



Recordando a

**Walter Benjamin**

Justicia, Historia y Verdad. Escrituras de la Memoria.

III SEMINARIO INTERNACIONAL  
POLITICAS DE LA MEMORIA

CENTRO CULTURAL DE LA MEMORIA HAROLDO CONTI  
Buenos Aires - Argentina

## WALTER BENJAMIN, KARL MARX AND THE SPECTER OF THE MESSIANIC: IS THERE A MATERIALIST POLITICS OF REMEMBRANCE?

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### Abstract

Starting with Giorgio Agamben's distinction between messianic time and eschatological end-time visions, my paper examines the temporal structure of Benjamin's messianic Marxism. Benjamin's notion of "now-time" [*Jetztzeit*] introduces a theologico-political temporality different from scientific-philosophical concepts such as absolute Newtonian, relativist Aristotelian, or transcendental Kantian time: (a) it indicates the ultimately achieved interruption/cessation of history by virtue of "political action [which], however destructive, reveals itself as messianic;" (b) it maintains a never irrevocably accomplished historical happening which can be retroactively redeemed by the experience of remembrance [*Eingedenken*].

Secondly, I bring Benjamin into confrontation with Marx's concept of history and time and its oscillation between continuity and rupture. In Marx, we can distinguish at least two dimensions of time: a closed time of capitalism and a disruptive, excessive time of revolution. This duality is doubled and twisted in itself: it can be addressed in terms of the historical process *within time*, that is to say, political struggles, social relations or dynamical productivity, as well as in terms of *time itself* as a repetitive, linear or "homogenous and empty time" (Benjamin) of capitalism. The same applies to the invoked end of capitalism: whereas for traditional Marxism history was driven by "objective" historical forces towards its communist *telos within history*, Benjamin's messianic Marxism attempted a blast of the very horizon of capitalist *history itself*.

Finally, with reference to Jacques Derrida (1994), my paper raises the question whether we could also "conceive an atheological heritage of the messianic," a "messianism without messianism"? And concerning Benjamin's peculiar sort of "materialist theology": could we distinguish the Benjaminian messianic as inherently different from Judeo-Christian messianism and its eschatological temporality? As a subtractive messianic which opens up to a politico-temporal actuality that is neither fully identifiable with theological concepts of time, nor with secular ideas of Utopia?

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*Dem revolutionären Denker bestätigt sich die eigentümliche revolutionäre Chance aus einer gegebenen politischen Situation heraus. Aber sie bestätigt sich ihm nicht minder durch die Schlüsselgewalt eines Augenblicks über ein ganz bestimmtes, bis dahin verschlossenes Gemach der Vergangenheit. Der Eintritt in dieses Gemach fällt mit der politischen Aktion strikt zusammen und er ist es, durch den sie sich, wie vernichtend immer, als eine messianische zu erkennen gibt.*<sup>2</sup>

Walter Benjamin

### How to Read Benjamin?

According to Michael Löwy<sup>3</sup>, we can distinguish at least three main schools of reading Walter Benjamin which try to make sense of Benjamin's contradictory position between theology and historical materialism:

Firstly, a "materialist school", that is to say, Benjamin is a Marxist and even though he used theological formulations, terminologies, metaphors etc., we can always clearly differentiate between the materialist signified and the theological signifier – a position adopted prominently by Benjamin's friend Bertolt Brecht;

secondly, the "theological school": Benjamin as a "Jewish theologian" and "messianic thinker" who falsely misunderstood himself as being a historical materialist – that was, of course, the standpoint of Benjamin's other close friend Gershom Scholem;

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin: "On the Concept of History", Handexemplar-Thesis 18, in *Gesammelte Schriften*. ed. by Hermann Schweppenhäuser; Rolf Tiedemann, Vol. VII, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M., 1989, p. 784.

This article quotes Benjamin according to the following editions:

*German*: Walter Benjamin: *Gesammelte Schriften*. ed. by Hermann Schweppenhäuser; Rolf Tiedemann, 7 Vol., Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M., 1972ff. (abbreviated *GS*, *Vol.*, *Page.*);

*English*: Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings*. ed. by Marcus Bollock; Michael W. Jennings, 4 Vol., Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1996ff. (abbreviated *SW*, *Vol.*, *Page*);

*English*: Walter Benjamin: *Arcades Project*. transl. by Howard Eiland; Kevin McLaughlin, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1999. (abbreviated *Arc*, *Number of Convolute*, *Page*);

<sup>3</sup> Michael Löwy: *Fire Alarm. Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'*. transl. by Chris Turner, Verso, London, 2005.



