxism would have it—a merely contingent function of knowing, but is bound to a nucleus of time lying hidden within the knower and the known alike" (AP, N3,2). This meeting of knower and known does indeed contain a certain kind of violence—a point emphasized in Marx's construction of a resolutely *human* knowledge. Benjamin therefore depicts the proper relation to the past in strikingly violent terms (as we shall see presently). In Benjamin's account of the appropriation of the past, however, the violence that is exercised is not the sort of violence that attends other ways in which humans take possession. Rather, the violence that is exercised in the appropriation of the past is internally related to the divine violence, which is a violence that is bound up with historical fulfillment.

Benjamin contrasts the forms of violence done to history by historicism and historical materialism:

> Historicism gives the 'eternal' image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past. The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called 'Once upon a time' in historicism's bordello. He remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history. (§XVI)

In submitting the past event to the governing schema of "Once upon a time," historicism drains that event, and the subject who receives it, of the power which that event may hold. Historicism's 'continuum of history' therefore appears in the "Theses" as an object of wrath. Benjamin writes in order that his historical materialist might "remain in control of his powers." The historical materialist will do so by virtue of his willingness to "blast open the continuum of history." (§XIV). But how does this action of "blasting" relate to the "nucleus of time" that Benjamin sees as hidden?

A crucial feature of the uniqueness of the past that admits of being blasted out of history is precisely that it is not merely past. Rather, it is time "filled by the presence of the now" or "time filled full by now-time [*Jetztzeit*]" (§XIV). In the now-time, the temporal distance that historicists claim separates the present moment from the moment in the past is collapsed such that the past moment is brought to fulfillment in the present. In being brought to fulfillment, the past becomes genuinely historical. Benjamin writes, "History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now" (§XIV). Homogeneous, empty time is the mode of time in which the historical progress of humankind takes place. It constructs the historical moment not on the order of a calendar, which builds days of remembrance into itself, but on the order of a clock. Whereas clocks make the duration of time uniform, holidays interrupt the continual march of progress by bringing the past event into proximity with the present. The interruption is the

condition which enables the historical materialist to become cognizant of the presence of the now-time with which the past event is filled.

Benjamin therefore writes, "A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history" (§XVI).

The interruption that the holiday makes within the flow of time enables the historical materialist to perceive the hidden "nucleus of time" because this interruption puts the present moment into relation with the event around which the calendar is constructed. The historian ought to "[grasp] the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one" (§A). These "constellations" form an image in which the past does not appear archaically, and the present does not appear in isolation from the past. Rather, the past and present appear together in what Benjamin calls a "dialectical image." These images are dialectical in that they attains to the depiction of that which animates the movement in both moments.

Although Benjamin does not use the term "dialectical image" in the "Theses," the description he offers of it in the *Arcades Project* clearly shows the function it may play in his battle against historicism:

> Image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely a temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical...only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic) (AP, 2a,3).

In this passage, Benjamin appears, at first, to give ground to a historicist representation of the past, for, the temporality characteristic of the historicist "image" of the past is adequate for the representation of past and present. However, he immediately revokes this legitimacy by allowing the categories of the "what-has-been" and the "now" to supersede those of past and present. Thus historicism's images are necessarily archaic ones; they serve only in documenting the past. This announces a concern that also appears in the "Paralipomena," namely, a concern with the application of scientific method to historiography. The tendency toward this kind of representation is on display in historicism's attempt to become exhaustive either by formulating a causal account of the sweep of history (as has been noted) or through the attempt to "formulate 'laws' for the course of historical events."[7] Indeed, either method could be used to assimilate historiography to natural science.

Natural science performs a function directly analogous to that of myth; it depicts the human as fully circumscribed by an order of causality over which he has no control, and out of which it is impossible to break. Like myth, science presents the human in his immanence, according to the mere life that is in him; scientific and mythical narrations of human existence both culminate in the claim that freedom is impossible. It follows from this that the documentation of the purely temporal relationship between past and present is only historical in a degenerate sense; mythic time and homogeneous, empty time are both

[7] Walter Benjamin, "Paralipomena," (see n. 2), 401. *GS*, I: 1231.

"parasitically dependent on the time of a higher, less natural life,"[8] for in submitting the perpetually new moments of history to the schema of 'once upon a time,' historicism assures that the order of myth will triumph over them.

In the "Theses," Benjamin calls the time in which the 'less natural' historical materialist lives "Messianic time." The historical materialist attains to a mode of historiography that is adequate to the dialectical relationship between the what-has-been and the now by binding together the remembrance of the past with the past's appropriation. The most programmatic statement of historical materialist historigraphy's opposition to historicism occurs in thesis XVII:

> Historicism rightly culminates in universal history. Materialistic historiography differs from it as to method more clearly than from any other kind. Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its method is additive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time. Materialistic historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad.

Materialistic historiography unmasks historicism's falsely universal and falsely exhaustive history by subordinating historicism's homogeneous empty time to the 'now-time' (echoed again here when Benjamin makes reference to the "arrest" of thoughts "in a configuration pregnant with tensions"). Insofar as history appears in a document, it becomes a document of civilization—which is at the same time a document of barbarism (§VII). And such documents never fail to display the rule of myth.

