

**Redemptive
Revolutions:
The Political
Hermeneutics of
Walter Benjamin**

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An often quoted and highly plausible phrase points out a contemporary challenge for political philosophy: “Today, it is easier to imagine the end of all life on earth, than the breakdown of capitalism.” This quote is sometimes attributed to Žižek, sometimes to Jameson. Its uncertain origin serves to prove its common appeal: that we live in a time of economic, social and political crises is no controversial claim. Here, we strike a problem much more profound: the crisis does not merely concern our political system or our economic behavior, but also *thinking itself*. The aforementioned phrase says: It is impossible to *imagine* anything outside of the status quo.

If this is true, political philosophy faces a hermeneutical challenge—and this, I believe, is where a turn to the thought of Walter Benjamin can prove itself useful. Instead of postulating utopian dreams that late capitalism can easily integrate and consumerize, Benjamin offers a political hermeneutics seeking to develop thought that can transcend the status quo without underestimating the totalizing function of capitalism.

As an *homme de lettres*, he locates this potential in reading and writing. In this sense, Benjamin’s work is a hermeneutical quest for justice that revolves around the citation that he believes to entail a twofold responsibility: the citation must do justice to the one quoted, and it must be well-placed, well-timed and thus also do justice to its present surroundings. For Benjamin, the citation (and are not all texts citations?) is a philological engagement with a specific piece of the past, and simultaneously, as an actualization or recollection of this past, it is an engagement with the present that has the interventional potential to change the present. The citations are both philological and political.

In his essay on Eduard Fuchs, Benjamin discusses the slogan of the German Social Democracy before World War I, “Knowledge is power,” by suggesting that the party failed to perceive its double meaning. It thought the same knowledge that secured the rule of the bourgeoisie over the proletariat would enable the proletariat to free itself from that rule. In reality, knowledge with no outlet in praxis, knowledge that could teach the proletariat nothing about its situation as a class, was no danger to its oppressors.¹

The intellectual producing political knowledge—the outcome of a political hermeneutics—must meet two criteria: (a) teach the proletariat about its situation as a class, i.e., take upon himself an organizational

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¹ Benjamin 1979, p. 356. When relevant a reference to the German text in *Gesammelte Schriften* will follow the English reference in square brackets: [GS, volume/part, page].

function and (b) give this knowledge an “outlet in praxis,” i.e., offer the constructed collective subjectivity motivations for political action.² Obviously, the question imposing itself on the political hermeneutics here concerns the relation between theory and praxis. As I will show (in section I), this relation in Benjamin’s early materialism (culminating with the often neglected Brecht-period) becomes a dialectic between the image of an emancipatory potential and a collective subject capable of revolutionary action. Following this insight, the central concept of Benjamin’s late philosophy, *redemption* (described in section II), must be politically repositioned through an inquiry into the *relation between collectivity and the weak Messianic force* (which I follow in section III).

I. Images and Organization

Richard Wolin calls Benjamin’s Brecht-period “vulgar materialist” and believes Benjamin to have “uncritically identified” the methods of mechanical reproduction and the revolutionary potential of art.³ This is a typical way to dismiss this period in Benjamin’s thinking, where he is most explicitly developing a political philosophy. This account of the engagement with Brecht, however, fails to acknowledge how the organizational function of art, media and technology is, in fact, addressing a central problem present in Benjamin’s earlier (and widely celebrated) collection of aphorisms from 1928, *One-Way Street*, and in his work on Surrealism from 1929, which mark his initial turn towards materialism.

In the aphorism ‘Imperial Panorama’ from *One-Way Street*, Benjamin formulates a historiographical theme that will occupy him for the rest of his life, when he discusses the piece of phraseology “things can’t go on like this.” This is seen as an expression of the “average [German] citizen,” who notices the increasingly unpleasant conditions of life in capitalist society, but expects this decay to come to an automatic halt.⁴ Benjamin, however, objects: “To decline is no less stable, no more surprising, than to rise.”⁵ Rather than assume that decline is inherently unstable and bound to stop, he suggests that under capitalism we must conceive “decline as stability itself.”⁶ The present situation is so dire that we must

.....
2 Cf. Buck-Morss 1981, p. 53

3 Wolin 1994, p. 156, 158

4 Benjamin 1979, p. 54

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

view everything in the light of the impending catastrophe rather than expect progress. In a certain sense, he seems to suggest that progress *is* a catastrophe: “Nothing, therefore, remains but to direct the gaze, in the perpetual expectation of the final onslaught, on nothing except the extraordinary event in which alone salvation now lies.”⁷

This (famous) pessimism or melancholia reveals the method of *One-Way Street* with which Benjamin hopes to open the possibility of the “extraordinary event in which alone salvation now lies.” The maxim *to see events in the light of the catastrophe* is (a personal inclination and) a strategic, literary method that Benjamin uses in an attempt to inspire people to break out of the habits that hold us on a collision course with disaster. By allegorically juxtaposing the objects of everyday life with the horror of present-age capitalism, Benjamin hopes to strip them off their immediacy and familiarity and create a distance for critical reflection and action.

The image of the catastrophe reappears in another aphorism, ‘Fire Alarm,’ that can serve as a further indicator of his conception of criticism: if the abolition of the bourgeoisie is not completed by an almost calculable moment in economic and technical development (a moment signaled by inflation and poison-gas warfare), all is lost. Before the spark reaches the dynamite, the lighted fuse must be cut. The interventions, danger, and tempi of politicians are technical—not chivalrous.⁸

Society is in decay and if nothing is done, disaster is certain. What is needed, however, is not an imaginative consideration of alternative worlds or utopias but the courage to stare at the “final onslaught” in order to find its weak spot. Benjamin emphasizes the technicality of this task when using surgery as a metaphor of the literary-critical process: “With the cautious lineaments of handwriting the operator makes incisions, displaces internal accents, cauterizes proliferations of words, inserts a foreign term as a silver rib.”⁹

The forces that the critic must counter are great, and thus he cannot do it alone. To be countered is thus the individualizing effect of modernity. In ‘Imperial Panorama’ Benjamin underlines that this is the fuse that must be cut:

[J]ust as a man can endure much in isolation, but feels justifiable shame when his wife sees him bear it or suffers it herself, so he may tol-

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7 Ibid., p. 55

8 Ibid., p. 84

9 Ibid., p. 85

erate much as long as he is alone, and everything as long as he conceals it. But no one may ever make peace with poverty when it falls like a gigantic shadow upon his countrymen and his house. Then he must be alert to every humiliation done to him and so discipline himself that his suffering becomes no longer the downhill road of grief, but the rising path of revolt.¹⁰

The critic must uncover the impoverishment and the humiliation caused by bourgeois society by countering isolation and (re)placing man in a social context. Only in a collective body can we face the terror and follow “the rising path of revolt.” Man in isolation accepts grief, but the collective revolts. And yet, the formation of the present isolates man: “people have only the narrowest private interest in mind.”¹¹ Thus, Benjamin’s revolutionary materialism encounters the problem of organization: how can the literary-philosophical author constitute a collective body capable of political action? That this problem is absolutely central to Benjamin’s early materialism is evident, when we consider the position described in his essay on Surrealism that Benjamin felt akin to.

The Surrealist emphasis on intoxication presents another attempt to counter the described individualism. “In the world’s structure dream loosens individuality like a bad tooth.”¹² In intoxication—a form of *ekstasis*, a being outside of oneself—the Surrealists found a method of breaking the confining isolation of capitalism. In their writing, the Surrealists document or demonstrate the experience of intoxication that breaks the self—that is, its revolutionary potential.

This potential, however, is not *necessarily* connected with intoxication. The important aspect that Benjamin finds fruitful, however, is not the intoxication itself, but rather the experience of a possible negation of the status quo. A concrete material triggers this experience and as such it is a profane instead of religious dogmatism. “[T]he true, creative overcoming of religious illumination certainly does not lie in narcotics. It resides in a *profane illumination*, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson.”¹³ Benjamin calls the experience a *profane illumination*. Through its art, Surrealism makes the audience realize the mysteries of everyday life as the

.....
10 Ibid., p. 56

11 Ibid., p. 55

12 Benjamin 2007a, p. 179

13 Ibid., p. 179

objects of our everyday lives are transformed into something mysterious and alien. By merging reality and dream, the Surrealists seek to distance us from our habitual course of life and make us, in the material closest to us, see the possibility of something entirely different. Thus, the profane illumination is an immanent negation that through a concrete object reveals the possibility of change. The Surrealist fusion of reality and dream makes us realize the *possible in the actual*.

Despite this obvious revolutionary potential, Benjamin doubts that the Surrealists strategy can actualize itself into revolutionary action. As in *One-Way Street*, there seems to be a missing link between the interruption as an alienation of everyday life and collective action. “[A]re they successful in welding this experience of freedom to the other revolutionary experience that we have to acknowledge because it has been ours, the constructive, dictatorial side of revolution? In short, have they bound revolt to revolution?”¹⁴

Thus, we arrive at the central problem with the Surrealist position: they retain a romantic distance to the masses when they consider art to be autonomous and thus cannot rid themselves of a certain form of individualism or isolation. This is the problem with the avant-garde or the intelligentsia. The same essentially individualistic tendency problematizes the use of narcotics: the Surrealists isolate themselves in private dream worlds and thus reveal themselves to be anarchic rather than properly revolutionary. Nonetheless, there is a revolutionary potential in the profane illumination that expresses a central pessimistic attitude in the Surrealist “cult of evil” not unlike the pessimism employed in *One-Way Street*’s image of the catastrophe.¹⁵ Thus, the critical attitude expressed in both these works lacks the socializing element required to transcend the individualism of the present age and enter the rising path of revolt. Benjamin addresses this problem, when he calls for an “organization of pessimism”:¹⁶

Surrealism has come ever closer to the Communist answer. And that means pessimism all along the line. Absolutely. Mistrust in the fate of literature, mistrust in the fate of freedom, mistrust in the fate of European humanity, but three times mistrust in all reconciliation: between classes,

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14 Ibid., p. 189

15 Ibid., p. 187

16 Ibid., p.190

between nations, between individuals.¹⁷

Even though the profane illumination gives us a radical concept of freedom, it is unable to constitute a collective body capable of revolutionary action. The Communist answer “is pessimism all along the line.” This means that pessimism must acquire an organizing function.

The allegory of *One-Way Street* and the profane illumination of Surrealism are examples of what Benjamin calls *images*. The notion of the image marks one of the difficulties of approaching Benjamin’s philosophy as he uses images instead of systematically defined concepts. Obviously, images in this sense are not synonymous with pictures or photographs as Benjamin was an *homme de lettres*— they are discursive but non-conceptual.¹⁸ Or, rather, they mark the *limit of concepts*. The images are made in language but they resist a total conceptualization and thus are dissolved into the established totality of meaning. As he writes in ‘Surrealism’:

Life only seemed worth living where the threshold between waking and sleeping was worn away in everyone as by the steps of multitudinous images flooding back and forth, language only seemed itself where where sound and image, image and sound interpenetrated with automatic precision and such felicity that no chink was left for the penny-in-the-slot called “meaning.” Image and language takes precedence (...) Not only before meaning. Also before the self.¹⁹

The image takes precedence over meaning, i.e., in the revolutionary attempt image gains priority over meaning, which, on the other hand, is identified as essentially belonging to the capitalist order: meaning is commoditized as a “penny-in-the-slot.” The image is an immanent negation in the sense that it is articulated in a present totality of meaning but points beyond this sphere and thus contains and localizes a potential for revolutionary action. The image is expressed, but never adequately.

In order to become truly revolutionary the image function of art must be supplemented by organizing subjectivity into a collective body: “to organize pessimism means nothing other than to expel moral metaphor from politics and to discover in political action a sphere reserved one hundred percent for images.”²⁰ This means that the Left-wing intellectuals must overthrow the intellectuals of the bourgeoisie and unite their con-

.....
17 Ibid., p. 191

18 Cf. Benjamin 1999: N3,1. References to The Arcades Project will follow Benjamin’s own indexation.

19 Benjamin 2007a: p. 178f

20 Ibid.

templative revolutionary experiments with the masses by making a multiplicity of images accessible.