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thirdly, the “school of contradiction”: Benjamin tried but finally failed to “reconcile Marxism with Jewish theology” – this very influential school is mainly represented by Frankfurt School thinkers such as Benjamin’s closest Marxist friend Theodor W. Adorno, his later editor Rolf Tiedemann and Jürgen Habermas.<sup>4</sup>

Given this picture, Löwy tries to introduce a forth school, a school of a Goethe-like *Wahlverwandtschaft* (“elective affinity”) of Marxism and theology. “Walter Benjamin is a Marxist and a theologian”<sup>5</sup>, that is to say, “Marxism and messianism are simply two expressions [...] of a single thought.”<sup>6</sup> In this context, Löwy is also right to point out the continuity of certain Benjaminian leitmotifs such as German Romanticism, allegorical thinking, criticism of the idea of historical progress as well as of formalist neo-Kantian concepts of *Erfahrung*. According to this interpretation, Benjamin’s motifs are generally irreducible: they also render it almost impossible to separate their materialist and theological ingredients. Thus, Benjamin’s late Marxist writings feature a stunning Marxism *sui generis*, a kind of “alchemical fusion”<sup>7</sup>, which, according to my reading, might be called ‘Messianic Marxism’.

With regard to Benjamin’s last theses *On the Concept of History* this outstanding fusion of messianic thought and Marxism is strikingly obvious if we compare him to classical Utopian-Marxist thought. Uniquely in the history of Marxism, Benjamin’s thought is not directed towards a future messianic Advent but – as the allegory of the “Angel of History”<sup>8</sup> indicates – towards the past. The powerful image of the *Angelus Novus*, however suggestive, should not be confused with a melancholic sentiment, a gaze at a lost past – an interpretation that rather stems from Benjamin’s close friend Theodor W. Adorno’s reading rather than from Benjamin himself. Benjamin’s revolutionary “tiger’s leap into the past” (Thesis XIV) strives for, as we shall see, at something radically different.

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4 Cf. Michael Löwy: *Fire Alarm*, pp. 19ff.

5 Michael Löwy: *Fire Alarm*, p. 20.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Benjamin’s famous 9. thesis *On the Concept of History*: “There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*.

It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awake the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm” (SW 4, 392).



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Theoretically speaking, Benjamin's theses aim at nothing less than a radical inversion of historical materialism which – as some Benjamin scholars have argued – is only comparable to Marx's attempt in the *Theses on Feuerbach*. Like Marx, Benjamin calls for a shift of perspective moving away from an objectivist and merely contemplative materialism towards a new materialism always already involved in its subject matter.

### **Epistemology, or the NOW of recognizability**

In his *Theses*, Benjamin states a fierce criticism of vulgar-Marxist and historicist historiography: Against the idea of an “eternal image of the past” (GS I, 702) Benjamin calls for the suspension of any concept of history based upon the idea of progression, continuous succession or causal nexus of times/epochs/ages. Those false imageries of history always take the victor's perspective in which all past events form a coherent and therefore ideological narrative. In contrast, Benjamin's concept of history is centred around notions like standstill, discontinuity, citation and rupture; consequently, his concept of historiography is based upon construction, citation and constellation.

This epistemo-political concept of history, however, is not to be mistaken for historicist or post-modernist eclecticism of historical citation; Benjamin strictly holds on to the concept of history as a collective singular; therefore, we should not misread him as an apologist of the plurality of historical narratives. Consequently, he does not propose any form of counter narratives of history; rather, his term of the “tradition of the oppressed” pierces through the continuum of the “homogenous and empty time” of historicism. Whereas the continuum of victor's history is linear, the “tradition of the oppressed” is disruptive and discontinuous. This rather ‘non-traditional’ concept of tradition seems to be aporetic since the Latin word *traditio* literally means “to hand down” or “to hand over” – an operation which precisely constructs continuity. Benjamin was well aware of this aporia which he discussed in his preliminary notes to the *Theses*:

“Basic aporia: ‘Tradition as the discontinuum of the past in contrast to history as the continuum of events.’ [...] ‘The continuum of history is the oppressor. Whereas the idea of the continuum levels



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everything to the ground, the idea of the discontinuum is the foundation of authentic tradition.” (GS I, 1236)<sup>9</sup>

One way out of this aporia can be found in Benjamin’s epistemological concept of historical truth which combines to oppositional features: (1) historical truth relates to the “tradition of the oppressed” (against the idea of an objective historical truth from the ‘neutral’ standpoint of historiography); (2) truth, though radically non-objective and bound to a political subjectivity (“the fighting and oppressed class”), is formed by an involuntary constellation of *the past* and *the present* (against the relativist concept of the multiplicity of historical perspectives/narratives/concepts of events). In other words, Benjamin holds on to idea of a truth – a materialist truth which is not idealistically eternal but contains an *Zeitkern* [“time-core”] inscribing a historical index into the subject *and* the object of historical cognition.

Resolute refusal of the concept of ‘timeless truth’ is in order. Nevertheless, truth is not – as Marxism would have it – a merely contingent function of knowing but is bound to a nucleus of time [*Zeitkern*] lying hidden within the knower and the known alike.” (GS V, 578; Arc N 3,2)

For Benjamin, the true image of the past can suddenly appear like a “ball lightning [*Kugelblitz*] that runs across the whole horizon of the past.” (SW 4, 403) At a certain moment those flashlights emerge out of a critical constellation between the historian and a certain fragment of history and crystallize like a monad containing “time in its *interior* as a precious but tasteless seed.” (Thesis 17) Benjamin calls these images “dialectical images”; the epistemological task of the “true historian”, which is for Benjamin always bound to the political task of the “true politician”, is to seize those never recurring images: “The true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again [...]” (Thesis 5) “To seize” dialectical images necessarily involves a *Geistesgegenwärtigkeit* [literally: “a presence of mind”] though these images only emerge involuntarily and non-intentionally. Hence, the knowledge of these images is never a ‘given’; the true image of the past – the dialectical image – does not exist ‘as such’; it can only be seized from the uncircumventable standpoint of the “now of