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[8] Walter Benjamin, "Fate and Character," *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 308.

In opposing historicist historiography, then, historical materialism participates in the opposition of divine violence to myth. The second chapter of this thesis explored the divine opposition to myth and to mythic violence in terms of divine law and the alternative economy of desire that it initiates. The appearance of this revealed law—which bears a destroying and a saving power—is paradoxical in that is an irruption of the eternal in the temporal. Benjamin uses the category of the messianic to capture this paradox. In order to understand what is at stake in this category, and specifically, in order to understand the sense in which the "Theses" are aimed at developing a messianic politics, it will be helpful to turn to another work in which Benjamin attempted to thematize the relationship between the temporal and the eternal, namely the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" for Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama.*[9]

4 Truth, the Ideas, and the Name

The affinity between the "Theses" and the "Prologue" bears itself out in the subject matter of the "Prologue." The "Prologue" was intended to register as a contribution to the methodological controversies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As his thesis was concerned with baroque mourning play or *Trauerspiel*—a form of drama so thoroughly ruined by the passage of time that its resurrection had become impossible—Benjamin clearly had in view questions of

[9] If doing so requires a justification other than the value it has as an object of comparison (the value of which I hope will become clear in the discussion of the work), this could be sought in the publisher's notes for the "Theses." Two letters are cited in which Benjamin suggests that the "Theses" (which were then unfinished) could be for the *Arcades Project* what the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" was for the *Trauerspielbuch*, namely an account of the theoretical foundations of the work which followed. *GS*, I: 1224.

objectivity, and of the representation of the past. A consideration of the *Trauerspiel* study proves useful for my purposes in that it clarifies the mode of objectivity that Benjamin develops (or fails to develop adequately) in the "Theses." This is a mode of objectivity that is opposed to that of historicism in that it leads not to the documentation of the past, but to the redemption of the past. To anticipate, such redemption is possible because of the way this mode of criticism refers phenomena to the messianic, which is the "world of universal and integral actuality"[10]—namely to the world that is simultaneously at the origin of all phenomena, present even in the profane world (though in a hidden way), and the world of fulfillment.

Benjamin's "Prologue" intends to set the stage for his representation of the idea of the form of *Trauerspiel*. This requires, first of all, that the concept of the system be discarded, for a philosophy that is determined by this concept makes its universalistic claims vainly, neglecting the form all representations of truth must take, namely that of a propaedeutic. In contrast to the system, a philosophical propaedeutic will immerse itself "in the most minute details of subject-matter" (TS, 29 GS, I: 208). Why is this approach necessary? It is necessary not primarily because the system is, as a form, unsuited to its receivers. Indeed, Benjamin's rejection of systematizing philosophy is a protest against the fact that so many of his contemporaries thought representation required systematization. Rather, this approach is necessary because "truth, bodied forth [*vergegenwärtigt*]

[10] Walter Benjamin, "Paralipomena," 404. *GS*, I: 1235.

in the dance of represented ideas, resists being projected, by whatever means, into the realm of knowledge" (TS, 29: GS, I: 209). Benjamin contrasts the self-consistency of truth, which is possessed of an unassailable and integral unity, with the form of knowledge, which must derive its coherence from an essence other than itself. This raises the question as to how, that is, through the investigation of what essence, can knowledge strive after the unity that inheres in truth? Benjamin takes his cue from the *Symposium*'s declaration that the truth is beautiful (TS, 30: GS, I: 210). In directing the lover of wisdom to search after beauty, Eros betrays neither truth nor the searcher, for the truth is beautiful. The content of beauty, namely truth, is to be sought not in its unity with the external form that it takes (in the beautiful object), but "in the destruction of the work in which [beauty's] external form achieves its most brilliant degree of illumination" (TS, 31: GS, I: 211). Through such destruction, beauty enters the world of ideas that is the proper domain of human knowledge.

The philosopher's task is to describe the world of ideas. The artist shares in the representational aspect of this task through the use of metaphor, and the scientist shares in the philosopher's task insofar as the division of reality the scientist makes by way of concepts enables the philosopher to transcend the merely empirical. Thus, to consider the relation between phenomena and ideas in one direction, ideas are that by which the salvation of phenomena takes place, as ideas are the "objective interpretation" (TS, 34: GS, I: 214) of phenomena. Considered in the opposite direction, because engagement in art and science will

lead to the fuller development and articulation of ideas in their relation to phenomena, art and science can be said to lend actuality to ideas. In this description of the ideas' relation to phenomena, we find Benjamin's grounds for the rejection of systematizing philosophy. If philosophy aims at the discovery of truth, but truth is available to knowledge's grasp neither directly, through cognition, nor through the mediation of the scientific concept, the primary questions are not epistemological ones which would describe the human cognitive or conceptual apparatus. Rather, as has been shown by Beatrice Hanssen, the primary questions should concern just those ideas in which truth "bodies itself forth" [*sich vergegenwärtigt*] and about how the philosopher can be receptive to the "pre-given, transcendent force of truth."[11]

