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**Walter Benjamin's Images of Revolution
in "On the Concept of History"**

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Abstract

This thesis examines Walter Benjamin's reflections on revolutionary praxis in "On the Concept of History." The latter work aims to supply historical materialism with a conception of history that would be advantageous in the struggle against fascism.¹ This task entails wresting historical materialism from the "bourgeois habits of thought"² which Benjamin claims pervade orthodox materialist approaches to history. In particular, Benjamin rails against Social Democracy's evolutionary view of history, grounded on an ideological notion of progress, and calls for a "historical materialism which has annihilated within itself the idea of progress."³

The specialised literature has generally considered that, in the "Theses," Benjamin not only puts forward an alternative materialist view of history, but also develops the theory of an alternate political praxis which, as Rolf Tiedemann puts it, "would be suited to the pursuit of the cause of historical materialism."⁴ From this interpretative standpoint, the scholarship has focused on outlining the essential features of the conception of praxis Benjamin is seen as proposing.

In contrast to this view, this thesis will pursue the claim that Benjamin's treatment of the notion of revolution in the "Theses" does not take the form of conventional philosophical analysis, and nor does it develop a theory of political praxis. Rather, Benjamin's reflections on revolutionary praxis are offered as *images*. In this work, we are

¹ *SW*, 4:392.

² *AP*, 460 (N2,2).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Tiedemann, "Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?", 197.

confronted with a *constellation* of images of the revolution. These are, first and foremost, images deployed against images: they oppose a positivistic, mechanistic image of history, and the consequences of said image for how political action is to be conceived. More importantly, however, the images Benjamin deploys, such as allusions to forgotten revolutionary figures or concrete scenes of past struggles, highlight one of his main preoccupations: the relation of the materialist historian to the tradition of the oppressed.

The thesis defends the view that Benjamin's images of the revolution execute his proposed method for approaching the oppressed past; the historian's gaze is fixed in those concrete *caesuras* within history, which briefly become visible when the oppressed classes "call into question every victory, past and present, of the rulers."⁵ Correspondingly, the historical materialist project of rescuing a fragile and fragmentary image of the oppressed past is conceived as an eminently political undertaking: by attempting to "read the blanks" in history, the materialist historian struggles to wrench the tradition of the oppressed from the grips of "official history." Benjamin's images of the revolution are presented as constructions of those "blanks," which designate sites of practical intervention, and which intend thereby to contribute to the shattering of the reified image of a progressive history.

The thesis will thereby advance the claim that Benjamin's images of revolutionary praxis should be understood as images of *interruption* or *historical discontinuity* and it will explore the significance and limitations of Benjamin's historiographical method in the context of relevant debates in the scholarly literature. The thesis is divided into three chapters. Chapter 1 presents an overview of the writing conditions of the "Theses," and an outline of the history of the reception of the document. Chapter 2 examines Benjamin's reworking of historical materialism and theology, in order to delineate the main features of

⁵ SW, 4:390.

the philosopher's materialist historiography. Chapter 3 elaborates a study of his conception of historiography as an intrinsically political task, which involves a structural reconceptualisation of the materialist historiographical method.

Declaration

This thesis is an original work of my research and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, or any use of generative artificial intelligence technologies, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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This thesis is dedicated to my grandmothers, Corina Alfaro and Socorro Vera. The verses from a poem by Peruvian writer César Vallejo reverberate bittersweetly from the deepest recesses of my memory every time images of the past suddenly invade my mind: “So let’s wait, obedient and with no / other choice, for the return, the apologies / of the grown-ups always in front / leaving us the little ones at home, / as if we too couldn’t / go away.”⁶

⁶ Vallejo, *The Complete Poetry*, 171.

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Abbreviations

- GS:** Benjamin, Walter. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhauser. 7 vols. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972-1989.
- SW:** Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings*. Edited by Marcus Bullock, Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings and Gary Smith. 4 vols. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996-2003.
- C:** Benjamin, Walter. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin: 1910-1940*. Edited by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno. Translated by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- AP:** Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin MacLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002.
- MER:** Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Edited by Robert C. Tucker. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1978.

...the well-known motto of our youth:
never forget the class struggle; never forget the working class!
—Jacques Rancière, “The Archaeomodern Turn”

What will remind them
Of all the killed?
Wounds still unhealed
Those will remind them.
—Bertolt Brecht, “In Times of Extreme Persecution”

Introduction: “On the Concept of History,” final testimony of the last European intellectual

“On the Concept of History” certainly occupies a privileged position in the Benjaminian corpus. Composed in early 1940, months before Benjamin would tragically take his life in Portbou when attempting to escape Europe, the “Theses” have come to represent a sort of vanishing point from which to shed light on Benjamin’s overall philosophical production. The last work of the last true European intellectual—as per Hannah Arendt’s portrayal of Benjamin—for many the final theoretical statement of the philosopher holds “overwhelming significance for understanding his work as a whole.”⁷ The centrality of the document was acknowledged by Benjamin himself: in a letter to Gretel Adorno dated 10 February 1940, he underscored how the “Theses” allowed him to give written form to thoughts which he had kept to himself for twenty years.⁸

And yet, with all the importance that the document holds for approaching the different moments of Benjamin’s oeuvre, the “Theses” also pose numerous challenges for those who attempt to make sense of the philosopher’s entire body of work by referring to this “final piece” of the Benjamin puzzle. This is the case not only due to the fragmentary character of the text and Benjamin’s hermetic and unique method of writing⁹—a conscious stylistic choice through and through—but also because it promises no easy answers when it comes to the question of whether Benjamin’s thinking can ultimately be characterised as

⁷ Wolin, *An Aesthetic of Redemption*, 260.

⁸ *GS*, 1:1226.

⁹ Arendt, for example, regards Benjamin as belonging to “the lot of the unclassifiable ones, that is, those whose work neither fits the existing order nor introduces a new genre that lends itself to future classification.” For “[t]he trouble with everything Benjamin wrote was that it always turned out to be *sui generis*” (introduction to *Illuminations*, 3).

consistent. His last intellectual enterprise is a bold one: to put into relationship the two extremes that demarcated the boundaries of his philosophical standpoint, to transform the tension between the two diverging tendencies of Marxism and theology into a productive and workable contradiction. Still, the “Theses” seem to stand less as a testament to such an intellectual achievement than as the confirmation of the fact that Benjamin’s oeuvre can hardly be seen as constituting a “harmonious synthesis”¹⁰ that successfully reconciles the antipodes of his thinking. All the rubrics under which his philosophy is categorised are ultimately bound to fall short of capturing the complete scope of his thinking; theology, Romanticism, Marxism, literary criticism, these are all tags that “merit partial validity,” but they simultaneously fail to grasp “the truth in its entirety.”¹¹

Accordingly, the scholarship on Benjamin has drawn attention to one of the main attributes of his philosophical thought: namely, its resistance to classification. Löwy, for example, characterises the philosopher’s work as “a kind of erratic block in the margins of the main schools of contemporary philosophy.”¹² Likewise, Arendt contends that the task of accurately describing Benjamin’s thought entails resorting to a series of negative statements.¹³ This aspect of Benjamin’s philosophy, its problematic relationship to the common philosophical categories of its time, becomes immediately apparent for the reader of the “Theses.” Furthermore, the fragmentary structure and unfinished nature of the document confronts accounts of “On the Concept of History” with the issue of bridging the

¹⁰ Wolin, *An Aesthetic of Redemption*, 251.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 2.

¹³ “[...] his erudition was great, but he was no scholar; his subject matter comprised texts and their interpretation, but he was no philologist; he was greatly attracted not by religion but by theology and the theological type of interpretation for which the text itself is sacred, but he was no theologian and he was not particularly interested in the Bible; he was a born writer, but his greatest ambition was to produce a work consisting entirely of quotations; he was the first German to translate Proust [...] and St.-John Perse, and before that he had translated Baudelaire’s *Tableaux parisiens*, but he was no translator; he reviewed books and wrote a number of essays on living and dead writers, but he was no literary critic; he wrote a book about the German baroque and left behind a huge unfinished study of the French nineteenth century, but he was no historian, literary or otherwise [...]” (Arendt, introduction to *Illuminations*, 3-4).

gap between the opposing traditions that Benjamin purportedly intends to fuse together in his thinking. This undertaking is particularly troublesome when dealing with Benjamin's writings, for, as Adorno observes, the fragmentary character of his work "is implicit from the start in the structure of his thought, in his fundamental idea."¹⁴

It is no surprise, then, that in keeping with the anomalous standing of Benjamin's oeuvre in respect to conventional theoretical classifications, one of the first reactions of the specialised literature was to produce "a multitude of Benjamins."¹⁵ Indeed, by the early 1970s Jürgen Habermas already noted how in the fierce debates of the 1960s around the Benjaminian corpus a series of "battles lines" had been drawn within it; in that sense, the dialogue between the different scholarly positions took the form of "factional disputes" that ended up contributing to the splintering of the image of Benjamin.¹⁶ In his memoir on his friendship with Benjamin, Gershom Scholem reminisces about the philosopher's allusion to his "Janus face" when reflecting on the contrasting orientations that inform his thinking, a figure which for Scholem signified how "Benjamin evidently was torn between his predilection for a mystical theory of language and the equally strongly perceived need to struggle against it in the context of a Marxist view of the world."¹⁷ The Benjamin scholarship swiftly exploded his "Janus face" into a series of heterogeneous portraits of the philosopher, and presented a Benjamin "divided against himself."¹⁸ As Esther Leslie argues, the Benjaminian corpus was "torn limb from limb, and divided up into pre-Brecht-influenced writings and post-Brecht-influenced writings, pre-Marxist writings and post-Marxist

¹⁴ Adorno, "Introduction to Benjamin's *Schriften*," 6.

¹⁵ Eiland and Jennings, *A Critical Life*, 678.

¹⁶ Habermas, "Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique," 91-2.

¹⁷ Scholem, *The Story of a Friendship*, 263.

¹⁸ Leslie, *Overpowering Conformism*, 213.

writings, aura-destroying essays and aura-preserving essays, Leninist Benjamin versus surrealist Benjamin versus Heideggerian and Schmittian Benjamin.”¹⁹

Among the competing accounts that emerged in the wake of the first waves of the reception of Benjamin’s writings, very few of them have been as influential in the English-speaking world as that which establishes Benjamin as the paradigm of extemporaneity—the archetype of the intellectual who intentionally positions himself at the margins of society—someone whose intellectual attitude “rested upon their resolute refusal to be integrated politically or socially.”²⁰ Richard Wolin recovers Adorno’s characterisation of Benjamin as an intellectual figure situated “à l’écart de tous les courants,”²¹ a rather fitting description for a thinker who—at least initially—was represented time and time again as “a foreigner to ‘normal German intellectual life’.”²² Indeed, Benjamin did not only place himself “in stark opposition to all modern philosophy,”²³ but consciously adopted a “radically critical attitude” towards “the academic establishment.”²⁴

From this perspective, Benjamin is presented as the embodiment of a “type,” the intellectual who, as a result of his positioning outside of academia, assumes a life of isolation and loneliness as the essential marker of his profession: “no one was more isolated than Benjamin, so utterly alone,”²⁵ Arendt remarks. Furthermore, Arendt emphasises that Benjamin’s intellectual style has to be understood as belonging to the figure of a social actor that was functionally extinct during his time: Benjamin appears as the last representative of the *homme de lettres* of pre-revolutionary France, the rebellious intellectual who “always strove to keep aloof from both the state and society,” but who in twentieth-century Europe

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Arendt, introduction to *Illuminations*, 27.

²¹ Wolin, *An Aesthetic of Redemption*, 274.

²² Meltzer, “Acedia and Melancholia,” 143.

²³ Adorno, “Introduction to Benjamin’s *Schriften*,” 4.

²⁴ Arendt, introduction to *Illuminations*, 34.

²⁵ Arendt, 9.

“has lost its material basis in such a catastrophic way,” that he now survives “as a rather harmless, marginal figure.”²⁶ In that sense, while Benjamin’s brilliance and intellectual commitment are openly acknowledged and celebrated—he is, after all, connected to the *hommes de lettres* through his “purely intellectual passion,”²⁷ and therefore stands as “someone for whom philosophy and literature are not mere parlor games, but for whom these serve as the focal point, the *raison d’être* of life”²⁸—at the same he is portrayed not only as being at odds with every major philosophical school of his time, but also as existing out of time, some sort of “twentieth-century anachronism.”²⁹ He is, then, not only a stranger to normal German intellectual life, but to twentieth-century Germany altogether.

“Did he ever feel at home in twentieth-century Germany?”, Arendt feels compelled to ask. Of course, this is a rhetorical question: “One has reason to doubt it,” she responds to her own question immediately.³⁰ With this, the portrait of Benjamin, the “solitary, lonely, melancholic intellectual,”³¹ becomes complete. Benjamin’s life as an intellectual is marked by a radical indigence, for he “knew that, in a bitter sense, the intellectual is homeless.”³² In that sense, Lowenthal portrays Benjamin as the intellectual who takes a stand by remaining “on the side of marginality, of negativity”; he is regarded as “the figure on the fringe who refuses to take part.”³³ Along the same lines, Bauman comments that Benjamin “was nowhere at home. Or, rather, he made a home of his homelessness.”³⁴

²⁶ Arendt, 27-8.

²⁷ Arendt, 28.

²⁸ Wolin, *An Aesthetic of Redemption*, x.

²⁹ *Ibid.* This short phrase accurately captures the crux of Arendt’s sketch of Benjamin: “His gestures and the way he held his head when listening and talking; the way he moved; his manners, but especially his style of speaking, down to his choice of words and the shape of his syntax; finally, his downright idiosyncratic tastes—all this seemed so old-fashioned, as though he had drifted out of the nineteenth century into the twentieth the way one is driven onto the coast of a strange land” (introduction to *Illuminations*, 19).

³⁰ Arendt, introduction to *Illuminations*, 19.

³¹ Leslie, *Overpowering Conformism*, 209.

³² Lowenthal, “The Integrity of the Intellectual,” 252.

³³ Lowenthal, 254.

³⁴ Bauman, “Walter Benjamin, The Intellectual,” 48.

Adorno conceives of Benjamin as torn apart by a contradiction that is inherent to his condition as an intellectual during the Interwar period: “He knew the impossibility of fitting in and yet never renounced the desire to do so.”³⁵ This contradiction, we are told, “is the origin of Benjamin’s melancholy, his ‘character’ [...]. Sadness [...] was his nature.”³⁶ Benjamin is scolded by Adorno for undertaking “the obviously hopeless attempt to fit into communities and various organizations”³⁷—no other “effort of helpless assimilation”³⁸ on Benjamin’s part is denounced more vehemently than what is perceived as a failed venture into the Marxist doctrine. But he is equally reproached for displaying “the weakness of an isolated individual,” who ultimately has to acknowledge “that private reflection is deficient as long as it is separated from social movements and praxis that aim at changing the situation.”³⁹ Arendt also touches upon the same contradiction: if Benjamin persisted in keeping both the route to Moscow and the road to Palestine “open for himself for years” (and at crucial stages of his life he even seemed to vacillate between both options), it was because both promised, according to Arendt, “a way out of bourgeois illusions and untruthfulness, a position outside the literary as well as the academic establishment.”⁴⁰ However, Benjamin was bitterly aware that “all ‘belonging’ had become equally questionable,” and that “all solutions were not only objectively false and inappropriate to reality, but would lead him personally to a false salvation, no matter whether that salvation was labeled Moscow or Jerusalem.”⁴¹ He therefore “settled down in the desperate conditions

³⁵ Adorno, “Introduction to Benjamin’s *Schriften*,” 15.

³⁶ *Ibid.* Scholem’s account of Benjamin is in clear agreement with Adorno’s assessment of the character of the philosopher: Scholem notes that, in Benjamin’s youth, “his character was marked by a profound sadness” (*On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, 174). Sontag’s treatment of the philosopher as a melancholy figure also places an important emphasis on this description: “He was what the French call *un triste*” (introduction to *One-Way Street*, 8).

³⁷ Adorno, “Introduction to Benjamin’s *Schriften*,” 14.

³⁸ Adorno, 15.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Arendt, introduction to *Illuminations*, 34.

⁴¹ Arendt, 36.

which corresponded to reality”⁴²; in the end, Benjamin was pushed “into a position which actually did not exist anywhere”: “It was the position on the ‘top of the mast’ from which the tempestuous times could be surveyed better than from a safe harbor, even though the distress signals of the ‘shipwreck’, of this one man who had not learned to swim either with or against the tide, were hardly noticed.”⁴³

If, from this standpoint, “Benjamin shines forth as an acceptable embodiment of dissidence, from everything,”⁴⁴ it is because he is as marginal and nonconformist as he is harmless. Benjamin is elevated by Lowenthal to the status of a figure that best exhibits the “integrity of the intellectual,” he is the paradigm of the intellectual who “remains ‘untouched’ in his integrity,” not by “withdrawing into the ivory tower,” but by taking a stand in the face of the present crisis.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Benjamin’s commitment is paradoxically construed as radically noncommittal, his rejection of all the “escape routes from illusion into reality”⁴⁶ as false pathways to salvation signals a retreat, not only from “normal” academic life but from the present situation as well. In that sense, the position that Benjamin assumes, “on the top of a mast that is already crumbling,”⁴⁷ can hardly be regarded as an advantageous one. For, as Françoise Meltzer puts it, Benjamin is condemned “to a position as eccentric recorder of the times, or intelligent dilettante who was somehow on to something in spite of himself.”⁴⁸ In other words, Benjamin expertly registered the catastrophe of his time, he approached it from a radically unique perspective, and developed one of the most penetrating analyses of the contradictions of his present situation. By the

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Arendt, 22.

⁴⁴ Leslie, *Overpowering Conformism*, 213.

⁴⁵ Lowenthal, “The Integrity of the Intellectual,” 253.

⁴⁶ Arendt, introduction to *Illuminations*, 34.

⁴⁷ Arendt, 36.

⁴⁸ Meltzer, “Acedia and Melancholia,” 146.

same token, however, he remained utterly incomprehensible; furthermore, his final gesture is one of inwardness, since he ends up taking refuge in the sheer solitude of the intellectual.

Thus, under the light of the portrait of Benjamin as the categorically uncompromising but ultimately powerless intellectual, the “Theses” have often been presented as testament to “the isolation of a theorist who still does not cease to ‘rely on his own ability to think for himself.’”⁴⁹ To be sure, a number of contributions to Benjamin studies have criticised descriptions of the philosopher as “a man wishing to escape history, seeking to disappear into the folds of convoluted time”⁵⁰—and consequently have pushed against accounts that construe his final text from the standpoint of this characterisation. Most notably, Leslie contends that outlines of the philosopher as “the archetypal non-committal intellectual” fail to do justice to “Benjamin’s work from the late 1920s onward,” which is quintessentially concerned with “the politically urgent task of reformulating the notion of the intellectual in terms of community and commitment.”⁵¹ This is why Leslie understands Benjamin’s project as a “redrawing of the intellectual.”⁵²

Indeed, many of Benjamin’s later writings contain thoughtful examinations of what it means to be a committed intellectual. In “The Author as Producer” (1934), for example, the philosopher rejects the “conception of the ‘intellectual’ [...] as a type of person defined by his opinions attitudes, or dispositions, but not by his position in the process of production,”⁵³ and thereby excoriates “so-called left-wing intellectuals” who, having professed their commitment to the class struggle, express their “solidarity with the proletariat only in [their] attitudes, not as [...] producer[s].”⁵⁴ These intellectuals declare their place to be “*beside* the

⁴⁹ Tiedemann, “Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?”, 202.

⁵⁰ Leslie, *Overpowering Conformism*, 214.

⁵¹ Leslie, 218.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *SW*, 2:773.

⁵⁴ *SW*, 2:772.

proletariat,” which is, nonetheless, an illusory position, devoid of social basis: “[...] what kind of place is this? That of a benefactor, of an ideological patron—an impossible place.”⁵⁵ On the contrary, “the writers who *matter* (that is [...] the best technicians in their field)” take on “the demand *to think*, to reflect on [their] position in the process of production,” and thus arrive “to observations that provide the most factual foundation for solidarity with the proletariat.”⁵⁶ They are acutely aware of “the fact that even the proletarianization of an intellectual hardly ever makes a proletarian.”⁵⁷ In accordance with this fact, the intellectual who attempts to further the cause of the proletariat “betrays his class of origin,” and is therefore transformed “from a supplier of the productive apparatus into an engineer who sees it as his task to adapt this apparatus for the purposes of the proletarian revolution.”⁵⁸ Ultimately, the demand to reflect on the social position of the intellectual entails the demand to revolutionise intellectual production as such, to undertake the task of a radical reconfiguration of intellectual activity.

These concerns lie at the heart of Benjamin’s writings on the practice of historiography. If “Benjamin described his work as a ‘Copernican revolution’ in the practice of history writing,”⁵⁹ it is clear that for the philosopher such a revolutionising involves the reconceptualisation of the method with which the historian approaches history in his activity. In an entry in *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin outlines a “central problem of historical materialism [...]: Must the Marxist understanding of history necessarily be acquired at the expense of the perceptibility of history? Or: in what way is it possible to conjoin a heightened graphicness to the realization of the Marxist method?”⁶⁰ The

⁵⁵ *SW*, 2:773.

⁵⁶ *SW*, 2:779.

⁵⁷ *SW*, 2:780.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* Here, Benjamin cites a short passage by Louis Aragon: “The revolutionary intellectual appears first and foremost as the betrayer of his class of origin.”

⁵⁹ Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, x.

⁶⁰ *AP*, 461 (N2,6).

philosopher's proposed solution to this dilemma is "to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event. [...] To grasp the construction of history as such."⁶¹

Further, in the "Theses" Benjamin opposes the procedure of historicism, which lacks "theoretical armature," to the method of materialist historiography, "based on a constructive principle."⁶² In the preparatory notes for the document, the philosopher asserts that "[t]he historical construction" produced in the materialist investigation of history "is dedicated to the memory of the anonymous"—unlike the historical narration of the historicist which only honours "the memory of the famous, the celebrated."⁶³ In that sense, to "honour the memory of the anonymous" cannot mean, for the materialist historian, to write an alternative narration of history, told from the standpoint of whom he establishes as the subjects of history—i.e., the hopeless ("the hopeless in Benjamin's notion of historiography are the oppressed, in whose name the history that insists on recording the minor detail is constructed. The hopeless are the subjects of written history"⁶⁴). Rather, confronting the question pertaining to how the oppressed are to figure in history gives rise to a profound re-examination of the historical materialist method. I argue that these considerations certainly inform Benjamin's treatment of the notion of revolution in the "Theses," which the philosopher presents in the form of a constellation of images of revolution.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *SW*, 4:396.

⁶³ *SW*, 4:406 (Ms 447 and Ms 1094).

⁶⁴ Vardoulakis, "The Subject of History," 121.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 engages with the “tidal wave of scholarly literature”⁶⁵ that has been produced on the thought of Walter Benjamin. I aim to provide a detailed account of the history of the reception of Benjamin’s work, focusing on some of the most important scholarly debates around “On the Concept of History.” In particular, when confronted with the reflections on revolution contained in the document, the scholarship has regarded Benjamin as developing a theory of revolutionary politics which is complementary to his version of historical materialism. From this interpretative standpoint, the literature has emphasised the anarchist imprint of Benjamin’s concept of political praxis. Nevertheless, there is still a discussion to be had on whether Benjamin’s intention is to provide an anarchistic account of revolutionary praxis in the “Theses.” Recent contributions to Benjamin studies have suggested alternative interpretative paths from which to shed new light on the philosopher’s conception of revolution.

1.1 Reception of “On the Concept of History”

As Alison Ross observes in her study of Walter Benjamin’s conception of revolution, Benjamin’s overall oeuvre has greatly contributed to “underwrite his reputation as a supporter of the proletarian, ‘revolutionary cause’ in Europe between the wars.”⁶⁶ Only a few of his texts have been more crucial for the cultivation of that reputation than his Theses “On the Concept of History,” document in which Benjamin’s commitment to the proletarian class struggle shines through the multiple passages that contain the philosopher’s reflections

⁶⁵ McCole, *The Antinomies of Tradition*, 15.

⁶⁶ Ross, *Revolution and History in Walter Benjamin*, 4.

on revolutionary praxis. In that sense, the “Theses” have been explicitly conceived by the specialised literature as a text of Marxist politics—albeit one that addresses this question from a radically unique theoretical position.

Benjamin first undertook the task of writing “On the Concept of History” in early 1940, after his release from an internment camp in Nevers, France. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, the editors of the *Gesammelte Schriften*, trace Benjamin’s first reference to the document back to a letter to Max Horkheimer, on 22 February, 1940, where he refers to the completion of “a number of theses on the concept of history” which “represent a first attempt at pinning down an aspect of history that must establish an irremediable break between our way of seeing and the survivals of positivism which [...] mark out so profoundly even those concepts of history which are, in themselves, closest and most familiar to us.”⁶⁷ After completing a first version of the “Theses” around April or May 1940, he sought to send copies of the manuscript to some of his closest friends and colleagues; some of these copies arrived safely to their respective destinations, while others did not reach their intended recipients.⁶⁸

The short piece was comprised of eighteen small sections or “theses,” and included two supplements—labelled “A” and “B.” This version of the document was also the one published in the first volume of Benjamin’s *Gesammelte Schriften*; the notes and materials Benjamin prepared during the period he spent working on the “Theses” were also included in the volume by the editors. These materials have been preserved in manuscript form, and are comprised of alternative versions of the theses—as well as entirely new theses—that were

⁶⁷ *GS*, 1:1225. The English translation of this passage appears in Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 120–121.

⁶⁸ See Wizisla, *Benjamin and Brecht*, 65: “[Benjamin’s] ‘On the Concept of History’, which Benjamin wanted to send Brecht, never reached its destination. Brecht did not receive it until after his arrival in America.” See also Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, 277: “In the spring of 1940 he sent me a copy of the ‘Thesen’, but [...] this never reached me.”

not included in the final manuscripts of the document, short notes, commentaries on quotes, and both long reflections and fragmentary remarks on the topic of history.⁶⁹

Löwy notes that “[t]he direct spur of composing the ‘Theses’ was doubtless the Germano-Soviet Pact, the outbreak of the Second World War and the occupation of Europe by Nazi troops.”⁷⁰ In that sense, “On the Concept of History” is a text that demands to be read in light of the sociohistorical context in which it was written, for it is closely connected to Benjamin’s clearly pessimistic view of the European political situation during the outbreak of the war. Bolívar Echeverría mentions that multiple passages of the document are certainly dominated by the atmosphere of impotence and defeat predominant among leftist intellectuals and politicians.⁷¹ Along the same lines, Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings highlight that the animus of the “Theses” “is directed against those who have betrayed humanity: fascism, the Soviet Union, and finally those historians and politicians who have failed to grasp the order of the day.”⁷²

As Leslie observes, the document “voices [...] a bitter critique of political doctrines.”⁷³ The bulk of Benjamin’s criticisms in the “Theses” are directed against the Social Democratic theory of history, which “holds faith with the permanently progressive yellow-brick road of history, lined by ever-developing forces of production, interminable technical progress and the cheering crowds of a mobilizable mass base,”⁷⁴ and whose cardinal principles were

⁶⁹ Volume 7 of the *Gesammelte Schriften*, published in 1989, detailed the discovery, made by Giorgio Agamben, of a new typescript of “On the Concept of History” found at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, where Benjamin had left a body of material before his attempt to escape from Europe. This version of the “Theses” consisted of nineteen sections instead of eighteen, for here Benjamin had incorporated one of the preparatory fragments—labelled “XVIIa” in his manuscripts—in the main document, and now figured as thesis XVIII (See *GS*, 7:782-4). Despite Agamben’s finding, publications of “On the Concept of History” in other languages have generally adhered to the German edition of Benjamin’s collected writings, preserving the original variant—of eighteen theses—of the document.