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<sup>9</sup> Translation mine; German original: “Grundlegende Aporie: Die Tradition als das Diskontinuum des Gewesenen im Gegensatz zur Historie als dem Kontinuum der Ereignisse.’ [...] ,Das Kontinuum der Geschichte ist das der Unterdrücker. Während die Vorstellung des Kontinuums alles dem Erdboden gleich macht, ist die Vorstellung des Diskontinuums die Grundlage echter Tradition.” (GS I, 1236)



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recognizability”. The inner logic of this intricate construction is outlined by the following preparatory note to the *Theses*

“Articulating the past historically means recognizing those elements of the past which come together in the constellation of a single moment. Historical knowledge is possible only within the historical moment. But knowledge within the historical moment is always knowledge of a moment. In drawing itself together in the moment—in the dialectical image—the past becomes part of humanity's involuntary memory.” (SW 4, 403)<sup>10</sup>

But how are we then to conceive of this “single moment”, this “now” of historical recognizability? The true image of the past can neither be seized in a mere empirical moment of time, nor it refers to a Bergsonian *durée*, nor it is to be mistaken for a non-chronometric duration of time like Husserl’s phenomenological time. Benjamin’s singularity or originality stems from his attempt to think of a materialist way to conceive this Now: on the one hand, this Now and its corresponding images are not to be placed within the “empty and homogeneous time” ( – a criticism of linear Aristotelian time he basically shares with Bergson, Husserl or Heidegger); on the other hand, an irreducibly materialist dimension comes into play due to the radically historical transiency of those images recognizable only in a singular Now from the standpoint of a certain historical subjectivity. Hence, the true historical image is not merely a given historical imagery; rather it only “unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in an moment of danger” (Thesis VI). Benjamin’s conceptualization of this “now” hinges on a constellation formed by an *unintentional* “perilous moment” (Arc N 3,1) and the *intentional* acting of a political subjectivity (“the fighting and oppressed class”). To grasp the status of this “now” and its consequences, I am tempted to follow Werner Hamacher’s very succinct close reading of the *Theses* proposing a transcendental interpretation of the Benjaminian “now”:

“With the notion ‘Now of recognizability’, which is fundamental for his philosophy of history, Benjamin insists on the transcendental status of that to which he refers. He is not concerned with the

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<sup>10</sup> German original of this later crossed out passage: „Vergangnes historisch artikulieren heißt: dasjenige in der Vergangenheit erkennen, was in der Konstellation eines und desselben Augenblickes zusammentritt. Historische Erkenntnis ist einzig und allein möglich im historischen Augenblick. Die Erkenntnis im historischen Augenblick aber ist immer eine Erkenntnis von einem Augenblick. Indem die Vergangenheit sich zum Augenblick – zum dialektischen Bilde – zusammenzieht, geht sie in die unwillkürliche Erinnerung der Menschheit ein.“ (GS I, 1233)



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Now of cognition, but with the Now which, ahead of every actual cognition, fixes, the structural condition of the possibility of cognition.”<sup>11</sup>

For Benjamin, however, the “structural condition of the possibility of cognition” is only given by the political situation; therefore, the “subject of historical knowledge” is not a Kantian *Transzendentalsubjekt*<sup>12</sup> but “the struggling, oppressed class itself.” (Thesis XII)

At this point again, a comparison with the early Georg Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) and his notion of “the standpoint of the proletariat” might be instructive. In his famous essay on reification, Lukács tried to re-formulate an epistemological problem of capitalist ideology, that is to say reification, commodity fetishism etc., in terms of a political subjectivity, that is to say, bourgeoisie and proletariat. Only the latter, the standpoint of the proletariat, is exclusively supposed to overcome the universal *Verblendungs-zusammenhang* or ideological misperception of capitalism due its objective political-economical standpoint within society. In contrast to Lukács, however, the more messianic Anarchist Benjamin does not speak of an objective standpoint, neither politically nor epistemologically; rather, he de-ontologises Lukács’ Leninist proletarian standpoint by referring to a certain non-intentional moment of recognisability, which can coincide (at a certain critical moment) with an interested, historically involved standpoint of a political subjectivity (the Marxian Proletariat). It is exactly this point or moment what he calls the *Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit* [“Now of the recognizability”]. Likewise the subject of history is not humankind but the oppressed<sup>13</sup>, the subject of reconizability is also not humankind but the oppressed.

With regard to this ‘Lukácsian’ reference we can sum up Benjamin’s epistemo-political position:

(1) It marks at the same time an epistemologico-transcendental condition of knowledge as well as a political standpoint within society. As already mentioned, for Benjamin this

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<sup>11</sup> Werner Hamacher: “Now’: Walter Benjamin on Historical Time“, transl. by N. Rosenthal, in Andrew Benjamin: *Walter Benjamin and History*. Continuum, London; New York, 2005, S. 38-68; here: p. 62.