The first step in the development of this receptivity comes in the recognition that ideas are not merely objects of knowledge or human constructions. Ideas bear an internal relation to truth insofar as they relate to the name. Names, of course, have their obvious and profane meanings, and it is in this sense that they *are* objects of knowledge. At the same time, names have a "more or less hidden, symbolic aspect" (TS, 36: GS, I: 216). It is in this aspect that names bear an internal relation to truth, and "it is the task of the philosopher to restore, by representation, the primacy of the symbolic character of the word" (TS, 36: GS, I: 216-217). Restoring this primacy brings the name back into proximity with the conferring of names that took place in paradise. The lack of

[11] Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 39. I will subsequently refer to this work as Hanssen.

intention that characterized Adam's act of naming was constitutive of the adequacy of his approach to the realm of truth. In fact, it may be more accurate to say that his lack of intention derived from his innocence, and the lack of a distinction between subject and object that comes to characterize human knowledge after the Fall. The equivocity that characterizes profane names arises from "abortive denominative processes in which intention plays a greater part than language" (TS, 37: GS, I: 217). Adamitic language, by contrast, is a "speech that does not communicate anything other than itself and in which spiritual essence and linguistic essence thus coincide."[12] It is by reactualizing the state of Adamitic nonintentionality [*Intentionlosigkeit*] that the philosopher satisfies the demand for objectivity made by his task.

5 Approaching the Ideas

In performing this task, the philosopher must "treat every idea as an original [*ursprünglichen*] one" (TS, 43, GS, I: 223) despite the irreducible multiplicity of ideas. This methodological consideration is brought to bear on Benjamin's concern with *Trauerspiel* in terms of the problem of origin. In Benjamin's description, the problem of origin is not that of genesis—which would be the problem of how, in this case, an art form came to be—because "that which is original is never revealed in the…existence of the factual" (TS, 45: GS, I: 226). Benjamin writes, "origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it

[12] Giorgio Agamben, "Benjamin and the Demonic," *Potentialities*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 52.

swallows the material involved in the process of genesis" (TS, 45: GS, I: 226).[13] Thus origin is both genesis and flourishing; in origin a form is determined "in which an idea will constantly confront the historical world, until it is revealed fulfilled in the totality of its history" (TS, 45-46: GS, I: 226)). Ideas are to be approached by studying those forms in which ideas confronts the historical world.

Forms should not, however, be understood as static, for if they were, a roughly Kantian approach to ideas would be legitimate. Such an approach, however, yields an impoverished, ahistorical conception of experience because Kant drew the principles for philosophical knowledge from the ascendant science of his day, namely mathematical physics.[14] But the knowledge and reality on which Kant wanted to base certainty and truth were "of a low, perhaps the lowest, order."[15] This forced Kant to privilege the question of the certainty of knowledge that is lasting, and Kant's treatment of the question of "the integrity of an experience that is ephemeral"—namely temporal experience—necessarily suffered. Kant's concept of experience is therefore inadequate for the consideration of historically constituted forms like *Trauerspiel*, which come to be and pass away.

What is demanded by the forms that ideas take is a mode of philosophical history that seeks the fullness of an idea by tracing the idea's development

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[13] The German reads, "Der Ursprung steht im Fluß des Werdens als Strudel und reißt in seine Rhythmik das Entstehungsmaterial hinein."
[14] Walter Benjamin, "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy," *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, trans. Mark Ritter, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1996), I:101. *GS*, II: 158.
[15] Ibid., 100.

through its pre and post-history (*Vor- und Nachgeschichte*), such that it finds that idea's origin manifesting itself even in its most extreme historical formulations. Thus the inadequacy of Kant's concept of temporal experience made it inadequate for the approach to truth. The attempt to construct a unity out of the subsequent formations that an idea absorbs is therefore destined to fail, for such a unity would depend on the development of a concept. Likewise, seeking to abstract something common to all of the idea's historical formations will not achieve the desired result, for the process of abstraction would ensure the loss of the particular. Rather, it will seek the individuality's Platonic 'redemption' by allowing the individuality to stand under the aegis of the idea and thus to become a totality (TS, 46, GS, I: 227).

6 The Two Histories of Phenomena

These considerations arise from the following questions: how can the science of philosophy satisfy the concept of being given that being has a history (TS, 47: GS, I: 228)? How can an idea be given its total scope such that it can absorb the phenomenon's history? These questions are complicated by the fact that Benjamin is seeking to describe the being of historical phenomena (such as German *Trauerspiel*) that bear an internal relation not only to the ideas, but to human intentionality. Benjamin attempts to address these questions by showing how the intransient Platonic ideas can be dialectically joined, in the category of origin, with the dynamic contingence of being.[16] This takes place through what

[16] Hanssen, 45.