⁷⁰ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 18.

⁷¹ Echeverría, *Siete aproximaciones a Walter Benjamin*, 31.

⁷² Eiland and Jennings, *A Critical Life*, 662.

⁷³ Leslie, *Overpowering Conformism*, 169.

⁷⁴ Leslie, 170.

integrated into the theoretical foundations of “actually existing socialism”—i.e., the Stalinist variant of Soviet socialism. Social Democracy is denounced as completely incapable of combating the rising threat of fascism, for, as Wolin underlines, it “has been lulled and seduced into a false sense of security based on the erroneous assumption that the forces of history are on its side.”⁷⁵ If from the perspective of the Social Democratic view of history “the victory of fascism was unforeseeable,”⁷⁶ the looming catastrophe of the war would suddenly render this naïve analysis of European social conditions completely obsolete.

The most striking aspect of Benjamin’s “Theses” is that it does not merely constitute a condemnation of the “official” version of Marxism, but also attempts to overcome the pitfalls into which this doctrine has fallen by connecting two opposing tendencies, the one leading to Jewish messianism, the other to historical materialism.⁷⁷ Echeverría reads the “Theses” as sketching “a kind of minimum programme for historical materialism,”⁷⁸ which essentially consists in the introduction of a “radical messianic corrective” into the historical materialist conception of history.⁷⁹ This is one of the crucial exegetical challenges posed by the “Theses,” so it has received much attention from the specialised literature on the philosopher.

Benjamin’s “Theses” were first included in a mimeographed volume in memory of the philosopher titled *Walter Benjamin zum Gedächtnis*, which was published by the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research—exiled in Los Angeles—in 1942. Only a few hundred copies of this booklet were printed and distributed among a relatively small audience.⁸⁰ Five years later, in October 1947, Pierre Missac’s French translation of the “Theses” appeared in *Les*

⁷⁵ Wolin, *An Aesthetic of Redemption*, 261.

⁷⁶ Leslie, *Overpowering Conformism*, 169.

⁷⁷ Echeverría, *Siete aproximaciones a Walter Benjamin*, 32.

⁷⁸ Echeverría, 36; my translation.

⁷⁹ Echeverría, 33.

⁸⁰ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 19.

Temps modernes, and the journal *Neue Rundschau* published the document in German in 1950; both publications garnered little to no attention.⁸¹ In general, the efforts made to publish Benjamin's body of work during the period immediately after the war were understandably limited and encountered a number of difficulties. As Scholem puts it, during this time Benjamin was "[a]t best [...] the subject of an esoteric whispering campaign that some of us assiduously promoted."⁸²

Eiland and Jennings regard Benjamin's *Schriften*, a two-volume edition of the philosopher's writings prepared by Theodor and Gretel Adorno in 1955, as the publication that set the rediscovery of Benjamin's work in motion; even though the collection itself "occasioned no widespread public discussion, they were noted and taken up by a number of writers and critics."⁸³ Interestingly enough, they also mention the importance the 1968 West German student movement had for sparking the debate around Benjamin's oeuvre, which in turn awakened a readership of said works in the process.⁸⁴ The publication of the initial volumes of the *Gesammelte Schriften* during the 1970s likewise contributed to the emergence of a growing academic interest in the philosopher: "An incomparably broader range of texts now became available, calling for a long process of digestion."⁸⁵ By the 1980s, what had initially taken the form of a "steady stream of popular and scholarly discourse on Benjamin" had turned "into a flood."⁸⁶

The Benjamin scholarship has thoroughly documented this explosion in the production of studies on the philosopher. In 1972, Jürgen Habermas, attesting to the

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, 172.

⁸³ Eiland and Jennings, *A Critical Life*, 677. See also Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 19; likewise, Habermas credits Adorno for "not only introduc[ing] the first wave of the posthumous reception of Benjamin but also put[ting] his lasting imprint on it" ("Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique," 91).

⁸⁴ Eiland and Jennings, *A Critical Life*, 677-8.

⁸⁵ McCole, *The Antinomies of Tradition*, 15.

⁸⁶ Eiland and Jennings, *A Critical Life*, 678.

emergence of “a Benjamin philology that relates to its subject in a scholarly fashion,” would cautiously warn the uninitiated reader that the Benjaminian corpus was “no longer an unexplored terrain.”⁸⁷ Ten years later, Richard Wolin would take a quick look at the ever-increasing list of publications on Benjamin and declare that the philosopher had undoubtedly become “a bona fide phenomenon” among numerous academic circles.⁸⁸ Wolin judged that there was “no reason to suspect that this profusion of posthumous interest will abate in the near future.”⁸⁹ A cursory glance at the current state of Benjamin studies immediately proves Wolin’s assessment correct. Osborne’s observation in 1998, that “Benjamin’s prose breeds commentary like vaccine in a lab,”⁹⁰ also continues to ring true.

Many early contributions to Benjamin studies presented the “Theses” as one of the theoretical keystones of his overall intellectual project, and thereby interpreted the text as containing “the essential distillation of his philosophy.”⁹¹ In his 1982 book on Benjamin, Julian Roberts highlights that Adorno and Scholem were in complete agreement on this particular appraisal of the document, despite developing contrasting positions on Benjamin’s thought.⁹² Adorno gave indication of the relevance that “On the Concept of History” held for him in his introduction to *Schriften*, where he maintained that the “Theses” constituted one of the “keys to Benjamin’s work,” for in the short text Benjamin “finally spoke candidly of his philosophical idea.”⁹³ On the other hand, in the “Theses” Scholem found confirmation of his reading of the philosopher as a quintessentially theological thinker. The “Theses,” which Scholem understood as “an apotheosis of Judaism” cloaked as

⁸⁷ Habermas, “Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique,” 91.

⁸⁸ Wolin, *An Aesthetic of Redemption*, x.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Osborne, “Philosophizing beyond Philosophy,” 286.

⁹¹ Roberts, *Walter Benjamin*, 197.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Adorno, “Introduction to Benjamin’s *Schriften*,” 12.

“a quasi-Marxist text on historical time,”⁹⁴ allowed him to argue that Jewish theology was the guiding thread of Benjamin’s philosophical endeavour.

Roberts took issue with this early tendency to establish Benjamin’s last writing as the starting point from which to approach his overall oeuvre, to readily accept the “Theses” as “the flagship of Benjamin’s theoretical enterprise.”⁹⁵ Acknowledging “the Theses’ seductive status as ‘last work’, and the undoubted breadth of their theoretical prescriptions,” Roberts would nonetheless reject the suggestion that the document “provide[d] the theoretical completion for Benjamin’s preceding writings.”⁹⁶ On the contrary, he was to regard the “Theses” as “an idiosyncratic and rather isolated text.”⁹⁷ Hence, Roberts would contend that the “Theses” laid bare the “weakness of Benjamin’s later position, after his conversion to Communism,” which lied “in his failure ever to re-examine its metaphysical foundations.”⁹⁸ In that sense, for Roberts the philosopher’s final work was more properly understood as a failed attempt at a coherent reconstruction of his philosophical programme. Commenting on Adorno and Scholem’s propensity to use the “Theses” as “a stick with which to beat would-be Marxist interpreters,” Roberts would stress that not only did the text “not give much comfort to Communism,” but neither did it give it “to *anyone* of good faith.”⁹⁹ In the final analysis, Roberts concluded that “Benjamin’s greatest work lies elsewhere”; thus, the scholarship was doing him “a disservice by holding too fast to the Theses.”¹⁰⁰

Nonetheless, once the scholarship moved away from the tendency to confront Benjamin’s thought with “facile demands for consistency,”¹⁰¹ once it no longer stubbornly

⁹⁴ Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, 197.

⁹⁵ Roberts, *Walter Benjamin*, 197.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Roberts, 198.

⁹⁸ Roberts, 6.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Habermas, “Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique,” 92.

held on to the philosopher's last writing as the prism through which to make sense of his work as an internally coherent whole, the true richness of the document was able to be fully grasped. Now, it should also be noted that over half a decade of heated debate around the "Theses" has not exhausted its material yet; this short text is still giving way to new studies and discussions. As Löwy rightly remarks, the "Theses" belong "to that rare species of writings whose destiny it is to prompt new readings, new viewpoints, different hermeneutic approaches and original thoughts *ad infinitum*."¹⁰² Faced with the ever-growing variety of interpretations of the "Theses," the first task of this thesis is to provide a general account of the most influential readings of "On the Concept of History" and to identify where there are shortcomings in the scholarly literature.

1.1.1 The first debates of the Benjamin scholarship

As Susan Buck-Morss asserts, "[n]o point in Benjamin's philosophy has been more vehemently contested than his attempt to fuse theological and Marxist exegesis in the name of historical materialism."¹⁰³ Löwy underscores that it was precisely the question on the relationship between Marxism and messianism in Benjamin's later writings that was at the core of the polemics of the late 60s and early 70s.¹⁰⁴ Interpretations of Benjamin's unusual combination of materialism and theology from this period sought to assimilate the philosopher to either tradition, while disregarding the other aspect of his thought. As we shall see, these efforts to read Benjamin either as a coherent Marxist or as a Jewish theologian were influenced by lines of interpretation which were first suggested by some of Benjamin's closest intellectual relationships. In this regard, John McCole remarks that "each of Benjamin's major intellectual partners—Gershom Scholem, Theodor W. Adorno, and

¹⁰² Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 23.

¹⁰³ Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 245.

¹⁰⁴ Löwy, "Pessimisme révolutionnaire," 99.

Bertolt Brecht—claimed to be in tune with the true sources of his inspiration and warned him against the baneful influence of the others.”¹⁰⁵

Buck-Morss observes that the “sectarian battles” which marked the first decades of the reception of the philosopher’s work ultimately “polarized the Marxist and theological sides of his thinking claiming them to be incompatible antitheses.”¹⁰⁶ In keeping with Buck-Morss’ assessment, Löwy identifies two competing schools of interpretation on Benjamin’s philosophy that arose in the context of these initial controversies. On the one hand, the *theological school* would understand Benjamin as a predominantly messianic thinker, while simultaneously criticising his appropriation of a number of materialist concepts.¹⁰⁷ Gershom Scholem, the main proponent of this line of interpretation, remained throughout his life, in Habermas’ words, a “totally inflexible advocate of the dimension in Benjamin that was captivated with the traditions of Jewish mysticism.”¹⁰⁸ Indeed, the Jewish scholar was firmly convinced that Jewish theology was not merely “one of those quirks to which [Benjamin] clung with all his obstinacy”; on the contrary, he held that Benjamin “delve[d] into problems of Judaism as a matter that concerned him personally and fundamentally.”¹⁰⁹ In that sense, for Scholem Judaism was undoubtedly “the goal which Walter Benjamin approached asymptotically throughout his life, without ever attaining it.”¹¹⁰

As I indicated above, Scholem assigned a central place to the “Theses” in his defence of his friend’s deep connection with theology. In his view, the document signified Benjamin’s

¹⁰⁵ McCole, *The Antinomies of Tradition*, 10. In particular, during the philosopher’s lifetime, both Adorno and Scholem would express their reservations about Benjamin’s friendship with Brecht. The first chapter of Erdmut Wizisla’s book on the relationship between Brecht and Benjamin contains a minute reconstruction of this “quarrel among friends” (see *Benjamin and Brecht*, 9-24).

¹⁰⁶ Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 232.

¹⁰⁷ See Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 20.

¹⁰⁸ Habermas, “Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique,” 91. Likewise, Buck-Morss recognises Scholem as “one of the most partisan fighters, defending the ‘theological’ in Benjamin against all attacks” (*Dialectics of Seeing*, 232).

¹⁰⁹ Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, 191-2.

¹¹⁰ Scholem, 197.

decisive and long-awaited break with Marxist ideology (Scholem would famously claim that with the “Theses” the philosopher had finally “accomplished his awakening from the shock of the Hitler-Stalin pact”¹¹¹). Although the text was “stamped with the seal of the Marxist dialectic,” Scholem endeavoured to shed light on the “echoes of fundamental Jewish concepts” that still reverberated in it.¹¹² Thus, he construed the text as putting forward “a metaphysical justification of a ‘historical materialism’, which owes more to theology [...] than could be stomached by its [...] ‘Marxist’ readers.”¹¹³ Scholem’s overall characterisation of Benjamin’s later philosophy as a “materialist theology [...] a materialist theory of Revelation”¹¹⁴ was certainly in consonance with his reading of the “Theses.”

On the other hand, the *materialist school* would read Benjamin as a coherent Marxist, and cast aside the numerous messianic motifs that plague texts like the “Theses,” which were regarded as no more than “an exotic form in which materialist truths are clothed.”¹¹⁵ This position was prefigured in a number of Brecht’s commentaries on his friend’s materialist thinking. For instance, in an entry in his *Arbeitsjournal*, dated 25 July 1938, the German writer recorded his criticisms of Benjamin’s hypothesis of the liquidation of the aura “by the reproducibility of the art-work,” formulated in the “Work of Art” essay: “a load of mysticism, although his attitude is against mysticism. this is the way the materialist understanding of history is adapted. it is abominable.”¹¹⁶ Conversely, in a later entry dated August 1941, Brecht positively appraised Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History”: he commented approvingly on Benjamin’s rejection of “the notion of history as a continuum, the notion of progress as a mighty enterprise undertaken by cool clear heads, the notion of

¹¹¹ Scholem, “Walter Benjamin and his Angel,” 82.

¹¹² Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, 194.

¹¹³ Scholem, “Walter Benjamin and his Angel,” 82.

¹¹⁴ Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, 194.

¹¹⁵ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 20.

¹¹⁶ Brecht, *Journals 1934-1955*, 10.

work as the source of morality, of the workforce as protégés of technology,” and argued that the main virtue of the “little treatise” was that it dealt with complex materialist issues simply, “despite its metaphors and its judaisms.”¹¹⁷

One particularly fierce controversy was to be the catalyst for the revival of the Marxist Benjamin in 1960s Germany: in the wake of the 1966 publication of Benjamin’s letters, edited by Adorno and Scholem, Adorno’s role as executor of the philosopher’s literary estate would come under scrutiny in a number of reviews, which alleged that the Frankfurt scholar had attempted “to ‘extinguish’ Benjamin’s conversion to Marxism.”¹¹⁸ The Marxist theoreticians levelling these accusations against Adorno took issue with his view “that Benjamin’s work lay squarely within the tradition of Critical Theory being developed by the [...] Institute,” and accused him of “tailoring Benjamin’s image and even censoring his texts to suit his own purposes.”¹¹⁹ Both Western and Eastern German Marxist scholars were highly critical of the Frankfurt School’s purported attempts to “play down Benjamin’s [...] indebtedness to Bertolt Brecht,”¹²⁰ and therefore turned their attention to those elements of Benjamin’s later thinking which are most closely related to the theories of his Marxist friend.

¹¹⁷ Brecht, 159.

¹¹⁸ Bathrick, “Benjamin from West to East,” 247.

¹¹⁹ McCole, *The Antinomies of Tradition*, 13-4. The Benjamin scholarship has carefully documented the chronology of these disputes. In his 1967 review published in *Merkur*, Helmut Heissenbüttel “was the first to suggest that Adorno’s selection and editing of texts give a distorted view of Benjamin’s political position” (Bathrick, “Benjamin from West to East,” 254n4). Afterwards, the editorial staff of the journal *alternative* criticised Adorno for “suppress[ing] documents supportive of Benjamin’s later commitment to Marxism” (Wolin, *An Aesthetic of Redemption*, 275n8). The two special issues on Benjamin produced by the Marxist journal not only contained “numerous contributions focusing on Benjamin’s Marxism and his relationship to Brecht,” but also “introduced unpublished materials which supplemented and in some cases revised the image of Benjamin in Adorno’s presentation” (Bathrick, “Benjamin from West to East,” 254n5). Wolin conducts a detailed examination of the journal’s charges against Adorno, and concludes that these should be dismissed as unfounded (see *An Aesthetic of Redemption*, 275-6n8). Likewise, he comments in passing that “Hannah Arendt, in her article on Benjamin in *Merkur* [...] also seems to have jumped on the bandwagon, accusing Adorno, in his capacity as editor, of having sought to perpetuate to his own advantage the intellectual disagreement between him and Benjamin” (Wolin, 275n8). The controversy waned by the mid-1970s, thanks in no small part to the “publication of the first volumes of the *Gesammelte Schriften*,” which put “the entire debate on a new footing. Accusations of doctoring or suppressing texts gradually lost their object” (McCole, *The Antinomies of Tradition*, 15).

¹²⁰ Bathrick, “Benjamin from West to East,” 247.

As David Bathrick explains, the German left developed two distinct “interpretative points of focus” from which to analyse Benjamin’s appropriation of Marxist theory: “The first revolved around Benjamin’s view of the media and the end of art; the second concerned the problem of historical progress as developed in the ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’.”¹²¹ On the one hand, interpreters regarded the technological optimism expressed by Benjamin in some of his more “Marxist” writings as “the cultural correlative to their own increasingly classical reading of Marxist economics as well as a way out of the political pessimism of the culture industry analysis” advanced by the Frankfurt School.¹²² On the other hand, they made a case for a reading of Benjamin as theoretician of the revolution, stressing that the philosopher “shared with Brecht a firm belief in the ‘necessity of social revolution’.”¹²³ As McCole emphasises, the Benjamin promoted by the German Marxist orthodoxy “was thus a ‘Brechtian’ Benjamin, whose revolutionary élan provided leverage against the resignation into which Adorno seemed to have lapsed.”¹²⁴

The heated debates on the question of Benjamin’s relation to Marxism coincided with the 1968 student protests in West Germany. It is no surprise that, against the political backdrop of the student movement, the task of redeeming the dialectical materialist, revolutionary Benjamin gained a sense of urgency. Leslie mentions that “in the years after 1968,” Benjamin would be depicted in a poster holding “a joint in one hand (because of his writings on hashish) and a Soviet machine gun in the other.”¹²⁵ Still, while accounts of Benjamin as a committed Marxist recovered an essential dimension of his later thought, these readings refrained from engaging with the messianic, theological component of his philosophy, and thereby disregarded a number of Benjamin’s ideas which could not be

¹²¹ Bathrick, 248.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Bathrick, 249.

¹²⁴ McCole, *The Antinomies of Tradition*, 14.

¹²⁵ Leslie, *Overpowering Conformism*, 220.

unproblematically reworked into the orthodox Marxist framework, such as Benjamin's "highly unorthodox views concerning the course of history."¹²⁶ In that sense, as Buck-Morss puts it, the Marxists "rightly claiming Benjamin as their own [...] generally failed to recognize the enormity of the challenge that this appropriation poses to their own theoretical presuppositions."¹²⁷ Thus, Benjamin ultimately remained an "ambivalent presence within the more orthodox circles of both Western and Eastern Marxisms."¹²⁸

1.1.2 The "school of contradiction"

Löwy's study on the "Theses" sheds light on a third school of interpretation on Benjamin's thought, which emerged in the wake of the controversies of the late 1960s. Unlike the aforementioned exegetical efforts to assimilate Benjamin to one main philosophical tradition—either historical materialism or Jewish messianism—the *school of contradiction* would argue instead that the philosopher's attempt to reconcile Marxism and theology is condemned to failure, since both viewpoints are incompatible.¹²⁹ The most notable proponent of this line of interpretation is Jürgen Habermas, who in his essay on the actuality of Benjamin's philosophical thought, "Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique" (1972), asserts that "Benjamin brought together motifs that ordinarily run at cross purposes, but he did not actually unite them, and had he united them he would have done so in as many unities as there are moments in which the interested gaze of succeeding interpreters breaks through the crust and penetrates to where the stones still have life in them."¹³⁰

Habermas highlights two eminently contradictory moments within Benjamin's work: the development of an antievolutionary conception of history, on the one hand, marked by

¹²⁶ Bathrick, "Benjamin from West to East," 248.

¹²⁷ Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 232.

¹²⁸ Richter, "Interpretation, Revolution, Inheritance," 529.

¹²⁹ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 20.

¹³⁰ Habermas, "Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique," 92.

the need to perform a “rescuing intervention into the past”¹³¹; on the other hand, his adherence to the materialist doctrine, which, according to Habermas, Benjamin refused to renounce due to his political beliefs. In this regard, the general thesis defended by Habermas is that the philosophical programme of the “Theses” is untenable; for him, Benjamin’s attempt to reconcile some kind of “domesticated” version of historical materialism with his messianic conception of history must ultimately be regarded as a fruitless endeavour. As summarised by Buck-Morss, in Habermas’ view “Benjamin’s Messianic conception of history as a radical break from the past is incompatible with Marx’s theory of history, because in the latter, precisely the development of empirical history creates the dynamic tension out of which socialism is born.”¹³²

In a similar fashion to Habermas, Rolf Tiedemann wishes to engage critically with the “Theses,” in order to accurately assess Benjamin’s unorthodox appropriation of the Marxist tradition, and to cast some light on what he considers to be some of the more problematic features of Benjamin’s intellectual project. His appraisal of the “Theses” in “Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?” (1983) includes a detailed examination of Benjamin’s peculiar attempt to “interweave a theory of [materialist] historiography with a theory of the real course of history in the same way in which history itself is referred to its ‘making’—political praxis.”¹³³ Insofar as the overarching purpose of the text is to supply historical materialism with a concept of history that proves to be advantageous in the struggle against fascism, Tiedemann contends that this involves the task of developing “the concept of an alternate political praxis, which would be suited to the pursuit of the cause of historical materialism.”¹³⁴ Now, when it comes to the Benjaminian conception of revolutionary praxis,

¹³¹ Habermas, 100.

¹³² Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 248.

¹³³ Tiedemann, “Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?”, 196.

¹³⁴ Tiedemann, 197.

this is precisely where, in Tiedemann's opinion, Benjamin runs the risk of "leap[ing] out of historical materialism into the realm of political Messianism where nothing can be done at all."¹³⁵

According to Tiedemann, Benjamin's political Messianism draws more from utopian socialism and Blanquism than it does from orthodox Marxism. In this sense, Benjamin's examination of the theory and praxis of historical materialism—which takes on the critique of progress as its starting point—leads him to uphold a concept of revolution which is more akin to "the enthusiasm of the anarchists than the sobriety of Marxism."¹³⁶ This notion cannot be seriously transposed into politics: if progress is *the catastrophe*, if the *continuum* of history is understood as *one single catastrophe*, then, conversely, the interruption of that *continuum* would be equally catastrophic. For Tiedemann, the task of revolutionary praxis as stated in thesis VIII—to bring about the *real state of emergency*—is prefigured as "the Other of history"; it appears not as the end of the class struggle, but as "the end of history itself."¹³⁷

Tiedemann harshly criticises Benjamin's "Theses" as "no less than a handbook for urban guerrillas"; he denies, however, that the relationship between theory and praxis in the text should be read as "tak[ing] the form of practical 'instructions'."¹³⁸ Those who construe the document as a manual containing "recipes for revolution" will probably extract "anarchistic *conclusions* for political *praxis*" from it; nevertheless, Tiedemann stresses that Benjamin could not have wanted these conclusions, and perhaps "he was even unconsciously *afraid*" of them.¹³⁹ In Tiedemann's opinion, this is why the philosopher plays "a game of hide-and-seek" with the political content of the "Theses," which he conceals

¹³⁵ Tiedemann, 201.

¹³⁶ Tiedemann, 200.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ Tiedemann, 202.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

behind the guise of theology.¹⁴⁰ As Irving Wohlfarth puts it, with his characterisation of the “Theses” Tiedemann seems to be suggesting that, if the short document were misinterpreted as a practical handbook for political intervention, “the possibility of such a misreading” is, nonetheless, to be “located in the Theses itself.”¹⁴¹

Therefore, Tiedemann contends that Benjamin’s alternative politics does not constitute any better politics by any means. For him, the integration of Benjamin’s revolutionary politics into the framework of historical materialism would prove disastrous for the advancement of the goals of the latter: “Historical materialism remains entranced by the mythical make-up of the world. It is totally unable to turn towards the future, much less to aid in establishing the ‘true empire of freedom’.”¹⁴² In that regard, “despair over the failure of the proletarian-party and the treason of its self-appointed leaders” does not justify revolutionary impatience, nor should it lead to the anarchistic exaltation of “revolutionary destruction for its own sake.”¹⁴³ In the final analysis, Tiedemann stresses that the significance of Benjamin’s “Theses” for Marxism essentially lies in their critical assessment of the “objective degeneration” of Marxist theory, and not in their anarchist account of revolutionary praxis.

Habermas’ critical examination of the “Theses” not only was picked up by Tiedemann, but also had a massive influence on some of the most important contributions to the secondary literature in English produced during the 1980s. These accounts directly opposed what was diagnosed as a prevailing tendency among the existing English-language literature on Benjamin “to avoid unseemly controversy or over-hasty interpretations”—which had only led to the philosopher becoming “even more obscure and misunderstood a figure than he

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ Wohlfarth, “Spectres of Anarchy,” 12.

¹⁴² Tiedemann, “Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?,” 200.

¹⁴³ Tiedemann, 199.

ever was”—and instead endeavoured to “set out the overall co-ordinates of Benjamin’s work.”¹⁴⁴ Such an undertaking entailed, in the first place, entering into direct confrontation with Hannah Arendt’s “portrait of Benjamin as one of the last *hommes de lettres*,” whose “influence in the United States and Britain” had “scarcely waned in the more than two decades since she first set forth her view.”¹⁴⁵ For instance, in *An Aesthetic of Redemption* (1982) Richard Wolin deplored that Arendt’s presentation of “Benjamin’s intellectual odyssey” as unconventional and *sui generis* had been taken by “much secondary literature on the American side of the Atlantic [...] as its point of departure without probing much deeper.”¹⁴⁶ Thus, unlike interpretations of the philosopher’s work which remained captured by “the idiosyncratic side of Benjamin,”¹⁴⁷ Wolin’s objective was to pierce through the aura of unconventionality shrouding him in order to “present a comprehensive, well-rounded account of Benjamin’s work as a totality.”¹⁴⁸

To be sure, to engage systematically with Benjamin’s thought does not mean to reduce the Benjaminian corpus to a “simplistic, unifying theme,”¹⁴⁹ for Wolin is conscious of the fact that Benjamin’s oeuvre “does not present itself as a harmonious synthesis of the [...] tendencies” informing his writings, but rather “takes on the form of a series of contradictions, a network of discontinuous extremes—in no uncertain terms, it assumes the form of a *ruin*.”¹⁵⁰ Hence, to approach Benjamin’s theoretical production as a totality requires grappling with his failure: “to speak of the ‘failure’ of Benjamin’s work means [...] that it was precisely in terms of his incapacity to unite the extremes of his thought, in his

¹⁴⁴ Roberts, *Walter Benjamin*, 3.