<sup>12</sup> In the German edition of the “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History’” we can also find the following variant, which demonstrates Benjamin’s difference from Kantian transcendentalism even more unambiguously than Thesis XII: “Die Befugnis des Historikers hängt an seinem geschärften Bewußtsein für die Krise, in die das Subjekt der Geschichte jeweils getreten ist. *Dieses Subjekt ist beileibe kein Transzendentalsubjekt sondern die kämpfende unterdrückte Klasse in ihrer exponiertesten Situation.* Historische Erkenntnis gibt es allein für sie und für sie einzig im historischen Augenblick.“ (Benjamin, GS I, 1243, emphasis mine.)

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Benjamin: „Das Subjekt der Geschichte: die Unterdrückten, nicht die Menschheit.“ (GS I, 1244)



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knowledge is not a given (by virtue of an Marxist or ‘objective standpoint’ within capitalist society) but an *ability* of knowledge, or, to be more precise, a *recognizability*, which is twofold: it accounts for the knowledge of a political subject, the flipside of which is the site of an unintentional historical truth (“the true historical image”) flashing up like a Proustian *mémoire involontaire*.

(2) Concerning the Now, the moment or instance of recognisability a certain theory of historical time and temporality is implied. Looking at Benjamin’s 16. thesis, this temporal structure can be described as non-linear, disruptive, for it is based upon an insisting time point, a temporal puncture, a standstill *of* time. This *Einstehen* or *Stillstand* of time, which could be read as a political interpretation of what Franz Rosenzweig called a *nunc stans*, a “‘stehender’ Augenblick”<sup>14</sup>, does not only refer to a certain disruptive event *within* time but to a rupture, an irreducible abyss *of* time itself. Benjamin clearly says that without such an insisting instance of time there is no real history at all, since this standstill defines the presence of the historiographer. Benjamin speaks of “two temporal orders”<sup>15</sup> which can only be identified/separated from the standpoint of the now, the standstill *in* and *of* time. The task of the true historian/politician is to seize this Now because the true image of the past is a transient moment that will never come again.

### **Messianic time**

Benjamin epistemo-political theory of the Now alludes to a theologico-political temporality different from scientific-philosophical concepts such as absolute Newtonian, relativist Aristotelian, or transcendental Kantian time. Benjamin calls this time *Jetztzeit* or Now-Time – a fulfilled, contracted time providing a model of messianic time in contrast to the “empty and homogeneous time” implied by vulgar-Marxist, historicist, or evolutionist historiography. But how are we to conceive of the specificity of the messianic time to which this model refers?

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<sup>14</sup> Franz Rosenzweig: *Der Stern der Erlösung*. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M., 1988, p. 322. Cf. “The new thing that we are seeking must be a *nunc stans*, not a moment that flies away, but a “fixed” moment.” (Franz Rosenzweig: *The Star of Redemption*. transl. by Barbara E. Galli, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison; London, 2005, p. 307.)

<sup>15</sup> Translation mine. Cf. Benjamin: “Die Existenz der klassenlosen Gesellschaft kann nicht in derselben Zeit gedacht werden wie der Kampf für sie. Der Begriff der Gegenwart in dem für den Historiker verbindlichen Sinn ist aber notwendig durch diese beiden zeitlichen Ordnungen definiert.“ (GS I, 1245)





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According to Giorgio Agamben's distinction between messianic time and eschatological end-time visions like Mysticism, Gnosticism, or, Manichaeism, Benjamin's messianism *sui generis* needs to be differentiated from other influential understandings of the messianic.

Whereas for Benjamin's close friend and Kabbalah scholar Gershom Scholem "the Messianic idea in Judaism has compelled a *life lived in deferment*, in which nothing can be done definitely, nothing can be irrevocably accomplished"<sup>16</sup>, in Benjamin the messianic works in two opposite direction: firstly, it indicates the finally achieved interruption or cessation of history by virtue of "political action [which], however destructive, reveals itself as messianic" (SW 4, 402), and, secondly, it maintains a never irrevocably accomplished historical happening which can be retroactively redeemed.

The first aspect, the messianic interruption, however destructive it may be, arrests the eternal postponement of the coming of the Messiah. This sudden break or *Abbruch* of history inverts the common levelling of the messianic to the apocalyptic. For Benjamin, the redemptive and destructive dimension of the messianic neither designates an eschatological end-time vision nor invokes a final apocalyptic 'Judgement Day' when all past events will be totally recalled and decided. Rather, the *already catastrophic status quo* of the capitalist everyday will be suspended or de-posed [*ent-setzt*] by the revolutionary "'real' state of exception."

The second point concerning history's incompleteness is more complicated. Although for Benjamin, history is never fully accomplished, we are not compelled to impotent awaiting or eternal postponement. Rather, the Judaist motif of remembrance [*Eingedenken*] and the instantaneous actualization of history's hidden potentials are two sides of the same messianic structure of history. This structure, however, always maintains an irreducible tension between the messianic Event and the historical happening which the later Benjamin transposes into politico-temporal terms. As already mentioned, in his preparatory notes to *On the Concept of History* he writes:

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<sup>16</sup> Gershom Scholem: *The messianic idea in Judaism and other essays on Jewish spirituality*. Allen & Unwin, London, 1971, p. 35.



