

WALTER BENJAMIN'S [ÜBER DEN BEGRIFF DER GESCHICHTE] and the Marxist Tradition

MAXWELL WADE

Walter Benjamin's "On the Concept of History" has long puzzled readers due to its eclectic and novel theses that call into question orthodox understandings of religion, Marxism, and historical progress. Many readings have emphasized the feeling of rupture throughout the text, treating it as an intense break with his prior intellectual commitments,¹ a political and theoretical "dark night of the soul" at the end of Benjamin's life. Elements of the text certainly support this reading, and many interpreters, such as Gershom Scholem,² take this text as a clear-cut rejection of Benjamin's prior Marxism. In what follows, I aim to push back against this trend in scholarship and argue that "On the Concept of History" can be understood as an attempt to move Benjamin's thought in a new direction, while still remaining faithful to radical political traditions and much of his earlier thought. I will begin by looking at various attempts to make sense of Benjamin that fall short of adequately dealing with the nuances of the text. I will then analyze the theses themselves in an attempt to read them in tandem with other key texts from the Marxist tradition, and will use that method to make sense of the political implications of "On the Concept of History."

1 Wilde, Marc de. "Benjamin's Politics of Remembrance: A Reading of 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte'." *A Companion to the Works of Walter Benjamin*. Ed. Rolf J. Goebel. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2009. 177.

2 Beiner, Ronald. "Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History." *Political Theory* 12, no. 3 (1984): 423-434.

Perhaps one of the most basic difficulties in Benjamin scholarship with “On the Concept of History” is the plethora of interpretations around it, many of which contradict each other. Scholars frequently reach radically different conclusions about the meaning of the work and its place within Benjamin’s thought, and consensus on this issue seems impossible. Part of this difficulty, I believe, is rooted in an understanding of Marxism and religion as intrinsically opposed or adversarial (it is no wonder Benjamin’s audience would be left scratching its head at such a strange blending of Jewish mysticism and radical politics). Rainer Nägele, for example, thinks that “Benjamin was compelled to make a paradoxical turn, or *Umschlag*, from politics to religion and this had to do with his psychology.”³ But it is not clear to me where the paradox lies in this turn, unless we are to take it that religion and politics are like oil and water, absolutely incapable of intermixing. Others have even considered this text to represent a kind of melancholic neurosis in Benjamin’s psyche,⁴ thereby completely domesticating, under the pretense of psychologism, many complicated or challenging insights in the text.

Being charitable, one might say that these psychological readings are able to give some insight into the conflicts and tensions that gave rise to such a unique and polarizing text. But they neglect the implications of the text itself, merely treating its content as such a theoretical oddity that it must be filed away under the category of “paradox” or “neurosis.” Other interpretive frameworks for the theses seem to fare no better. As Marc de Wilde explains:

The metaphor of the dwarf in the chess machine, which identifies the relation between historical materialism and theology as among the main philosophical stakes of Benjamin’s theses, has prompted a debate between, on the one hand, scholars inspired by Marxism who, in the wake of Bertolt Brecht’s observation that “the small work is clear and illuminating (despite its metaphors and Judaisms),” emphasize the importance of historical materialism at the expense of theology, and, on the other hand, cultural theorists who, following in the footsteps of Gershom Scholem, emphasize the work’s “deep connections with theology,” claiming that “[often] nothing remains of historical materialism but the word.”⁵

Both interpretative camps end up pursuing a certain method in their reading that emphasizes one aspect of the text at the expense of another. Either Marxism is given centrality while theology is pushed aside, or the opposite happens, and theology becomes the only relevant theme in the text. I agree with Wilde’s assessment that “these interpretations, though not untrue, are one-sided.”⁶ They are founded on the same theoretical premise that axiomatically positions religion and Marxism as

3 Rapaport, Herman. “Benjamin as historian.” *Clio* 36, no. 3 (2007): 396.

4 *Ibid.*, 397.