In the image-sphere, the artist or the intellectual must address his proper audience: the revolutionary subject. Or, rather, he must participate in the organization of this subject. This happens *through technology*, as this is the medium that can finally make body and image interpenetrate. In other words, Benjamin calls for a dialectical transformation that unites the image with the collective body and forms a revolutionary subject.

So far Benjamin has been concerned with only one side of the dialectics: the development of the image. The organizational side of the dialectics is largely lacking, and this is what turns him towards the Brechtian materialism and specifically his *Umfunktionalisierung*. This also means that an internal dialectics is present in Benjamin's thought, striving towards the establishment of a revolutionary subject. This dialectical connection between Benjamin's first materialist writings and his Brecht-period seems to be what Wolin fails to see when he dismisses the latter as "undialectical."²¹

In 'The Author as Producer' (1934) Benjamin seeks to dialectically transcend the unfruitful antinomy between literary quality and political tendency that dominates the literary theory and criticism at his time. Instead, he proposes that such a dichotomy loses its importance once we reflect on the *technique* of the author, or his position within and effect on the current relations of production. Already in this framing of the argument, it is evident that Benjamin picks up where he left Surrealism. We must rethink the artistic technique so that it can be socially and politically progressive. When urging us to think not of the *attitude* towards the relations of production in the work but of the *position in* the relations of productions, he has, from the very outset, dealt with the question concerning the autonomy of art.

At this point in the argument, in order to avoid a gross misunderstanding of 'The Author as Producer' as expressing a naïve or vulgar faith in technological progress, it is important to stress that technique and technology, however closely related they might be, are *not* identical. Further explaining his misreading of the Brecht-period, Wolin makes exactly this mistake: The work of art will be progressive if it follows the most advanced *techniques*—epic theater, film, Soviet journalism—and regressive

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21 Wolin 1994, p. 158. A similar mistake is made by Michael Löwy, when he, avoiding the temptation to categorize the Brecht-period as blunder, calls it a "brief intellectual experiment" (Löwy 1985, p. 54) or an "exception" (*ibid.*, p. 53) to the overarching criticism of progress. Like Wolin, Löwy severs the dialectical connection between image and organization.

if it follows traditional, outmoded artistic practices—regressive, that is, in terms of both its political tendency and quality. (...) As in the 1936 “Work of Art” essay, Benjamin’s analysis is vitiated by the vulgar materialist presupposition that the use of *technologically* advanced means will have unilaterally positive results for art.²²

As my italics show, Wolin slips from the *technical* advanced to the *technological* advanced. An evocation of the analogy of the surgeon that Benjamin used in *One-Way Street* to describe the role of the writer emphasizes this difference. A surgeon uses *technology* and preferably the newest and most advanced technology, but his *technique*, the skill with which he operates, is not solely determined by the technology available to him. To believe that technique and technology are identical amounts to claiming that a painter would become a surgeon if his brushes and paint were suddenly replaced by scalpels, clamps and suction tubes, and that the surgeon should use the newest equipment for brain surgery in order to remove an appendix. The most advanced technique is the one that performs the operation in the best possible way. The best possible way, in turn, reflects the technology available as well as the nature of the patient and the operation (or, in the case of the revolutionary, the nature of the collective subject and its capability to change the relations of production).

Benjamin himself implies this difference, when saying that Brecht, whom he admired deeply, “fell back on the most primitive elements of the theater. He contended himself, by and large, with a podium.”²³ Contrary to Wolin’s suggestion, a technological simplicity founds the technical advancement of Epic Theater. Benjamin’s fascination of Brecht is due to the delicacy with which Brecht conceived of his role as a producer, specializing in the field of theater. Instead of upholding the distinction between artist and spectator, as such a specialization seems to imply, Brecht sought to undermine it, and the technique of the Epic Theater is exactly such an attempt to engage the audience, rather than to pacify it.

In the Epic Theater, Benjamin locates a double function: the interruptive and the organizing. In his plays, Brecht takes up familiar situations but defamiliarizes them through interruption. Benjamin exemplifies this point by referencing how Brecht allows a complete stranger to enter the scene, so that when the audience looks at things from the stranger’s per-

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22 Ibid., p. 156, my italics

23 Benjamin 2008, p. 90

spective they are suddenly alienated from a situation that minutes ago they were completely absorbed in. Where the traditional theater seeks absorption, *catharsis*, Brecht seeks its interruption. Benjamin formulates the revolutionary potential in this alienation by saying that “What emerges is this: events are alterable not at their climaxes, not by virtue and resolution, but only in their strictly habitual course [*gewöhnheitsmäßigen Verläufe*], by reason and practice [*durch Vernunft und Übung*].”²⁴ The function of this interruption resembles the function of the profane illumination: it alienates us from our everyday, and in so doing it provides a distance from which we can critically reflect.

This leads to the *Umfunktionierung*, which seems to be the Brechtian parallel of the image-sphere, where the engagement of the audience dialectically unifies interruption and a collective body. By equipping the spectator with a critical distance, Brecht socializes “the intellectual means of production.”²⁵ This means that the interruption “has the character not of a stimulant but of an organizing function.”²⁶ With interruption, Brecht alienates the spectator. Inherent in this alienation is a distance that allows the spectator *critically to reflect* on the world in which he usually operates with utmost familiarity. Only through interruption and reflection can habits be changed, and thus, the interruption plays a revolutionary role. Furthermore, as the audience is not a single but a collective subject, the *Umfunktionierung* is social. The technique Brecht employs thus manages to consider and affect its own position in the relations of production. Benjamin summarizes this when he writes: “*An author who teaches writers nothing teaches no one.* (...) [The] apparatus is better, the more consumers it is able to turn into producers—that is, readers or spectators into collaborators.”²⁷

Brecht’s advantage is the way he induces the audience to be collaborators in his play, rather than passive and thoughtless spectators. Nonetheless, even for the most optimistic revolutionary, a collective subject the size of a theater audience is incapable of overthrowing the capitalist means of production. Brecht did, however, find a technique, the *Umfunktionierung*, that generates a critical, collective subject. But as the technique, or the apparatus as Benjamin says, is “better, it is able to turn

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²⁴ Ibid., p. 91 [GS, II/2, p. 699]

²⁵ Ibid., p. 93

²⁶ Ibid., p. 91

²⁷ Ibid., p. 89, his italics

more consumers into producers,” Benjamin must face the limitations of the Epic Theater and move beyond the domain of art. He must instead turn his attention to the mass production of popular culture.