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“The existence of the classless society cannot be thought *within* the same time as the struggle for it. But the concept of the present, in its binding sense for the historian, is necessarily defined by these *two temporal orders*.”<sup>17</sup>

It is precisely in this sense that for Benjamin’s messianic Marxism, the task of the true Historian always *relates* (though it is not identical to it) to an authentic revolutionary act introducing a temporal rupture. Benjamin’s radical separation of these two temporal orders introduces a partition into the messianic caesura which divides the messianic from the historical preventing any theocratical conflation of politics and theology proper. This doubled separation is already stated in Benjamin’s *Theologico-political Fragment* in seemingly tautological terms, for only “the *profane* order of the profane promotes the coming of the Messianic Kingdom”. It is in this sense that we should also understand Benjamin’s additional *Handexemplar* thesis 18 *On the Concept of History* (also known as thesis 17a):

“In the idea of classless society, Marx secularized the idea of messianic time. And that was a good thing. It was only when the Social Democrats elevated this idea to an ‘ideal’ that the trouble began.” (SW 401)

For Benjamin, this Marxian secularization of messianic time does not claim “an atheological heritage of the messianic”<sup>18</sup>, as Jacques Derrida’s structural reading of the messianic proposes. Benjamin’s materialist theology is not about an “undetermined messianic hope”<sup>19</sup> or “a waiting without horizon of expectation”<sup>20</sup>; on the contrary, history can only be truly historical insofar as it maintains standing in an antithetical and tense relation to messianic time which is for Marx as well as for the late Benjamin the idea of ‘classless society.’

As is well known, in Benjamin this messianic relation is not directed to the future but to the past irreducibly linking theology and politics. In his second thesis *On the Concept of History*, Benjamin mentions “a secret agreement between past generations and the present one”; therefore, “like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim.” (SW 4, 390) This insisting claim of the past striving for its retroactive redemption points towards a past which is not only

<sup>17</sup> Translation mine. Cf. Benjamin: “Die Existenz der klassenlosen Gesellschaft kann nicht in derselben Zeit gedacht werden wie der Kampf für sie. Der Begriff der Gegenwart in dem für den Historiker verbindlichen Sinn ist aber notwendig durch diese beiden zeitlichen Ordnungen definiert.“ (GS I, 1245)

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Derrida: *Specters of Marx. The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. transl. by Peggy Kamuf, Routledge, London; New York, 1994, p. 211.

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida: *Specters of Marx*, p. 81.

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Derrida: *Specters of Marx*, p. 211.



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oppressed by official historiography but which, moreover, did not happen. In other words, the theologico-political addressing of the “*weak* messianic power” does not merely refer to a demand of history’s dead but of its undead. In this way we may read the famous beginning of Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire*:

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.”<sup>21</sup>

For Benjamin, these “circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past” carry with them a secret index by which they are referred to redemption; – and it is this secret index or messianic signature which prevents them from being fully historicised in the historical text. The proper psychoanalytical name of this nightmare or *Alb* that weighs on the brains of the living is trauma.<sup>22</sup> What is repressed by this trauma is not a primordial *Urszene* of history but the crushed potentialities of failed revolutions. But how are we to grasp the potentialities of history if the latter is not just about an alternative counter-history made after the same model as official historiography?

## 2. Actuality and Potentiality

In his definition of messianic time, Slavoj Žižek draws the following conclusion from Benjamin’s anti-historicist and anti-determinist concept of history.

“[W]e cannot deduce the emergence of messianic time through an ‘objective’ analysis of historical process. ‘Messianic time’ ultimately stands for the intrusion of subjectivity irreducible to the ‘objective’ historical process, which means that things can take a messianic turn, time can become ‘dense,’ *at any*

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Karl Marx: *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte*. ed. by Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED, Marx-Engels-Werke, Bd. 8, Dietz, Berlin, 1975, p. 115.

<sup>22</sup> See also Žižek: “‘Eternity’ is not atemporal in the simple sense of persisting beyond time; it is, rather, the name for the Event or Cut that sustains, opens up, the dimension of temporality as the series/succession of failed attempts to grasp it. The psychoanalytic name for this Event/Cut is, of course, trauma. [...] Eternity and time (in the sense of temporalization/historicization) are thus far from being simply opposed: in a sense, there is no time without eternity: temporality is sustained by our failure to grasp/symbolize/historicize the ‘eternal’ trauma. If trauma were to be successfully temporalized/historicized, the very dimension of time would implode/collapse into a timeless eternal Now. This is the point to made against historicism: that it fails to take into account the reference to some traumatic point of Eternity that sustains temporality itself.” (Slavoj Žižek: *The Fragile Absolute – or, Why is the Christian legacy worth fighting for* Verso, London; New York, 2000, p. 95f.)