5 Wilde, “Remembrance,” 180.

6 *Ibid.*, 181.

intrinsically opposed, with the coexistence of these two intellectual currents being taken as an oddity or abnormality. If Marxism and mysticism are being talked about together in such a way that they are influencing or supplementing each other, the orthodox critic—either Jewish or Marxist—reacts immunologically against the “contamination” of their tradition by an outside influence. The Orthodox Marxist readers, à la Brecht, are forced to jump through hoops to explain away the dominant messianic themes as either incidental or mere parables.⁷ The “cultural theorists,” conversely, take this text as an expression of Jewish religiosity that only incidentally has similarities to radical political thought. These readings place ideological purity over textual fidelity to the point of incoherence, and in doing so, distort Benjamin’s message that these theses “[do] not designate the precedence of one of these concepts over the other but rather points to their independence.”⁸ Benjamin challenges his readers to rethink the relationship between Marxism and religion, and unfortunately it seems that many have failed to live up to this task.

Of course, I speak to more than just the interplay between Marxism and religion. Readers have rightly pointed out from the start that Benjamin’s reconceptualization of time and his subsequent rejection of progress, as well as his messianism and notions of redeeming the past, are all generally anathema to what is normally taken as the standard premises of Marxist thought. If progressive teleology, future-oriented history, and a rejection of religious sentiment all constitute the theoretical core of Marxism,⁹ then perhaps it is true that Benjamin here is making a break with tradition. However, a close examination of both “On the Concept of History” and selections from Marx and Engels will serve to complicate this picture, showing how Benjamin is engaged in a project that seeks to bring back to the foreground certain elements in Marx’s work that were glossed over by later readers in favor of a simpler, more “systematic” and uncomplicated Marxism.

First and foremost, we must turn our attention to Benjamin’s reconceptualization of time. Time is an overarching theme throughout the text and remains a crucial point of focus for Benjamin’s attack. The metaphysics of time—how we conceptualize our place within history, and how time is treated politically are all intertwined, and

7 “According to Tiedemann, even explicitly theological concepts in Benjamin’s theses, such as ‘the Messiah, redemption, the angel, and the Antichrist,’ are thus merely to be taken as ‘images, analogies, and parables, and not in their real form.’” Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 The label of “Marxism” itself has a complicated and interesting history, especially since Marx himself famously rejected the “Marxism” of his contemporaries, saying “what is certain is that I myself am not a Marxist.” The philologist Michael Heinrich takes this to mean Marx was engaged in a constantly changing critical project, rather than a “rigid science” found in later Leninist-inspired readers. This makes it quite difficult to pin down an “essence” of Marxism or Marxist thought, especially given the theoretical nuances of Marx’s writing. A main point of this paper will be to problematize the notion of a singular or unified “Marxism,” and instead look to see the ways in which Benjamin, like other “unorthodox” thinkers, can still work within the tradition. See Heinrich, Michael. “Je ne suis pas marxiste.” *Neues Deutschland*, January 24, 2015. Accessed December 11, 2018. <https://www.neues-deutschland.de/artikel/959492.je-ne-suis-pas-marxiste.html>. Full English translation available at <https://libcom.org/library/%E2%80%9Eje-ne-suis-pas-marxiste%E2%80%9C>.

“On the Concept of History” —starts by interrogating a certain unifying concept of time that is dominant in our present historical epoch. The common notion of time in the modern capitalist era is one of “progression through a homogenous, empty time,”¹⁰ which is the primary mode of thought that serves as the basic conceptual framework of the past, present, and future. Formally articulated by “positivist historians” like Eduard Meyer,¹¹ this way of thinking about history rose to dominate the academic study of history and reflects the material changes that have occurred under capitalism. Tied in with the development of new technologies used to subjugate both humanity and nature, this shift in thinking about time is a new development in consciousness (though it is surely one that has “corrupted the German working class” more than anything else).¹² Yet, unlike his earlier works in which historical or technological development would at least open up a new space of freedom, this progressivist historicism seems like pure illusion, an ideological dead-end. For example, the innovation of the photograph is “the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction [...which] for the first time in world history, technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual.”