For Benjamin, the political importance of film consists not only in the larger audience that it addresses but also in the way that it changes “the *relation* of the masses to art.”²⁸ Whereas mass consumption might be a sufficient aim for a capitalist producer, Benjamin locates three different ways that change the *relation* to the masses in order to socialize the revolutionary impulse. The first two of these have already been encountered in premature forms and will thus be briefly summarized. The first corresponds to the defamiliarization of everyday life as an interruption, where the camera distorts objects and the editing distorts contexts.²⁹ The second entails the possibility of collectivizing the ecstatic aspect of Surrealism as dreams and psychotic experiences that “can be appropriated by collective perception.”³⁰

The third function is what Benjamin calls *distraction*. Here, he finds a technique that differs from the others in the way that it seeks to constitute a collective body not by establishing a critical distance to the everyday life but by assuming the closest proximity to it. “[T]he greatly increased mass of participants has produced a different kind of participation.”³¹ Traditionally, “the masses are criticized for seeking distraction in the work of art, whereas the art lover supposedly approaches it with concentration.”³² This distinction between distraction and concentration, however, must not be conceived as one between social classes, but as one between modes of reception. The concentrated person “enters into the work,” whereas “the distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves.”³³ In distraction we find a habitual training: “Even the distracted person can form habits.”³⁴

Technique is thus the dialectics between emancipatory potential as images on the one hand and a collective body on the other. *One-Way*

.....
28 Ibid., p. 36, my italics

29 Ibid., p. 37

30 Ibid., p. 38

31 Ibid., p. 39

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., p. 40

34 Ibid.

Street and Surrealism offer shock-like interruptions of everyday life and thus destabilize the status quo. They do, however, lack a collective body. Brechtian Epic Theater and movies, on the contrary, are able to constitute a collective subject through socializing the revolutionary experience of alienation, dreams and certain types of distraction. In section III, the insight that aesthetics and media are forms of reception and organization and thus ultimately a counter-hegemonic movement will be unfolded, but first I will trace the impulse already seen in *One-Way Street* where events were seen in the light of catastrophe to its radicalization in Benjamin's groundbreaking theses on history.

II. Historical Materialism: Ideology and History

The last text Benjamin wrote before he died was the famous 'On the Concept of History', often referred to simply as the theses. Commentators often recognize the political potential of the theses with its radical critique of progress and historical continuity and hint that Benjamin's philosophy of history is a critique of ideology,³⁵ but they fail to place this critique of ideology in the larger political framework of Benjamin's thought. I will in this section provide a reading of the theses that focuses on its potential as a critique of ideology, before in the next section considering the relation between the dialectics of image and collective body outlined above and the weak Messianic force. Following the development of Benjamin's text, I will outline (i) the ontological ground for the juxtaposition of history and theology, (ii) how the weak Messianic force is a relation to the past, and (iii) the political function of this account of history and its relation to the dialectical image.

The famous image from the first thesis sets the scene: historical materialism is a chess-playing puppet. In order for it "to win all the time" it must enlist "the services of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight."³⁶ What does it mean that historical materialism must enlist theology in its service? How is this possible? What people tend to overlook is that we are not merely presented with the elements—history and theology—that must be related, we are also given a hint towards the nature of this relationship: its aim is to "win all the time." The game played, I believe, is politics, and thus to be figured out is

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35 Löwy calls it "the most important attempt at a Marxist critique of the ideology of progress" (Löwy 2000, p. 41) and Buck-Morss says that "Benjamin's 'Copernican revolution' completely strips 'history' of its legitimating, ideological function" (Buck-Morss 1993, p. x).

36 Benjamin 2007b, p. 253

in what sense the relation between history and theology is political.

This question motivates a turn to ontology in order to clarify the type of objects that must be common to history and theology in order for them to become a functional unit. This is, implicitly, what happens in the second thesis, which Benjamin introduces by quoting Lotze:

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.³⁷

According to Benjamin, the bracketing of the future experienced in envy runs parallel to the experience of happiness, which is “colored by the time to which the course of our own existence has assigned us.”³⁸ He emphasizes a certain modality central to both these phenomena: the possibility of envy means that our happiness exists “among people we *could* have talked to, women who *could* have given themselves to us.”³⁹ Thus, humans have an ability to put themselves in a relation to something absent. In envy and happiness, this ability is confined to a certain modality and temporality: we are not envious of the future, only the present and the past. Furthermore, we are envious of what could have happened, but did not. This is, in a certain sense, an ability to transcend the present and put oneself in relation to something other than what is immediately given. That something could have happened but did not means that the present has brushed aside these other possibilities. For Benjamin, the present has been actualized at the expense of these alternative possibilities that have consequently been oppressed. Thus, happiness and envy imply a structure that puts man in a relation to the past. They imply a modal-temporal ability to transcend the present. This motivates Benjamin to make the apparently abrupt conclusion that “our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption [*Erlösung*]. The same applies to our view of the past [*der Verstellung des Glücks*], which is the concern [*Sache*] of history.”⁴⁰

Behind this inference is the assumption that the logic of redemption implies the same modality and temporality as that of happiness and of history. Thus, the object, *die Sache* of history and of redemption (i.e., theology) is the *past*. Benjamin’s word is *die Vergangenheit*, literally ‘that