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*point*. The time of the Event is not another time beyond and above the ‘normal’ historical time, but a kind of inner loop within this time.”<sup>23</sup>

Zizek’s idea of the time of the Event as an “inner loop within time” implicitly refers to Agamben’s reading of Saint Paul. In *The Time that Remains*, Agamben introduces an “operational time pressing within the chronological time, working and transforming it from within; it is the time we need to make time end: *the time that is left us*.”<sup>24</sup> – But what is the specificity of this temporal loop, this time of the end in contrast to the eschatological or apocalyptic end-of-time? The notion of an “operational time” – a term Agamben borrows from the French linguist Gustave Guillaume – does not stand for the final incursion of eternity into history but point towards a political subjectivity without which there is no potentiality of the past. Agamben’s crucial point is that for this subjectivity and the operational time seized by it, potentiality involves more than just a possibility to be actualized. If the messianic structure of history undermines the classical understanding of the relation between *actus* and *potentia*, we have, as Zizek claims, to reject

“the standard Aristotelian ontology which is structured around the vector running from possibility to actuality. In contrast to the idea that every possibility strives fully to actualize itself, we should conceive of ‘progress’ as a move of *restoring the dimension of potentiality to mere actuality*, of unearthing, at the very heart of actuality, a secret striving toward potentiality.”<sup>25</sup>

But what is meant by “mere actuality” – or, to put it differently: what remains in actuality once a potential has been actualized? According to Agamben, the “secret striving toward potentiality” can only be detected if we do not anymore conceive of potentiality in a teleological manner. Whereas according to a classical understanding of the Aristotelian opposition of *dynamis* and *energeia*, potentiality can only grasped from the standpoint of actuality after *a potential has already been turned into an actuality or reality*, Agamben’s unconventional reading of Aristotle conceives of actuality from the perspective of potentiality. In Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, we can at least find two interpretations of how to conceive of the temporal, logical, and ontological order of potentiality [*dynamis*] and actuality [*energeia*]:

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<sup>23</sup> Slavoj Žižek: *The Puppet and the Dwarf: the Perverse Core of Christianity*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2003, p. 134.

<sup>24</sup> Giorgio Agamben: *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*. transl. by Patricia Dailey, Stanford Univ. Press, Stanford, 2005, p.

<sup>25</sup> Slavoj Žižek: *The Parallax View*. transl. by Frank Born, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2006, p. 78.



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“To all such potentiality, then, actuality is prior both in formula and in substance; and in time it is prior in one sense, and in another not.” “In time, as Aristotle unfolds this argument, actuality “is prior in this sense: the actual member of a species is prior to the potential member of the same species, though the individual is potential before it is actual.” (Aristotle, Met. 1049 b)

This priority of potentiality leads Agamben to the question of impotentiality. Again, he takes his cue from Aristotle:

“Every potentiality is at one and the same time a potentiality for the opposite; for, while that which is not capable of being present in a subject cannot be present, everything that is capable of being may possibly not be actual. That, then, which is capable of being may either be or not be; the same thing, then, is capable both of being and of not being.” (Aristotle, Met. 1050 b).

Agamben, then, takes this passage one step further and asks the heretical question: “*How is it possible to consider the actuality of the potentiality to not-be?*”<sup>26</sup> In other words, Agamben’s conclusion from this passage is that we can also think of an actuality of an impotentiality. In *The Time that Remains*, he confronts this reading of Aristotle with Benjamin’s “*weak messianic power*” (Thesis 2). If the messianic is about *restoring the dimension of potentiality to mere actuality*, this ‘mere actuality’ is the actuality of an impotentiality. Hence, Benjamin’s messianic power is not just the weak power of the hidden potentialities of history, of history forgotten events but also about the *impotentiality* of history insisting within the *actual* course of the catastrophic victor’s history. Only against this background of an actualized happening, the past can be redeemed and find its *restitutio in integrum* – a *restitutio in integrum* of possibility restoring the impotentiality of the actually happened past.

But where is the site where this impotentiality of history can *actually* change the past? How can the “true image of the past” also account for those events which did not take place – of events whose potentialities were not actualized in the course of history?

### **Theology or: the experience of remembrance [*Eingedenken*]**

Benjamin’s politico-epistemological concept of the recognizability or legibility of the historical text as well as the temporality of messianic time correspond to a certain kind of theology, whose key term can be found in the notion of *Eingedenken* [remembrance].

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<sup>26</sup> Giorgio Agamben: *Potentialities. Collected essays in philosophy*. ed. by Daniel Heller Roazen, transl. by Daniel Heller Roazen, Stanford Univ. Press, Stanford, 1999, p. 106.