Beatrice Hanssen calls Benjamin's "natural history," a history which she constrasts with "pure and 'pragmatically[17] real' human history."[18] The latter is that form of history which relates the coming to be and development of an art form or a historical event to the author's or agent's intentions, or, failing that, to what desires and beliefs the relevant persons may be said to have had due to the internal features of the events or to the actors' having lived at such and such a time and place. Most histories are written with these categories squarely in view; they situate a historical phenomenon relative to historical events, practices, institutions, etc. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama,* Benjamin goes on to provide this history by describing the context within which Opitz, Gryphius, and Lohenstein (among others) were writing their *Trauerspiele.*

But alongside this history, there is a natural history that depicts the phenomenon's relation to redemption by the idea. In the pre- and post-history of the idea—for example, in the phenomena that attend *Trauerspiel*'s coming to be and passing away—an inner history of the idea is developed such that ideas (such as *Trauerspiel* and tragedy) can be contrasted with one another, and the authentic and inauthentic modalities of each idea can be recognized with reference to the idea's state of completion. When the phenomena have been redeemed in the idea, the pre- and post-history of the idea can be said to have always already been given

[17] Hanssen intends "pragmatically" here in its etymological sense—namely in terms of its relation to human deeds (*pragmata*).
[18] Hanssen, 46.

in the idea. The philosopher's task is therefore to "establish the becoming of phenomena in their being" (TS, 47: GS, I: 228).

This approach is required because of what Benjamin calls the monadological structure of the idea. Benjamin makes reference to the description Leibniz offers in his *Discourse on Metaphysics* of the way in which every single monad contains, in an indistinct way, all the others. Since "the idea is a monad[,] the pre-stabilized representation of phenomena resides within it, as in their objective interpretation" (TS, 47, GS, I: 228). This means that in "establish[ing] the becoming of phenomena in their being" (TS, 47, GS, I: 228), the philosopher is revealing that which is in the idea itself. Benjamin follows Leibniz in arguing that "the higher the order of the ideas, the more perfect the representation contained within them" (TS, 47-48, GS, I: 228). The import and importance of the philosopher's task should not be underestimated: "The idea is a monad—that means briefly: every idea contains the image of the world. The purpose of the representation of the idea is nothing less than an abbreviated outline of this image of the world" (TS, 48, GS, I: 228).

Philosophical history, in writing the natural history of the idea, gives display to the salvation of phenomena through the idea because the grasping of the latter enables a glimpse of the idea's originary phenomenon (*Urphänomen*) unencumbered by the intentional overlay that so preoccupies historians concerned with the idea's merely pragmatically real human history. Moreover, the account a Benjaminian historian offers of the idea's origin (now in Benjamin's sense) can

claim access to truth rather than merely being one narration, since it grasps the idea in its originary, non-intentional state, in which truth dwells as "the death of intention" (TS, 36, GS, I: 216). This is helpfully contrasted with natural history's opposite. Most history, as the history of the idea's pragmatically real human history, ends up depicting the idea's relation to human intentionality. It must therefore be reductionistic because without an understanding of the idea's origin, it will be unable to distinguish between the authentic and inauthentic historical formations the idea takes historically. It is doomed either to construct a false unity in attempting to encompass the entire range of an idea's historical formations, or if it should, by chance, succeed in encompassing this range (which is, it bears noting, possible in principle), to be unable to account for its success in representing the idea's actual unity.

7 History, Translation, and Originary Harmony

The relations between natural history and pragmatically real histories are homologous, then, with those between the Adamite language on the one hand, and the multiplicity of profane languages on the other: just as the historical phenomenon is interpreted within pragmatically real human history in terms of its relation to an agent's desires and beliefs, so the name is interpreted within profane language in terms of its relation to a speaker's intention. And just as the historical phenomenon is interpreted within the natural history of the idea in terms of its relation to its origin, so the name is interpreted within the Adamite language in terms of its relation to Adam's act of non-intentional naming. With this in mind,

the claim Benjamin famously makes in "The Task of the Translator" that "no poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the audience"[19] is granted its proper sense. The task of translation is precisely that of revealing the truth-content of the work which, in its universality, lies beneath the work of (literary) art (and apart from the historical relationships of the languages into which it is translated) as that which the work of art wants to express.

Engagement in this task would be futile if one did not rely on the pre-established kinship between all languages. This kinship is grounded neither in the historical connections between languages nor in their identity of origin, though as Benjamin notes, and as we have noted above, "the concept of 'origin' remains indispensable."[20] Rather this kinship is grounded in the proximity of all languages to the pure language in which the *veut dire* of all languages finds fulfillment. In its translation, the work of art is brought into its closest proximity to "the predestined, hitherto inaccessible realm of reconciliation and fulfillment of languages."[21] The translator and the historian, then, both rely on the originary harmony that is beneath all historical occurrence, and it is the task of the properly engaged philosopher to refer historical phenomena to their origin in that "intentionless state of being [which is] made up of ideas" (TS, 36: GS, I: 216), namely truth.