¹⁴⁵ Smith, “Thinking through Benjamin,” vii.

¹⁴⁶ Wolin, *An Aesthetic of Redemption*, x. Conversely, as Gary Smith notes, “Arendt’s characterization of the nature of Benjamin’s thought as *poetic* met with reservations in Germany, most directly from Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem” (“Thinking through Benjamin,” viii). For Adorno and Scholem were in agreement that Benjamin’s thought was “quintessentially philosophical” (Smith, viii-ix).

¹⁴⁷ Wolin, *An Aesthetic of Redemption*, x.

¹⁴⁸ Wolin, xv.

¹⁴⁹ Wolin, xi.

¹⁵⁰ Wolin, 251.

unwillingness to subordinate the materialist side to the theological or vice versa, that the enigmatic character, the majesty [...] the moment of his thought that remains living resides.”¹⁵¹ So, while commending Benjamin for his refusal “to close prematurely the gap” between the two antagonistic dimensions of his philosophical position—for, in this way, “he escaped the fate of being merely one more in a long line of Marxist or theological thinkers”¹⁵²—Wolin contends nonetheless that it is precisely Benjamin’s “pronounced and baffling tendency to alternate between a Marxist and a metaphysical frame of reference”¹⁵³ that needs to be uncovered as the locus of the failure of his overall intellectual project.

According to Wolin, nowhere is this failure more apparent than in Benjamin’s relationship to the historical materialist doctrine, which “was constantly fraught with tension.”¹⁵⁴ He certainly acknowledges that, insofar as “Benjamin sought to come to grips politically with the problems associated with the disintegration of Weimar and the rise of fascism, rather than [...] merely persist in feigning a state of blissful ignorance,” his “involvement with the materialist world view” was “a sincere response on the part of a radical intellectual to the political events and crisis of his era.”¹⁵⁵ Still, Wolin argues, “once this political stance was translated into theoretical terms, the version of Marxism that resulted was often one that was extremely undialectical and simplistic.”¹⁵⁶ Therefore, he stresses that the significance of Benjamin’s thinking “is not to be discovered in those works where he considered himself to be operating most consistently according to Marxist

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² Wolin, 251-2.

¹⁵³ Wolin, xiv.

¹⁵⁴ Wolin, 258.

¹⁵⁵ Wolin, xiv. Further, Wolin contends that “to desire for [Benjamin] to have lived or written in any other way would be to attempt to evade the real historical problem with which he found himself confronted” (Wolin, 273).

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

convictions,” for “[h]is efforts in this direction are [...] vitiated by an extremely uncritical and reductionist reliance on orthodox Marxist dogmas.”¹⁵⁷

Interestingly, Wolin regards the “Theses” as Benjamin’s attempt to develop “a nondogmatic and critical understanding of historical materialism.”¹⁵⁸ For Wolin, in the short document the philosopher essentially acknowledges that “historical materialism—especially in the face of its manifest failure to meet the threat of fascism in the 1930s—remains in and of itself incapable of providing humanity with the full range of wisdom and understanding necessary to surmount the realm of historical necessity”; Benjamin thereby returns to “the Messianic philosophy of history of his early work.”¹⁵⁹ Thus, in his final philosophical statement Benjamin “confers on the theological side the upper hand.”¹⁶⁰ Further, by characterising the “Theses” as the “consummate expression” of Benjamin’s materialist theory of experience,¹⁶¹ Wolin explicitly takes on Habermas’ suggestion that we look for Benjamin’s relevance in the attempt “to ‘enlist the services’” of his “theory of experience for historical materialism.”¹⁶² Esther Leslie would protest against readings of Benjamin’s work that conceive of the task of redeeming his philosophy exclusively “under the sign of a ‘Frankfurtization’” which, in her view, amounted to “an ethical domestication of his work.”¹⁶³ Still, Wolin’s study appears to anticipate the general tone of the academic debates on Benjamin’s thought in the 1980s and 1990s: during this period, Leslie comments, the

¹⁵⁷ Wolin, 255-6.

¹⁵⁸ Wolin, 261.

¹⁵⁹ Wolin, 260.

¹⁶⁰ Wolin, xv. In Wolin’s view, “if there is any overall sense of continuity to [Benjamin’s] work, it must be seen in terms of the definite persistence of Messianic motifs in his later work” (Wolin, xiv). Thus, the theological dimension of his thinking would be the underlying thread which lends his oeuvre “a continuity much greater than one would initially suppose” (Wolin, xi).

¹⁶¹ Wolin, 261.

¹⁶² Habermas, “Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique,” 120.

¹⁶³ Leslie, *Overpowering Conformism*, 225.

philosopher would be written as “the failed philosopher of failure in a time of ideological failing.”¹⁶⁴

1.1.3 Michael Löwy and the opening-up of history

In the late 1980s, Buck-Morss noted that “despite the differences among those who have taken Benjamin seriously as a philosopher, the overriding opinion is that his attempt to fuse ‘theology’ and historical materialism failed, and perhaps was bound to”; she suggested, nonetheless, “that this conclusion is not inevitable.”¹⁶⁵ In *Fire Alarm*, Michael Löwy conducts a thorough re-examination of this generally agreed-upon conclusion, in an effort to add “to the three established ways of interpreting Benjamin’s Theses on The Concept of History, a fourth interpretation: the thesis of alchemical fusion.”¹⁶⁶ Instead of stressing just one aspect of Benjamin’s thought—either its religious dimension or its Marxist component—and brushing aside the other, Löwy intends to read Benjamin both as a Marxist *and* a theologian.¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, unlike Habermas and Tiedemann, who according to Löwy judge materialism and messianism as being ultimately incompatible, the latter holds that, while usually contradictory, the “relationship between redemption and revolution in [Benjamin’s] philosophy of history” should be understood in terms of “*an elective affinity* [...] a mutual attraction and reciprocal reinforcement of the two approaches, on the basis of certain structural analogies, leading to a kind of alchemical fusion.”¹⁶⁸ In that sense, by insisting upon the Janus-faced character¹⁶⁹ of Benjamin’s philosophy of history, Löwy seeks to

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 248-9.

¹⁶⁶ Ross, *Revolution and History in Walter Benjamin*, 142n54.

¹⁶⁷ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 20.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ Here Löwy is alluding to a letter from Walter Benjamin to Gershom Scholem, written in 1929, where the former refers to “the side of my Janus face that is turned away from the Soviet state” (C, 347). Löwy has often remarked that, even though this passage has usually been interpreted as highlighting the internal contradictions in Benjamin’s thought, we should remember “the Roman god had two faces but a single head”

understand “Marxism and messianism” as “simply two expressions [...] of a single thought,” thereby justifying his attempt to “bring out a certain coherence [to the disparate elements in Benjamin’s work] where so many others merely see dissonance, contradiction or ambiguity.”¹⁷⁰

Now, for Löwy the theoretical constellation of the “Theses” would not be complete without shedding light on Benjamin’s relation to Romanticism. Löwy holds that the philosopher’s conception of history “draws on three very different sources: German Romanticism, Jewish messianism and Marxism,” upon which “he builds a construction of his own [...] to produce philosopher’s gold.”¹⁷¹ Ross underlines that according to Löwy “the singularity of Benjamin’s thought lies in its romantic world-view, understood as a critical attitude to ‘progress’.”¹⁷² Indeed, Löwy regards Benjamin as the first Marxist who performed a radical break with the ideology of progress that pervaded even the official variants of historical materialism of the first half of the 20th century,¹⁷³ by developing a categorical critique of progress with a distinct romantic origin, which is traced back to the romantic “cultural critique of modern (capitalist) civilization in the name of pre-modern (pre-capitalist) values.”¹⁷⁴

Nevertheless, this nostalgic attitude towards the past does not necessarily entail adopting a retrograde or conservative position, for Benjamin’s “attack on the ideology of progress is not made in the name of backward-looking conservatism, but of revolution.”¹⁷⁵ In that sense, if Benjamin denounces the positivistic or evolutionary readings of Marxism of his

(Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 20. See also “Temps messianique et historicité révolutionnaire,” 117-8; “Pessimisme révolutionnaire,” 99).

¹⁷⁰ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 20-1.

¹⁷¹ Löwy, 4.

¹⁷² Ross, *Revolution and History in Walter Benjamin*, 131.

¹⁷³ Löwy, “Pessimisme révolutionnaire,” 91.

¹⁷⁴ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 5.

¹⁷⁵ Löwy, 6.

time, it is precisely because he considers that such an understanding of history ultimately leads to a certain practical attitude characterised by passivity and *attentisme*, rather than to the recognition of what the present moment demands from us: namely, *urgent practical intervention* in social reality. The charges levelled by Benjamin against the “conformism” which pervades the political tactics of the Social Democrats¹⁷⁶ are clearly connected to Rosa Luxemburg’s critique of Social Democratic revisionism, who argued that from such a theoretical standpoint it is only possible to “draw [...] the following ‘practical’ conclusion: to go to sleep. [...] it is a conception which, at the most decisive moments of the struggle, condemns the proletariat to inactivity, and thus to a passive betrayal of its own cause.”¹⁷⁷

One of Löwy’s main arguments in *Fire Alarm* is that, against the deterministic view of history grounded in progress, Benjamin develops an *open conception of history*. According to Löwy,

[t]he 1940 “Theses” represent a kind of philosophical manifesto, in the form of dialectical images and allegories rather than abstract syllogisms, for *the opening-up of history*. That is, for a conception of the historical process that opens onto a dizzying field of possibilities, a vast branching structure of alternatives, without, however, falling into the illusion of absolute liberty: the “objective conditions” are also conditions of possibility.¹⁷⁸

Benjamin’s critical reformulation of historical materialism, informed by this open conception of history, is characterised by Löwy as a Marxism of unpredictability that holds on to the “irreducible core of the unexpected” within history—a core that “lies beyond the most rigorous ‘calculations of probability’.”¹⁷⁹ Now, such a vision of history also allows for an alternative understanding of political action: from this particular view, revolutionary praxis is not merely conceived “as the ‘natural’ or ‘inevitable’ outcome of economic and technical progress (or of the ‘contradiction between the forces and relations of production’).”¹⁸⁰ For

¹⁷⁶ SW, 4:393.

¹⁷⁷ Luxemburg, *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, 158.

¹⁷⁸ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 107.

¹⁷⁹ Löwy, 109.

¹⁸⁰ Löwy, 9.

“the fact remains that political action defies any attempt to analyse it as a mere function of structures or, even worse, as the outcome of the ‘scientific laws’ of history, economics or society.”¹⁸¹ Instead, within the theoretical framework developed in the “Theses,” “revolutionary events [...] as innovative historical acts” appear as “essentially unpredictable.”¹⁸² So, in Löwy’s view, Benjamin conceives political praxis as humanity’s attempt to pull the “emergency break”: that is to say, political action is conceptualised “as the interruption of a process of historical evolution.”¹⁸³ In that sense, Benjamin’s open view of history accounts for the possibility of different outcomes, including revolutionary action. As Buck-Morss remarks: “We are in history, and its time is not over.”¹⁸⁴

Löwy warns us, however, against attributing an overly optimistic vision of the course of history to Benjamin, for taking into account the possibility of “great *emancipatory* movements” also means “taking into account the possibility [...] of *catastrophes*.”¹⁸⁵ Moreover, as Benjamin himself emphasises in the “Theses,” from the historical standpoint of the oppressed the norm in history has been that of oppression, barbarism and injustice. Benjamin clearly regarded the sociopolitical situation in Europe at the end of the 1930s with deep mistrust and pessimism; after all, the German philosopher belongs to that generation which “experience[d] some of the most monstrous events in the history of the world.”¹⁸⁶

Löwy insists, nonetheless, that Benjamin’s historical pessimism is not contemplative, but revolutionary in nature: it is “an active, ‘organized’, practical pessimism, directed entirely at preventing the onset of disaster by all possible means.”¹⁸⁷ As Löwy states, then, in Benjamin’s open conception of history political praxis essentially appears as a kind of wager,

¹⁸¹ Löwy, 110.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ Löwy, 9.

¹⁸⁴ Buck-Morss, “Revolutionary Time,” 213.

¹⁸⁵ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 110.

¹⁸⁶ *SW*, 2:731.

¹⁸⁷ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 9.

for the success of the revolutionary struggles throughout history has not been guaranteed: “[this wager] is the engagement of individuals—or social groups—in an action that involves risk, the danger of failure, the hope of success, but to which one commits one’s life.”¹⁸⁸ Thus, Löwy stresses that Benjamin’s vision of history involves an ethical and political commitment with the standpoint of the tradition of the oppressed, as well as the “decision to support the victims of oppression and those who fight that oppression.”¹⁸⁹ This is why Löwy considers that “On the Concept of History” has the quality of a warning directed towards Benjamin’s contemporaries, as it entails the attempt “to draw attention to the imminent dangers threatening them, to the new catastrophes looming on the horizon.”¹⁹⁰ In the final analysis, Löwy regards the “Theses” as a plea for “a conception of history as open process, not determined in advance, in which surprises, unexpected strokes of good fortune and unforeseen opportunities may appear at any moment.”¹⁹¹

1.1.4 Contemporary approaches to Benjamin’s conception of revolution

Even though their overall appraisals of the political project of the “Theses” stand in stark opposition to each other, both Löwy and Tiedemann have tended to accentuate—either positively or negatively—the anarchist elements of Benjamin’s political thinking. The former expresses his approval of the romantic and anarchistic aspects of Benjamin’s philosophy of history. According to Löwy, later writings such as the “Theses” show that Benjamin’s Marxism retains the strong left-libertarian tendencies characteristic of earlier essays like “Toward the Critique of Violence,” written in 1921.¹⁹² Löwy thereby characterises Benjamin as developing a kind of “gothic Marxism,” which is described as “a historical

¹⁸⁸ Löwy, 114.

¹⁸⁹ Löwy, 116.

¹⁹⁰ Löwy, 16.

¹⁹¹ Löwy, 105.

¹⁹² Löwy, “Pessimisme révolutionnaire,” 91-2.

materialism sensitive [...] to the dark moment of revolt, to the flash of lightning that illuminates the sky of revolutionary action.”¹⁹³ Thus, Löwy argues that Benjamin’s considerations on revolutionary praxis allow for the possibility of setting out “a revolutionary project with a general mission to emancipate.”¹⁹⁴

Conversely, in his reading of the “Theses” Tiedemann contends that in his revolutionary politics Benjamin confuses ends and means: the relation between the end goal of historical materialism—the classless society—and the means to achieve this goal—the revolution—is reversed.¹⁹⁵ Hence, Tiedemann claims that for Benjamin “[t]he revolutionary politics of the proletariat are not to be embarked upon in the interest of establishing the classless society, but rather the other way around: this is only a reason for bringing revolutionary politics back into play, to make revolution for its own sake.”¹⁹⁶ However, in his attempt to “give a new meaning to revolutionary acts themselves,” Benjamin falls prey to the “actionistic naivete” at the root of anarchist politics.¹⁹⁷ In the philosopher’s conception of revolution, Tiedemann remarks, “Bakunin and Netschayev, and Blanqui even more so, seem [...] to win out over Marx.”¹⁹⁸ Thus, Tiedemann regards Benjamin as forming part of the “impatient ones,” who in the name of “revolutionary impatience” aim to “skip ‘all intermediate stages and compromises’.”¹⁹⁹

Similarly to the aforementioned authors, Irving Wohlfarth presents Benjamin’s conception of revolutionary praxis as being informed by an uneven mixture of anarchism and historical materialism. In his view, Benjamin constantly “considered the winning

¹⁹³ Löwy, 93; my translation. Löwy considers that in the context of Benjamin’s work the term “gothic” should be understood “in its romantic sense: a fascination with the marvellous and with the enchanted aspects of pre-modern societies and cultures” (*Ibid.* My translation).

¹⁹⁴ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 112.

¹⁹⁵ Tiedemann, “Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?”, 201.

¹⁹⁶ Tiedemann, 200.

¹⁹⁷ Tiedemann, 198.

¹⁹⁸ Tiedemann, 201.

¹⁹⁹ Tiedemann, 199.

combination to be a properly communist implementation” of a peculiar anarchist project, which would prevent historical materialism “from becoming a set of false, quasi-religious dogmas that would sooner or later be foresworn.”²⁰⁰ In the later writings of the philosopher, the anarchist dimension of his thinking on revolution “disappeared from view and entered into a secret pact with historical materialism.”²⁰¹ Nonetheless, Wohlfarth argues that the general outline of said anarchist politics is provided in Thesis VIII of “On the Concept of History,” passage in which “the *so-called* ‘state of emergency’ brought about by Fascism” is exposed as “the exacerbation of a *permanent* state of emergency, which could in turn only be ended by a *revolutionary* state of emergency.”²⁰² In his interpretation of the fragment, Wohlfarth considers that the eighth Thesis recovers “the anarcho-nihilist theology first formulated in the ‘Critique of Violence’”; Benjamin’s “programme for a coming politics” is thereby understood as “a ‘teleology without final goal’: an unconditional break with the millennial past.”²⁰³

Now, Wohlfarth stresses that, within this particular framework, Benjamin can only think of revolutionary action “as a purely preventive measure intended to avert the worst.”²⁰⁴ He therefore criticises “the attempt to bring about a revolutionary state of emergency under post-revolutionary conditions,” which led, “when literally acted out, to the dead end of urban terrorism.”²⁰⁵ Such “applications” of Benjamin’s “revolutionary programme” were the result of a misreading of the philosopher’s writings, for they failed to recognise that, in the final analysis, revolutionary praxis was a last-resort measure for him: if he regarded

²⁰⁰ Wohlfarth, “Spectres of Anarchy,” 10.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

²⁰² Wohlfarth, “The Measure of the Possible,” 14.

²⁰³ Wohlfarth, “Spectres of Anarchy,” 10.

²⁰⁴ Wohlfarth, “The Measure of the Possible,” 14.

²⁰⁵ Wohlfarth, 15. Wohlfarth’s criticisms are probably directed against the Red Army Faction (RAF), a West German radical leftist group which engaged in acts of terrorism during the 1970s and 1980s. Wohlfarth has produced a comprehensive essay on the relation between Walter Benjamin and the RAF. If Wohlfarth focuses his attention on this group, this is because the RAF appropriated some of Benjamin’s insights on revolutionary praxis.

revolutionary intervention in the present as a wager, “it was not,” by that token, “a game of Russian roulette.”²⁰⁶

Alison Ross, on the contrary, challenges the description of Benjamin as advancing a programme for revolutionary politics, and explicitly rejects the view that for the philosopher revolutionary action basically was an extreme measure aimed at preventing the worst from happening. In *Revolution and History in Walter Benjamin* (2019), she lays out a comprehensive examination of those accounts that present Benjamin as “a thinker of the revolutionary ‘future’.”²⁰⁷ In particular, Löwy is criticised by Ross for proposing that we “find the ‘future’ in Benjamin’s preoccupation with the past,” as a means to secure “the relevance of Benjamin’s thought for revolutionary struggles.”²⁰⁸ In Ross’ opinion, this undertaking essentially represents the attempt to ascribe views to the philosopher—like the idea of “a ‘collective-to-come’ or [the development of] a revolutionary project located in the ‘future’”²⁰⁹—that are nonetheless at odds with core aspects of his thinking.

Against readings which privilege the “futurity” of Benjamin’s work in an effort to sketch the general outlines of the political project he is seen as endorsing, Ross contends that “[t]here is no theory of ‘revolution’ in Benjamin’s writing, strictly speaking, but only an account of revolutionary experience.”²¹⁰ Thus, Ross underscores that “Benjamin treats ‘revolution’ as a category of experience.”²¹¹ Therefore, the scholarship should take on the task of analysing “in conceptual form” the philosopher’s “idea of revolutionary experience, for which we can draw on his entire writing”; for “Benjamin only ever wrote on a single topic:

²⁰⁶ Wohlfarth, “Spectres of Anarchy,” 13.

²⁰⁷ Ross, *Revolution and History in Walter Benjamin*, 8.

²⁰⁸ Ross, 134.

²⁰⁹ Ross, 8.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹¹ Ross, 4.

experience.”²¹² In this regard, Ross will defend the thesis that “the notion of fulfilling experience is the touchstone for Benjamin’s conception of revolution.”²¹³

Ross’ position that Benjamin does not produce a “theory of revolution” gives rise to a set of critical questions with which the scholarship needs to grapple when engaging with Benjamin’s conception of revolution. Now, while Ross’ claim functions as a general assessment of Benjamin’s work on the theme of revolutionary praxis, I find it relevant to consider the implications of this assertion for the particular case as well. For the reader of the “Theses” immediately becomes aware that Benjamin’s treatment of the notion of revolution does not have the structure of a conventional theoretical exposition that outlines the minimum programme of a “theory of revolution.” Rather, Benjamin constructs a multiplicity of images of revolutionary praxis: the image of revolution not as “the locomotive of world history,” but as “an attempt by the passengers on this train—namely, the human race—to activate the emergency break”²¹⁴; the image of the insurgents of the July Revolution “firing on clock faces to make the day stand still”²¹⁵; the “image of enslaved ancestors,” which nourishes the “hatred and [...] spirit of sacrifice” of the working class.²¹⁶ An attentive reader of the “Theses” will not only dissect the content of Benjamin’s reflections on revolution, he will also focus his attention on the mode of presentation of Benjamin’s ideas.

²¹² Ross, 9.

²¹³ Ross, 1. Ross defines the concept of fulfilling experience as “[s]elf-presence, at once absorbing and reflective (or introspective) [...]. The tension between these two poles, which to some extent coincide with the relations of the self to the present and the past, is obvious. The fulfilling experience totally claims the ego, who is nonetheless imbued with a thorough awareness of the moment as fulfilment of a (past) wish. One must assume that absorption in the moment [...] and reflection [...] do not completely coincide, which would make of the ‘fulfilling experience’ a contradictory concept” (*Ibid.*).

²¹⁴ *SW*, 4:402 (Ms 1100).

²¹⁵ *SW*, 4:395.

²¹⁶ *SW*, 4:394.

Chapter 2

In his portrayal of Benjamin, Leo Lowenthal declares that when it comes to the “messianic-marxist dilemma, I am wholly on Benjamin’s side, indeed I am his pupil.”²¹⁷ Here, Lowenthal is referring to the dilemma inherent to “the dichotomy, which has never been resolved and resists resolution, between political, secularized radicalism and messianic utopia.”²¹⁸ Benjamin explicitly tackles this question, which lies at the root of his philosophical enterprise, in the first Thesis of “On the Concept of History,” characterised by Wolin as “the ultimate allegorical confession by Benjamin concerning his own theoretical relationship to the twin extremes of Marxism and theology.”²¹⁹ In the following chapter, I will take Thesis I as the starting point for my examination of the overall coordinates of Benjamin’s materialist historiography, conceived by the philosopher as a dialectical reworking of the historical materialist and theological perspectives.

2.1 The puppet, historical materialism

Walter Benjamin’s first mention of historical materialism in “On the Concept of History” occurs at the end of Thesis I: here, as is well known, the philosopher puts forward the claim that historical materialism should take theology in its service. Instead of providing a conceptual clarification of the relationship between these two unlikely allies, Benjamin provides an image of this peculiar association, by resorting to the *allegory of the chess-playing automaton*. The allegory²²⁰ goes into detail about the mechanism of the automaton,

²¹⁷ Lowenthal, “The Integrity of the Intellectual,” 251.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

²¹⁹ Wolin, *An Aesthetic of Redemption*, 260.

²²⁰ Benjamin’s image of the chess automaton is a direct reference to Edgar Allan Poe’s 1836 essay, “Maelzel’s Chess-Player,” which aims to solve the problem of whether “the automaton operate[s] independently of human

“constructed in such a way that it could respond to every move by a chess player with a countermove that would ensure the winning of the game.”²²¹ The apparatus is comprised of a “puppet wearing Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth” sitting before a “chessboard placed on a large table” that employs a “system of mirrors” to create “the illusion that this table [is] transparent on all sides.”²²² Immediately, the first Thesis breaks through that illusion and reveals the true inner workings of the automaton: “a hunchbacked dwarf—a master at chess—sat inside [the table] and guided the puppet’s hand by means of strings.”²²³ Benjamin interprets the allegory by proposing a philosophic counterpart to the apparatus, in which *puppet* and *dwarf* are likened to *historical materialism* and *theology*, respectively: “The puppet, called ‘historical materialism,’ is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is small and ugly and has to keep out of sight.”²²⁴

When confronted with the question of the “precise nature of this entanglement,”²²⁵ the prevailing tendency among the scholarly literature has been to interpret Thesis I as positing the reconciliation or unification of historical materialism and theology. Whether we agree with Habermas when he contends that “Benjamin did not succeed in his intention of uniting enlightenment and mysticism,”²²⁶ or, on the contrary, are of the opinion, with Löwy, that Benjamin situates historical materialism and theology “in a relation of reciprocal illumination that enables them to be articulated together in a coherent way,”²²⁷ the debate

agency, or is there some way in which this machine secretly relies upon human guidance?” (Gold, “The Dwarf in the Machine,” 1223).

²²¹ *SW*, 4: 389.

²²² *Ibid.*

²²³ *Ibid.*

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

²²⁵ Comay, “Benjamin’s Endgame,” 247.

²²⁶ Habermas, “Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique,” 114.

²²⁷ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 20.

between these two rival positions is grounded on the shared assumption that Benjamin seeks to establish a “form of cooperation between historical materialism and theology.”²²⁸

Readings of Thesis I as a plea for cooperation find textual support on a seemingly minor detail in Benjamin’s first reference to the materialist doctrine: namely, that in Thesis I “historical materialism” appears within quotation marks. Both Löwy and Tiedemann argue that the use of quotation marks is entirely intentional, inasmuch as it designates precisely the version of historical materialism from which Benjamin takes distance in the “Theses”—that is, vulgar Marxism.²²⁹ In this sense, when Benjamin states that “historical materialism” is to win all the time, both authors contend that this assertion should not be read as expressing certainty about victory, but rather as casting doubt over the very possibility of “historical materialism” coming out victorious in the historical struggle. Indeed, Löwy and Tiedemann deem “historical materialism” to be incapable of “winning the game,” for it has scorned the services of theology. In turn, Benjamin’s own account of historical materialism—the historical materialism *without* quotation marks of the subsequent Theses—is construed as overcoming the pitfalls of the conception of history defended by vulgar Marxism. According to Esther Leslie, the text establishes a differential status “between the one version of historical materialism and the amended version conceived and recommended by Benjamin,”²³⁰ since the two stand in clear opposition to each other. While the former confirms its inability to “win the game” precisely by *not* enlisting the services of

²²⁸ Tiedemann, “Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?”, 190.