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This apparent break with the dialectical understanding of technological progress that guided his historical work would surely constitute a break with Benjamin’s prior Marxism if it were the case. However, dialectical tensions are still deeply present within the theses. For all of the polemics against the universal history of historicism, Benjamin also admits that “universal histories are not inevitably reactionary. A universal history *without* a structural [*konstruktiv*] principle is reactionary. The structural principle of universal history allows it to be presented in partial histories.”¹⁴ Universal history “has no theoretical armature”¹⁵—no structure that lets it express the historical particular—and because of this it will produce reactionary tendencies. In this sense, universal history is an unmoored idealistic fantasy: “a kind of Esperanto.”¹⁶ So, while it is true that “historicism rightly culminates in universal history,”¹⁷ it is not universal history that is itself the problem. In fact, it seems that the development of a universal history is a partial movement, one that is as of yet unfulfilled by bourgeois positivism. A true universal history is messianic in nature, as “the messianic world is the world of universal and integral actuality. Only in the messianic realm does a

10 Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” in Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940*. Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge [MA] and London: Belknap Press (2003), 395.

11 *Ibid.*, 401.

12 *Ibid.*, 393.

13 Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility” (1936-1939), in Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940*. Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge [MA] and London: Belknap Press (2003), 256. A similar example is film, which “enriched our field of perception... by its use of close ups, by its accentuation of hidden details in familiar objects, and by its exploration of commonplace milieus through the ingenious guidance of the camera.” *Ibid.*, 265.

14 Benjamin, “History,” 404.

15 *Ibid.*

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*, 396

universal history exist.”¹⁸ Universal history “comes too early” and does not tether itself to the historical materialist framework that can properly give it meaning.

This ambivalent dialectical tension within universal history indicates that Benjamin fully recognizes that there is a glimmer of freedom being opened up within progressivism. Yes, it is woefully destructive, but within that destruction is an element that points toward a redemptive, utopian vision. Here, a natural parallel to Marx emerges:

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations...In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct brutal exploitation...All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.¹⁹

Marx, like Benjamin, is no stranger to the horrors of progress, yet the horror likewise opens up a new clarity and vision of an unalienated world. Like the change in the structure of experience that allows for humanity to be able to “face with sober senses” the exploitation they experience, the change in our historical understanding of time and the past compels one to rethink universal history in a genuine, messianic light.²⁰

Much like the previous case of universal history, Benjamin’s idea of messianic time has also confounded many scholars (and not just due to its intentionally religious language). In Thesis A, Benjamin speaks about historicism as “content[ing] itself with establishing a causal nexus among various moments in history [...] the historian who proceeds from this consideration [...] tell[s] the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary,” *i.e.*, one after the other.²¹ Benjamin critiques this precisely because it fails to grasp history as a meaning-giving endeavor: “no state of affairs having causal significance 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.”²² The historicist wrongly treats history as a series of events, and, in doing so, fails to realize that events only become historical in retrospect when we reflect upon them and situate their significance in world history.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 404.

¹⁹ Karl Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in: *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1972) 473-474.

²⁰ It seems reasonable as well to draw a parallel here with the “change in the structure of experience” Benjamin speaks about in his essay on Baudelaire. Here too there is a loss, a death of a certain aesthetic style, but in this experience of loss there is a new distance created with which one can view history, or in this case, poetry, in a new light. See Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1939), in Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940*. Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge [MA] and London: Belknap Press (2003), 313-55.

²¹ Benjamin, “History,” 397.