8 Redemptive Criticism

[19] Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, trans. Harry Zohn, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1996), Vol. I, 253. *GS*, IV: 9.
[20] Ibid., 256. *GS*, IV: 13.
[21] Ibid., 257. *GS*, IV: 14-15

There is a striking correspondence between the tasks that Benjamin describes in the "Theses," the *Trauerspiel* study, and the Translation essay. In each case, Benjamin recommends that the reader write what, in the *Trauerspielbuch* was called "natural history" of the idea (TS, 47: GS, I: 227-228) of which the historical phenomenon is a 'making present' [*vergegenwärtigen*]. Elsewhere, this form of criticism has been called "redemptive criticism" [*rettende Kritik*],[22] for in each case, the phenomena in question (whether they be artistic or historical, or both) are redeemed through the idea. In its initial articulation, this mode of critique was to takes place through the "mortification of the works [of art]" (TS, 182: GS, I: 357) that the critic considers. Benjamin clarifies the way this process proceeds in his essay on Goethe's "Elective Affinities":

> Critique seeks the truth content of a work of art; commentary, its material content...The material content and the truth content, united at the beginning of a work's history, set themselves apart from each other in the course of its duration, because the truth content always remains to the same extent hidden that the material content comes to the fore.[23]

Extracting the truth content from the work of art—what Benjamin calls criticism—will necessarily involve commentary on its material content, for the two are bound up in the work of art, and particularly so in great works of art.[24] Time itself aids the critic in performing redemptive criticism, for in laying waste

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[22] Jürgen Habermas is one of the scholars who has done the most to popularize the use of this term, as it figures prominently in his essay "Walter Benjamin: Consciousness or Rescuing Critique" ("Rescuing Critique" translates "*rettende Kritik*"), *On Walter Benjamin*, ed. Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 90-128.
[23] Walter Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinities," *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, trans. Stanley Corngold, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1996), Vol. I, 297. *GS*, I:125.
[24] Ibid.

to the beautiful semblance that constitutes any work of art, time thereby uncovers the dynamic relation the work of art has, as a temporal object, to eternity.

The work of art is simultaneously a) (humanly-considered) the representation of an idea and b) (considered from the side of truth) an object that is the result of a form's determination of the way an idea will confront the historical world (TS, 45-46: GS, I: 226). A work of art, then, bears within itself the form of life (as transient), while not being mere life precisely because it bears a relation to the divine (as true). This is a crucial aspect of the monadological structure of the ideas. The idea is a monad in that it contains within itself a reflection of the whole world. The form an idea takes is not arbitrary. Rather, the unfolding of the idea in time—that is, its *becoming*—refers to its *being* in the intentionless state of being that it constitutes along with the other ideas that it reflects in itself, namely truth (TS, 36: GS, I: 216).

The dissolution of the work of art, which results from the passage of time, furnishes the critic with the raw material necessary for a description of the relation between the idea's becoming and its being as it makes itself manifest in the work of art. Benjamin describes the particular way in which the critic will approach this relation:

> The history of works prepares for their critique, and thus historical distance increases their power. If, to use a simile, one views the growing work as a burning funeral pyre, then the commentator stands before it like a chemist, the critic like an alchemist. Whereas, for the former, wood and ash remain the sole objects of his analysis, for the latter only the flame preserves an enigma: that of what is alive.[25]

[25] Ibid., 298. *GS*, I:125-126.

In this description, the preeminence of the alchemist is clear, and the alchemist's fascination with the flame—rather than with the wood and ash, which would yield scientific knowledge through analysis—announces the proximity of the enigma of life to truth. The work of art stands, in its integrity, as this enigma, for the material and truth content are bound together in the beautiful semblance (*Schein*) that characterizes the work of art. The dissolution of the work of art which is the result of history contributes to, but does not provide, the solution to the enigma. Benjamin thus continues: "every contemporary critique, however eminent, comprehends in the work more the moving truth than the resting truth, more the temporal effect than the eternal being."[26] The contemporary critique has access to the pragmatic history of the work of art and bears a moving truth—that is, a truth content that is only spuriously related to the origin of the phenomenon in the idea. It therefore lacks access to the resting truth that resides in the work's natural history. And while pragmatic history records details about the work that are indispensable in writing the natural history of the idea that expresses itself in the work, only when this pragmatic history is stripped away through the redemption of the work by the idea can the work's pragmatic history be properly understood.

9 Truth's Demand of the Subject

Benjamin's account of the relation between temporality and eternity is encoded into this understanding of the work of art's pragmatic and natural histories. It is offered as an attempt to address the problem that transience poses

[26] Ibid.

for philosophical reflection. When this account is read alongside the "Theses," however, we see the way in which it also gives rise to an understanding of ethical and political life. According to the account of truth that Benjamin develops in the "Prologue," truth is not primarily a property of propositions, nor is it something given in cognition. Rather, "it is the power which determines the essence of this empirical reality" (TS, 36: GS, I: 216). Although truth exists in its self-identicality in a realm made up of ideas, Benjamin's ideas are not static. Rather, they unfold themselves, as Wolin puts it, "*from within the particular itself*."[27]

The dynamism of the ideas, which is a dynamism in which all life is caught up as an enigma (as the Goethe essay points out), therefore demands that the subject assume a particular kind of comportment. Benjamin writes, "the proper approach to [truth] is not therefore one of intention and knowledge, but rather a total immersion and absorption in it" (TS, 36: GS, I: 216). Insofar as philosophical activity culminates in the documentation of certain forms of facts (as is the case with science) or the systematic elaboration of a system of concepts (as is the case with systematic philosophy) it is characterized by a primarily noetic approach to truth. Benjamin elaborates further: "The structure of truth, then, demands a mode of being which in its lack of intentionality resembles the simple existence of things, but which is superior in its permanence" (TS, 36: GS, I: 216). This non-intentional mode of being characterized Adam in Paradise, and is an attribute of truth itself. The way in which temporal being, or being in its

[27] Richard Wolin, *An Aesthetic of Redemption* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 87. Emphasis in original.

becoming, is always already being returned to this state redemptive criticism. The redemptive criticism of a work of art, then, consists in returning the work from its temporally constituted state to its origin in the idea, by way of the idea.