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In an remarkable letter dating from March 16th, 1937, Max Horkheimer, the director of the *Institute for Social Research*, wrote the following lines to Benjamin criticizing a theological concept in Benjamin's insistence on the incompleteness or openness of history:

“The assertion of incompleteness is idealist if completeness is not included in it. The past injustice has happened and is accomplished. The slain are actually killed. Ultimately, your statement is theological. If one is to take incompleteness really seriously one has to believe in the Last Judgement.”<sup>27</sup>

In response to this allegation of idealism and theology, Benjamin wrote a stunning commentary for his *Arcades Project*:

“Remembrance [*Eindenden*] can complete what is incomplete (happiness) and make incomplete what is complete (suffering). This is theology; but the experience of remembrance forbids us to grasp history in fundamentally atheological categories, however little we may [*dürfen*] try to write it in directly theological terms.” (Arc, N 8,1)<sup>28</sup>

These lines have sparked lots of debates about the theological status of Benjamin's late writings. At first sight, Benjamin's *Eingedenken* apparently refers to the Judaist motif of remembrance, that is to say in Benjaminian terms, remembrance of the dead of past failed revolutions: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history – everything can be retroactively redeemed. (Thesis 3) Thus, *Eingedenken* allows a messianic opening of the edifice of “official history” and, moreover, a retroactive change of the past. As Werner Hamacher pointed out, we should not misread Benjamin's employment of theology for Judeo-Christian theology proper:

“Redemption, as Benjamin here talks about it, is meant most prosaically: a redeeming (*Erlösung*) of possibilities which, are opened with every life and are missed in every life. If the concept of redemption points towards a theology – and it does so without doubt and *a fortiori* in the context of the first thesis, which mentions the ‘little hunchback’ of theology – then this is not straightforwardly Judeo-Christian

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<sup>27</sup> Translation mine. Cf. Max Horkheimer: “Die Feststellung der Unabgeschlossenheit ist idealistisch, wenn die Abgeschlossenheit nicht in ihr aufgenommen ist. Das vergangene Unrecht ist geschehen und abgeschlossen. Die Erschlagenen sind wirklich erschlagen. Letzten Endes ist Ihre Aussage theologisch. Nimmt man die Unabgeschlossenheit ganz ernst, so muß man an das Jüngste Gericht glauben.“ (Walter Benjamin: *Gesammelte Briefe*. ed. by Christoph Göttsche; Henri Lonitz, Vol. V, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M., 1999, p. 494f.)

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Benjamin: „Das Eingedenken kann das Unabgeschlossene (das Glück) zu einem Abgeschlossenen und das Abgeschlossene (das Leid) zu einem Unabgeschlossenen machen. Das ist Theologie; aber im Eingedenken machen wir eine Erfahrung, die uns verbietet, die Geschichte grundsätzlich atheologisch zu begreifen, so wenig wir sie in unmittelbar theologischen Begriffen zu schreiben versuchen dürfen.“ (GS V, 589)



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theology, but rather a theology of the missed or the distorted – hunchbacked – possibilities, a theology of missed, distorted or hunchbacked time.”<sup>29</sup>

According to this reading, Benjamin’s theology points to the radical contingency and openness of history. But what does the emphasis on the missed possibilities of history mean for Benjamin’s concept of historical time? Here, *Eingedenken* comes into play as Slavoj Žižek has pointed out:

“We cannot translate this *Eingedenken* simply by ‘remembrance’ or ‘reminiscence’; the more literal translation, ‘to transpose oneself in thoughts/into something’ is also inadequate. Although it is really a kind of ‘appropriation of the past’ which is at stake here, we cannot conceive *Eingedenken* in an adequate way as long as we stay within the field of hermeneutics.”<sup>30</sup>

Thus, if *Eingedenken* neither means remembrance *only*, nor a historicist interpretation of the historical text inscribed in mankind’s collective memory, nor more recent politics of remembrance like the contemporary mainstream concepts like *Erinnerungskulturen* [cultures of memorialization], how we are to grasp the theological dimension Benjamin’s *Eingedenken* is pointing to.

In his reading of *Eingedenken*, Žižek has stressed Benjamin’s attempt to retroactively redeem the potentialities of past failed revolutions and to actualize the still insisting claims of the undead of history. For Benjamin the past is never ontologically fully constituted, it can be rewritten, re-opened at a certain critical moment, at the moment of the “now of recognisability” implying two irreducibly intertwined aspects: a certain Event in time (revolution) which cuts off – arrests – the flow of “empty and homogenous” time, and an epistemological method to grasp the true image of history (“the dialectical image”). That is why Benjamin, in contrast to the historicism of traditional Marxism, had to invert the traditional understanding of historical dialectic suggesting a continuous, quasi-organic flow of events. Consequently, if *Eingedenken* transcends the limits of the continuous mode of the “empty and homogeneous time” as conceived by historicism, we have to look for a different structure of time implied by this peculiar sort of theology.<sup>31</sup>

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29 Werner Hamacher: „Now’: Walter Benjamin on Historical Time“, transl. by N. Rosenthal, in Andrew Benjamin: *Walter Benjamin and History*. Continuum, London; New York, 2005, pp. 38-68; here p. 40.

30 Slavoj Žižek: *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. transl. by Jon Barnes, Verso, London, 1989, p. 137.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Slavoj Žižek: *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 139ff.



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As Stéphane Mosès has underlined, we should conceive of Benjamin's concept of theology "as a specific feature of historical time as *Jetztzeit* or Now-Time, that is to say, as a time, in which human agency can intervene in order to retrospectively change its meaning."<sup>32</sup> Mosès' important suggestion of a retrospective change of history leads to us to the crucial point of Benjamin's reference to theology. Mosès' illuminating interpretation, however, might not go far enough to understand the entire scope of Benjamin's approach. Since retrospection always supposes a relation of a spectator and a logically and/or temporally preceding event which can later become subject to retro-spection, we might look for a more complex time structure that can grasp Benjamin's concept of history in its twofold dialectic of standstill and fluidization.