²² *Ibid.*

This was not a point lost on Marx. In his preface of the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx writes that:

The bourgeois mode of production is the last antagonistic form of the social process of production – antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism but of an antagonism that emanates from the individuals' social conditions of existence – but the productive forces developing within bourgeois society create also the material conditions for a solution of this antagonism. *The prehistory of human society accordingly closes with this social formation.*²³

This passage begins with the standard Marxian understanding of capitalism as that which generates its own conditions of abolition from within. Indeed, though the final portion of the quote is the most noteworthy: all of human “history” is mere *prehistory* up to and including the present. We are living in a prehistorical epoch and only with communism can history truly begin. This is a radically Benjaminian point, to put it in an intentionally anachronistic way, as the past only gains its meaning when viewed through the lens of the utopian messianic time—a time so radically different that it cannot be on the same historical continuum as that which came before. One can likewise read this passage together with another thesis by Benjamin:

Only when the course of historical events runs through the historian's hands smoothly, like a thread, can one speak of progress. If, however, it is a frayed bundle unraveling into a thousand strands that hang down like unplaited hair, none of them has a definite place until they are all gathered up and braided into a coiffure.²⁴

Mapping Marx's schema onto this passage, we can speak of human “prehistory,” (*i.e.*, all hitherto existing class societies) as the “frayed bundle unreeling into a thousand strands,” a mismatched collection of disparate events without meaning or cohesion. However, the communist moment is that which gathers up these historical strands and unifies them into a universal history. Only then can we speak of progress or of genuine history.²⁵

This discussion is valuable because it us can help make sense of Benjamin's call to redeem the past and how it can relate to Marxism. Simply stated, communism is the movement to redeem the past and set history right. Benjamin openly and explicitly explores this theme, first with the idea that “there is a secret agreement between past

23 Marx, Karl. *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by S. W. Ryazanskaya. (Moscow: Progress, 1977). Accessed from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/index.htm>. Italics added

24 Benjamin, “History,” 403.

25 Some interpreters may contest this reading of Benjamin on the grounds that this passage from New Theses C is arguing for the structural impossibility of history to run smoothly, therefore indicating the ultimate impossibility of progress. In this case, the comparison with Marx is invalid. However, given Benjamin's other comments on the messianic nature of a (true) universal history, it seems quite coherent to suggest that a redeemed history is one in which time can finally progress without catastrophe or fragmentation.

generations and the present one” that “endowed [us] with a *weak* messianic power.”²⁶ This connection between the past and present establishes a historical continuity in which messianic power is importantly not something that comes from the outside, as in more orthodox theological conceptions, but rather is something possessed by humanity. Mankind has the power to redeem itself—to “succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages”²⁷—thereby transforming the past. The past is transformed precisely because, as Benjamin puts it, class struggle “has effects that reach far back into the past. They constantly call into question every victory, past and present, of the rulers.”²⁸ A successful communist revolution means that the blood and suffering of past revolutions were not in vain and that the lives of all revolutionaries, past and present, have contributed to the same final goal.

Benjamin recognizes that this has been at work within the more radical strands of Marxism, as the proletariat is “the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of the downtrodden. This conviction, which had a brief resurgence in the Spartacist League, has always been objectionable to Social Democrats.”²⁹ The choice of the name of the Spartacist League is of course not incidental, but is rather a form of remembrance and continuity that reaches back into the past. The revolting proletarians in Germany share the same lineage and connection with the slave revolts of Ancient Rome, in the same way that “to Robespierre, ancient Rome was a past charged with now-time, a past which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate.”³⁰ Benjamin rightly points out the ways in which truly radical movements have challenged oppression precisely through their shared identification with past struggles, rather than an attempt to redeem future generations.³¹

Redemption of the past is intrinsically tied to historical memory and a sense of shared struggle with prior movements, and this, too, existed in the works of Marx and Engels. Perhaps the best and most striking example of this comes from Engels’ *The Peasant War in Germany*, in which he examines the peasant revolts of the 16th century not merely as a discrete and isolated historical event, but as something that still bears connections and inspiration for revolutionary movements of his time. He writes with great admiration for the radical mystic Thomas Müntzer:

Only in the teachings of Muenzer did these communist notions find expression as the desires of a vital section of society. Through him they were formulated with a certain definiteness, and were afterwards found in every great convulsion of the people, until gradually they merged with the

26 Ibid., 390.

27 Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, in: *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1972) 193.