But redemptive criticism is itself temporally constituted—it bears a moving truth, and has its own temporal effects. If redemptive criticism is to lead to a more adequate approach to truth, then, it cannot be an end in itself. For if it were an end in itself, it would fail to properly relate the subject to the truth in that it would allow the subject to remain noetically rather than ontically related to the truth. The redemptive criticism of works of art therefore gives way to the redemptive criticism of political action. The "Theses" attempt to bring the tasks of historico-philosophical representation of the past and political action in the present into a unity in the enactment of revolutionary party.

10 The Subject's Need of the Past

In order to see the way Benjamin takes up, in the "Theses," the redemptive criticism that he practiced in his earlier work—only now with its object being political action rather than the work of art—it is important to keep in mind the mediating role played by the distinction between pure, pragmatically real human history and natural history.[28] As noted above, the critic is aided by the passage of

[28] An objection to my reading—one which would not take this distinction into consideration—could be raised as follows: from your claim that the "Theses" elaborate the redemptive criticism of action, it follows that truth is to be approached by a manifest untruthfulness to the history that is being appropriated by the historical actor. For if articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it 'the way it really was,' the historical actor will act based on something other than the truth. On this interpretation, Benjamin's understanding of the proper way to approach truth will have changed between the early writings and the "Theses" such that the former literature will express a more traditional modern perspective and the latter a thoroughly Marxist one. While this

time which leads to the separation of material and truth content in a work of art. In the moment of the subject's action, however, no such separation presents itself. The subject does not have direct access to the truth content of his own activity because the subject lives within a historical horizon. Within his own historical horizon, the subject does not have access to the idea which redeems the phenomena that surround him. The subject engages in practices, forms or reforms institutions, participates in events, but the idea of which these phenomena are the expression eludes him. Therefore performing the redemptive criticism of one's own activity, or, put differently, writing its natural history, is nearly impossible in the moment of one's action because in the present moment, the truth content is intimately bound up with the material content. For this reason, the way in which the subject participates in the idea's unfolding in one's own action could only become clear to the subject when the natural history of the idea that is unfolding in his own temporality has been written. The reference that Marx makes to "the self-deceptions...that the *bourgeois* needed in order to conceal from themselves the narrow bourgeois substance of their own struggles"[29] captures something important about the psychology of the historically constituted actor. A certain kind of self-deception is characteristic of all historical actors in their historically-constituted aspect. This self-deception cannot be mitigated by the access subsequent generations have to the idea that is becoming in the midst of the self-

objection is, admittedly, a straw man, it nonetheless serves to highlight the subjective conditions that attend the moment of the subject's appropriation of the past.

[29] Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, (see n. 5.), 16.

deceived one, for the enslaved ancestors cannot be freed when their time has passed.

The liberating knowledge that the subject requires, then, is not to be provided by a utopian vision of the future, for this would only exacerbate the difficulties posed by the subject's temporal constitution. Rather, this liberating knowledge can only be provided by the past, and, in particular, by the constellation the present moment forms with a past one. Benjamin describes the moment in which past and present come into such a constellation as a moment in which time has come to a stop (§XVI, XVII). In this moment, the historical past "crystallizes into a monad" (§XVII) or draws the past into itself. In this 'monadic' construction of past and present, truth makes its appearance, for, as Benjamin argues in the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue," each monad contains in itself an image of all other monads in an indistinct way.

In the monadic crystallization of past and present, the appearance of truth does not, however, confront the subject passively. Rather this configuration is "pregnant with tensions" (§XVII). Benjamin writes: "If the object of history is to be blasted out of the continuum of historical succession, that is because its monadological structure demands it. This structure first comes to light in the extracted object itself" (AP, N10,3). In blasting the object of history out of historical succession, the subject acts in accordance with the demand made by the past event. Indeed, the relationship between past and present that appears within

the monad is a dialectical one (AP, N3,1); that is to say, it gives rise to a synthesis in action.