.....
37 Ibid., p. 253

38 Ibid., p. 254

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid. [GS, I/2, p. 693]

which has gone by or which is no longer actual.' What is characteristic of the past is that it carries with it "a secret index [*heimlichen Index*] by which it is referred to redemption."⁴¹ Benjamin exemplifies (in a passage omitted in *Illuminations*) this secret index by expanding on the modality of our happiness: "Are we not touched by the same air as our predecessors? Are there not in the voices that we lend our ears an echo of those now silenced? Do the women that we court not have sisters they do not know?"⁴² The secret index is inscribed in this modality, where everything present exists at the expense of something else. Thus, the existent carries for Benjamin's sensible ear an echo of what has been silenced. He sees in the existent particular not an entirely hypothetical or abstract multiplicity of possibilities, but one that has been historically silenced or oppressed. What is no longer actual must be heard in every word. The present being bears witness to beings no longer actual. In every particular being there is *a trace of a historically concrete multiplicity*. Pushed to its furthest ontological consequence: the possibilities of the past are *real* but *un-actual*.⁴³

Whereas history traditionally *uncovers* the past, theology, or at least messianism, *redeems* this past. This common ontology justifies the juxtaposition of history and theology, but why one necessarily calls for the other is in no way self-evident.

The nature of the reference "by which [the secret index] is referred to redemption" might explain this entanglement of theology and history. The rest of the theses goes:

If this is so, then there is a secret agreement [*geheime Verabredung*] between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim [*Anspruch*]. That claim cannot be settled cheaply. Historical materialists are aware of that.⁴⁴

The reality of the past implies for Benjamin a call or a demand [*ein Anspruch*]. The secret index is what I have called the real but un-actual

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41 Ibid., translation corrected

42 GS, I/2, p. 693f, my translation

43 I use this inelegant negation in order to avoid the associations of the usual antonyms of actual: it is not fictitious or imaginary but objectively real, nor is it hypothetical, a mere logical possibility to be proven. My dictionary even suggest past as an antonym to actual, but even past seems (if we ignore the obvious tautological nature of such an expression) a bit to crude to describe the ontological delicacy of Benjamin's *Vergangenheit*: the adjective past connotes that something is lost for good, and this is, exactly, what must be countered if we are to follow Benjamin.

44 Ibid., p. 254 [GS, I/2, p. 695], translation corrected

historical multiplicity and the reference to redemption is the call or demand directed towards the historical materialist. The modal-temporal ability to relate to something outside of the present is a condition of the weak Messianic force: only with this ability can the historical materialist hear the call from the past. But the ability to hear is not enough: the weak Messianic force is a type of responsiveness, where a past demands something of me and I must prove myself responsible to the past. This responsibility is the weak Messianic force. It is the redemptive power that puts me in a relation to the real but un-actualized past, i.e., the power by which the historical materialist rejects that anything should be *irredeemably* lost.

A turn to the epistemology of this account of history shows how the demanded response as redemption is possible. Benjamin writes in his third thesis:

To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a *citation à l'ordre du jour*—and that day is Judgment Day.⁴⁵

For mankind to receive the fullness of its past is equivalent to the past becoming citable in all its moments. This means that the function of the weak Messianic force is to actualize the un-actualized or forgotten. For Benjamin this is the function of the citation: to quote is to take something out of its context and bring it into the present, to put something on the agenda, *the order of the day*. The citation is a way of answering the demand of the past—it is a textual responsibility where one takes responsibility for and actualizes the past. The quotation is thus a relation with the past; an instance of the weak Messianic force.

Due to the finitude of man, hermeneutically situated in the ideological structures of his own time, only certain elements of the past are understandable and quotable: “only for a [fully] redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments.” Benjamin puts the same thought differently in the Arcades Project when commenting on a letter from Horkheimer concerning his essay on Fuchs. Here, Benjamin unfolds the theologico-historical hermeneutics that relates one to the past by saying that history is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance [*Eingedenken*]. What science has ‘determined,’ [*festgestellt*, fixated or held fast] remembrance can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete [*das Unabgeschlossene*] (happiness) into something

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45 Ibid.

complete, and the complete [*das Abgeschlossene*] (suffering) into something incomplete. That is theology; but in remembrance we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted us to try to write it with immediately theological concepts.⁴⁶

Eiland and McLaughlin translate *Abgeschlossene* and *Unabgeschlossene* are complete and incomplete, but as these words derive from *schließen*, which means to end or conclude but first and foremost to close or shut down, I prefer to translate them with *closed* and *open*, since the word *complete* associates a form of perfection or totality and such an association will prove itself incompatible with Benjamin's project. What the science of history has determined or fixated, what has finally been *closed*, can be opened by remembrance. The closed nature of history is what I called the un-actual—that which is no longer actual, relevant or citable. This movement can be countered by the theological approach to the past: remembrance. The medium of this remembrance is citation, where what was forgotten and thus closed is taken up again, reopened, and is, perhaps, given the opportunity to unfold its potential.

In thesis five, Benjamin describes how the “true picture of the past flits by” and can only be recognized by the historical materialist in a “flash.”⁴⁷ These epistemological claims are perhaps best explained with a contrast to historicism. Buck-Morss suggests that the differentiation between Benjamin's method and that of historicism is that the latter, even though it, like Benjamin interprets the “past in the light of the present,” and is concerned with “the given present rather than a revolutionary one.”⁴⁸ Benjamin's emphasis on redemption is central to his historical method and implies that a radical break with historicism as redemption holds as its object that which has been oppressed and thus forgotten by the present and not the past as it is immediately handed over by the tradition. The theological impulse implies that the concern with the past is not one of preservation, but an attempt to change the present.⁴⁹ This means,

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46 Benjamin 1999, N8,1 [GS, V/1, p. 589]

47 Benjamin 2007b, p. 255

48 Buck-Morss 1981, p. 60

49 In her major work, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, Buck-Morss associates this insight with Benjamin's interest in the hermeneutical method of Kabbala: “As is true of most theology, it is first and foremost a hermeneutic method of reading the sacred texts. But as mysticism, it reads them for hidden meanings that could not have been known at the time of their writing, rejecting the historicist approach of interpreting texts in terms of authorial intent (...) Their concern for tradition is in the interest of its transformation rather than preservation. They interpret the texts in order to illuminate

however, that the recognition of the historical materialist is not merely determined by the past as it was objectively given. The recognition unfolds between the past and the present, as the current conditions of the present (co)determine (i) which aspects of the past are revealed and (ii) which of these are capable of changing the status quo. Or, as Benjamin puts it in the Arcades Project, truth is “bound to a nucleus of time lying hidden within the knower and the known alike. This is so true that the eternal, in any case, is far more the ruffle on a dress than some idea.”⁵⁰ Consequently, as the present changes, the “true picture of the past flits by.”