²²⁹ On the one hand, Löwy argues that the puppet of Thesis I—to which “historical materialism” is likened—is not “‘true’ historical materialism, but something that is *given* that name” by “the chief spokesmen of Marxism in his [Benjamin’s] period, that is to say the ideologues of the Second and Third Internationals” (*Fire Alarm*, 25). On the other hand, for Tiedemann the quotation marks indicate “no doubt the common variety [of historical materialism] dating back to Marx and since annexed and corrupted by the policies of the Soviet Union” (“Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?”, 191).

²³⁰ Leslie, *Overpowering Conformism*, 173.

theology, the latter, on the other hand, has attained the fundamental insight that, to win, it “needs the help of theology.”²³¹

This particular discussion begs the question of what is the *game* that historical materialism is supposed to *win*. Such an interpretative problem demands that we focus our attention on the third central component of the allegory, the game of chess—which, generally speaking, stands as a depiction of war, of struggle. Löwy construes the chess game as alluding simultaneously to two different—albeit intertwined—conflicts: the battle “against the oppressors’ view of history,” on the one hand, and the struggle of the oppressed against the ruling classes—which, in 1940, takes the concrete form of the fight against fascism—on the other.²³² Löwy’s analysis stresses, then, that for Benjamin the stakes of the game are not merely theoretical, but practical as well: as stated in Thesis VIII, the task is to supply historical materialism with a concept of history that “improves its position” in its confrontation with fascism.²³³ This crucial matter is also discussed by Pablo Oyarzún, who underlines that the chess metaphor is not merely referring to “a war for the representation of history but a war whose arena is history itself.”²³⁴ If, as Oyarzún contends, Thesis I “inscribes history as a field of battle” by means of the chess metaphor, the chess game, then, cannot be solely identified with the struggle for the (true) representation of history; rather, “the puppet [...] always has to win in the war that *is* history.”²³⁵

The close link drawn between these two connotations of “the winning of the game”—“correctly interpreting history” and “defeating the historic enemy itself, the ruling classes”²³⁶—is to be regarded as essential for the overarching purpose of the “Theses.” As

²³¹ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 25.

²³² *Ibid.*

²³³ *SW*, 4:392.

²³⁴ Oyarzún, *Doing Justice*, 54.

²³⁵ Oyarzún, 54-5.

²³⁶ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 25.

Löwy mentions, “without a correct interpretation of history,” it would be “difficult, if not impossible” for the puppet “historical materialism” to combat its adversary effectively in the arena of history.²³⁷ At the same time, Oyarzún remind us that “[t]he struggle of [the] (true) representation [of history] is of interest” in the historical struggle “only to the extent that history is its sphere of activity.”²³⁸ Ultimately, these two seemingly opposing remarks point towards and converge in one of the central themes of the “Theses”: the “indissoluble unity of theory and practice.”²³⁹ This topic also receives special attention from Tiedemann, who reads the document as explicitly concerned with the Marxist postulate that “theory and practice should form a unity.”²⁴⁰ Accordingly, he locates the core of Benjamin’s critique of “historical materialism” in the impossibility of the latter to fulfil this dictum; conversely, the “Theses” would constitute the philosopher’s “attempt to develop the theory of a different practice which might have a chance of winning the ‘match’ [...] even under altered historical circumstances.”²⁴¹

In a similar fashion to Löwy’s reading, Tiedemann’s examination of “the winning of the game” refers the chess metaphor not only to “the quarrel over the true concept of history,” but, most importantly, to “the real struggle of the real classes.”²⁴² In this regard, Tiedemann analyses the “historical match” of Thesis I in terms of the Marxist concept of *class struggle*, and consequently interprets the first Thesis as entailing the question concerning “the necessary conditions for ‘winning’ the historical match.” For even if “[t]here can be no doubt about the desired outcome of the class struggle for one who has taken up the position of the revolutionary proletariat,” such a choice of standpoint “must also be decreed by history

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

²³⁸ Oyarzún, *Doing Justice*, 54.

²³⁹ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 25.

²⁴⁰ Tiedemann, “Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?”, 191.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

²⁴² Tiedemann, 190.

itself” if it wishes “to be more than a voluntaristic decision.”²⁴³ Correspondingly, Tiedemann contends that it is only if historical materialism enlists the services of theology that the “victory of the proletariat” can be posited as “*objectively* irresistible”—whereas the failure of “historical materialism” to do just that is taken as indication that “the outcome of the match is in doubt.”²⁴⁴

The “Theses,” however, do not merely convey scepticism regarding the outcome of the game; rather, they categorically decree the defeat of the current representatives of “historical materialism.” Most notably, Thesis X depicts “the politicians in whom the opponents of fascism had placed their hopes” as lying prostrate, “confirm[ing] their defeat by betraying their own cause.”²⁴⁵ Equating the chess game to “the real struggle of the real classes,” to the concrete historical struggle of the oppressed classes—i.e., the struggle against fascism—poses problems not only for “historical materialism,” but for Benjamin’s own historical materialism as well. For if the central question of Thesis I concerns “the necessary conditions for ‘winning’ the historical match,” the latter still must deal with the issue of posing such a question in a historical situation that appears to be devoid of any revolutionary potentialities.

Insofar as “historical materialism” remains fundamentally committed to a view of history grounded on a dogmatic conception of progress, the “Theses” insist upon the inability of “historical materialism” to provide a correct understanding of the present sociohistorical context, and, in that sense, to “be a match” for fascism. In Thesis XIII, the dogmatism of such a notion of progress is attacked on three different fronts. Firstly, in this concept vulgar historical materialism conflates the “advances in human ability and

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁵ *SW*, 4:393.

knowledge” with the “progress of humankind itself.”²⁴⁶ Secondly, “in keeping with [the idea of] an infinite perfectibility of humanity” manifest in the course of history, it conceives progress as “something boundless,”²⁴⁷ that is, as a “process of gradual, infinite improvement.”²⁴⁸ Finally, Benjamin criticises the way that the idea of historical progress is understood under the guise of a natural phenomenon, as an inevitable and irresistible force in the course of history that necessarily propels humanity forward—“something that automatically pursue[s] a straight or spiral course.”²⁴⁹ This blind commitment to an ideology of historical progress leads to the development of an account of historical materialism that can only offer “an optimistic, linear view of history”²⁵⁰—a view which, according to Benjamin, bears “little relation to reality.”²⁵¹

As Rebecca Comay points out, the presentation of history as a narrative of progress amounts to an accommodation of “barbarism in the name of progress.”²⁵² This is clearly reflected in the way that the Social Democrats intend to combat the rise of German fascism. As Benjamin remarks in Thesis VIII, if fascism has a chance of coming out victorious in this struggle, it is precisely because “its opponents oppose it in the name of progress (which they take) as a historical norm.”²⁵³ The orthodox historical materialist view postulates the victory of the proletariat as a *historical necessity*; European social reality, however, has culminated in *war*, a state of affairs construed by Benjamin as antithetical to the class struggle in his

²⁴⁶ SW, 4:394.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁸ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 85.

²⁴⁹ SW, 4:394.

²⁵⁰ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 85.

²⁵¹ SW, 4:394.

²⁵² Comay, “Benjamin’s Endgame,” 255.

²⁵³ SW, 4:392; translation modified. Here I have relied on Alison Ross’ retranslation of Thesis VIII: Ross identifies a mistake in the translation of the passage in Benjamin’s *Selected Writings*, which considerably alters the overall sense of the Thesis. See *Revolution and History in Walter Benjamin*, 93-4n28.

“Work of Art” essay, for only war “makes it possible to set a goal for mass movements on the grandest scale while preserving traditional property relations.”²⁵⁴

From the vulgar Marxist perspective, one can only regard the current—catastrophic—state of affairs with *unphilosophical* amazement, as a “state of exception” to the rule of progress. In contrast, the alliance of historical materialism and theology opposes this view of history by attaining to a conception of history that accords with the insight that “the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule.”²⁵⁵ As we have seen, in Thesis VIII Benjamin explicitly contends that arriving at such a conception of history leaves historical materialism in an improved position in the struggle against fascism because it is not blinded by faith in the idea of history as progress. Nevertheless, it remains unclear how from this purported improved position the victory of the historically oppressed could be established as “objectively irresistible.” Indeed, it is almost impossible to expect, from the standpoint of Benjamin’s materialist historiography—predicated on the basic understanding that in history the *exception* has become the *rule*—any sort of naïve assertion of the historical certainty of the outcome of the class struggle. Quite the opposite, one of the fundamental admissions of the Benjaminian historical materialist will be that the “enemy has never ceased to be victorious.”²⁵⁶

The difficulty to read Thesis I as a proclamation of the ineluctable victory of the partnership between historical materialism and theology poses, in turn, a serious dilemma for accounts that decode the particular logic of this relationship “in terms of a co-ordination or synthesis.”²⁵⁷ At first glance, the series of antitheses invoked by the fragment—
“giant/dwarf, manifest/hidden, outside/inside, high/low, inanimate/animate and so on”²⁵⁸—

²⁵⁴ *SW*, 3:121.

²⁵⁵ *SW*, 4:392.

²⁵⁶ *SW*, 4:391.

²⁵⁷ Comay, “Benjamin’s Endgame,” 248.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

appears to promote a straightforward dialectical resolution. This is, for example, the line of interpretation followed by Tiedemann, who regards Benjamin as casting “a rather simple dialectic” over the association between puppet and dwarf: “A mediated by B to produce C.”²⁵⁹ Viewed through this lens, Thesis I seems to establish a set of correspondences between the image of the automaton and Benjamin’s “philosophic counterpart”: for just as the alliance of dwarf and puppet is able to respond to any move on the chess board with a winning countermove, so the combination of historical materialism and theology is said to “be a match for anyone,” since it is to “win all the time.”²⁶⁰

However, the “apparent reciprocity of the bondage” begins to break down once we fully address the “tension if not contradiction between the actual ‘apparatus’ or image [...] and its purported ‘philosophical counterpart’.”²⁶¹ Whereas in the allegory “the hunchback chess ‘master’” is depicted as “covertly *pulling the strings* of a passive puppet,” Benjamin’s interpretation, in turn, portrays the puppet “historical materialism” as “actively *enlisting the services* of a servile and hunched theology.”²⁶² For this reason, Comay recognises that the allegory resists “any *mechanical* or *automatic* [...] interpretation” along the lines proposed by scholars such as Tiedemann, as it is ultimately unclear how the pivotal antithesis of the passage is meant to be resolved.²⁶³ Consequently, Comay argues that “[i]n insisting on the co-implication of ‘historical materialism’ and ‘theology’, Benjamin is neither *proposing* nor *exposing* their final unity,” for Thesis I is neither putting forward an appeal for cooperation nor working as a conventional exposition of the mystery of the apparatus.²⁶⁴ Hence,

²⁵⁹ Tiedemann, “Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?”, 190.

²⁶⁰ *SW*, 4:389.

²⁶¹ Comay, “Benjamin’s Endgame,” 246-7.

²⁶² Comay, 246.

²⁶³ Comay, 248.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.* In that sense, Comay believes, Thesis I is not concerned with the “question of demystification or unmasking, whether banal (Marxism is just another ‘creed’, the Enlightenment harbours false gods) or sophisticated (as in Hegel’s analysis in the *Phenomenology* of the reciprocity of faith and insight; or, more pointedly, as in Nietzsche’s excoriation of socialism as a slave morality, and hence a prolongation of the ascetic

tempting as it may be to defend, with Löwy, the hypothesis that “Benjamin wishes to show the dialectical complementarity” of historical materialism and theology by presenting them as “both the master and the servant of each other,”²⁶⁵ Comay’s observation that “[t]his is not a dialectical or symmetrical exchange of power resolvable along Hegelian lines”²⁶⁶ presents a serious challenge for such lines of interpretation of the central image of Benjamin’s first Thesis.

Comay is of the view that the image of the chess automaton “is being made to function in an argument which will in effect undermine its explicit meaning.”²⁶⁷ For her, no other fragment of the first Thesis illustrates this more clearly than Benjamin’s puzzling assertion that “[t]he puppet team [...] is ‘supposed to win each time’,” a claim which is deemed to be “one of [his] more flagrant misreadings or interpolations into the Poe subtext he is reworking.”²⁶⁸ Comay refers here to Poe’s “Maelzel’s Chess Player”—the writer’s essay on the chess-playing apparatus owned by German inventor Johann Nepomuk Maelzel, which I will discuss further below. The glaring interpolation is explained as follows: whereas Poe’s essay “specifically emphasizes the *fallibility* of the automaton as the telltale sign of its hidden operator,” Benjamin posits, instead, that the “pair of sideshow freaks [is to] become a winning number,” without providing a tenable explanation for how “this uneasy partnership, divided against itself and without internal coherence, could possibly form a united front.”²⁶⁹ Furthermore, Comay contends that the claim is nonsensical, for it seems that there is little

ideal it would surmount; or, yet again [...] as in Karl Löwith’s depiction of Marxism as a secularization of providential eschatology)” (*Ibid.*).

²⁶⁵ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 27.

²⁶⁶ Comay, “Benjamin’s Endgame,” 247.

²⁶⁷ Comay, 255.

²⁶⁸ Comay, 254-5.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

point in invoking “the notion of automatic victory to introduce a text the essential point of which will be [...] to problematize the very notion of victory, automatic or otherwise.”²⁷⁰

I will return to the issue of control in Thesis I—which Joshua Gold condenses in the following question: “Does theology or historical materialism dictate the moves?”²⁷¹—in the final section of this chapter. First of all, I find it helpful to turn to Poe’s own analysis of the automaton, which provides further insight into Comay’s identification of Benjamin’s “flagrant misreading” of the essay—i.e., the idea that the strange alliance yields an “automatic victory.” Instead of diving head-first into his proposed solution to the question of the *modus operandi* of the automaton, in “Maelzel’s Chess-Player” Poe briefly comments on the opinion of those who “make no scruple in pronouncing the Automaton a *pure machine*,” and concedes that, assuming this hypothesis *were* in fact true, Maelzel’s device would undoubtedly be, “beyond all comparison, the most astonishing of the inventions of mankind.”²⁷² One particularly enlightening passage of Poe’s essay, where he compares the chess-playing automaton to Charles Babbage’s calculating machine,²⁷³ delves deeper into why the first apparatus would constitute such a feat of human ingenuity. For while the mathematical operations of Babbage’s calculator “are, from their very nature, fixed and determinate,”²⁷⁴ in the course of the chess game, on the contrary, “[n]o one move [...] necessarily follows upon any one other.”²⁷⁵ Correspondingly, the procedure of the calculating engine is characterised by a series of regular, progressive and undeviating

²⁷⁰ Comay, 255.

²⁷¹ Gold, “The Dwarf in the Machine,” 1223.

²⁷² Poe, “Maelzel’s Chess-Player,” 6.

²⁷³ Poe provides the following description of the calculator: “[...] what shall we think of the calculating machine of Mr. Babbage? What shall we think of an engine of wood and metal which can not only compute astronomical and navigation tables to any given extent, but render the exactitude of its operations mathematically certain through its power of correcting its possible errors? What shall we think of a machine which can not only accomplish all this, but actually print off its elaborate results, when obtained, without the slightest intervention of the intellect of man?” (Poe, 9).

²⁷⁴ Poe, 9.

²⁷⁵ Poe, 10.

movements towards the required solution, movements which, “however complex, are never imagined to be otherwise than finite and determinate.”²⁷⁶ Conversely, Poe argues that “the case is widely different with the Chess-Player,”²⁷⁷ for the automaton cannot be regarded as proceeding by means of an intrinsically determinate set of movements. Poe illustrates this difference by contrasting the *first move* in a game of chess with the *first step* in the operations of the calculating machine—i.e., the *data* of any given mathematical question:

[...] from the *data* [...] the second step of the question, dependent thereupon, inevitably follows. It is modelled by the *data*. It must be *thus* and not otherwise. But from the first move in the game of chess no especial second move follows of necessity. In the algebraical question, as it proceeds towards solution, the *certainty* of its operations remains altogether unimpaired. The second step having been a consequence of the *data*, the third step is equally a consequence of the second, the fourth of the third, the fifth of the fourth, and so on, *and not possibly otherwise*, to the end. But in proportion to the progress made in a game of chess, is the *uncertainty* of each ensuing move. A few moves having been made, *no step* is certain.²⁷⁸

From this analysis, Poe concludes that no analogy can be drawn between the operations of the two apparatuses. Poe’s insightful observation, in turn, should be taken into account when assessing whether the automaton can be considered a *pure machine* or not. For to conclusively establish the status of Maelzel’s Chess-Player as a *pure machine* would require an exposition of its internal mechanism as something else than a “merely automatic” machine—in the sense that such a label can be ascribed to the calculating machine. Could the puppet ensure its ineluctable victory in a game of chess by merely following a predetermined “succession of unerring steps liable to no change, and subject to no modification”²⁷⁹ towards an equally predetermined outcome? As Poe suggests, the very logic of the game of chess contradicts this proposed solution to the enigma of the internal mechanism of the apparatus. Each specific movement made by the automaton is informed not only by the *certainty* of the previous sequence of moves that necessarily leads to a

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

particular arrangement of the pieces on the chessboard, but also by the *uncertainty* introduced by the myriads of possible legal moves that can be played at a particular stage of the game, from which Maelzel's device is said to always choose the winning combination. And even granting what—as maintained by Poe—should not be granted, “that the movements of the Automaton Chess-Player were in themselves determinate,” this fixed progression of moves “would be necessarily interrupted and disarranged by the indeterminate will” of each adversary, as the uncertainty of the ensuing move can only be resolved by “the variable judgment of the players.”²⁸⁰

On this account, if, as Oyarzún states, encoded within the chess metaphor we identify an eminently “polemological conception of history”²⁸¹ as a conflict-ridden field, then only on the surface does Thesis I invoke the notion of an “automatic victory”—if we take this to mean that the outcome of the game is fully determined from the outset, and that all the automatic chess player has to do to win is perform a predetermined chain of movements on the chessboard until reaching the “final determination” of the match, i.e., until achieving the unavoidable victory. Whilst after the outcome of the match has been decided one can rather unproblematically establish a causal sequence from the opening move to the manoeuvre that delivers checkmate, in the course of the game, however, the countermoves played by the automaton signify the critical moments of each specific encounter. Every position reached on the board, every instance of counterplay attempted by each challenger, demands, in turn, a particular winning countermove, delivered with a particular chess piece on a particular square of the chessboard. Likewise, a more thorough evaluation of the neat chain of moves that constitutes a given game will reveal the “twist and turns,” the moments of disruption, of this purportedly homogeneous sequence. This holds true even for the

²⁸⁰ Poe, II.

²⁸¹ Oyarzún, *Doing Justice*, 55.

matches played by the chess automaton, which, allegedly, is never supposed to put itself in a losing situation: an equal position can be swiftly transformed into a winning one by one single move, but it can also trigger a gruelling battle for a firm positional advantage. Further, different winning positions will require different combinations of moves in order to be successfully converted into victories.

Ironically, the seemingly infallible puppet has not remained undefeated: “In general,” Poe reports, “the Turk is victorious—once or twice he has been beaten.”²⁸² While no doubt the puppet holds an impressive winning record, the automaton’s “automatic victory”—achieved through an equally “automatic procedure”—is nothing but a farce, a spectacle. In that respect, as Oyarzún puts it, “[a]s an automaton, the puppet is a fraud”—it is no more than the mere “simulacrum of an automaton.”²⁸³ Now, notwithstanding the Turk’s failure to respond with the winning countermove in every single game of chess it plays, the shortcomings of the puppet “historical materialism” are far more blatant: for despite it being supposed to “win all the time,” it falls short at every turn.

Of course, as mentioned previously, for Poe the fact that the machine “does not invariably win the game”²⁸⁴ becomes the telltale sign that “the operations of the Automaton are regulated by *mind*, and by nothing else.”²⁸⁵ In Löwy’s account, Poe’s “mind” is unproblematically linked to the dwarf of Thesis I, “theology”—“the messianic spirit, without which historical materialism cannot ‘win the game’ and the revolution cannot triumph.”²⁸⁶ This identification is purportedly grounded on a passage of Poe’s essay where the writer briefly focuses on “[t]he first attempt at a written explanation of the secret,” which puts

²⁸² Poe, “Maelzel’s Chess-Player,” 18.

²⁸³ Oyarzún, *Doing Justice*, 53.

²⁸⁴ Poe, “Maelzel’s Chess-Player,” 11.

²⁸⁵ Poe, 26.

²⁸⁶ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 26.

forward the hypothesis “that a dwarf actuated the machine.”²⁸⁷ Löwy omits, however, that Poe dismisses the whole hypothesis as being “too obviously absurd to require comment, or refutation.”²⁸⁸ In Thesis I, then, there is a clear departure from the source text that needs to be taken into account: the very same absurd hypothesis that is bluntly rejected by Poe reappears in the “Theses” as Benjamin’s suggested solution to the riddle of the automaton. Furthermore, while the manifest purpose of Poe’s essay is to develop a conclusive account of the mystery of the *modus operandi* of the apparatus, Benjamin seems more interested in keeping the trick safe, in concealing it. Instead of exposing the secret of the machine to the public, as is Poe’s intention, Thesis I pushes the reader inside the automaton, into the hiding place of the hunchbacked dwarf, which, “as we know, is small and ugly and has to keep out of sight.”²⁸⁹

2.2 The dwarf, theology

Gershom Scholem characterises Benjamin’s relationship with Judaism as essentially complex: while maintaining that the Jewish element in Benjamin’s production constitutes “the ultimate destination of his thought,” he also acknowledges that it is “present only in overtones in the bulk of his work, though admittedly in very conspicuous places.”²⁹⁰

Scholem certainly recognises “On the Concept of History” as one of those places in the Benjaminian corpus where, as Irving Wohlfarth puts it, his friend allows himself to lay “his theological cards on the table”²⁹¹: contrary to the remark that theology must keep out of

²⁸⁷ Poe, “Maelzel’s Chess-Player,” 19.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.* See also Gold, “The Dwarf in the Machine,” 1224: “Poe maintains that human agency offers the only plausible explanation for how the automaton operates; what he discounts is the possibility that this person could be a dwarf.”

²⁸⁹ *SW*, 4:389.

²⁹⁰ Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, 191.

²⁹¹ Wohlfarth, “On the Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin’s Last Reflections,” 172.

sight, Scholem disputes that it does not “remain all that invisible”²⁹² in the “Theses.” Correspondingly, in his interpretation of the first Thesis theology takes complete precedence over historical materialism: for him, the fragment serves to dispel the illusion that historical materialism is in command, as it is shown to be nothing more than a hollow puppet “that can win the historical game only by taking into its service the hidden mastery of theology.”²⁹³ In the final analysis, Thesis I is the image of a historical materialism “subservient to theology,” for “it is theology that pulls the strings, even if it has to remain hidden in a materialist language.”²⁹⁴ Hence, theology ought to be revealed as the “secret core” of the document’s purportedly materialistic formulations, insofar as what links “the last datable writing by Benjamin” to “what one is accustomed to call historical materialism” is but “the ironic relation of the *termini technici*, which, however, signify the opposite of what a more robust, less mystical materialist [...] would like to understand by them.”²⁹⁵

Despite some of Scholem’s central assertions finding an echo in accounts which stress the pre-eminence of the theological component of Benjamin’s thinking in the “Theses”—e.g., Wohlfarth holds that in the “parable of the dwarf and the automat” Benjamin defines his own Marxism as “a disguised form of Messianism”²⁹⁶—the question remains whether the view developed by the theologian deals with the crucial antithesis of the passage in a satisfactory manner. Certainly, the fragment’s final subjugation of theology to the condition of *ancilla machinae* (servant of the machine)²⁹⁷ calls into question the *mastery* of the *chess master* tucked away in the device. Thus, Löwy compels us to “take seriously the idea that theology is ‘in the service’ of materialism,” since “[t]heology for Benjamin is not a goal in

²⁹² Scholem, “Walter Benjamin and His Angel,” 82.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁴ De Wilde, “Benjamin’s Politics of Remembrance,” 181.

²⁹⁵ Scholem, “Walter Benjamin and His Angel,” 85.

²⁹⁶ Wohlfarth, “On the Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin’s Last Reflections,” 148.

²⁹⁷ See de Vries, *Le miracle au cœur de l’ordinaire*, 62.

itself”; rather, “it is in the service of the struggle of the oppressed.”²⁹⁸ Notwithstanding Scholem’s protestations against the subordination of theology to a presumably auxiliary role, if the first Thesis’ overall ambivalent presentation of the dwarf—both master and servant, manoeuvring the strings and in the service of the mechanism—is expression of Benjamin’s uneven relation to theology, then how should we take the text’s closing recommendation that it stays “out of sight”? Are we to disregard it as a rule to which Benjamin does not conform, since, as Löwy (with Scholem) argues, “theology is plainly visible”²⁹⁹ in the document? On this basis, are we to sabotage the “covert game of hide-and-seek”³⁰⁰ that Benjamin plays with theology by “prying loose the shell of the apparatus so as to *recover* theology as [the] hidden content”³⁰¹ of historical materialism, of which, according to Scholem, “nothing remains [...] except the term itself”³⁰²?

Is it truly the case that in Thesis I Benjamin intends to expose the dwarf in the machine? Comay thinks, on the contrary, that here “the very idea of exposure as the externalization of an interiority” is undermined, insofar as it seems to be less “a question of exposing, theatricalizing or expressing the [puppet’s] secret than of subverting our habitual assumptions regarding exposure or theatricality as such.”³⁰³ Comay’s contention finds support in some of the elements of the allegory: most notably, she points to the system of mirrors which “misrepresent[s] a crowded box as a transparent table,” specifically designed to camouflage the presence of the dwarf by manufacturing “transparency [...] as one more conceit.”³⁰⁴ Furthermore, the final remark of the fragment resonates in the way in which Benjamin employs the theological notions to which he appeals throughout the rest of the

²⁹⁸ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 27.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁰ Wohlfarth, “On the Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin’s Last Reflections,” 172.

³⁰¹ Comay, “Benjamin’s Endgame,” 251.

³⁰² Scholem, “Walter Benjamin and His Angel,” 82.

³⁰³ Comay, “Benjamin’s Endgame,” 248.

³⁰⁴ Comay, 247.

document. For while theology (*die Theologie*) is directly invoked at the end of the first Thesis, it is not explicitly mentioned in the subsequent fragments; instead, we catch fleeting glimpses of Benjamin's messianic thinking only through various concepts (remembrance, redemption) and figures (the Messiah, Judgment Day, the angel), but their meanings are nevertheless not clarified via a conventional philosophical exposition. This is why Eli Friedlander emphasises that in the "Theses" "[r]eligious language cannot stand on its own. Its use must always be indirect"; in that sense, the theological categories utilised in the document need to "be presented as characteristics of [Benjamin's] practice of writing history."³⁰⁵

Perhaps we can begin to approach the questions derived from Benjamin's obscure and unorthodox treatment of theology in the "Theses" by supplying some much-needed conceptual clarification of its meaning within the said context. Löwy provides a good starting point for this analysis by linking theology to "two [...] essential components of the new 'concept of history' which the 'Theses' construct"—namely, the concepts of "remembrance (*Eingedenken*) and messianic redemption (*Erlösung*)."³⁰⁶ He considers the first notion to be one of the chief tasks of the "theological dwarf": the task of a "historical remembrance of the victims of the past."³⁰⁷ Beyond Löwy's specific examination of the concept, the reference to remembrance as a type of praxis is particularly noteworthy, for the "Theses" also make allusions to this idea. Most importantly, fragment B condenses this theme in the image of the inquiries on time conducted by the Jewish soothsayers, who were "instructed [...] in remembrance" through the study of the Torah.³⁰⁸ The depiction of remembrance as an activity is accompanied by the image of an experience of time which

³⁰⁵ Friedlander, *A Philosophical Portrait*, 191.