11 Truth, Divine Violence, and Tradition

The sort of action that the past demands of the subject is not one which attempts to merely preserve the past event in memory. The past is not to be approached aesthetically, as a depiction of the beautifully tragic actions of those who have gone before, nor is it to be respectfully represented in its integrity. On the contrary, the redemption of phenomena which takes place through redemptive criticism is necessarily mediated by a destructive moment. The description of the redemption of phenomena through citation that Benjamin offers in his essay on Karl Kraus sums up what is involved in the historical materialist's approach to the past: "In the quotation that both saves and chastises, language proves the matrix of justice. It summons the word by its name, wrenches it destructively from its context, but precisely thereby calls it back to its origin."[30] This quotation recalls one of the crucial claims Benjamin makes in the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue," namely that ideas bear an internal relation to truth in their inner symbolic character as names. Just as language proves the matrix of justice within Karl Kraus' literary criticism, so political action proves the matrix of justice for the historical past for Benjamin in the "Theses." Indeed, the 'blasting' that Benjamin recommends requires an attitude toward the past that, far from venerating the past,

[30] Walter Benjamin, "Karl Kraus," *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz(New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 269. *GS*, II: 334-367.

unleashes "the destructive forces...that lie in the thought of redemption" (*GS*, I: 1246).

These destructive forces are allied with those of the divine violence that was discussed in the previous chapter. The example that Benjamin offers of the manifestation of divine violence is that of the judgment God renders on those that rebelled at Korah:

> It strikes privileged Levites, strikes them without warning, without threat, and does not stop short of annihilation. But in annihilating it also expiates, and a deep connection between the lack of bloodshed and the expiatory character of this violence is unmistakable. For blood is the symbol of mere life (CoV 297).

The divine origin of this violence is announced in that the privileged Levites "do not die a natural death," but that "the LORD creates something new...and they go down alive into Sheol" (Numbers 16: 29-30). Divine violence, which manifests itself in the destruction of the profane, is "for the sake of the living" (CoV, 297) in that, in bringing destruction, it saves the remnant from the violence that is wrought by the descent from moral life into mere life.

What is at stake in divine violence is the salvation of the remnant through destruction. This is announced by the fact that this violence is also directed towards the construction of an authentic mode of tradition. Benjamin describes the rescue of phenomena that is enacted through the messianic engagement of the revolutionary party thus:

> What are phenomena rescued from? Not only, and not in the main, from the discredit and neglect into which they have fallen, but from the catastrophe represented very often by a certain strain in their dissemination, their 'enshrinement as heritage.'—They are saved through the exhibition of the fissure within them.—There is a tradition that is catastrophe (AP, N9,4).

The catastrophe, Benjamin goes on to say, is precisely "that things are '*status quo*'" (AP, N9a,1). It is not through the maintenance of tradition that authentic tradition is enacted, but precisely by its interruption, for tradition can only be authentic insofar as it becomes messianic—that is to say, insofar as the eternal aspect of that which appears in the temporal is given its full expression. Messianic fulfillment can only be mediated by the interruption, which exhibits the fissure that is within the phenomena that issue from the tradition.

This fissure within the phenomena of tradition makes its presence known precisely in that, at every point, the same powers that are at work in the profane threaten to turn the messianic into its opposite. This logic is on display in the discussion of Mosaic Law that Benjamin offers in the "Critique of Violence." Insofar as one's engagement with the Torah is directed at making the Mosaic law commensurable with the accomplished deed—at having it provide a juridical criterion that can be applied in condemning the transgressor—to this extent divine law has turned into its opposite, namely the mythical law that is at the heart of profane politics. Divine violence, by contrast, declares an end to the mythical cycle of violence through the interruption which exhibits the fissure at the heart of the phenomena of tradition.

12 Truthful Tradition and Messianic Enactment

Benjamin therefore offers an illustration of how tradition may function in an authentic way in the *Anhang* to the "Theses": "We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and prayers instruct them in

remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to soothsayers for enlightenment" (§B). Rather than becoming part of Jewish "heritage," the Torah's prohibition on soothsaying provided the Jews with instruction in remembrance. In order for the prohibition to function in this way, it needs to mediate divine violence. This required that those who promulgate the prohibition (the privileged Levites, originally) understand that the prohibition could never become part of a human institution, and that they approximate a nonintentional relation to the prohibition in their engagement with it. For in this way, the law could be fulfilled at each historical moment.

It is crucial that the divinely violent moment that is mediated when phenomena (such as law) are brought to fulfillment and the fissure within them is exposed not be overlooked. When Benjamin recommends that the historical materialist "blast a specific life out of an era," he writes "as a result of this method the lifework is preserved in this work and at the same time cancelled"—or, more directly, "the lifework is *aufgehoben*" when the life is blasted out of the era. Benjamin turns the theological term which originates in the *Lutherbibel* as a translation for Paul's *katargein*, and which became a philosophical weapon against theology in Hegel, back into what Agamben calls a "genuinely messianic"[31] weapon that is active in the appropriation of the past. The logic of *aufhebung* may be applied thus to virtuous enactment of the law: "When the Torah is rendered inoperative in messianic *katargēsis*, it is not caught up in a

[31] Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, trans. Patricia Daley (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005) 99.

deferment or in an infinite displacement; rather the Torah finds its *plērōma* [fullness] therein."[32] This image simultaneously embraces what is at stake in fulfillment and in what Benjamin calls "genuine historical existence" in this note to the "Theses": "The eternal lamp is an image of genuine historical existence. It cites what has been—the flame that once was kindled—in perpetuum, giving it ever new substance."[33] This sort of engagement with the prohibition simultaneously cancels the prohibition, in its profane aspect, and brings it to fulfillment in the enactment of the community that is shaped by it.