28 Benjamin, “History,” 390.

29 Ibid., 394.

30 Ibid., 395.

31 Ibid., 394.

modern proletarian movement...his political programme touched upon communism, and there is more than one communist sect of modern times which, on the eve of the February Revolution, did not possess a theoretical equipment as rich as that of Muenzer of the Sixteenth Century.³²

This passage may surprise some readers, as the stereotype of Marx and Engels as militant atheist arch-materialists still persists. Yet, the identification with religious mysticism as a revolutionary force runs throughout the text, and Engels sees the revolutionary movements of the Medieval period as being fundamentally of the same nature as proletarian movements in his time.³³ Another example of this is how “[Marx and Engels] shared Hegel’s high esteem for the sixteenth century German mystic and heretic Jacob Boehme, saluted by Marx in the *Rheinische Zeitung* in 1842 as ‘a great philosopher.’”³⁴ Here, too, we see the positive appraisal of mysticism by Marx and Engels, particularly in the sense that mystical thinkers were able to glean great insights into politics and philosophy, perhaps even to the extent that “secular” thinkers were not capable of.

Finding these themes in Marx requires a little more digging; his job as a journalist often meant that most of his time was spent writing about the present, not just past revolutions in antiquity. In recent decades, however, more attention has been paid to Marx’s *Ethnological Notebooks*, and scholars like Franklin Rosemont and Kevin Anderson have sought to explore the ways in which Marx saw revolutionary potential in premodern and non-Western social arrangements. Additionally, Marx was fascinated throughout his life by past societies and their relevance for communism, developing a deep fascination with the Iroquois Confederacy and the ways in which this society serves as an alternative mode of life to capitalism. His anthropological notes reveal that “it was not only Iroquois social organization, however, that appealed to him, but rather *a whole way of life* sharply counter-posed, all along the line, to modern industrial civilization.”³⁵ Another example of this can be found in his studies of Russia, which focus on the ways in which the communal lifestyle of the peasantry can provide an alternative pathway than capitalism. In his letter to Zasulich, Marx writes that “his recent studies of Russian society had ‘convinced me that the commune is the fulcrum for a social regeneration in Russia.’”³⁶ Equally relevant is his comment in the preface to the Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto*, wherein he posits

32 Engels, Friedrich. *The Peasant War in Germany*. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969). 30, 37.

33 Likewise, it is important to note how Engels admired utopian religious communities as excellent examples of communism. For example, “In 1844 we find Engels writing sympathetically of American Shaker communities, which he argued, proved that ‘communism... is not only possible but has actually already been realized.’” Rosemont, Franklin. *Karl Marx & the Iroquois*. (Red Balloon Collective, 1992). 5.

34 *Ibid.*, 6.

35 *Ibid.*, 14.

36 Anderson, Kevin B., “Marx’s Late Writings on Non-Western and Precapitalist Societies and Gender,” in *Rethinking Marxism* 14, no. 4 (2002): 89.

that "Russia's peasant communal land-ownership may serve as the point of departure for a communist development."³⁷

These passages are illuminating precisely because they point to a strand of Marx's thinking that emphatically rejects the blind progressivism that Benjamin is critiquing in his theses. Marx is neither shrugging off the suffering caused by capitalism as a historical inevitability nor is he treating communism as a far-off world of the future. Rather, he is searching for alternative developmental paths for the world to take and looking at ways in which communal, egalitarian lifestyles are present in the world at the time of his writing. The great irony is that

At the very moment that his Russian "disciples" - those "admirers of capitalism," as he ironically tagged them - were loudly proclaiming that the laws of historical development set forth in the first volume of *Capital* were universally mandatory, Marx himself was diving headlong into the study of (for him) *new experiences of resistance and revolt against oppression* - by North American Indians, Australian aborigines, Egyptians and Russian peasants.³⁸