³⁰⁶ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 27.

³⁰⁷ Löwy, 31.

³⁰⁸ *SW*, 4:397.

accords with this praxis: it is the image of messianic time, which is construed in radical opposition to the experience of an empty, homogeneous temporality. The soothsayers, having been prohibited from inquiring into the future, turn to the past instead; the passage thereby underlines a “refusal to create an image of the future. Instead of the image of the future there is the practice of remembrance,”³⁰⁹ which challenges the hold that the future has over the present. This is not to say, however, that the future is grasped under the model of “homogeneous, empty time”; rather, Benjamin remarks, every second is experienced as “the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter.”³¹⁰ Here, then, we encounter a depiction of “Jewish religious life” which is “informed [...] by the experience of an infinitely modulated time, in which [...] the particular constellation of each passing moment [has its] own essence and distinct meaning.”³¹¹ This is a *qualitatively distinct* experience of temporality from that of a “neutral and cumulative time [...] conceived according to the model of physical time as the vector of a series of predictable phenomena,”³¹² lying at the basis of modern historiography—which accounts for the relation between past, present and future by subduing them to a causal nexus, thereby reducing the labour of historiography to the act of “tell[ing] the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary.”³¹³ Conversely, the reference to an (eminently theological) experience of time will allow for the reconceptualisation of the double link of the present to both past and future within the context of Benjamin’s overall project in the “Theses.”

In order to unpack the particular logic under which this reforging is conducted, I shall first turn my attention to what the specialised literature has thematised as a “vigilant

³⁰⁹ Benjamin, *Working with Walter Benjamin*, 194.

³¹⁰ *SW*, 4:397.

³¹¹ Mosès, *The Angel of History*, 123.

³¹² Mosès, 122-3.

³¹³ *SW*, 4:397.

orientation towards the past”³¹⁴ informing Benjamin’s materialist historiography, clearly associated with the notion of remembrance. Benjamin makes explicit reference to this theme in the preparatory materials for the “Theses”: in one of his notes, he summons up Schlegel’s portrayal of the historian as “a prophet facing backward.”³¹⁵ Now, what matters is the distinctive marker of this orientation, for Benjamin observes that the saying has two different interpretations: “Traditionally, it has meant that the historian, transplanting himself into a remote past, prophesies what was regarded as the future at that time but meanwhile has become the past. [...] But the saying can also be understood to mean something quite different: the historian turns his back on his own time, and his seer’s gaze [*Seherblick*] is kindled by the peaks of earlier generations as they sink further and further into the past.”³¹⁶ For Benjamin, only the “visionary gaze” of the latter is related to the procedure of “genuine historiography”—i.e., historical materialism—whereas the view of the past of the historian who intends to “transplant himself” into it “corresponds exactly to the historical theory of empathy”³¹⁷—i.e., to the method of historicism.

Equipped with the tools of historicism, the historicist presumes that “the present may enter into every past,” that the “present of the historian [...] can bring the past back to life.”³¹⁸ This presumption is grounded upon a reified view of the past as “already there, fully formed just as an object is.”³¹⁹ Correspondingly, the historian is to unproblematically make the past “present”; from the historicist standpoint, the task of historical articulation of the

³¹⁴ Gold, “The Dwarf in the Machine,” 1222. Further, Wohlfarth shines a light on “the attentiveness that the present owes the past [...]. Such attentiveness is, it has emerged, traditionally codified in prayer, secularized in various [...] modalities of *Eingedenken*” (“On the Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin’s Last Reflections,” 161). Along the same lines, Stéphane Mosès holds that the fundamental trait that Benjamin borrows “from the religious experience” is the “extreme attention to the qualitative difference of time” (*The Angel of History*, 116).

³¹⁵ Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, 27.

³¹⁶ *SW*, 4:405 (Ms 471).

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*

³¹⁸ Friedlander, *A Philosophical Portrait*, 159.

³¹⁹ Friedlander, 161.

past is but the attempt to recognise it “the way it really was.”³²⁰ Benjamin, for his part, construes the attitude of the historical materialist towards the past in stark contrast to the historicist vision of the past: when the materialist historiographer inquires into the past, he does not proceed in accord with the “historicist understanding of the past as fixed and ever available”³²¹ for the present; rather, his gaze is ignited by the image of a “rapidly receding past,” of a past that quickly “sinks before him into the night of times.”³²² So, as Ronald Beiner observes, the “historical materialist historian is ruled by a perception of the *precariousness* of the past”³²³; hence the extreme watchfulness that the historian devotes to past times.

A more thorough examination of the essentially precarious link of the present to the past that lies at the core of historical materialism’s conception of history can be conducted by returning to the figure of the dwarf “theology,” the hidden operator of the automaton. Besides the mention of “a hunchbacked dwarf” (*ein buckliger Zwerg*) controlling the movements of the puppet, certain key texts by the philosopher contain multiple allusions to “the little hunchback” (*das bucklicht Männlein*), a character found in a folk song for children compiled in the collection of German folk poetry, *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (1808). In particular, both *Berlin Childhood around 1900* and Benjamin’s well-known essay on the work of Kafka, “Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death,” contain sections devoted to a discussion of said character. If, as Marc de Wilde notes, in the context of these writings “the figure of the ‘hunchbacked dwarf’ refers to the way the past is experienced in memory,”³²⁴ then tackling the question of how these textual references are connected to the image of theology produced in Thesis I is crucial for deepening our understanding of how the specificity of the relationship between past and present is rethought in the “Theses.”

³²⁰ *SW*, 4:391.

³²¹ Friedlander, *A Philosophical Portrait*, 170.

³²² *SW*, 4:407 (Ms 485).

³²³ Beiner, “Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy of History,” 427.

³²⁴ De Wilde, “Benjamin’s Politics of Remembrance,” 182.

In the Kafka essay, the little hunchback is conjured up in one of the quintessential gestures performed by Kafka's characters—i.e., “that of the man who bows his head far down on his chest.”³²⁵ Kafka's stories highlight the hunched back as the archetype of distortion (*Entstellung*); in this regard, Benjamin represents the little hunchback as the inhabitant of distorted life: he “is at home in distorted life.”³²⁶ Furthermore, through the image of the hump, Benjamin draws a close link between distortion and forgetting; this protrusion, the burden or weight on the back, is directly associated with forgetfulness: “Quite palpably, being loaded down is [...] equated with forgetting—the forgetting of a sleeping man.”³²⁷ The equation is further reinforced through the introduction of Odradek, one of Kafka's creatures, which in the writer's work appears as “the most singular bastard which the prehistoric world has begotten with guilt.”³²⁸ For Benjamin, Odradek—described as a “flat, star-shaped spool for thread”—“is the form which things assume in oblivion. They are distorted.”³²⁹ Thus, Comay summarises, “deformity or ‘distortion’,” synonymous with “‘misplacement’ or ‘displacement’,” represents “the essential hallmark of oblivion.”³³⁰

Ostracised within the household—both “without a place in [...] the ‘family circle’” and “without escape from [it]”³³¹—Odradek prefers reduced spaces like the stairs, the corridor, or the hall; alternatively, it is relegated to rooms like the attic. “Attics,” indicates Benjamin, “are the places of discarded, forgotten objects.”³³² In turn, in *Berlin Childhood* we catch a glimpse of the little hunchback lurking in the subterranean darkness of the cellar. In this text,

³²⁵ *SW*, 2:811.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*

³²⁷ *Ibid.* This topic has garnered considerable attention from the specialised literature, especially from Irving Wohlfarth, who stresses that for Benjamin “[a] hunchback in Kafka's universe is [...] a back bent by a burden of fatigue or guilt that is synonymous with forgetting” (“On the Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin's Last Reflections,” 161).

³²⁸ *SW*, 2:810.

³²⁹ *SW*, 2:810-1.

³³⁰ Comay, *Benjamin's Endgame*, 252.

³³¹ *Ibid.*

³³² *SW*, 2:811.

Benjamin reiterates his interpretation of the figure of the little hunchback as a sign of forgetting; as Gold explains, here the character is related “to the way in which the world of childhood slips into the past without the narrator’s knowledge.”³³³ This trickster—identified as belonging to a clan “so keen on mischief-making and pranks”—inflicts the curse of inattention upon us: “Whoever is looked at by this little man pays no attention. [...] Where the hunchback appeared, I could only look on uselessly. It was a look from which things receded.”³³⁴ Under the influence of the little man things are withdrawn into the past, they shrink and “grow a hump.” The hunchback imprints the mark of forgetting on the objects and places that form the world of the past as it appears in memory, thereby making them his own. “The world as it is remembered,” underscores de Wilde, “is thus a world of little men and dwarfs.”³³⁵ This is the image of a fundamentally distorted world, due to the pervasiveness of oblivion in the activity of memory. No act of inattention on our part goes unpunished by the mischief-maker: “The hunchback,” Wohlfarth remarks, “penalizes us for every [...] inattention. He takes away [...] the ability to tell one’s own life.”³³⁶ When looking back at his childhood, Benjamin reminisces about the penalties enforced upon him by the hunchback: “this gray assessor [...] exact[ed] the half part of oblivion from each thing to which I turned.”³³⁷

In essence, then, these pieces construe the little hunchback’s relation to the past primarily through the theme of forgetting; nevertheless, how is this figure related to the hunchbacked dwarf concealed inside the chess-playing apparatus? The answer preferred by Gold involves setting the two in opposition to each other: whereas “in *Berlin Childhood around 1900* and ‘Franz Kafka’ [...] the little hunchback signifies forgetting, his deformed

³³³ Gold, “The Dwarf in the Machine,” 1226.

³³⁴ SW, 3:385.

³³⁵ De Wilde, “Benjamin’s Politics of Remembrance,” 182.

³³⁶ Wohlfarth, “On the Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin’s Last Reflections,” 159.

³³⁷ SW, 3:385.

shape embodying the distortion imposed upon all that is irretrievably lost to the past,” in the “Theses” the dwarf chess master is not concerned with the past “as it relates to forgetting,” but “represents something closer to remembrance.”³³⁸ Some amount of textual support can be provided for this hypothesis by focusing on the tricks performed in each case: the little hunchback of *Berlin Childhood*, Arendt describes, “cause[s] the objects to play their mischievous tricks upon children”; adults announce his presence whenever “one of the countless little catastrophes of childhood” takes place.³³⁹ On the other hand, the dwarf operator demonstrates his mastery by pulling off the “trick” of making the automaton appear as a purely automatic device capable of achieving an automatic victory. Ultimately, he is the one behind the movements of the puppet, he is the “master at chess [...] guid[ing] the puppet’s hands by means of strings”³⁴⁰ that is meant to lead the puppet to victory.

Nevertheless, this master operator has not been relieved of the hump, he still carries the sign of oblivion. Accordingly, Comay recognises a “double distortion” intrinsic to this figure (“‘small and ugly’, dwarf and hunchback”), which “marks the doubleness or duplicity of all distortion: ‘displacement’ as such is never quite in its place.”³⁴¹ Odradek, the distorted form things take in oblivion, is never “quite in its place” in the family household—it is both imprisoned within the house and banished to the attic. Likewise, the chess master does not seem to be “quite in his place” inside the apparatus, for, as it was discussed earlier in this section, in the “Theses” the figure of the hunchbacked dwarf is coloured by a fundamental ambiguity. If, on the one hand, without his intervention the automaton simply cannot function, on the other hand, however, his presence must remain a secret: in order for the illusion to be executed successfully, the puppet needs to appear as having no operator at all.

³³⁸ Gold, “The Dwarf in the Machine,” 1227.

³³⁹ Arendt, introduction to *Illuminations*, 6.

³⁴⁰ *SW*, 4:389.

³⁴¹ Comay, “Benjamin’s Endgame,” 253.

Thus, Hent de Vries explains, if, above all, the dwarf “theology” is *intended* to be kept out of sight, then he should be concealed to such a degree that we can no longer tell whether he is—or should be—in his hiding place at all.³⁴²

In sum, the hunchback, upon whom the duty of controlling the machine has been imposed, is to take himself out of the equation. He is to carry out his role with such expertise so as to give the impression that the puppet is playing chess autonomously. And as much as in Thesis I the dwarf is shown as “master and spirit” of the Turk, he is also portrayed, de Vries mentions, in what seems to be “no more than an instrumental position.”³⁴³ Hence, “although a *Meister*,” Comay holds, the hunchback “is no master.”³⁴⁴ Benjamin’s philosophical interpretation, we are reminded, explicitly puts the dwarf in the service of the puppet, categorically inverting the dynamic between the two: “Not only does the giant puppet, in enlisting the dwarf’s services, become the puppeteer of his own puppeteer, jerking the line that will jerk him. So too the dwarf [...] is himself burdened by the reification he would control: stunted, doll-like, puppet to the puppet who sits astride him.”³⁴⁵ The ambivalence which pervades this figure is fully captured in Comay’s analysis; for her, the dwarf is “a secret agent” in every sense of the term: “The hunchback, while the Messianic agent or augur of remembrance, is at the same time thus the supremely guilty instance of forgetfulness.”³⁴⁶

The figure of the hunchbacked dwarf, then, is constructed as the embodiment of a distinctive dialectic of memory and forgetting permeating Benjamin’s idea of the bond between past and present in the “Theses.” If, as Alison Ross underlines, in Benjamin’s view of

³⁴² De Vries, *Le miracle au cœur de l'ordinaire*, 62.

³⁴³ De Vries, 61.

³⁴⁴ Comay, “Benjamin’s Endgame,” 279.

³⁴⁵ Comay, 247.

³⁴⁶ Comay, 253.

history theology is manifest “in the way the relation with the past [...] is conceptualised,”³⁴⁷ it becomes visible first and foremost through a conception of remembrance which, as Wohlfarth points out, is “synonymous with the difficulty of recapturing past time.”³⁴⁸ For in remembrance we have an experience of the past as quintessentially fragmentary—the hunchback, Benjamin comments in *Berlin Childhood*, “stands dazed before a heap of fragments.”³⁴⁹ Now, as Comay argues, Benjamin refuses to resolve this fragmentation “into the spiritual interiority of consciousness,”³⁵⁰ for that would amount to an endorsement of the historicist aspiration of presenting the past as fixed in time. Thus, Benjaminian *Eingedenken* constitutes a protestation against “a notion of memory [...] as an anamnestic totalization of the detotalized,”³⁵¹ which merely aims at the conservation of the past “as it was.” In that sense, as Peter Osborne emphasises, Benjamin “is not arguing for some kind of total recall” of the past, for here we find the “myth of historicism: the recovery of the past ‘the way it really was’.”³⁵²

The Benjamin scholarship has further thematised the philosopher’s criticisms against memory as the process of interiorization of the past by explicating the way in which Benjamin’s understanding of *Eingedenken* differs from Hegelian *Erinnerung* as a form of recollection. Wohlfarth holds that the latter refers to “an encyclopaedic, (anal-)retentive, self-interiorizing memory (*Er-Innerung*),” which labour is reduced “to the indiscriminate accumulation of bric-à-brac from a historical past.”³⁵³ In contrast, Benjaminian remembrance, Comay insists, signifies “precisely the *opposite* of the unifying inwardness of

³⁴⁷ Ross, *Revolution and History in Walter Benjamin*, 10.

³⁴⁸ Wohlfarth, “On the Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin’s Last Reflections,” 156.

³⁴⁹ *SW*, 3:385.

³⁵⁰ Comay, “Benjamin’s Endgame,” 251.

³⁵¹ Jay, “Walter Benjamin, Remembrance, and the First World War,” 190.

³⁵² Osborne, “Small-scale Victories, Large-scale Defeats,” 86.

³⁵³ Wohlfarth, “No-man’s-land,” 174.

[...] thought,” and “announces [...] a mindfulness or vigilance”³⁵⁴ directed towards a past threatened by the perils of oblivion. So, while Hegelian *Erinnerung* “is [...] re-membering” as “resurrection” of an idealized past, Benjamin, on the contrary, “re-members”; in Benjaminian remembrance the “work of memory” takes shape as “the ceaseless, ‘rhapsodic’ excavation of vestiges.”³⁵⁵ This is precisely how Benjamin describes the activity of memory in his *Berlin Chronicle*: “He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. This determines the tone of genuine reminiscences.”³⁵⁶

As such, remembrance is not oriented towards the memorialisation of the past, but towards the *rescue* (*Rettung*) of a past that plunges further into the depths of history: “[w]hat guides the relation to the past” in the case of remembrance “is the will to save it, to deliver it from forgetfulness or ossification.”³⁵⁷ For at the core of remembrance lies the awareness of the fundamental fragility of the link between past and present: the materialist historiographer recognises, first and foremost, that the past is susceptible of falling prey to the pitfalls of forgetting. Hence, Benjaminian *Eingedenken* cannot denote a vision of past times as mere reified object for accumulation; rather, Benjamin argues, “[t]he true image of the past flits by,” threatening “to disappear in any present that does not recognize itself as intended in that image.”³⁵⁸ So, contrary to the pretensions of historicism—which regards historiography as the endeavour of accessing the world of the past “as is” from the standpoint of the present and, in that sense, aspires to offer “the ‘eternal’ image of the past”—the historical materialist, cognisant of the sudden manner in which the past makes

³⁵⁴ Comay, “Benjamin’s Endgame,” 260.

³⁵⁵ Comay, 250. Likewise, Wohlfarth describes *Eingedenken* as “reclamation of the past from a flood, re-collection with rake and shovel” (“On the Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin’s Last Reflections,” 194).

³⁵⁶ *SW*, 2:611.

³⁵⁷ Mosès, *The Angel of History*, 124.

³⁵⁸ *SW*, 4:390-1.

itself manifest in the present, aims at supplying “a unique experience with the past.”³⁵⁹ From this standpoint, the task of articulating the past historically takes the configuration of *the appropriation of a memory*,³⁶⁰ for it is a matter of seizing the fleeting image of the past which briefly makes its presence felt within the bounds of our own time.

Having shattered historicism’s reified image of the past, the historical materialist’s appropriation of the past involves the recognition of the “passing or ephemeral moment inherent in the construction of history.”³⁶¹ Thus, unlike the historicist, the materialist historian cannot rest content with “establishing a causal nexus among various moments in history.”³⁶² Against historicism’s method of investigating history—its procedure, the philosopher explains, “is additive: it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time”—Benjamin contends that “no state of affairs having causal significance is for that very reason historical”³⁶³; so “imposing on history the model of mechanical causality in which the cause of an effect must immediately precede it [...] on the temporal chain”³⁶⁴ does not render the past intelligible for the present. For this amounts to accounting for the relation of the present to the past as a *purely temporal* one; nevertheless, as Mosès emphasises, “historical intelligibility [...] can stem only from the encounter between a past and a present moment, the one where the historian is located.”³⁶⁵ Therefore, as Wohlfarth claims, Benjamin puts forward as one of his central theses that “genuine historical memory takes the form of messianic contacts between the present and specific moments of the past.”³⁶⁶

³⁵⁹ SW, 4:396. Some correspondences can be established between this idea and Benjamin’s mention of memory—in *Berlin Chronicle*—“not [as] an instrument for exploring the past but [as] its theater. It is the medium of past experience, just as the earth is the medium in which dead cities lie buried” (SW, 2:611).

³⁶⁰ SW, 4:391. See also Friedlander, *A Philosophical Portrait*, 167.

³⁶¹ Friedlander, *A Philosophical Portrait*, 170.

³⁶² SW, 4:397.

³⁶³ SW, 4:396-7.

³⁶⁴ Mosès, *The Angel of History*, 112.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁶ Wohlfarth, “On the Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin’s Last Reflections,” 152.

The little hunchback of Benjamin's childhood memories perfectly exemplifies the way in which the past appeals to the present. Having been introduced as the bearer of misfortune, the hunchback's folksong ends with "the dwarf's conversion from spoiler to suppliant."³⁶⁷ Both the Kafka essay and *Berlin Childhood* quote the closing verses of the folk rhyme,³⁶⁸ where the hunchback interrupts the child one last time—he pays them a sudden visit, without warning³⁶⁹—but in so doing the little man asks to be included in their prayers; before vanishing, the dwarf implores for remembrance: "in asking to be remembered [...] the little devil comes at the last moment to seek redemption, attention, release from his ugliness."³⁷⁰ The plea of the hunchback points to remembrance as an imperative: against obliviousness, the little man demands "attentiveness in all its forms."³⁷¹

Remembrance as a form of attention towards the past, we are reminded by Wohlfarth, does not only emerge in the religious context of prayer, but it is also epitomised in "the storyteller's sympathy with the humblest creatures of God's creation."³⁷² Of Kafka, for example, Benjamin asserts that, although "he did not pray [...] he still possessed in the highest degree [...] 'the natural prayer of the soul': attentiveness [*die Aufmerksamkeit*]. And in this attentiveness he included all creatures, as saints include them in their prayers."³⁷³ Further, in his essay on Nikolai Leskov, *The Storyteller*, Benjamin connects the figure of the storyteller to the medieval chronicler—"the history-teller," presented as the precursor of the

³⁶⁷ Wohlfarth, 160.

³⁶⁸ "When I kneel upon my stool / And I want to pray, / A hunchbacked man is in the room / And he starts to say: / My dear child, I beg of you, / Pray for the little hunchback too" (SW, 2:812). See also SW, 3:385.

³⁶⁹ See Sferco, "Essai autour de la temporalité fragmentaire du 'Petit Bossu'," 118.

³⁷⁰ Wohlfarth, "On the Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin's Last Reflections," 161.

³⁷¹ Wohlfarth, 162. For a discussion of the theological dwarf of Thesis I as signifying the "imperative of remembrance," see also de Wilde, "Benjamin's Politics of Remembrance," 183.

³⁷² Wohlfarth, "On the Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin's Last Reflections," 161.

³⁷³ SW, 2:812. Likewise, when discussing Nikolai Leskov's works in *The Storyteller*, Benjamin stresses that "the storyteller keeps faith with [the era in which man could believe himself to be in harmony with nature], and his eyes do not stray from that clockface and its revolving procession of creatures" (SW, 3:153).

modern historian.³⁷⁴ This character makes a brief reappearance in Thesis III: the chronicler, Benjamin highlights, “narrates [*hererzählt*] events without distinguishing between major and minor ones,” and thereby conducts himself in accordance with the truth that “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history.”³⁷⁵ The chronicler’s orientation towards salvation is delineated by Wohlfarth as follows: “The history-teller (re)counts [*(herer)zählt*] all souls. He tells time, all of it, and his chronicle is utopian because it is unselective. [...] it makes no discrimination. It does not focus exclusively on the great events of history.”³⁷⁶ Now, if the historical materialist agrees with the truth of the chronicler, it is not because he takes it as historiographic principle, as mere criterion for writing history—it is not, then, in the interest of congealing the entire past into an unproblematic retelling of what has happened. Rather, both chronicler and materialist historiographer share “the vision of a history in which nothing is sacrificed, nothing is lost forever.”³⁷⁷

In the impulse towards salvation, we uncover the full meaning of remembrance “as a category of ethics,”³⁷⁸ as here it becomes intertwined with redemption. Remembrance, Friedlander notes, is “redemptive memory,”³⁷⁹ for which the weak—messianic—link between past and present becomes manifest in the form of “a secret agreement between past generations and the present one.”³⁸⁰ Oyarzún makes the point that the facet of the past towards which the gaze of the historian is oriented, “[t]he past in a strict sense is the

³⁷⁴ *SW*, 3:152. Now, Benjamin underlines a crucial difference between the task of the chronicler and that of the modern historian: the former *narrates* history, the latter *writes* it. While the historian is endeavoured to “*explain[ing]* in one way or another the happenings with which he deals,” the chronicler displays them “as models of the course of the world”; the medieval chroniclers ground “their historical tales on a divine—and inscrutable—plan of salvation,” so they lift from the very outset “the burden of demonstrable explanation from their own shoulders. Its place is taken by interpretation, which is concerned not with an accurate concatenation of definite events, but with the way these are embedded in the great inscrutable course of the world” (*SW*, 3:152-3).

³⁷⁵ *SW*, 4:390. See also Simay, “Tradition as Injunction,” 139: “the storyteller refuses to consider the past as a closed chapter, as if it had been consumed for good.”

³⁷⁶ Wohlfarth, “On the Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin’s Last Reflections,” 152.

³⁷⁷ Mosès, *The Angel of History*, 125.

³⁷⁸ Mosès, 124.

³⁷⁹ Friedlander, *A Philosophical Portrait*, 190.

³⁸⁰ *SW*, 4:390.

truncated past, the one that cannot—could not—be realized in its present. But precisely the aspect of the past that has been truncated is the index of its tension with respect to redemption.”³⁸¹ “What is decisive in Benjamin’s conception [of the past],” he adds, “is that the past remains pending.”³⁸² The past, Benjamin insists, has a claim on the present, which “cannot be settled cheaply,” since “only a redeemed mankind is granted the fullness of its past.”³⁸³ The historical materialist is keenly aware of the hold that the past has on the present. Consequently, as Mosès highlights, the materialist historian “take[s] on the memory of the forgotten”; in his praxis the historian is guided by “a sense of responsibility” towards “a past [...] he must answer for somehow.”³⁸⁴ Thus, Löwy explains, if the philosopher “conceives redemption from the very first as historical remembrance of the victims of the past,”³⁸⁵ it also entails the fulfilment and reparation of the truncated past: “For redemption to take place, there must be reparation [...] for the suffering and grief inflicted” on past generations.³⁸⁶

2.3 The dialectics of historical materialism and theology

Already in 1843, in his introduction to the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, the young Karl Marx declared the criticism of religion—which “is the premise of all criticism”—to be largely completed: religion was thereby revealed as “the illusory sun about which man revolves so long as he does not revolve about himself.”³⁸⁷ The inaugural text of the historical materialist tradition opens with the demand for “the abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of men,” which is but the “demand for their

³⁸¹ Oyarzún, *Doing Justice*, 61.

³⁸² *Ibid.*

³⁸³ *SW*, 4:390.

³⁸⁴ Mosès, *The Angel of History*, 107.

³⁸⁵ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 31.

³⁸⁶ Löwy, 32.