A danger is inherent in the present as it constantly threatens to drown the call from the past. As it is shown in the sixth thesis, this is first and foremost a political danger.

Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject [dem historischen Subjekt] singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. 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. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist. 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. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.⁵¹

The political danger is that of being exploited by the ruling class, and this threatens the past as well as its receivers in the present. This reveals traditional historiography as essentially ideological. At play is the dual responsibility I mentioned in the beginning of this paper: the historical materialist must counter the danger of the ruling classes, which means that he must save the past *and* the present. In other words, he must be a philologist and a politician. In order to prevent this danger, the historian must realize that “*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy” because historiography plays a legitimizing role for the ruling class that must be countered. An appropriation of history (which we call tradition and which gives a single historical document or event priority over everything else) legitimizes the status quo.

their own era, in order to discover within it clues of the coming Messianic Age” (Buck-Morss 1993, p. 233).

50 Benjamin 1999: N3,2

51 Benjamin 2007b, p. 255

“It is the task of the historical materialist to dispel the phantasmagoria, to wrest tradition from the ruling class,” writes Rolf Tiedemann before commenting on Benjamin’s usage of the explicitly theological images of the Antichrist and the Messiah in this thesis, “The Antichrist is an image for the ‘ruling classes,’ their ‘conformism.’ But the Messiah, who overcomes him, is their opponent in the class struggle: the proletariat and its science, historical materialism.”⁵² This interpretation is supported by the fact that Benjamin in an earlier draft of the theses wrote that “[i]n the idea of a classless society, Marx had secularized the idea of messianic time. And that’s as it should be.”⁵³ Thus, the science of historical materialism must awaken the historical subject, the proletariat, in order to “subdue” the ruling classes and “redeem” the past. Firstly, this supports the hypothesis that the game played by the materialist puppet and the theological hunchback is politics. Secondly, this double function of the proletarian Messiah as a redeemer and a subduer helps to establish that the weak Messianic force, due to its subversiveness, is at least partly a critique of ideology, To redeem the past is, simultaneously, to awaken the proletariat from its traditional slumber.

This critique of ideology is way of turning the legitimizing function of history upside down. The cultural treasures

owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.⁵⁴

Every cultural document that is taken as a witness of richness and legitimation of the status quo must be seen as an expression of oppression and barbarism. In this way, history is brushed “against the grain.”⁵⁵ The historical materialist’s recognition springs forth from a constellation of the past and the present that forestalls any notion of historiographical continuity. As this is a mere construction serving to legitimize the status quo, to brush history against the grains is to do justice to what has been historically oppressed and thus left out of the traditional narrative. *Discontinuity is the leading concept of historical materialism.*

The most famous image of the theses is the interpretation of

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⁵²Tiedemann 1989, p. 187

⁵³ GS, I/3, p. 1231, my translation

⁵⁴ Benjamin 2007b, p. 256

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 257

Klee's *Angelus Novus*, "the angel of history," who is said to stare at the past with eyes wide open. The vision of the angel reveals the theme of discontinuity in a new form: "Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet."⁵⁶ As I have shown, the method of the historical materialist is to brush history against the grains and see the oppressed historical multiplicity where traditional historians see tradition and causality. Hence, the angel of history is in fact the ideal image of the historical materialist himself. What is the ground for this theological substitution of the (pseudo-)scientific historical materialist for the angel of history? Unsurprisingly, it is the theological impulse known as the weak Messianic force.

Like the historical materialist, the angel seeks to redeem the past, to "awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed," but this is prevented by a storm "blowing from Paradise,"⁵⁷ which the angel is unable to stop. "This storm is what we call progress."⁵⁸

In the image of the angel, the notion of progress is revealed to be just as ideological as the notion of continuity. Since progress prevents any justice to the past by continuing to oppress whatever does not fit its categories, it continues to pile "wreckage upon wreckage." Put in political terms, any belief in progress implies a causality in which the horrifying oppression and injustice of the status quo is continued rather than redeemed. The historical materialist must, like the angel, obstruct the gaze seeking the future. The revolutionary must seek the past.

In the *Arcades* it is said:

It may be considered one of the theological objectives of this work to demonstrate a historical materialism which has annihilated the idea of progress. Just here, historical materialism has every reason to distinguish itself sharply from bourgeois habits of thought. Its founding concept is not progress but actualization.⁵⁹

This means that the object of the historical materialist is not the future or the future promise of happiness but the past, always in need of rescuing. The fundamental insight of this pessimism ("all along the line", one might add) is that the political promises of progress, of future happi-

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56 Ibid., p. 257

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid., p. 258

59 Benjamin 1999: N2,2

ness, are all lies.

Firstly, however, it is important to insist that this pessimism, in spite of appearances, does not entail a political resignation. The radical historiographic critique of continuity and progress called the weak Messianic force is, in fact, an *ability* leading to an emancipatory *technique*. This is what Benjamin elsewhere calls the *dialectical image*.

The historical materialist must not see the present as a transition to the future, but in witnessing the “flash of recognition”, he must regard time as standing still. This flash of recognition, where the present is experienced in a tension with the past, is what Benjamin calls *Jetztzeit*.⁶⁰ In the *Jetztzeit*, the present reveals itself as charged with the past, i.e., with unactualized possibilities, to such an extent that it is about to burst and thus explode the continuum of history. What the historical materialist produces in the moment of recognition, the *Jetztzeit*, is dialectical images, i.e., the constellation of the present and the past finally made legible and thus citable.⁶¹ The profane illumination reveals the possible in the actual, and even though the Surrealists fall into an empty or unreal abstraction, they were on the right path when they dialecticized everyday life. Benjamin attempts the same thing, but instead of putting everyday life in a dialectical relation with a dream-like, fictitious or euphoric utopia, it is a dialectical relation with the oppressed past.