### **Benjamin avec Lacan, or: The retroactivity of the historical text**

According to Žižek's reading, in Benjamin we can find an astonishing parallel to Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis and its time structure of retroactivity allowing for a more radical dynamization of the static relation implied by mere retrospection.

For Jacques Lacan's concept of *future antérieur*, the meaning of the signifier is always retroactively, *après coup* fixed and inscribed in the symbolic net. "Signifiers which are still in a 'floating' state – whose signification is not yet fixed – follow one another. Then, at a certain point, some signifier fixes retroactively the meaning of the chain, sews the meaning of the signifier, halts the sliding of the meaning."<sup>33</sup> Lacan calls this point of fixing the "quilting point" or *point de capiton*, which retroactively gives meaning to an unstructured chain of floating signifiers. The crucial point here not to be missed lies in the time structure implied by Lacan's matrix of signification, as Žižek underlines: "... instead of the linear, immanent, necessary progression according to which meaning unfolds itself from some initial kernel, we have a radically contingent process of retroactive production of meaning."<sup>34</sup>

If we read Benjamin through a Lacanian perspective of retroaction and if history is to be understood as a "text" (GS I, 1238) legible only at a certain "moment of danger" (GS I, 695), *Eingedenken* lays bare a radical contingent mode of production of historical meaning.

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32 Cf. Stéphane Mosès: *Der Engel der Geschichte. Franz Rosenzweig - Walter Benjamin - Gershom Scholem*. Jüdischer Verlag, Frankfurt a. M, 1994, p. 154: "Von daher wird vielleicht verständlich, daß der Begriff 'Theologie' für Benjamin gerade das Spezifische der geschichtlichen Zeit als 'Jetztzeit' bezeichnet, das heißt als Zeit, in welche die menschliche Aktivität eingreifen kann, um in retrospektiver Weise deren Bedeutung zu verändern."

33 Slavoj Žižek: *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. transl. by Jon Barnes, Verso, London, 1989, p. 101f.

<sup>34</sup> Slavoj Žižek: *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 102.





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Conversely, if we dare a Benjaminian reading of Lacan, we have to identify the dominant *point de caption*, the fixing point with official historiography, that is to say, with the dominant narrative of objective history as victor's history. Here, *Eingedenken* undertakes a twofold operation: firstly, on the level of ideology, it de-mystifies the official narrative of history, the "eternal image of the past" by unveiling the, as Lacan would have put it, 'necessary contingent' mode of official/historicist historiography. Secondly, on the level of historical temporality itself, *Eingedenken* retroactively fluidifies the fixed texture of official history in order to seize new "true images" of the past. Therefore, the political act of retroaction goes far beyond the idea of a mere retrospection supposing an external relation of the subject of historiography (the historian) and his or her object (history as "objective" data). On the contrary, for Benjamin history is to be politically "subjectified", that is to say, the subject of historiography is always already involved in political struggles.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, with Žižek's psychoanalytical-Materialist and Hamacher's transcendental-structural interpretations, we can sum up the most important elements of Benjamin's messianic Marxism: Whereas the motif of *Jetztzeit* offers a model of the messianic "contracted" or filled time, the Benjaminian *Eingedenken* provides a messianic opening-up of the official edifice of history. These two aspects are functions of the same act of historical cognition/acting: on the flipside of the fluidization and opening of official historiography provided by *Eingedenken* takes place a seizure of constellations of *Jetztzeit*. In Benjamin's messianic Marxism, this "deep freeze" (Žižek) or "dialectics at a standstill" (Benjamin) in which the continuous flow of the "homogenous and empty time" is suddenly immobilized and past and present crystallize into a monad is addressed politically (in terms of a proletarian revolution), epistemologically (as the *Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit* [now of recognizability]) and theologically (in terms of a retroactive redemption).

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35 See also Žižek: "The key point not to be missed here is that this moment of future *antérieur* is not the moment when a past situation is 'defrosted', caught in a transformational dynamic, but, on the contrary, the moment of 'deep freeze' elaborated by Walter Benjamin; as Benjamin emphasized in his Theses, the present appears to a revolutionary as a frozen moment of repetition in which the evolutionary flow is immobilized, and past and present directly overlap in a crystalline way." (Slavoj Žižek: *The Plague of Fantasies*. Verso, London, 1997, p. 91.) If we combine this reading of Benjamin with Žižek's interpretation of Marx and Lacan, we come close to an epistemo-political construction mentioned above in my chapter on "epistemology": "Is not Lacan's *futur antérieur* his version of Marx's Thesis 11? The repressed past is never known 'as such', it can become known only in the very process of its transformation, since the interpretation itself intervenes in its object and changes it: for Marx, the truth about the past (class struggle, the antagonism which permeates the entire past history) can become visible only to a subject caught up in the process of its revolutionary transformation. What is at play here is the distinction between the subject of the enunciated and the subject of the enunciation ..." (Ibid., p. 90f.)



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