³⁸⁷ *MER*, 53-4.

real happiness.”³⁸⁸ Hence, the mandate to liquidate religion as “*the fantastic realization of the human being*” constitutes the “*call to abandon a condition which requires illusions*”; that man “revolve[s] about himself as his own true sun” means, ultimately, that man “has lost his illusions and regained his reason.”³⁸⁹ Thus, it is only by unmasking religion as the “*sacred form*” of “human self-alienation” that the “criticism of heaven” can be transformed “into the criticism of earth” and, consequently, that the task of “unmask[ing] human self-alienation in its *secular form*” can be achieved.³⁹⁰

Nearly one hundred years after being expunged from the theoretical apparatus of Marxism, we find that the dwarf “theology” has made its hideout *inside* the puppet “historical materialism.”³⁹¹ Benjamin lets us in on the secret of the mechanism, and proclaims that theology ought to be put at the service of the overall aims of historical materialism, since this alliance is said to be capable of taking on any opponent. Now, although the claim that historical materialism is to always emerge the winner suggests the introduction of theology as the *deus ex machina* which secures the victory for the automaton instantaneously, de Vries observes, rather, that theology “enters the scene [...] as a learned exercise of thought and spirit [*un exercice savant de la pensée, et de l’esprit*],”³⁹² encapsulated in the forethought the dwarf devotes to “the *countermove* [...], the countermeasure, the response that would ensure the winning of the game.”³⁹³ As Tiedemann explains, “[t]he dwarf can think, analyze, and make combinations,” while the puppet “is merely the object of

³⁸⁸ *MER*, 54.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁹¹ To be sure, there is a fundamental divergence between “theology” and “religion” in Benjamin’s work that needs to be taken into account. Buck-Morss notes that, in Benjamin’s writings, “theology functions as an axis of philosophical experience,” which “differs from the function of ‘religion’ as part of the ideological superstructure” (*The Dialectics of Seeing*, 248-9). See also Andrew Benjamin’s study, who argues that “Benjamin’s work introduces a specific thinking of the opposition between theology and religion”; hence, if “[t]heology continues as an effective presence structuring [Benjamin’s] philosophical project,” this is because “it stands opposed to religion” (*Working with Walter Benjamin*, 1-2).

³⁹² De Vries, *Le miracle au cœur de l’ordinaire*, 61; my translation.

³⁹³ Friedlander, *A Philosophical Portrait*, 273n3.

manipulation: it can make no move which is not prescribed [by its operator].”³⁹⁴ This distinction is reinforced by Löwy, who construes the dwarf “theology” as the “messianic spirit,” the “soul” that performs the “spiritual activation” of historical materialism, thereby reestablishing its “explosive, messianic, revolutionary force.”³⁹⁵ Thus, Löwy argues, by means of the “vivifying action of the dwarf, the whole [apparatus] becomes alive and active.”³⁹⁶

But if the allegory has any chances of being construed as an illustration of theology’s vivification of historical materialism, we first need to ask, with Friedlander, why Benjamin chooses to “elaborate the relation between historical materialism and theology” through a story of trickery³⁹⁷—one in which the puppet stands as a simulacrum of life: the machine solely gives the appearance of playing chess autonomously. The gestures and movements of the Turk, Poe notes in his analysis of the device, are permeated with the semblance of artificiality: remaining, at best, a deficient imitation of life, the puppet is exhibited as an “artificial and unnatural figure.”³⁹⁸ How, then, are we to take the act of “spiritual activation” of an essentially inanimate machine? Can the dwarf actually imbue the lifeless puppet with life by taking control of its operations—in the image, does it not all amount to a hoax? If the

³⁹⁴ Tiedemann, “Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?”, 189.

³⁹⁵ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 28. To strengthen his interpretation of the figure of the dwarf, Löwy appeals to the romantic theme of “the hunchbacked dwarf [...] as *spiritus rector* of an inanimate structure” (Löwy, 26), which allegedly fascinated Benjamin (in support of this point, Löwy mentions Benjamin’s short story, “Rastelli’s Tale,” where “he presents a dwarf carefully concealed in a master’s juggler’s ball and performing ‘wonders’ by ‘work[ing] the compression springs in the interior of the ball” [*Ibid.*]). Löwy refers to Quasimodo, the protagonist of Victor Hugo’s *Notre-Dame de Paris*, as paradigm of this literary theme: in the novel, the hunchback is portrayed as the “soul” of the cathedral, the latter described as “a docile and obedient creature beneath [Quasimodo’s] hand [...] possessed and filled with Quasimodo” (quoted in Löwy, 26). By proceeding in this direction, however, Löwy not only fails to take into account Benjamin’s subtle but deliberate deviation from the main hypothesis defended in Poe’s essay—which, in turn, contradicts his gesture of equating the hunchbacked dwarf with Poe’s “mind” (“Poe’s ‘mind’ becomes, in Benjamin’s thesis, theology” [Löwy, 26]). He also glosses over the other references to the figure of the dwarf in Benjamin’s work that were discussed in the previous section of this chapter.

³⁹⁶ Löwy, 26.

³⁹⁷ Friedlander, *A Philosophical Portrait*, 272–313.

³⁹⁸ Poe, “Maelzel’s Chess-Player,” 29. “The external appearance, and especially, the deportment of the Turk, are, when we consider them as imitations of *life*, but very indifferent imitations. The countenance evinces no ingenuity, and is surpassed, in its resemblance to the human face, by the very commonest of wax-works. The eyes roll unnaturally in the head, without any corresponding motions of the lids or brows. The arm, particularly, performs its operations in an exceedingly stiff, awkward jerking, and rectangular manner” (*Ibid.*).

dwarf is soul, mind, spirit, is it not the *anima* of a soulless, mindless, spiritless marionette, called “historical materialism”?

The exposure of the puppet as a fraud may in fact be read as a denunciation of vulgar Marxism for its ideological degeneration of “genuine” Marxist orthodoxy: Löwy thinks, after all, that in Thesis I Benjamin is not referring to “true” historical materialism, but a dogma that has been granted that label illegitimately. According to this view, the introduction of theology *into* historical materialism would thus serve to dispel the vulgar-Marxist distortions of the revolutionary postulates of classical Marxism. Osborne reminds us, nonetheless, that “[o]nly secondarily was [Benjamin] interested in [historical materialism] as a doctrine.”³⁹⁹ To be sure, Benjamin does not stand alone in his denunciation of the progressivist and mechanical view of history defended by vulgar Marxism. Rather, by quarrelling against Social Democracy and the orthodox Marxist position of his time, the philosopher situates himself in the twilight of one of the most crucial debates within the twentieth-century Marxist tradition, which commences, right before the turn of the twentieth century, with Rosa Luxemburg’s polemics against Eduard Bernstein’s revisionism of the original Marxian doctrine. Nevertheless, unlike Luxemburg’s earliest excoriations of the “opportunist current” within the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD)—for which Bernstein had developed its theoretical basis—and its “unconscious attempt to assure the predominance of the petty-bourgeois elements” that had infiltrated the Party,⁴⁰⁰ Benjamin’s text is not concerned with the controversy pertaining to the true conception of scientific socialism, nor with safeguarding the “objective necessity of socialism” by rejecting the idea of a developmental transition towards its end goal and affirming “the historical necessity of the socialist revolution.”⁴⁰¹

³⁹⁹ Osborne, “Small-scale Victories, Large-scale Defeats,” 68.

⁴⁰⁰ Luxemburg, *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, 130.

⁴⁰¹ Luxemburg, 132-3.

Neither, for that matter, is Benjamin's examination of the dogmatism of Social Democracy fully consistent with the spirit of the criticisms of Social Democratic reformism put forward by György Lukács or Karl Korsch during the 1920s. Both Lukács' and Korsch's contributions to the post-First World War disputes around the question on the "essence of Marxism" attack the "trivialisation of Marxism and its deflection into a bourgeois 'science'" enacted by the revisionist approach to scientific socialism,⁴⁰² for which scientific socialism "had inevitably ceased to be a theory of social revolution."⁴⁰³ In that sense, their condemnations of the "distortion of the revolutionary doctrine of Marxism [...] into a purely theoretical critique that no longer leads to practical revolutionary action, or does so only haphazardly,"⁴⁰⁴ inform the general endeavour to restore "the correct and full sense of Marx's theory, denatured and banalized by the epigones."⁴⁰⁵ Nevertheless, if Benjamin's intention in the "Theses" is to insert himself in the interwar debate on the "true semblance" of Marxism, by 1940 this pretension would have been exposed as untimely and anachronistic.

In the early 1920s Korsch recognised that "Marxist theory had entered a critical phase" triggered by the "greatest crisis that has yet occurred in the history of Marxist theory," which resulted from the rift between "Marxist neo-reformism" and "the theoretical representatives

⁴⁰² Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 29.

⁴⁰³ Korsch, "Marxism and Philosophy," 66.

⁴⁰⁴ Korsch, 64. Likewise, Lukács disapproves of the "onslaught on the dialectical method in the name of exact 'science'" perpetrated by Marxist revisionism (*History and Class Consciousness*, 29).

⁴⁰⁵ Korsch, "Marxism and Philosophy," 70. Note, as well, Lukács' commentary on the question of how to define orthodox Marxism, in which he refers Marxist orthodoxy "exclusively to *method*"; delineated in this way, orthodoxy is "the scientific conviction that dialectical materialism is the road to truth and that its methods can be developed, expanded and deepened only along the lines laid down by its founders. It is the conviction, moreover, that all attempts to surpass or 'improve' it have led and must lead to over-simplification, triviality and eclecticism" (*History and Class Consciousness*, 1). It should be stressed, nonetheless, that neither Lukács nor Korsch consider the task of restoration of "the correct—dialectical and revolutionary—conception of original Marxism" to be "a simple *return*" but the "*dialectical development*" of Marxist theory into "a theory of social revolution that comprises all areas of society as a totality" (Korsch, "Marxism and Philosophy," 70-1). See also Lukács' observation that "Marxist orthodoxy is no guardian of traditions, it is the eternally vigilant prophet proclaiming the relation between the tasks of the immediate present and the totality of the historical process" (*History and Class Consciousness*, 24).

of a new revolutionary proletarian party [who] unleashed a struggle against [...] old [...] and new reformism [...] under the battle-cry of restoring pure or revolutionary Marxism.”⁴⁰⁶ The task of the theoretical rehabilitation of dialectical, revolutionary Marxism arose nonetheless “from the needs and pressures of revolutionary practice”⁴⁰⁷: during the first decades of the twentieth century, Marxist intellectuals attested to the beginning of “a new epoch of revolutionary struggle” which culminated in the revolutionary waves that struck post-war Europe at the end of the 1910s.⁴⁰⁸ It is notable for our topic that in Korsch’s view the “revival of original Marxist theory” formed part of the socialist agenda at the time because in this sociohistorical context “the question of social revolution” could be posed “as a realistic and terrestrial question in all its vital dimensions.”⁴⁰⁹ In other words, historical circumstances dictated that “not only the workers’ movement itself, but the theoretical conceptions of communists which express it, must assume an explicitly revolutionary form.”⁴¹⁰

By the time the “Theses” see the light of day, the sociohistorical circumstances that had given rise to the quarrel on the true conception of Marxist orthodoxy had been eradicated as a consequence of the outbreak of the Second World War and the rise of European fascism. While Lukács or Korsch aimed at providing critical assessments of a vigorous, lively debate among the Marxist ranks, in 1940 Benjamin’s potential theoretical adversaries within the German left (the Social Democrats) are found prostrate as confirmation of their defeat. In

⁴⁰⁶ Korsch, “Marxism and Philosophy,” 53-4.

⁴⁰⁷ Korsch, 70.

⁴⁰⁸ Korsch, 53. Here, Korsch is thinking primarily of the events of the Russian Revolution, which “placed the question of the dictatorship of the proletariat on the agenda as a practical problem” (Korsch, 68). Korsch mentions Lenin as the one who consciously re-established “the internal connection of theory and practice within revolutionary Marxism” when he “placed the same question theoretically on the agenda at a decisive moment” (*Ibid.*). Alongside Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg is also credited for having answered “the practical needs of the new revolutionary stage of proletarian class struggle” by liberating Marxist theory “from the inhibiting traditions of [...] Social Democracy,” which “weighed ‘like a nightmare’ on the brain of the working masses whose objectively revolutionary socio-economic position no longer corresponded to these evolutionary doctrines” (Korsch, 67).

⁴⁰⁹ Korsch, 66-7.

⁴¹⁰ Korsch, 67-8.

1933, the SPD (alongside the Communist Party of Germany [KPD]) was banned by the Nazi regime, and its representatives were violently persecuted or went into exile. In that sense, perhaps Benjamin's polemic against Social Democracy would have to be expounded as a post-mortem report of the Social Democratic front, which failed to adequately respond to the fascist threat in Germany. For, as remarked by Oyarzún, the puppet "historical materialism" "lies on the ground, disarticulated and dismembered, showing all over the rudimentary quality of its skeleton and flesh and its clumsy carnivalesque aesthetics."⁴¹¹ This depiction of historical materialism evokes in turn Jacques Rancière's appraisal of Benjamin as "the theoretician who [...] displayed the dismembered body of Marxism."⁴¹²

Hence, the Thesis I "postulate on the invincible force of historical materialism"⁴¹³ is confronted throughout the subsequent Theses with what can be grasped as a palpable image of this force's inevitable defeat. Against the optimism in an ineluctable historical movement towards the progressive realisation of the end goal of socialism, the uncovering of the march of history as the product of barbarism and oppression. Moreover, against the apparent certainty that historical materialism "is to win all the time," the bitter reminder that, over the course of history, it is the enemy who, time and time again, has emerged the victor.⁴¹⁴ Instead of participating in Social Democracy's confidence that "the automatic victory of the proletariat [...] would irresistibly propel Europe through its darkest hour," Benjamin's materialist historiographer "expose[s] the ultimate illegitimacy of every victory, reminding us that victory as such implies victimization."⁴¹⁵

Benjamin's dissection of the ideals of Social Democracy does not simply represent a searing indictment of the distortions forced upon the original Marxian doctrine. Neither is it

⁴¹¹ Oyarzún, *Doing Justice*, 55.

⁴¹² Rancière, "The Archaeomodern Turn," 38.

⁴¹³ Oyarzún, *Doing Justice*, 55.

⁴¹⁴ *SW*, 4:391.

⁴¹⁵ Comay, "Benjamin's Endgame," 255.

the case that his condemnation of the Social Democrats merely identifies them as the *cause* of the internal crisis of Marxism. Rather, Benjamin will diagnose the complete collapse of Marxism's emancipatory, revolutionary aspirations as a *symptom* of a deeper and more generalised crisis, at the root of the project of modernity. If historical materialism saw itself as overcoming the fundamental contradictions that are immanent to modernity as emancipatory project, with its dogmatic commitment to the ideology of progress it ultimately demonstrated that it remained dominated by the phantasmagorias of modernity: "The world dominated by its phantasmagorias—this [...] is 'modernity'."⁴¹⁶ For Benjamin, in the vulgar Marxist approach to history we find the clearest confirmation that, as Brecht puts it, "the struggle against ideology has become the new ideology."⁴¹⁷ If, as Marx claims, "[t]he ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas,"⁴¹⁸ then to view history as grounded in the norm of progress will entail the endorsement of a particular historical viewpoint, that of the rulers. Thus, Benjamin demands "a historical materialism which has annihilated within itself the idea of progress," which has distinguished itself "sharply from bourgeois habits of thought."⁴¹⁹ Historical materialism needs to undertake the task of developing a radically different approach to history, from a radically different perspective; this task, in Benjamin's view, requires the intervention of theology. Historical materialism, unable to turn towards the past, turns to theology; theology executes the reorientation of the gaze of the historian towards the oppressed past.

⁴¹⁶ *AP*, 26.

⁴¹⁷ Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, 119.

⁴¹⁸ *MER*, 172.

⁴¹⁹ *AP*, 460 (N2,2).

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 presents a detailed examination of the notions of tradition and class struggle as discussed in the “Theses.” Benjamin’s treatment of these two notions highlights one of the philosopher’s main preoccupations in the document—namely, the question as to how to conceptualise the materialist historian’s affiliation to the tradition of the oppressed. In the document, Benjamin raises a series of criticisms against the historicist account of tradition; historicism will thereby be accused of “empathising with the victors.” The historical materialist, on the contrary, fundamentally committed to the historical standpoint of the “vanquished,” attains the insight that “[c]lass struggle [...] is always in evidence”⁴²⁰ from this particular historical perspective. I will tackle some of the major difficulties associated with Benjamin’s utilisation of this conception in the context of the “Theses.” I argue that, in the final analysis, Thesis IV should be construed as presenting an image of history as class struggle.

3.1 Brushing history against the grain

The materialist historian who “regards it as his task to brush history against the grain [*die Geschichte gegen den Strich zu bürsten*],”⁴²¹ Benjamin claims in Thesis VII, performs a definitive break with historicism’s historiographical method, outlined by the philosopher as “a process of empathy [*Einfühlung*].”⁴²² Benjamin condenses historicism’s procedure in a reference to Fustel de Coulanges’ recommendation, addressed to “the historian who wishes

⁴²⁰ SW, 4:390.

⁴²¹ SW, 4:392.

⁴²² SW, 4:391.

to relive an era,” that “he blot[s] out everything he knows about the later course of history.”⁴²³ As Oyarzún explains, insofar as historicism’s “epistemological ideal is to know the historical individuality better than it knew itself and to ‘revive’ it in this way,” by means of its empathic method historicism conceives of historical knowledge “as a process of penetrating into the past which makes abstraction out of the temporal distance that separates the past from the present of its knowledge.”⁴²⁴ Along the same lines, Philippe Simay remarks that, by advocating for empathy as the process of identification with a distinct past time, historicism aims at “bracketing the historicity of the historian and of the object being studied in order to re-experience it.”⁴²⁵ The historical distance that separates the past and the historian’s present thus abolished, historicism ostensibly recovers the image of the past *as it was*.

Oyarzún underscores that, by quarrelling with this approach to history, Benjamin seeks to demonstrate that historicism “does not rescue the past *as past*,” but merely “tries to revive the past from a dominant interest in the present.”⁴²⁶ As Friedlander contends, seeing that historicism’s “mode of accounting for historical occurrences by reference to their specific context sanctifies the actual order as the rational outcome of history,” the historicist discourse inevitably “takes the form of *apologia*, a defense of what has occurred by placing it and understanding it in its context.”⁴²⁷ Hence, historicism’s purported identification with the specific world of the past is unveiled as the uncritical endorsement of a particular

⁴²³ *Ibid.* Löwy describes the French historian Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges (1830-1889) as a positivist and reactionary figure (*Fire Alarm*, 47). See also *Fire Alarm*, 124n58.

⁴²⁴ Oyarzún, *Doing Justice*, 70. See also Friedlander’s remarks on historicism’s investigation of the past: “Historicism takes the central form of explanation in history to be the return of the historical phenomenon investigated to the utterly specific context of its times.” Thus, historicism upholds “the ideal of the incorporation of the phenomenon to be explained into the individual context, which would provide the rationale for things occurring as they did” (*A Philosophical Portrait*, 158).

⁴²⁵ Simay, “Tradition as Injunction,” 148.

⁴²⁶ Oyarzún, *Doing Justice*, 69.

⁴²⁷ Friedlander, *A Philosophical Portrait*, 158-9. So, Friedlander stresses, historicism “is a form of acceptance of the past that depends on the assumption that whatever has in fact occurred can be seen as reasonable insofar as it is viewed in its proper context” (Friedlander, 158).

historical perspective: in reality, the historicist's "empathy with the past" amounts to a sympathy with past rulers. Furthermore, Benjamin argues, historicism's empathy with those who emerged the victors in the course of history "invariably benefits the current rulers."⁴²⁸ For its "rationalisation" of the present as a necessary product of the past is at the same time a justification of "the order or hierarchy of forces within a particular period"; in other words, it ultimately legitimises "the ruling order of the past," which is conceived as leading "all the way to the present rulers."⁴²⁹ Thus, historicism constitutes "the ideology that eventuates in [the] vision of history [of the victors] and justifies it."⁴³⁰

Insofar as historicism relates to the past "as something essentially finished and immutable,"⁴³¹ the historicist approach to history presupposes and promulgates a vision of tradition as "the smooth and uninterrupted transmission of the past to the present," which declares the present to be "the untroubled heir of the past."⁴³² As Friedlander underlines, by linking present and past in such a way, historicism thereby equates tradition to "the appropriation of the cultural values of the past as the spoils of the present."⁴³³ Within the historicist framework, then, the process of transmission of the past to the historian's present context appears as "the triumphal procession in which current rulers step over those who are lying prostrate," and in which past "cultural treasures" are carried as the loot of the historical victors.⁴³⁴

⁴²⁸ *SW*, 4:391.

⁴²⁹ Friedlander, *A Philosophical Portrait*, 159.

⁴³⁰ Friedlander, 158.

⁴³¹ Friedlander, 165.

⁴³² Caygill, "Benjamin, Heidegger and Tradition," 12.

⁴³³ Friedlander, *A Philosophical Portrait*, 159. Howard Caygill traces this notion of tradition back to "both the Enlightenment liberal and counter-Enlightenment conservative understandings of the relation between past and present," which recover "the sense of tradition as a 'handing down'" ("Benjamin, Heidegger and Tradition," 12), as "the handing over of events" (Caygill, 20). Moreover, Philippe Simay explicates that this is a "substantialist conception" of tradition, "which identifies tradition with a thing or group of things [...] susceptible of being alienated and handed over" to the present ("Tradition as Injunction," 140).

⁴³⁴ *SW*, 4:391.

The historical materialist is depicted in Thesis VII as observing this parade from a radically different standpoint than that of the historicist who remains fundamentally committed to the viewpoint of the oppressors. Benjamin highlights that the former cannot but contemplate the procession with horror, and therefore examines the “documents of culture” passed on as the heritage of current rulers “with cautious detachment.”⁴³⁵ As the philosopher emphasises in the preparatory materials for the “Theses,” the materialist historian invariably takes “a highly critical view of the inventory of spoils displayed by the victors before the vanquished.”⁴³⁶

The historicist, on the contrary, regards such a spectacle with *acedia*, that indolence of heart that Benjamin discovers at the origin of the method of empathy characteristic of historicism. Françoise Meltzer stresses that for the philosopher *acedia* “is a problem of a relation to history”⁴³⁷; specifically, it denotes a melancholic attitude towards the past, for which the past is already irrevocably lost. If, as Benjamin claims in the *Arcades Project*, “the polemic against empathy” mainly consists in “[f]orming the basis of the confrontation with conventional historiography and [the] ‘enshrinement’ [of the past],”⁴³⁸ this entails, Friedlander explains, unmasking historicism’s empathy as “a manifestation of melancholy.”⁴³⁹ For in “historicism’s relation to the past as a form of enshrinement of that past” we not only find the presupposition “that the unchangeability of the past is the condition for its being inherited, a condition of possessing and passing it on,” but also the compulsion to hold on to “something long dead as though the past is not only treasures but also relics to be conserved.”⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁵ *SW*, 4:391-2.

⁴³⁶ *SW*, 4:406 (Ms 447 and Ms 1094). Benjamin calls this inventory “culture” (*Ibid.*).

⁴³⁷ Meltzer, “Acedia and Melancholia,” 148.

⁴³⁸ *AP*, 475 (N10,4).

⁴³⁹ Friedlander, *A Philosophical Portrait*, 163.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Behind historicism's strive "to make the past present (to reenlive it by identification)," Friedlander contends, "stands the melancholic temperament that has given up on life."⁴⁴¹ Hence, "the wish to identify with how things were without 'disturbing' their order" is marked by a "fundamental passivity," for empathy basically functions "as a substitute for action, for real involvement."⁴⁴² Löwy also touches on this topic in his reading of Thesis VII: if we uncover the historicist's desire to capture the "eternal" image of the past as dominated by "the melancholy sense of the omnipotence of fate which removes all value from human activities," then we will recognise that *acedia* consequently leads "to total submission to the existing order of things."⁴⁴³ Thus, it is no surprise that the proponent of historicism "chooses objective identification with the majestic triumphal procession of the powerful," since "his submission to destiny always makes him join the victor's camp."⁴⁴⁴ It is not difficult to imagine the melancholic historian of Thesis VII as obediently taking his place in the cortege, willingly participating in the triumphal procession of the victors; indeed, as Wohlfarth puts it, historicism "always swims *with* the stream."⁴⁴⁵ Accordingly, as I suggested above, it is key to recognise that the historicist's position *within* the procession differs strikingly from the position adopted by the historical materialist, who surveys this scene with critical distance.

Therefore, "to brush history against the grain" is the motto of Benjamin's rebellion against a servile historicism which enthusiastically endorses the historical viewpoint of the rulers, and which thereby legitimises this account as "the official version of history."⁴⁴⁶ As Löwy puts it, this formula condenses Benjamin's "refusal in one way or another to join the

⁴⁴¹ Friedlander, 164.

⁴⁴² Friedlander, 162.

⁴⁴³ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 47.

⁴⁴⁴ Löwy, 48.

⁴⁴⁵ Wohlfarth, "Smashing the Kaleidoscope," 194.

⁴⁴⁶ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 49.

triumphal procession, which continues, even today, to ride roughshod over the bodies of those who are prostrate.”⁴⁴⁷ Furthermore, with this dictum Benjamin opposes historicism’s understanding of the process of transmission of the past to the present, which renders tradition an instrument of the ruling classes. Thus, it represents the demand to “wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it,”⁴⁴⁸ which is characteristic of historicism’s approach to the past.

3.1.1 The instrumentalization of tradition: Tradition as the tool of the ruling classes

...what has each society forgotten, in order that
it may be able to remember its past in a way that it prefers?
—Shohei Sato, “Operation Legacy”

As I argued in Chapter 2, instead of endeavouring to memorialise the past as a reified, dead object at the historian’s disposal, the historical materialist, conscious of the frail link that ties the present to the past, comprehends that the past “can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability [*im Augenblick seiner Erkennbarkeit*], and is never seen again.”⁴⁴⁹ The materialist historian, Benjamin argues in Thesis V, thereby shatters through historicism’s conservative view of the past, which takes it as given that the historian has a privileged access to the world of the past as it was. The philosopher invokes Gottfried Keller’s proclamation that “the truth will not run away from us” in order to locate “exactly that point in historicism’s image of history where the image is pierced by historical materialism.”⁴⁵⁰ For in historicism’s presumption that the truth of the past will not slip away from the grasp of the historian, Benjamin uncovers the historicist’s despair over his

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁸ *SW*, 4:391.

⁴⁴⁹ *SW*, 4:390.

⁴⁵⁰ *SW*, 4:390-1. Benjamin also makes reference to the German-Swiss writer’s claim in *The Arcades Project*: “The truth will not escape us’, reads one of Keller’s epigrams. He thus formulates the concept of truth with which these presentations take issue” (*AP*, 463 [N3a,1]).

undeniably futile attempt to cling to “the genuine historical image as it briefly flashes up.”⁴⁵¹ Therefore, the latter merely accommodates himself, with hopeless resignation, to the historical narrative of the oppressors, and dons it with a semblance of objectivity by presenting it as “official history.”