That the dialectical image is, in fact, a revolutionary technique is evident when we consider Benjamin’s history of philosophy as a critique of ideology countering the traditional historiography—“the strongest narcotic of the century.”⁶² Like any critique of ideology its aim is to free man from his pacifying, ideological chains and to prepare him for revolutionary action. Benjamin’s metaphor is one of *awakening*. This is the intended effect of the dialectical image:

In the dialectical image, what has been within a particular epoch is always, simultaneously, ‘what has been from time immemorial.’ As such, however, it is manifest, on each occasion, only to a specific epoch—namely, the one in which humanity, rubbing its eyes, recognizes just this particular dream image as such. It is at this moment that the historian takes up, with regard to that image, the task of dream interpretation.⁶³

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60 cf. GS, I/2, p. 701

61 Benjamin 1999, N3,1

62 Ibid., N3,4

63 Ibid., N4,1

In the dialectical image, the promise of a particular epoch is revealed as something that has immemorially been a mere promise, i.e., that the promised progress is a lie. Thus, the dream image, the longing for something better (in Marxist terms, the longing for a classless society), is revealed as nothing but a dream that will not be granted. The dream image is a messianic impulse, a whiff of paradise, but it must be understood in a very specific way: as something the status quo always promises but never provides. The dialectical image reveals this promise as such and awakens humanity, breaks it free of the illusory promises that have chained it, and thus render it capable of revolutionary action. Like the image reveals the limit of concepts, the dialectical image reveals the present as the border to a radically different course of history.

But if we are to take Benjamin seriously, two questions remain: why should anyone revolutionize without any hope for progress? And is this notion of the dialectical image not merely a new kind of intellectualism remaining as distant to the masses as the avant-garde revolution of Surrealism?

III. Dialectical Materialism: Mythic Violence and Its Other

My hypothesis is that an answer to these questions requires a consideration of the relation between the two different kinds of materialism I have described above: on the one hand the dialectic between image and collective body aiming for a revolutionary subject capable of changing the status quo, and on the other hand, the historical materialism turning the ideological function of history upside down by redeeming the oppressed past. The key to understanding this relation, I believe, is Benjamin's famous essay 'The Critique of Violence' from 1921.

Already at this point in Benjamin's thinking, his political engagement is shot through with theology, and Benjamin contrasts the essentially violent nature of law with what he calls *divine violence*. Later this will provide us with an interesting parallel to the theses, but first Benjamin's account of the internal dialectics of violence and law, that is, the dialectics of politics, must be outlined.

Benjamin tries to come up with a tenable differentiation between justified and unjustified violence, taking positive law as his point of departure. Positive law, Benjamin states, "undertakes a fundamental distinction between kinds of violence independently of cases of their application. This distinction is between historically acknowledged so-called

sanctioned and unsanctioned violence.”⁶⁴ Importantly, the distinction between sanctioned and unsanctioned violence comes to depend on “its historical origin.”⁶⁵ Positive law reveals the legitimizing function of history that justifies the distinction between violence [*Gewalt*] and law [*Recht*], or, rather, it justifies how some types of violence are legal and others are not.

This view, however, is complicated by military and paramilitary violence. Both examples show that unsanctioned violence can become sanctioned violence: paramilitary violence through the public admiration of e.g. the mafia that threatens to constitute a new law, and military violence through the formal requirement of a peace treaty. This possibility of establishing new law from illegal violence means that even in “violence used for natural ends, there is inherent in all such violence a lawmaking character.”⁶⁶

This does not render the criteria of historical acknowledgement arbitrary. Rather, the transition from (unsanctioned) violence to law (i.e., sanctioned violence) is done through a historical justification. When establishing a new regime, one historical document, e.g. the peace treaty or the new law, is continually cited as the basis of the new law-preserving violence. Thus, unsanctioned violence has a lawmaking character. The sanctioned law is called law-preserving, and thus the internal dynamics of the social order are revealed as dialectics of violence with the two dialectical poles being the law-preserving [*rechtserhaltende*] and the law-making [*rechtsetzende*].⁶⁷

This dialectical insight sheds new light on Benjamin’s attempts to identify the revolutionary potential of art and mass communication. Evidently, all revolutionary attempts are counter-hegemonic and thus directed against the law-preserving function of the status quo. According to this definition, art that questions the legitimacy of the status quo is counter-violence, however insignificant this threat might be. What happens in the Brecht-period and especially in the work on mass media is that Benjamin identifies in distraction a superstructure that enlarges the possibilities of establishing a new law through naturalization. The dialectics between image and collective body is a law-making force.

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64 Benjamin 2007a, p. 279

65 Ibid., p. 280

66 Ibid., p. 284

67 Ibid., p. 287

The dialectics of violence are, according to Benjamin, *mythical* since it in their relation to law, they *appropriate the past*. “[V]iolence crowned by fate [*schicksalhaft gekrönte Gewalt*]” is “the origin of law” (ibid., 286 [GS, II/1, 188]). Myth seeks legitimation by inscribing itself in history, by making one historical document legible at the expense of all others.

This is the point in the essay where Benjamin introduces the category of *divine violence*. Simultaneously, as my emphasis on the legitimizing function of history and its relation to law hopes to show, this move opens the text (and thus the Brecht-period) to an interpretation relying on insight into Benjamin’s philosophy of history. Even though divine violence is mainly defined in negative terms, as a mere opposition to mythical violence, this can indeed be taken as a justification of the juxtaposition between the divine violence and the weak Messianic force:

Far from inaugurating a purer sphere, the mythical manifestation of immediate violence shows itself fundamentally identical with all legal violence, and turns suspicion concerning the latter into certainty of the perniciousness of its *historical function, the destruction of which thus becomes obligatory*. (...) Just as in all spheres God opposes myth, mythical violence is confronted by the divine. (...) 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...*⁶⁸

Legal violence posits a pernicious historical function that must be destroyed. This is identical to the ideological function of traditional historiography that must be countered by the historical materialist. Like the weak Messianic force redeems, the divine power expiates.