In the "Theses," Benjamin proposes the partnership between historical materialism and theology precisely in order that this sort of enactment could come to characterize the revolutionary activity of the proletariat. Benjamin writes, "A genuinely messianic face must be restored to the concept of classless society and, to be sure, in the interest of furthering the revolutionary politics of the proletariat itself."[34] The classless society must come to function, for the proletariat, in an way analogous to that in which Torah functions for the Jews—that is, not as a Kantian "infinite task"[35] (as the Social Democrats claimed), nor as a directly enactable material condition (as would have been counseled by Marx's conception of revolution). Rather, the classless society is a condition that is perpetually coming to be in the moment of the proletariat's revolutionary interruption of the victors' politics. For it is only as the tensions of the

[32] Ibid., 100-101.
[33] Walter Benjamin, "Paralipomena," 407. *GS*, I: 1245.
[34] Ibid., 403. *GS*, I: 1232.
[35] See also the remark from ibid, 401-402. *GS*, I: 1231.

revolutionary moment resolve themselves and new institutions form and come to replace old ones that the mythic order returns to cover over the caesura or an opening to the transcendent in the immanent. If the revolutionary party could attain to a proper perception of what is demanded by the idea of a classless society, they would recognize that "there is not a moment that [does] not carry with it *its* revolutionary chance—provided only that it is defined in a specific way, namely as the chance for a completely new resolution of a completely new problem [*Aufgabe*]."[36] The "Theses" articulate a conception of messianic enactment that situates the subject in the present moment, which is the very moment in which the messianic kingdom is coming to be.

Understood in this way, the critical disjuncture between Benjamin's messianic politics and that of traditional secularist Marxism, on the one hand, and that of identitarian Jewish messianism on the other comes to light. A journal entry by Scholem illustrates this latter disjuncture: "Walter once said, 'The messianic kingdom is always present.' This perspective is very true—but only in a sphere that I believe no one has reached since the prophets."[37] Scholem's consignment of the messianic to a sphere other than the historical ("only in a sphere…"), and the insistence on a temporalization of divine action ("…since the prophets") that are expressed in this interpretation of Benjamin's remark are precisely what Benjamin's evental conception of the messianic resists. The same

[36] Ibid., 402. *GS*, I:1231.
[37] Gershom Scholem in Eric Jacobson, *The Metaphysics of the Profane: The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 25.

characteristics are on display with regard to the understanding of the classless society held by many Marxists. Indeed, Benjamin makes the above-cited remark regarding the necessity of "restoring a messianic face to the concept of classless society" directly after noting that the "classless society is not to be conceived as the endpoint of historical development...from this erroneous conception Marx's epigones have derived...the notion of the 'revolutionary situation,' which, as we know, has always refused to arrive."[38] The revolutionary situation's 'refusal to arrive' is not the manifestation of the party's failure to catalyze class consciousness or to organize itself according to orthodox Marxist principles. For the classless society is the "frequently miscarried, ultimately [*endlich*] achieved interruption"[39] of historical progress. Rather, it is the result of a failure to maintain the messianic mode of immediacy that would enable the proletariat to participate in the divine violence that is bringing even the classless society to its fulfillment.

It is on this violence, rather than on human activity that historical redemption—that is, the redemption of the phenomena that are temporal—depends. The subject's participation in historical redemption, however, does depend on the subject's engagement in a form of messianic politics that is receptive to divine violence. The key to maintaining this receptivity is the subject's recognition of those dangers with which the present moment is fraught. By grasping the "constellation" the present moment forms with a past one, the

[38] Walter Benjamin, "Paralipomena," 402-403. *GS*, I: 1232.
[39] Ibid., 402. I: 1231.

subject "establishes a conception of the present as the 'time of the now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time" (§A). Messianic time is that time in which the past comes to legibility for the subject and in which the past comes to fulfillment. The key to participation in the fulfillment of the past is the subject's appropriation of that mode of messianic engagement that was characteristic of the enactment of the actors in the historical moment that "flashes up" in the moment of the subject's own action—and, indeed, the renewal of that mode of messianic engagement in the subject's own enactment. What is characteristic of this virtuous enactment is that in it, the actor is receptive to the transcendent force of truth and the demand that the truth, and along with it, the demand of the past, makes on the subject.

In this way, the present generation makes good on the claim the past can make by virtue of the fact that the present generation has been endowed with its own weak messianic power (§II). In its enactment of the messianic, the present generation must be receptive to that power which manifests itself in divine violence and indeed, it must participate in the destructive force this violence bears against the profane. This is the measure of the present generation's weakness. But this weakness is not of a kind that leads to melancholy or to quietism. On the contrary, since historical redemption is to be found in the subject's participation in history's coming to fulfillment, this weakness does not function in turning the subject away from the world. Rather, it turns the subject toward the pursuit of

that transcendent happiness that is simultaneously hidden in the profane aspect of the world, and that is manifestly present in the world's messianic aspect.

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