The historical materialist also wishes “to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject.”⁴⁵² Unlike the historicist, however, the materialist historian “remains in control of his powers”⁴⁵³ at that critical instant when the image of the past emerges suddenly. Hence, rather than aspiring to recognise the past as it was, for the historical materialist the task of “[a]rticulating the past historically [...] means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger [*im Augenblick einer Gefahr*].”⁴⁵⁴ Friedlander remarks that with the notion of appropriation Benjamin sets historical materialism’s method for approaching the past apart from historicism’s empathic identification with the past: whereas empathy “assumes a distance from its object and the necessity to preserve the space of the object without interfering with it” (so to identify with the past is to leave it undisturbed, since that is the condition for “mak[ing] it an object of cult”), appropriation, on the contrary, “suggests a forceful seizure, an arrogation, or a taking over.”⁴⁵⁵

Benjamin asserts in *The Arcades Project* that by grabbing hold of the flashing image of the past the historical materialist operates the rescue [*Rettung*] “of what in the next moment is already irretrievably lost.”⁴⁵⁶ “To the process of rescue,” he annotates in a subsequent

⁴⁵¹ SW, 4:391.

⁴⁵² *Ibid.*

⁴⁵³ SW, 4:396.

⁴⁵⁴ SW, 4:391. When examining this passage, Andrew Benjamin notes that Thesis VI reiterates the “moment” of Thesis V, so a link is established between the “moment of recognisability” and the “moment of danger” (*Working with Walter Benjamin*, 178).

⁴⁵⁵ Friedlander, *A Philosophical Portrait*, 167.

⁴⁵⁶ AP, 473 (N9,7).

entry in *Convolute N*, “belongs the firm, seemingly brutal grasp.”⁴⁵⁷ The philosopher clarifies that the historical materialist rescues the historical phenomena “[n]ot only, and not in the main from the discredit and neglect into which they have fallen, but from the catastrophe represented very often by a certain strain in their dissemination, their ‘enshrinement as heritage’.”⁴⁵⁸ In other words, the materialist historian does not merely save the historical phenomenon from being permanently forgotten, but actively struggles against a particular mode of transmission of the past, which Benjamin directly associates with historicism’s conception of tradition. This form of transmission of the past must be understood as catastrophic because, as Simay underscores, it “ruins all that it transmits; it crystallizes the past considering every one of its moments as bygone.”⁴⁵⁹ Caygill likewise recognises that, in Benjamin, “tradition [as handing over] is ruination—barbarism—it destroys what it hands over.”⁴⁶⁰

Benjamin comes back to these considerations in Thesis VI, in which the philosopher contends that “both the content of the tradition and those who inherit it” are threatened by an imminent danger: namely, “the danger of becoming a tool of the ruling classes.”⁴⁶¹ He thus stresses that the past is in constant peril of succumbing to the “enemy,” to historicism’s “overpowering conformism,”⁴⁶² which, as Simay underlines, reduces tradition to “an instrument of conformity,” unequivocally “at the service of the dominant class.”⁴⁶³ Andrew Benjamin highlights that this “overpowering conformism” consists essentially in “the

⁴⁵⁷ *AP*, 473 (N9a,3).

⁴⁵⁸ *AP*, 473 (N9,4).

⁴⁵⁹ Simay, “Tradition as Injunction,” 141.

⁴⁶⁰ Caygill, “Benjamin, Heidegger and Tradition,” 21.

⁴⁶¹ *SW*, 4:391.

⁴⁶² “Historicism is the enemy,” posits Esther Leslie in her study on Benjamin (*Overpowering Conformism*, 195). The phrase “overpowering conformism” is likewise coined by Leslie, which she explains is an adaptation of the passage in Thesis VI which alludes to the “conformism that is working to overpower” tradition (*SW*, 4:391). Leslie maintains that, in the context of the sixth Thesis, conformism “refers to the energies of conventional interpretation”—exemplified by historicism in the “Theses” (*Overpowering Conformism*, vii).

⁴⁶³ Simay, “Tradition as Injunction,” 142.

enforcing of a form of continuity” in history.⁴⁶⁴ Walter Benjamin himself brings attention to the centrality of this element for historicism’s notion of tradition: in *The Arcades Project*, he insists that, at its core, historicism as enshrinement or apologia of the past “seeks the establishment of a continuity.”⁴⁶⁵

Insofar as historicism traces a *continuum* between past and present—between the order of the past and the present order, between past and current rulers—tradition, when usurped by the ruling classes, is made to “re-transmit the existing balance of power”⁴⁶⁶; that is, tradition merely asserts the status quo of the present. By the same token, if, as Friedlander notes, “the historicist’s scheme of succession of victors and accumulation of cultural treasure” seems to “suggest progress in history,”⁴⁶⁷ historicism can only uphold the semblance of a gradual process of amelioration in history by erasing the historical viewpoint of the oppressed, of those historical subjects whom Benjamin addresses as the “anonymous.”⁴⁶⁸ For, as Löwy emphasises, “from the point of view of the oppressed, the past

⁴⁶⁴ Benjamin, *Working with Walter Benjamin*, 179.

⁴⁶⁵ *AP*, 474 (N9a,5).

⁴⁶⁶ Leslie, *Overpowering Conformism*, vii.

⁴⁶⁷ Friedlander, *A Philosophical Portrait*, 164.

⁴⁶⁸ See *SW*, 4:406 (Ms 447 and Ms 1094): “It is more difficult to honor the memory of the anonymous [*das Gedächtnis der Namenlosen*; literally, the ‘nameless’] than it is to honor the memory of the famous, the celebrated.” Further, I consider it crucial to insist on the idea that the erasure of the “memory of the anonymous” cannot be solely understood as a methodological decision made by the historian who writes the history books; rather, throughout history it has also taken shape as concrete—and, in some cases, systematic—practices for the administration or outright eradication of the collective memory of the oppressed. A historical example suffices to illustrate this point: during the mid-twentieth century, the British Empire underwent multiple processes of decolonisation as a result of several of its former colonies winning back their independence. The preparations for decolonisation included tackling concerns regarding “the treatment of administrative records” of its colonies, which led to the codification and adoption of “a policy of systematically purging documents [...] that were deemed inconvenient, either for Britain or for its collaborators” (Sato, “Operation Legacy,” 712). In practice, the British Empire implemented “one of the most spectacular destructions of historical records known in our time,” in the form of an “enormous covert operation of selecting, burning and concealing the remains of the empire” (Sato, 698). “Operation Legacy,” the title that was eventually coined for the policy, thus “reflects the British intention to shape the legacy of the empire at the moment of decolonisation” (Sato, 699). The operation came to light in 2011, when the British government began declassifying a group of documents that were seized from different colonies and which had been kept secret in Britain up until that moment (Sato, 697). As Simay reminds us, “[t]he victors [...] decide [not only] what will have the right to exist in history, but also the modalities according to which we will have to relate to it” (“Tradition as Injunction,” 150).

is not a gradual accumulation of conquests, as in 'progressive' historiography, but an interminable series of catastrophic defeats."⁴⁶⁹

In Benjamin's view, then, historicism's servile affirmation of the present order as the necessary and rational result of a sacralised past entails the ceaseless denial of past injustices committed upon the oppressed throughout history. In essence, the casting of a reified continuity linking present and past comes at the cost of "the elimination of every echo of a 'lament' from history."⁴⁷⁰ Furthermore, as Leslie remarks, in the historicist presentation of the past as completed and, consequently, something that has been overcome, the past is "closed to re-evaluation from the perspective of the oppressed."⁴⁷¹ In the final analysis, historicism overwrites "the accumulated experience of the oppressed" by perpetuating those narratives about the past which have been "devised, or at least approved, by the ruling class and its ideology-mongers."⁴⁷² Löwy regards the act of effacing the historical perspective of the anonymous as amounting to a "falsification of the past," which represents the "second death of the victims of the past."⁴⁷³

For historicism, the relation of the present to the past is wholly determined by modalities of transmission which have been shaped by the interests of the ruling classes; the historicist who sides with the oppressors "contemplate[s] the past only under its patrimonial form," so he "reduces it to a sum of items" and "makes it an alienable good that can be mastered."⁴⁷⁴ Thus, historicism's treatment of the past must be denounced as fraudulent: the hypocrisy of which the historicist is guilty becomes apparent in his compulsive aspiration to resurrect the past, while at the same time "remaining insensible [...] to the laments

⁴⁶⁹ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 44.

⁴⁷⁰ *SW*, 4:401 (Ms 1098r).

⁴⁷¹ Leslie, *Overpowering Conformism*, 195.

⁴⁷² Leslie, vii.

⁴⁷³ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 45.

⁴⁷⁴ Simay, "Tradition as Injunction," 151.

contained in it by transforming them into heritage.”⁴⁷⁵ Insofar as historicism deems past injustices irreparable, it provides only illusory consolation—as commemoration of the victims of the past—for the suffering of the anonymous in history. So, as Martin Jay holds, historicism’s fraud is to be located in “the very belief in the resurrection of the dead, their symbolic recuperation [...] to justify their alleged ‘sacrifice’ and ignore their unrecuperable pain.”⁴⁷⁶ In contrast to the historicist, who silences the wails and weeps coming from the depth of history, the materialist historian “bears witness to an endless brutality committed against the ‘oppressed’.”⁴⁷⁷ For, as Benjamin highlights at the end of Thesis VI, the historical materialist is oriented by the firm conviction “that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious.”⁴⁷⁸

3.1.2 The *continuum* of history as catastrophe

The confirmation that, throughout history, the enemy has in fact “never ceased to be victorious”⁴⁷⁹—that, as Mosès comments, the oppressed (the “losers of history”) have continually been “robbed of the meaning of their past”⁴⁸⁰—brings to the fore a fundamental dimension of the supreme danger to which Benjamin makes reference in the sixth Thesis. In his view, this danger does not merely indicate the “ever-present possibility” of an impending disaster happening in the near future. Rather, as the philosopher clarifies in *The Arcades Project*, his intention is to shed light on the catastrophic status of “what in each case is given”; in that sense, “[t]hat things are ‘status quo’ is the catastrophe.”⁴⁸¹ Accordingly, Friedlander explicates that “the danger to avert is not something that occurs suddenly and

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁶ Jay, “Remembrance and the First World War,” 199.

⁴⁷⁷ Leslie, *Overpowering Conformism*, 195.

⁴⁷⁸ *SW*, 4:391.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁰ Mosès, *The Angel of History*, 113-4.

⁴⁸¹ *AP*, 473 (N9a,1).

unexpectedly. It is the status quo of the present—that which always characterizes the form of the ruling powers' appropriation of the past."⁴⁸² Along the same lines, Gerhard Richter underscores that Benjamin construes "the historicized present as a catastrophe that perpetuates itself, that is, as a current actuality, rather than as the threat of an ever-present future possibility."⁴⁸³

For Benjamin, to recognise the present as a self-perpetuating catastrophe requires grounding "the concept of progress [...] in the idea of catastrophe."⁴⁸⁴ The philosopher thereby presents a catastrophic vision of history, in which the *continuum* of history forged by the "law of progress" appears as "a hellish, cyclical repetition of barbarism and oppression."⁴⁸⁵ Such a vision of history is also depicted in Thesis IX, fragment in which Benjamin introduces the figure of the angel of history, who sees the "chain of events" that we identify with the continuity of history as "one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet."⁴⁸⁶

In his study on the "Theses," certain of Löwy's assessments run counter to Benjamin's observation that catastrophe is immanent to the present. Most notably, Löwy maintains that by advocating for an open conception of history, which takes into account "the possibility—though not the inevitability—of *catastrophes* on the one hand and great *emancipatory* movements on the other," Benjamin wishes to remind us that "the worst is not unavoidable."⁴⁸⁷ In that sense, for him "Benjamin's pessimistic predictions are conditional: there is a danger of this happening, *if...*"; or, "catastrophe is possible—if not, indeed, probable—*unless...*"⁴⁸⁸

⁴⁸² Friedlander, *A Philosophical Portrait*, 169.

⁴⁸³ Richter, "Interpretation, Revolution, Inheritance," 539.

⁴⁸⁴ *AP*, 473 (N9a,1).

⁴⁸⁵ Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 337.

⁴⁸⁶ *SW*, 4:392.

⁴⁸⁷ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 110-1.

⁴⁸⁸ Löwy, 111.

In my view, however, by following this line of interpretation we run the risk of doing a disservice to the fundamental teaching of the tradition of the oppressed—to which, Benjamin maintains, the historical materialist conception of history conforms—that in the *continuum* of history the “exception” is *the rule*.⁴⁸⁹ This is an insight to which the historical materialist can gain access only from the viewpoint of the oppressed: as Irving Wohlfarth reminds us, “[f]or those at the bottom [...] the state of exception [is] no exception.”⁴⁹⁰ Their historical experience denies that the catastrophe is merely *conditional*; rather, it is located at the very heart of the present: “hell is not something that awaits us, but it is life here and now.”⁴⁹¹ In the following sections, I will discuss how, in the context of the “Theses,” the task of attaining to a concept of history that does justice to the historical perspective of the oppressed entails approaching history from the standpoint of class struggle.

3.2 The view of history as class struggle

Thesis IV is one of the few fragments of the “Theses” in which Benjamin makes explicit use of Marxist categories. Interestingly, Benjamin’s allusions to orthodox-Marxist concepts in other passages are immediately followed by a series of critical indictments, which occasionally end up taking the form of searing attacks (note, for example, the philosopher’s onslaught, in Thesis XI, on the “vulgar-Marxist conception of the nature of labor” which runs through the economic views of the Social Democrats⁴⁹²). In contrast, in the fourth

⁴⁸⁹ *SW*, 4:392.

⁴⁹⁰ Wohlfarth, “Spectres of Anarchy,” 11.

⁴⁹¹ *AP*, 473 (Nga,1).

⁴⁹² *SW*, 4:393. Benjamin vehemently condemns the Social Democratic endorsement of an ideological, positivistic view of labour, which falls prey to “the illusion that the factory work ostensibly furthering technological progress constitute[s] a political achievement” (*Ibid*). He traces the vulgar-Marxist conception of labour back to the Gotha Program, adopted in 1875 by the nascent German Social Democratic Party (founded as the Socialist Workers’ Party of Germany), which in its opening lines defined labour as “the source of all wealth and all culture.” This notion of labour, Benjamin argues, “recognizes only the progress in mastering nature, not the retrogression of society,” and is thereby “tantamount to the exploitation of nature, which, with naïve complacency, is contrasted with the exploitation of the proletariat” (*SW*, 4:393-4). For the Social Democratic view of labour fails to consider “the question of how its products could ever benefit the workers

Thesis Benjamin insists on the centrality of the notion of class struggle (*der Klassenkampf*) for the “historian schooled in Marx”⁴⁹³ and for the practice of materialist historiography as such. Benjamin’s conscious adoption of the idea of class struggle for his own conception of history, in turn, brings to the fore several interpretative challenges with which the reader of the “Theses” needs to grapple. Most importantly, notwithstanding the purported capital importance of the concept for the historical materialist approach to history, the brief glimpse of Benjamin’s understanding of class struggle provided in Thesis IV hardly amounts to an account of how this eminently Marxist notion is to be integrated into the theoretical armature developed for Benjamin’s historiographical method.

A number of the issues that arise from the difficulty of accurately pinpointing the role that the concept plays within the framework of the philosopher’s conception of history initially came to light in one of the oldest controversies within the Benjamin scholarship, which pertains to his selective and often idiosyncratic appropriation of certain elements of Marxist theory for his thinking. While the tone of earlier discussions over Benjamin’s orthodoxy seems to have been largely overcome in the current academic reception of his oeuvre, it is also the case that little common ground was found in those disputes.⁴⁹⁴ In that

when they are beyond the means of those workers” (*SW*, 4:393). As Esther Leslie points out, for Benjamin “the social democrats remain bound to a quantitative fixation on productivity and omit reflection on how the quality of the labour process and social relations affect the worker. Focus on the quantifiable [...] results in a technocratic ideology” (*Overpowering Conformism*, 175). Benjamin’s critical appraisal of this technocratic ideology is certainly tied to his examination of the Social Democratic dogmatic conception of historical progress, which conflates technical progress—“the progress in mastering nature”—with social progress—the “progress of humankind itself” (*SW*, 4:394). See also Benjamin’s 1937 essay “Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian,” in which he holds that the Social Democrats “overlooked the fact that [the] development [of technology] was decisively conditioned by capitalism”; hence, they “failed to understand that the increasingly urgent act which would bring the proletariat into possession of this technology was rendered more and more precarious because of this development” (*SW*, 3:266).

⁴⁹³ *SW*, 4:390.

⁴⁹⁴ Already in the early 1980s, Richard Wolin pointed to the “question of Benjamin’s relationship to Marxism” as “the source of the most rancorous controversies in the secondary literature to date” (*An Aesthetic of Redemption*, 275n8). Specifically, Wolin is referring to the quarrels of the late 1960s, during which the integrity of Adorno as editor of Benjamin’s work was called into question. The German Marxist orthodoxy, critical of what they diagnosed was a pervasive tendency within the emerging scholarship to depoliticise the philosopher’s work, sought to save Benjamin “for Marxism against both ‘bourgeois’ and Frankfurt School readings” (Bathrick, “Benjamin from West to East,” 249). But even if “the German Benjamin revival of the 1960s

sense, it could be argued that in some of these former quarrels, the participants did not have a clear understanding of Benjamin's particular use of Marxist terminology. It is not my intention to advance the claim that Benjamin should be considered an orthodox Marxist in any meaningful sense of the term. Nonetheless, it is useful to briefly revisit the major positions that stem from this polemic as a background for my analysis of Benjamin's use of the notion of class struggle in the "Theses."

3.2.1 Early accounts of Benjamin's Marxism

The Adorno-Benjamin debate of the late 1930s, in which Adorno raised a series of objections against what he perceived was an illegitimate appropriation of historical materialist themes in Benjamin's writings, anticipates some of the core aspects of a stance that will later be shared by other prominent members of the Frankfurt School. In essence, Adorno regards Marxist theory as something foreign and dangerous to Benjamin's thought. Several of Adorno's most critical appraisals of his friend's Marxism are found in the correspondence between the two intellectuals: in a letter to Benjamin written in 1938, for

saw as its first priority the rehabilitation of the 'materialist' Benjamin" (Wolin, *An Aesthetic of Redemption*, xiii), readings of the philosopher as a materialist thinker failed to grapple with the lack of systematicity characteristic of Benjamin's relation to Marxism.

To be sure, numerous contributions to the Benjamin scholarship have set as their explicit goal to put the philosopher's intellectual project in direct relation with the Marxist tradition, in order to push against the presentation of a "depoliticised" Benjamin. For instance, Terry Eagleton's 1981 book on Benjamin was written with the intention "to get at him before the opposition does," for he ran the risk of "being appropriated by a critical establishment that regards his Marxism as a contingent peccadillo or tolerable eccentricity" (*Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*, xii). In the same year, Susan Buck-Morss would deplore that "the revolutionary impulse of Benjamin's work [had] aroused such little interest" within the "academic establishment," which instead preferred to focus on examining "how he connects to other 'great' figures in literature and philosophy" ("Revolutionary Writer [I]," 52). Two decades later, Esther Leslie would openly confront "domesticating readings" of Benjamin which, in her view, "excise[d] him from a culture of engaged political critique" (*Overpowering Conformism*, vii). Against those academics whose purpose was to drag Benjamin "from the jaws of Marxism" (Leslie, 216), she would insist that "Benjamin's critical involvement with Marxism should not be in question" (Leslie, 226).

It should be noted, however, that the current state of the Benjamin scholarship differs vastly from Habermas' description of the academic debates of the 60s and 70s as a battlefield of competing factions. In recent years, Alison Ross has identified "a general tendency" among the secondary literature "to avoid engaging with other scholars on disputed points of interpretation," which in turn has produced an "echo-chamber effect in Benjamin studies" (*Revolution and History*, 9). In that sense, she underlines that nowadays much of the scholarship on Benjamin "is addressed to the converted" (Ross, 14n20).

example, Adorno laments the violence Benjamin does to his own thinking in his attempt “to pay a tribute to Marxism” that benefits neither himself nor historical materialism.⁴⁹⁵ For Adorno, Benjamin’s adoption of the theoretical apparatus of Marxism entails a renunciation of his “boldest and most productive thoughts in a kind of precensorship.”⁴⁹⁶ In that sense, Adorno will classify Benjamin’s strain of Marxism as dogmatic: in his view, Benjamin embraced Marxist theory “in an orthodox fashion as a doctrinal corpus, without suspicion of the productive misunderstanding he thereby set in motion.”⁴⁹⁷ Thus, from this perspective, Benjamin’s usage of the language of class struggle is indication of his naïve endorsement of the materialist doctrine.

While Habermas presents a more nuanced evaluation of Benjamin’s encounter with the Marxist tradition, he is certainly in agreement with Adorno that Benjamin’s materialist undertaking is thoroughly coloured by his political insights. In Habermas’ view, an idealist answer to “the open question about the subject of the history of art and culture” was well within reach for a philosopher like Benjamin—further, Habermas argues, his “theory of experience grounded in a mimetic theory of language permit[ted] no other response.”⁴⁹⁸ Nevertheless, Benjamin’s experience “as a Jewish intellectual in the Berlin of the 1920s” made him acutely aware of “where his (and our) enemies stood,” which in turn “compelled him to a materialist response.”⁴⁹⁹ Given that Benjamin was “never prepared to give up the theological heritage,”⁵⁰⁰ he thereupon embarked on the project of uniting “historical

⁴⁹⁵ C, 583. Following the lead of Adorno, Wolin maintains that Benjamin’s Marxism amounts to “a form of self-sacrifice, a self-sacrifice through which he sought at the same time to gain meaning for his life.” In Wolin’s opinion, “Benjamin wished to downplay his originality, the initial genius he had shown as a literary critic, for the sake of more pressing political concerns, or at least to assimilate that originality to these concerns. [...] Yet, this transformation of methodological focus also entailed a tacit and on occasion lethal subordination of theory to practice, a subordination which led to the problematical character of many of his later works” (*An Aesthetic of Redemption*, 272-3).

⁴⁹⁶ C, 583.

⁴⁹⁷ Adorno, “Introduction to Benjamin’s *Schriften*,” 14.

⁴⁹⁸ Habermas, “Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique,” 112-3.

⁴⁹⁹ Habermas, 113.

⁵⁰⁰ Habermas, 117.

materialism [...] with the messianic conception of history developed on the model of rescuing critique.”⁵⁰¹ According to Habermas, this enterprise is clearly destined for failure, since Benjamin is trying to integrate two doctrines whose basic assumptions cannot be reconciled: “[...] the materialist theory of social development cannot simply be fitted into the anarchical conception of the *Jetztzeiten* that intermittently break through fate as if from above. Historical materialism, which reckons on progressive steps not only in the dimension of productive forces but in that of domination as well, cannot be covered over with an anti-evolutionary conception of history as with a monk’s cowl.”⁵⁰²

In light of this assessment, Habermas concludes that the more “vulgar-Marxist” elements of Benjamin’s later writings are completely at odds with some of his core philosophical ideas. In particular, Habermas calls attention to the problems associated with the philosopher’s uncritical assent to the notion of the “politicisation of art,” where Benjamin “confessed to being an engaged Communist.”⁵⁰³ In Habermas’ opinion, the idea of a politicised art is extrinsic to Benjamin’s philosophy, for this concept has no “systematic relation to his own theory of art and history.”⁵⁰⁴ Benjamin might have believed that by regarding “the relationship of art and political praxis primarily from the viewpoint of the organizational and propagandistic utility of art for the class struggle”⁵⁰⁵ he was contributing to the promotion of the cause of the proletariat; nonetheless, Habermas contends, his reasons for adopting this standpoint were solely political, if not ideological. In the context of the debates of the late 1960s, Habermas’ analysis reads as a refutation of the position developed by “the Marxist theoreticians of art” of said period, who sought to make the case

⁵⁰¹ Habermas, 113.

⁵⁰² Habermas, 113-4.

⁵⁰³ Habermas, 117.

⁵⁰⁴ Habermas, 119.

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

that Benjamin was first and foremost a Marxist thinker by putting his “work into the perspective of the class struggle.”⁵⁰⁶

Both Adorno and Habermas advised that we avoid looking for the substance of Benjamin’s philosophy in the semblance of steadfast Marxist orthodoxy he appeared to provide in some of his later writings, for here we find only some of the more unproductive elements of his eclectic thinking. Beyond this critical appraisal, interpretations of the philosopher as a coherent Marxist ultimately failed to supply a compelling account of Benjamin’s irregular engagement with classical historical materialism. In particular, David Bathrick remarks, Benjamin’s “emphasis upon historical rupture” put him at odds with the “objectivist history” defended by the East German Left.⁵⁰⁷ Consequently, the philosopher’s uncompromising rejection of “an historical paradigm based on the inexorable march of productive forces [...] made him retrograde in the eyes of Marxist orthodoxy.”⁵⁰⁸

In the 1980s, when the dust settled after the initial disputes concerning Benjamin’s relation to Marxist theory began to die down, varying positions pertaining to his reception of Marxism were developed. Most notably, in his reading of the “Theses,” Tiedemann expounds Benjamin’s project of combining theology and historical materialism as consisting in “[t]he retranslation of materialism into theology.”⁵⁰⁹ In the “theologising terminology” of the document, he argues, Benjamin wishes to safeguard a set of fundamental Marxist premises: the philosopher “attempts to preserve the content of the proletarian revolution within the concept of the Messiah, the classless society within the messianic age and class struggle within messianic power.”⁵¹⁰ In that sense, Tiedemann accuses Benjamin of

⁵⁰⁶ Habermas, 91. In particular, Habermas references the works of Hildegard Brenner (“Die Lesbarkeit der Bilder. Skizzen zum Passegenentwurf” [1968]), Helmuth Lethen (“Zur materialistischen Kunsttheorie Benjamins” [1967]), and Michael Scharang (*Zur Emanzipation der Kunst* [1971]).

⁵⁰⁷ Bathrick, “Benjamin from West to East,” 253.

⁵⁰⁸ Bathrick, 246.

⁵⁰⁹ Tiedemann, “Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?”, 201.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*

camouflaging the political content of the text “in the last place one would look for it: behind the mask of its theological language.”⁵¹¹ Likely guided by Habermas’ judgment that “Benjamin’s relevance does not lie in a theology of revolution,”⁵¹² Tiedemann contends that under the guise of historical materialism the philosopher produces “a political Messianism which can neither take Messianism really seriously nor be seriously transposed into politics.”⁵¹³ For, in Tiedemann’s view, Benjamin’s theory of political praxis is essentially predicated on the idea of “the revolution as apocalypse.”⁵¹⁴ Conceived in this way, the decisive victory of the proletariat in the class struggle assumes the form of a catastrophic display of violence: “*the* revolution [...] would [...] be far from the proletarian revolution Marx hoped for: it would be an apocalyptic destruction, an eschatological finish.”⁵¹⁵ As Löwy highlights, at the core of Tiedemann’s criticisms of Benjamin lies the charge that his politics amount to “an impotent decree that leaves out of account any analysis of reality.”⁵¹⁶ In Tiedemann’s own words, Benjamin’s theory of revolution is but “the impotent proclamation that salvation is indeed at hand in spite of all the barriers presented to it by actual conditions.”⁵¹⁷ To be sure, when, two decades later, Löwy describes Benjamin’s historical materialism as a “messianic Marxism”—a “materialism [...] revised by theology”⁵¹⁸—he will enter into direct confrontation with Tiedemann’s thesis that Benjamin theologises historical materialism.