To be spelled out here, however, is the relation between divine violence and the political action of the collective subject. The dialectical image seeks to establish a connection between the weak Messianic force and the revolutionary, lawmaking subject, but how can this be done if mythical and divine violence are antithetical?

My suggestion is that if we consider historiography a domain of ideology, historical continuity or acknowledgement is what must be criticized. This (1) undermines the legitimacy of the status quo and (2) opens up for a revolutionary potential, where the relation to the unredeemed, un-actualized and oppressed past can motivate, in a moment of *Jetztzeit*, revolutionary action in order to settle accounts with the present tyrants. The critique of the ideological historiography is thus a revolutionary technique,

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⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 297, my italics

which is remarkable in so far as it *opens the dialectics of violence*. Where the traditional dialectics of violence oscillates between contemporary agents (i.e., the revolutionaries and the counterrevolutionaries), the theses short-circuit this dialectic by assigning the past an active role to play in the class struggle rather than the passivity assigned to it in 'The Critique of Violence.' Historical acknowledgement is no longer merely in a relation to mythical violence, but central to the theological force. Instead of letting the ruling classes possess and utilize history in law-preservation, this almost infinite repertoire of motifs and tendencies must be regained by the revolution in order not to abandon this hermeneutical treasure.

How is this account of revolutionary action reconcilable with the abolition of any notion of progress and the insistence that law is ultimately mythic and violent? Here, the epistemological flashing of the *Jetztzeit* is crucial. The past can be used for revolutionary action, since revolutionary action is "nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren,"⁶⁹ but there can be no state or society entirely based on the weak Messianic force. The relation between redemption and revolutionary action *flashes*, i.e., it absolves itself in the moment it has been instituted. In fact, redemption is essentially incompatible with institution, but redemption can nonetheless spark institution. This means that the dialectical image is a revolutionary technique that can redeem the past, but once the revolutionary movement posits law it is no longer redemptive or divine, and the dialectical image has evaporated, as institution relies on a violently unjust appropriation of the past. The revolutionary potential is neutralized, as it is transformed into a new normality. Put historiographically, a moment of historical change reveals injustice, and an oppressed and over-looked event is made citable. But this happens in a new political constellation, where the citability of this event founds new instants of injustice in a new logic of domination. Hence, divine violence can be revolutionary only in a flash.

Cryptical as this might seem, Benjamin's 'Theologico-Political Fragment' supports this reading. Here, we are told that "the Kingdom of God is not the *telos* of the historical dynamic."⁷⁰ The Kingdom of God, which any redemptive power must seek, is *external* to the dialectics of violence. Not in a dialectical way in which it might later be appropriated, but completely in opposition. The Kingdom of Heaven is the Other of the dialectics of

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69 Benjamin 2007b, p. 260

70 Benjamin 2007a, p. 312

violence: external and inappropriable. In a flash, however, it can influence these political dialectics by giving motivation for revolutionary action. In the fragment, Benjamin gets at this relation by saying:

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 of free humanity for happiness runs counter the Messianic direction; 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.⁷¹

The profane and the theological are directed in opposite directions, but they can still assist one another, and profane justice can prepare the coming of the Messiah when the revolutionary technique is put in a relation to the unredeemed past. Whenever this relation is institutionalized and used as a legitimation for a law, a new instant of mythical violence does injustice to the past. What can be done is that through the revolutionary techniques of e.g. mass media the weak Messianic force of historical materialism can be magnified in order to strengthen its redemptive powers.

This explains the relation between the revolutionary collectivity and Benjamin's theology. And further, it explains how a concept of revolution is indeed compatible with the abolition of progress without reverting to a romantic anarchism: progress is impossible, since law is by nature violent, but in revolution this violence can, temporarily, be redeemed. The Kingdom of Heaven (or secularized: the classless society) is, by nature, out of reach for mankind, but the revolutionary, retrospective justice aims for it, nonetheless.

IV. Conclusion

Recently, global economic, social, ecological and political crises have failed to inspire the Left to formulate radical alternatives able to gain wide support and thus to counter present-age capitalism. Despite popular uprisings, symptomatic of a *de facto* existing discontent with the status quo, these have resulted in neoliberal policies rather than in real solidarity. According to a Benjaminian analysis, this is explained by the fact that the critique of the ideology of progress has been entirely absent as a Leftist strategy, and for good reasons, one might add: are we really to counter our political lack of imagination by abolishing any notion of hope?

Perhaps not, but I do believe that the political thought of Walter Ben-

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71 Ibid.

jamin provides us with a figure of inspiration: Benjamin took the most politically pessimistic stance possible—the belief that *progress is impossible*—and, yet, he sought and located a concrete method for releasing a revolutionary rage capable of overthrowing the most dire conditions.

What, then, is to be done? The production of dialectical images, when collectivized through media, establishes the connection between the weak Messianic force (which will allow us to think something outside of the status quo) and the collective body necessary for revolutionary action. Dream images, isolated from the ideological belief in progress, are revealed as Messianic impulses that cannot be fulfilled by the status quo, which continuously promise to do so. The realization of this is, according to Benjamin, the only means to an anger that will motivate a revolutionary break with the present conditions. This is what happens in the dialectical image that destroys the historical function of the current regime.

According to the dialectics of violence, however, revolutionary action that overthrows the ruling class and establishes a new society merely establishes a new reign of mythical violence, where one historical document is given priority above everything else. Thus, the revolutionary action leads inevitably to a new violent appropriation of the past. *Even the dead will not be safe*. This, however, is not a political resignation. This merely means that the collectivity of the proletarian revolution must be sought in a more complex relation to the weak Messianic force—a relation that motivates revolutionary action *while* abolishing the concept of progress.

The past is full of injustices that we can counter through actualization. According to Benjamin, this ability is both the weak Messianic force and the motivation for revolutionary action. The past *demands* this justice, and thus it is *urgently* necessary to revolutionize and cite what has been forgotten. In a flash, we can redeem the historical violence, but new laws can immediately establish a new paradigm of historical oppression. Thus, it is urgently necessary to revolutionize, even if it will inevitably lead to new violence.

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