This leaves us with new view of Marx that is more in line with Benjamin's perspective. Not only are Marx and Engels deeply interested in the historical continuity between their struggle and past movements, but they also engage with many of the same philosophical issues as well. Challenging simplistic notions of historical progress, as well as grounding communism as an immanent human reality, results in a Marxism that harmonizes—rather than clash—with Benjamin's most radical theses.³⁹

This understanding can also help shed light on the notorious passage from Thesis XVIIa, in which Benjamin writes that "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."⁴⁰ On the face of it, this seems radically conservative, rather than revolutionary, intimating that the point of revolution is an attempt to stop history where it is and bring things to a standstill, presumably to prevent further decay. Yet, it seems quite plausible to read Marxian strands here, despite the openly critical attitude Benjamin takes toward him in this section. Reading the two together, one can take the idea that "the history of all *hitherto* existing society is the history of class

37 Marx, Karl, and Frederick Engels. "Preface to the Manifesto of the Communist Party." Marxist Internet Archive. Accessed December 13, 2018. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/preface.htm>.

38 Rosemont, "Iroquois," 30.

39 It is important to note, of course, that it is unlikely (or in some cases, impossible) that Benjamin had read all of these texts from Marx and Engels' corpus. In many ways, their philosophical convergence on some of the same issues and themes points toward the fact that all three thinkers were dealing with many of the same philosophical dilemmas and reached similar conclusions.

40 Benjamin, "History," 402.

struggles”⁴¹ is the locomotive of what Benjamin calls “world history.” This world history is mere *prehistory* for Marx, however, as genuine history has not yet begun, and communist society with its abolition of the division of labor⁴² will bring about history in earnest. Therefore, if class struggle is the locomotive of (pre)history, then it is perfectly coherent to speak about communist revolution as an emergency brake: with the abolition of class society, there is no more “motor” to drive history and “world history” is brought to an end. Benjamin expresses this end of history as a messianic time, a wholly new state of consciousness, and Marx, too, understands communism as a vision in which mankind reaches a new, unalienated consciousness.

In his reading of this passage, the contemporary philosopher Benjamin Noys proposes a reading that reaches similar conclusions:

The conclusion is that the emergency brake is not merely calling to a halt for the sake of it, some static stopping at a particular point in capitalist history (say Swedish Social Democracy – which the American Republican Right now takes as the true horror of ‘socialism’). Neither is it a return back to some utopian pre-capitalist moment, which would fall foul of Marx and Engels’s anathemas against ‘feudal socialism’. Rather, Benjamin argues that: ‘Classless society is not the final goal of historical progress but its frequently miscarried, ultimately [*endlich*] achieved interruption.’ We interrupt to prevent catastrophe, we destroy the tracks to prevent the greater destruction of acceleration.⁴³

This analysis is particularly apt in the way that it recognizes that the pulling of the emergency brake signals not only a rethinking of the kind of historical progression that we are experiencing, but also a radical attempt to break with the whole history of class society. Noys likewise focuses in on a clever double-entendre with break/brake, as “Benjamin’s interruption suggests a more definitive break (or brake) with the aim of production. The stopping of the angelic locomotive tries to jump the tracks of history, or jump out of the vision of history as infinite waiting for the revolutionary situation.”⁴⁴ This “jump” out of history is, after all, “the dialectical leap Marx understood as revolution.”⁴⁵

In fact, even within this same thesis (XVIIa), Benjamin acknowledges the insight made by Marx in this regard. He begins by saying that “in the idea of classless society, Marx secularized the idea of messianic time. And that was a good thing.”⁴⁶ He is, in a very clear way, acknowledging his intellectual indebtedness to Marx—something not really plausible when one considers this text his “break” with Marxism—and sees

41 Marx, *Manifesto*, 473. Italics added.

42 Marx, *German Ideology*, 160.

43 Noys, Benjamin. *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism*. (Lanham: John Hunt Publishing, 2014) 63.

44 Ibid.

45 Benjamin, “History,” 395.

46 Ibid., 401.

the error as rooted in the Social Democrats' elevation of this to an abstract, idealistic principle.⁴⁷ Not only does this emphasize that the problem only began with the Social Democrats (not Marx, who therefore has a correct, or at least unproblematic, understanding of classless society), but he also indicates the ways in which Benjamin remains loyal to a materialist outlook that rejects elevating one's political goals into an unreachable "infinite task." This move toward abstraction is closely tied with the "empty and homogenous time" spoken of earlier, as "once the classless society had been transformed into an infinite task, the empty and homogenous time was transformed into an anteroom, so to speak, in which one could wait for the emergence of the revolutionary situation with more or less equanimity."⁴⁸

Returning to Marx, we again can see two resonant parallels between the two thinkers. The simplistic, reductionist (but unfortunately commonplace) reading of Marx would take him as placing communism in a far-off and distant future, maintaining that future-oriented stance that Benjamin so aggressively critiques in this text. Likewise, another common misreading of Marx takes communism as yet another political ideology, an idealistic framework that needs to be imposed on society from the outside. Yet, Marx explicitly states otherwise in *The German Ideology*, wherein he famously writes that "communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things."⁴⁹ The abstract as a political goal is rejected precisely because it forces reality to conform to it and is, therefore, an arbitrary and alien imposition on the world that is unmoored from its material conditions. Like Benjamin, there is a rejection of the future tense: the misunderstandings of communism are both that which is "to be," while true communism is squarely focused on the present state of things. It is focused on the here and now, and its power lies precisely in its immanence to the world as it is. Communism is not external or foreign, but rather is "the *real* movement," *i.e.*, the movement that actually exists in the world as it is right now.

When Benjamin speaks about classless society as "frequently miscarried,"⁵⁰ it still means the world is still "pregnant" with communism, much in the same way that Marx sees "the conditions of [the] movement result[ing] from the premises now in existence."⁵¹ This immanence is even more clearly explicated in his notion of messianic time, which shoots the present moment like splinters.⁵² Likewise, "every second was the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter."⁵³ These numerous passages all point toward a conception of utopia that is radically immanent

47 "It was only when the Social Democrats elevated this idea to an 'ideal' that the trouble began." Ibid.

48 Ibid., 402.

49 Marx, *German Ideology*, 162.

50 Benjamin, "History," 402.

51 Marx, *German Ideology*, 162.

52 Benjamin, "History," 397.

53 Ibid.

in its temporality, framing the revolutionary break as something that can happen at any time, which is not contingent upon some sort of “historical development” that justifies the exploitation and suffering leading up to it.

Therefore, we can take “On the Concept of History” as representing an attempt to synthesize the systematic and utopian tendencies within Marxism and bring it together into a unified whole. Historical materialism, as a rational and systematic historical framework, understands the role of class struggle and revolution, while messianism, as the utopian dream of redemption and salvation, recognizes the immanence of this radical change and the need to redeem the past from its suffering. Both serve as meaning-giving structures that help one understand the past and present, but not in such a way that resorts back to bourgeois historicism and positivist historiography. The two elements not only complement each other, but they also exert mutual influence in their coexistence, working together to provide a proper political program that can bring about this shattering of time and redemption of the world that Benjamin writes about.

Ultimately, the text should be understood neither as a rejection of the Marxist tradition, nor as an attempt to add a seemingly foreign element—religion—into the theoretical mixture. Rather, Benjamin is drawing on what is already latent in the text, and casts it in a new light, in order to draw attention to it and to cause readers to reevaluate their ossified, overly rigid notions of Marxism and revolution. It is a corrective measure against the failings and shortcomings of the Social Democrats that have ruined the workers’ movement and have let fascism triumph. It is precisely for this reason that this text needs to be understood in continuity with what has come before. Benjamin is working to redeem Marxism and salvage the messianic sparks hidden within, all while remaining loyal to what has come before. ♦

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