⁵¹¹ Tiedemann, 202.

⁵¹² Habermas, “Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique,” 120. With this observation, Habermas is pushing against a reading of Benjamin as “theologian of the revolution,” which was briefly popularised in the wake of the West German student movement of the late 1960s. As Bathrick explains, in this context Benjamin’s “notion of revolution and revolutionary theory [...] as [...] the marked and radical beginning of something qualitatively new in the present” was utilized as theoretical justification for “a politics marked by crisis, a radical uncompromising break with tradition, and the hope for active immediate intervention in the grinding wheels of history” (“Benjamin from West to East,” 252).

⁵¹³ Tiedemann, “Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?,” 200.

⁵¹⁴ Tiedemann, 201.

⁵¹⁵ Tiedemann, 200.

⁵¹⁶ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 104.

⁵¹⁷ Tiedemann, “Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?,” 201.

⁵¹⁸ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 109.

Other interpretations, during the 1980s, of Benjamin's appropriation of historical materialist themes include Eugene Lunn's commentary on "Benjamin's unusual [...] reading of Marxism."⁵¹⁹ For Lunn, what is novel about Benjamin's approach to the Marxist tradition is that, rather than simply applying Marxist postulates to his work, the philosopher "introduced [them] into his writings [as] a new source of poetic metaphor."⁵²⁰ In this sense, Lunn regards Benjamin as developing "a Marxism in symbolist form," which thereby weakens the theory's "claim to 'scientific' explanation."⁵²¹ Nevertheless, Lunn still maintains that "certain Marxian concepts were used [by Benjamin] in relative 'purity'," among which he highlights "[the notion of] class struggle (qualified [in Benjamin's writings] by much less hope in the victory of the proletariat)."⁵²² This assertion regarding conceptual purity, however, runs counter to his overall assessment that the "few major Marxian arguments" that Benjamin adopted were generally utilised "in a largely metaphorical fashion."⁵²³ It is probably due to the impossibility of reconciling the two premises that, similarly to Tiedemann, Lunn concludes that Benjamin's Marxism was mostly a "truncated affair."⁵²⁴ From Lunn's perspective, Benjamin simultaneously endorses a set of fundamental materialist analyses and poeticises "causal analysis away [...] by replacing it with the relational language of symbolist 'correspondences'"; hence, "the strongest antidote to [Benjamin's] own youthful aestheticism, Marxian materialism," is "itself aestheticized."⁵²⁵

⁵¹⁹ Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism*, 225.

⁵²⁰ Lunn, 217.

⁵²¹ Lunn, 220.

⁵²² Lunn, 229. Lunn also underscores a few other Marxist theses which he contends that Benjamin adopts in a somewhat orthodox fashion, like "[the analysis of the] contradictions between forces and relations of production (with a more twentieth-century perspective on the dangers of technocracy and technical warfare)," as well as "commodity fetishism (although with Benjamin's own understanding of the worship of 'dead objects')" (*Ibid.*).

⁵²³ Lunn, 215.

⁵²⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵²⁵ Lunn, 220.

3.2.2 Assuming the standpoint of the oppressed

While certainly stressing that Benjamin's "relation to the Marxian heritage is highly selective,"⁵²⁶ in *Fire Alarm* Löwy pushes against the different readings of Benjamin's approach to Marxism as aporetic. In the process, he produces one of the most exhaustive accounts of the peculiar logic of Benjamin's engagement with historical materialist theory. Löwy's work presents a vigorous defence of the claim that Benjamin's conception of history "stands explicitly on the ground of the Marxist tradition."⁵²⁷ In that sense, Löwy contends that the philosopher's rejection of some of the central premises of orthodox Marxist theory—especially the evolutionary view of history promoted by vulgar Marxism—should be understood through the framework of Benjamin's overall project in the "Theses," whose main goal in his view is "to deepen and radicalise the opposition between Marxism and the bourgeois philosophies of history, to sharpen its revolutionary thrust and raise its critical content."⁵²⁸ Benjamin carries out this programme by conducting a "critical reformulation of Marxism," through the incorporation of "messianic, romantic, Blanquist, libertarian and Fourierist 'splinters' into the body of historical materialism"; thus, for Löwy the philosopher fabricates "a new heretical Marxism, radically different from all the [...] variants of his time."⁵²⁹ It is important to clarify, however, that Löwy does not regard Benjamin as a proponent of "any kind of 'revisionism'" of classical Marxism; rather, he argues that the philosopher advocates for "a return to Marx himself"⁵³⁰—even if Benjamin's reworking of historical materialism is anything but an orthodox undertaking.

⁵²⁶ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 107.

⁵²⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵²⁸ Löwy, 14.

⁵²⁹ Löwy, 109. Indeed, Löwy considers that Benjamin "occupies a peculiar, unique position in Marxist thinking and in the European Left in the inter-war years," for Benjamin's historical materialism possesses "a critical quality that marks it off [...] from the then dominant 'official' Marxism" (Löwy, 9). Richter encapsulates Löwy's position in the claim that Benjamin's "historical materialism deserves to be seen as a radical heterodoxy" ("Interpretation, Revolution, Inheritance," 530).

⁵³⁰ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 14.

In order to shed light on the claim that the realisation of the programme of the “Theses” involves a return to the original sources of historical materialism, Löwy underlines an unresolved tension which pervades the thought of the founders of Marxism, “between a certain fascination with the natural scientific model and a dialectical-critical approach, between faith in the organic and quasi-natural maturation of the social process and the strategic vision of revolutionary action that seizes an exceptional moment.”⁵³¹ In Löwy’s view, Benjamin consciously abandons “all the moments in the works of Marx and Engels that have served as references for the positivistic/evolutionary readings of Marxism in terms of irresistible progress, ‘the laws of history’ and ‘natural necessity,’” in an effort to wrench historical materialism “from the bureaucratic conformism that threatens it as much as, if not more than, does the enemy.”⁵³² Conversely, the philosopher seeks to rehabilitate those Marxian themes which he deems essential for restoring historical materialism’s revolutionary impetus: specifically, Löwy mentions “the state as class domination, the class struggle, the social revolution and the utopia of a classless society” as some of the notions which Benjamin reappropriates for his “‘recasting’ of historical materialism.”⁵³³ Thus, Benjamin’s historical materialism is to be located at the dialectical-revolutionary end of the Marxist spectrum, completely at odds with the ideas at the other—positivistic and evolutionary—extreme of the spectrum, since his version of Marxism aims at keeping open the possibility for political intervention in the present sociohistorical conditions.

Löwy’s analysis of Thesis IV is fundamentally grounded on his overall appraisal of the project of the “Theses” as a heterodox reformulation of historical materialism. In this short passage, Benjamin claims that class struggle, which he defines as “the fight for the crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist,” “is always in

⁵³¹ Löwy, 108.

⁵³² Löwy, 107.

⁵³³ Löwy, 108.

evidence” for the “historian schooled in Marx.”⁵³⁴ This assertion allows Löwy to pin down class struggle as “[t]he most essential concept of historical materialism for [Benjamin]”; in Löwy’s opinion, this notion is the key “which enables us to understand the present, past and future, as well as the secret bond between them” that Benjamin proposes in his conception of history.⁵³⁵ According to Löwy, Benjamin’s insistence upon a view of history in terms of class struggle suggests that “[w]hat interests him in the past is not the development of the productive forces, the contradiction between the forces and relations of production, forms of property or state forms or the development of modes of production [...] but the life and death struggle between oppressors and oppressed, exploiters and exploited, dominators and dominated.”⁵³⁶ In that sense, by establishing this concept as the theoretical core of his Marxism, Löwy sees Benjamin as quarrelling against “a certain evolutionary conception of Marxism [...] that justifies the victories of the bourgeoisie in the past by the laws of history, the need to develop the productive forces or the unripe character of the conditions for social emancipation.”⁵³⁷ For the adoption of the latter position implies viewing history “from above,” “as an accumulation of ‘gains’, as ‘progress’ towards ever more freedom, rationality or civilization.”⁵³⁸ On the contrary, Benjamin’s commitment to a view of history as class struggle entails seeing history “‘from below’, from the standpoint of the defeated, as a series of victories of the ruling classes.”⁵³⁹ Thus, within the framework developed by Benjamin class struggle denotes the materialist historian’s conscious adoption of the historical perspective of the oppressed.

⁵³⁴ Löwy, 38.

⁵³⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁷ Löwy, 39.

⁵³⁸ Löwy, 38-9.

⁵³⁹ Löwy, 39. Irving Wohlfarth makes a similar point when discussing Benjamin’s portrayal of the historical materialist as ragpicker: “if Benjamin visualizes the materialist historian as a ragpicker,” he writes, “this is in order to write history from below, not to survey it from above” (“Smashing the Kaleidoscope,” 197).

The connection that Löwy traces between Benjamin's historical materialism and the classical Marxist view of history can be further explicated by briefly turning to Karl Korsch's 1938 study on Marx. In his analysis of the Marxian conception of history, Korsch first focuses his attention on those works by Marx in which "[t]he historical development of society is [...] represented mainly as an objective process."⁵⁴⁰ In these writings, the materialist conception of history is simplified into an "objective formula," which Korsch summarises as follows: "The history of society is the history of the material production and of the contradictions between the material forces of production and the production-relations which arise and are solved in the course of development."⁵⁴¹ Korsch contends that this formulation merely provides a partial account of the materialist presentation of history, for the explanation of history as the "objective development of the material forces of production" fails to mention the "historical 'subject' of that development."⁵⁴²

In that sense, the objective formula needs to be supplemented with a *subjective formula*, which is outlined in texts like the *Communist Manifesto*: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."⁵⁴³ In passages such as these, the course of history is depicted as the setting of "an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight" between oppressors and oppressed.⁵⁴⁴ Hence, instead of conceptualising the dynamics of historical change in purely socioeconomic terms,⁵⁴⁵ the subjective formula reminds us of what Marx

⁵⁴⁰ Korsch, *Karl Marx*, 186. In particular, Korsch offers a commentary of the Preface to Marx's *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), which provides an abridged exposition of the materialist conception of history developed by Marx and Engels.

⁵⁴¹ Korsch, 187.

⁵⁴² Korsch, 186.

⁵⁴³ *MER*, 473.

⁵⁴⁴ *MER*, 474.

⁵⁴⁵ "In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. [...] At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production or—what is but a legal expression for the same thing—with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social

remarks in the third Thesis on Feuerbach, that not only are “men [...] products of circumstances and upbringing,” but “it is men who change circumstances.”⁵⁴⁶ Thus, Korsch argues, the “subjective formula [...] calls by its proper name the [oppressed] class, which brings about the objective development by a practical action”; it thereby declares the proletariat, the modern working class, to be “[t]he acting subject of history at the present stage.”⁵⁴⁷

Benjamin explicitly subscribes to this particular element of the Marxian thinking on history in Thesis XII, where the working class—“the struggling, oppressed class itself”—appears as “[t]he subject of historical knowledge”: “Marx presents it as the last enslaved class—the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of the downtrodden.”⁵⁴⁸ To be sure, class struggle is not unproblematically incorporated into Benjamin’s view of history as some kind of scheme of the course of history in terms of a succession of class wars and revolutionary transformations (Marx and Engels discuss, for instance, “the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through”⁵⁴⁹; this terminology is foreign to Benjamin). Further, the philosopher is at odds with Marx and Engels’ confidence in the inevitability of the triumph of the working class: “What the bourgeoisie [...] produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.”⁵⁵⁰ Rather, if Benjamin subscribes to an understanding of history as class struggle, this is because such a notion denotes the historian’s decision to approach history from a historical viewpoint which breaks with the historical perspective perpetuated by the “official version” of history.

revolution. With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed” (*MER*, 4-5).

⁵⁴⁶ *MER*, 144.

⁵⁴⁷ Korsch, 187.

⁵⁴⁸ *SW*, 4:394.

⁵⁴⁹ *MER*, 484.

⁵⁵⁰ *MER*, 483.

As Rolf Tiedemann emphasises, “without reservation Benjamin accepts the cause of the oppressed [...] as his own.”⁵⁵¹

3.2.3 On the topos of heroic struggle

Compelling as Lowy’s account of Benjamin’s heretical Marxism may be, the Benjamin scholarship has pointed to a number of interpretative issues stemming from the very effort to establish a more or less straightforward link between the philosopher’s conception of history and the Marxian theory of class struggle. One of the primary challenges tackled by various interpreters pertains to the theoretical sources which inform Benjamin’s understanding of history as the setting of the struggle between oppressors and oppressed.

For instance, in his analysis of Benjamin’s “conflictual” notion of history, Julian Roberts holds that Benjamin’s sense of history is “rooted in a conflictual social ontology” which the philosopher tended to formulate in broadly Marxist terms.⁵⁵² He contends, however, that, once Benjamin’s conception of social struggle is subjected to closer inspection, it becomes clear that the core of the conflictual theme guiding Benjamin’s view of history is coloured by “the straightforward legacy of Hobbes, that life is struggle.”⁵⁵³ To be sure, Hobbes’ legacy reaches Benjamin by way of Hegel and Marx. The former “interprets intersubjectivity [...] with Hobbes as primitive *desire*—for survival and hence for conflict,” and translates this “conflictual ontology” into a “conflictual teleology”: “history [...] is presented as a sequence of struggles for identity” and “ends with the victory of the fittest.”⁵⁵⁴ The latter takes over Hegel’s conflictual teleology, and insists that life is, first and foremost, “a struggle against

⁵⁵¹ Tiedemann, “Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?”, 186. Here, we can also point to the Marxian undertones of this commitment: “The Communists [...] have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole. [...] they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole” (*MER*, 483-4).

⁵⁵² Roberts, “The Aesthetics of Conflict,” 166.

⁵⁵³ Roberts, 162.

⁵⁵⁴ Roberts, 160-1.

human enemies. And that struggle, at least to the extent that we can envisage it, is a struggle between competing interest groups.”⁵⁵⁵ Still, the fundamental scheme of Benjamin’s notion of struggle can be precisely located within the framework of Hobbes’ conflictual theory. Roberts’ observations appear to implicitly give way to critiques of what has often been construed as an unwarranted utilisation of the Marxist conception of class by Benjamin. John McCole, for example, pushes against Benjamin’s identification of the subject of history as the oppressed, revolutionary class, for “nothing in his theory requires that this subject be [...] a class.”⁵⁵⁶

The most meticulous examination of the exegetical problems associated with Benjamin’s notion of struggle has been conducted by Alison Ross in her study on the philosopher’s conception of revolution. Ross contends that Benjamin’s notion of revolution is permeated by “a double reference to theology on the one hand and to the literary topos of (heroic) quest [i.e., ‘heroic struggle’] on the other.”⁵⁵⁷ This is evident in Benjamin’s presentation of the revolution as both “the messianic caesura of history” and “a vindicating triumph of the ‘oppressed class’ in a historical quest that is beset with enemies and seducers.”⁵⁵⁸

Ross underlines that the “Theses” are certainly pierced by these two distinct points of reference. When it comes to Benjamin’s theological outlook on history, the document clings on to “the theological imperative to keep the possibility of bringing the catastrophe that is history to closure.”⁵⁵⁹ As Ross explains, “the possibility of bringing history to completion” is conceptualised in terms of a “messianic abbreviation of history in toto”—which likewise retains the “possibility of the redemption of past sufferings and disappointments”—

⁵⁵⁵ Roberts, 161.

⁵⁵⁶ McCole, *The Antinomies of Tradition*, 305.

⁵⁵⁷ Ross, *Revolution and History in Walter Benjamin*, 124.

⁵⁵⁸ Ross, 119.

⁵⁵⁹ Ross, 101.

fundamentally understood as “a revolutionary action which is experienced in its meaning as a fulfilled wish.”⁵⁶⁰ In that sense, she argues that Benjamin conceives of “the expected revolution [...] as the possible messianic ‘interruption’ ushering in the reconciled humanity.”⁵⁶¹ In Thesis XVII, Benjamin refers to this caesura as a “messianic arrest of happening.”⁵⁶² In Ross’ view, such a conception of revolution, which locates the possibility of the “messianic irruption in revolutionary action that aims at the classless society,” amounts to a “theological appropriation of the Marxian idea of revolution.”⁵⁶³

Conversely, Ross claims, “[t]he literary form of heroic struggle is the key to Benjamin’s imagination of ‘revolution’.”⁵⁶⁴ Ross traces the influence of the topos of struggle for Benjamin’s conception of revolution back to his “Critique of Violence” essay, in which the philosopher makes the case for the legitimation of revolutionary violence. In this work, Ross asserts, “the topos of struggle shadows the theological scheme,” insofar as “[t]he revolutionary cessation of the historical cycle of lawmaking and lawbreaking” brought about through violent, revolutionary praxis is likewise imagined as “the final triumph over the mythic”—hence, for the decisive break with mythic law, “nothing short of total annihilation of the enemy will do.”⁵⁶⁵

Ross stresses that we should not read Benjamin’s essay as putting forward a justification of “revolutionary violence as a necessary means of achieving an end,” for in the context of the document “revolution in its very occurrence and irrespective of its outcome is justified as the possible irruption of the divine in the human world.”⁵⁶⁶ Nonetheless, she also

⁵⁶⁰ Ross, 101-2. Benjamin refers to the “messianic abbreviation” of history in Thesis XVIII, where he discusses now-time as “a model of messianic time” which “comprises the entire history of mankind in a tremendous abbreviation” (SW, 4:296).

⁵⁶¹ Ross, *Revolution and History in Walter Benjamin*, 112.

⁵⁶² SW, 4:396.

⁵⁶³ Ross, *Revolution and History in Walter Benjamin*, 112.

⁵⁶⁴ Ross, 120.

⁵⁶⁵ Ross, 121.

⁵⁶⁶ Ross, 123.

underscores that, in the final analysis, the topos of struggle as “the schema of confrontation with and triumph over the ‘demonic’ enemy [...] draws revolutionary violence to the domain of strategic thinking.”⁵⁶⁷ Within the framework of the topos of struggle, history ultimately appears depicted as “a quest drama with a hero and villains, and a goal or end that is also a fulfilment.”⁵⁶⁸ This is the locus of the fundamental ambivalence which we find at the core of Benjamin’s thinking on the revolution: if, on the one hand, “revolution is the site of (possible) messianic interruption of history [...] on the other, messianism may itself become a weapon of the struggling hero.”⁵⁶⁹ Benjamin himself underlines that the task of restoring a “genuinely messianic face [...] to the concept of classless society” must be picked up “in the interest of furthering the revolutionary politics of the proletariat itself.”⁵⁷⁰

As I highlighted above, Ross maintains that the topos of heroic struggle informing relevant aspects of Benjamin’s notion of revolution is also visible in the philosopher’s last writings. For instance, the scholarship has often pointed to Thesis VI as presenting a “Manichean” scheme of the confrontation in history between victors and vanquished: “The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer; he comes as the victor over the Antichrist.”⁵⁷¹ More importantly, however, I regard Ross’ account of the philosopher’s conception of revolution as posing certain challenges for interpretations of Thesis IV which seek to make sense of Benjamin’s appropriation of the notion of class struggle. For her analysis gives rise to the question as to whether behind the guise of this notion lies the topos of heroic struggle, and whether therefore Benjamin is not merely reducing the present-day fight for “the crude and

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁸ Ross, 120.

⁵⁶⁹ Ross, 119.

⁵⁷⁰ *SW*, 4:403 (Ms 1103).

⁵⁷¹ *SW*, 4:391.

material things” between oppressors and oppressed to “an episode in the struggle against the demonic enemy.”⁵⁷²

3.2.4 The image of class struggle

Ross emphasises that, although the surreptitious presence of the literary topos of struggle in Benjamin’s thinking on revolution is in evidence for any scrupulous reader of his oeuvre, some of Benjamin’s major works include protestations against the adoption of this topos as schema for an understanding of history. In her analysis, she first sheds light on Benjamin’s polemic against “the use of aesthetic topoi in understanding human life”⁵⁷³ in his essay on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities* (1924/5). Here, the philosopher “explicitly rejects the ‘dogma’ of using literary categories to define human life and indeed determine its meaning”—specifically, he excoriates attempts to assimilate human life to the literary type of the hero under “the ‘[literary] form of struggle’.”⁵⁷⁴ In that sense, Ross interprets the Goethe essay as raising the question of “whether it is legitimate to use literary-critical categories or even literary forms in theorising historical phenomena.”⁵⁷⁵

Further, Ross briefly focuses the reader’s attention on an entry in Benjamin’s *One-Way Street* (1928), titled “Fire Alarm,” in which the philosopher “impugns the application of the schema of struggle to historical phenomena.”⁵⁷⁶ The passage, in which Benjamin denounces the “romanticisation” of the Marxian notion of class struggle, brings to the fore a number of relevant considerations for interpretations of Thesis IV:

The notion of the class war can be misleading. It does not refer to a trial of strength to decide the question “Who shall win, who be defeated?” or to a struggle whose outcome is good for the victor and bad for the vanquished. To think in this way is to romanticize and obscure the facts. For whether the bourgeoisie wins or loses the fight, it remains doomed by the inner

⁵⁷² Ross, *Revolution and History in Walter Benjamin*, 124.

⁵⁷³ Ross, 119.

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁶ Ross, 137n7.

contradictions that in the course of development will become deadly. The only question is whether its downfall will come through itself or through the proletariat. The continuance or the end of three thousand years of cultural development will be decided by the answer. History knows nothing of the evil infinity contained in the image of the two wrestlers locked in eternal combat. The true politician reckons only in dates. And 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, dangers, and tempi of politicians are technical—not chivalrous.⁵⁷⁷

In order to begin tackling the challenges presented by this fragment, we can first ask to whom these interpretative correctives are directed. In my opinion, Benjamin here is addressing potential Marxist interlocutors, those who have adopted the perspective of class struggle for their investigations on history. Benjamin cautions them not to misappropriate nor misrepresent the Marxian class war by construing it in terms of “the image of the two wrestlers locked in eternal combat.”

I see this particular remark as being intrinsically intertwined with Benjamin’s criticisms, in the manuscripts for the “Theses,” of the Social Democratic elevation of the Marxian idea of classless society to the status of an “ideal,” defined in Neo-Kantian terms as “an ‘infinite [*unendlich*] task’”: “Once the classless society had been defined as an infinite task, the empty and homogeneous time was transformed into an anteroom [...] in which one could wait for the emergence of the revolutionary situation with more or less equanimity.”⁵⁷⁸ Hence, the fatal mistake of the Social Democrats was to posit the classless society “as the endpoint of historical development,”⁵⁷⁹ for once the attainment of the classless society was instituted as the ultimate end goal of history, the entire course of history was to be conceived as a series of developmental steps leading all the way to the final goal of socialism. Rosa Luxemburg identifies how such a conception of the goal of historical materialism amounts to an abandonment of the perspective of class struggle, to the attenuation of

⁵⁷⁷ *SW*, 1:469-70.

⁵⁷⁸ *SW*, 4:401-2 (Ms 1098v).

⁵⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

existing class antagonisms, and therefore to a crucial confusion about the actual goals of historical materialism—namely, the “social revolution, the transformation of the existing order.”⁵⁸⁰ The Social Democrats thereby consider their practical task to be “the improvement of the condition of the working class.”⁵⁸¹

But if Social Democratic theorists thought they were doing away with the classical Marxist view of history in terms of class struggle, it is precisely the image of struggle as “bad infinity” which reemerges as the catastrophic reverse side of the Social Democratic evolutionary vision of the course of history. For, in the final analysis, Social Democracy legitimises present (capitalist) sociohistorical conditions as one more necessary step leading all the way to the classless society. In the process, it continually condemns the working class to its condition of oppression, and thereby perpetuates the violence and suffering committed upon the oppressed throughout history. The Social Democrats ask the working class to keep waiting for the “revolutionary situation” to materialise at some point of historical development; nonetheless, Benjamin stresses, this situation “has always refused to arrive.”⁵⁸² Thus, from the standpoint of the oppressed the *status quo* of the present is experienced as the hellish, unending repetition of the catastrophe that is history.

Now, it is precisely here that the image of history as class struggle shatters through the reified continuity of history founded on the concept of progress. For it exposes that *continuum* as the catastrophic perpetuation of what has been the rule of history, that of suffering and oppression. By assuming the perspective of the oppressed in history, the historical materialist not only reveals the actual norm of history, but also aims its gaze at the cracks in the *continuum*, only visible from a particular historical standpoint. By the same token, in the image of class struggle Benjamin conceives of the relation between past and

⁵⁸⁰ Luxemburg, *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, 128-9.

⁵⁸¹ Luxemburg, 131.

⁵⁸² *SW*, 4:403 (Ms 1103).

present as radically opposed to the image of history as the triumphant procession of the victors. As the philosopher underscores in Thesis IV, this link is understood as “calling into question” the past by the present: in their struggle, the revolutionary subjects “call into question every victory, past and present, of the rulers.”⁵⁸³ Therefore, this vision of history not only uncovers the grounds upon which the *continuum* of history is instituted, but also signals the political imperative of arresting the *continuum*, blasting the continuity of history apart.

⁵⁸³ *SW*, 4:390.

Conclusion

In one of the preparatory notes for the “Theses,” titled “Problem of Tradition,” Benjamin underlines a “fundamental aporia”: “Tradition as the discontinuum of what has been as opposed to history as the continuum of events [*Historie als dem Kontinuum der Ereignisse*]. [...] ‘The history of the oppressed is a discontinuum [*Die Geschichte der Unterdrückten ist ein Diskontinuum*].— ‘The task of history is to get hold of the tradition of the oppressed’.”⁵⁸⁴ While the first impulse of the materialist historian may be to recover and reconstruct the “narrative of the oppressed,” he will soon realise the inadequacy of this approach for “getting hold” of the oppressed past. The tradition of the oppressed essentially resists “being narrated,” for it confronts the historian with the fundamental discontinuity pervading history.

Thus, Benjamin contends that “continuity in the presentation of history is unattainable”; furthermore, to establish a *continuum* between past and present means, for Benjamin, that the present “fails to ‘do [...] justice’” to the past.⁵⁸⁵ In his attempt to eradicate even the last trace of discontinuity in history, the historicist “cover[s] up the revolutionary moments in the occurrence of history”; in contrast, the historical materialist sets his gaze precisely on “[t]he places where tradition breaks off”—the “peaks and crags” of the course of history.⁵⁸⁶ Therefore, the historical materialist presentation of the “peaks and crags” of history cannot resemble the historicist attempt to conceptualise the relation between past and present in the form of continuity; rather, the materialist historian wrests an image of

⁵⁸⁴ *GS*, 1:1236 (Ms 469). Here, I am referring to McCole’s translation of this passage (see *The Antinomies of Tradition*, 295). Other commentaries on this fragment include the following: Mosès, *The Angel of History*, 110-1; Simay, “Tradition as Injunction,” 152-5.

⁵⁸⁵ *AP*, 470, (N7a,2).

⁵⁸⁶ *AP*, 474 (N9a,5).

the (oppressed) past from the homogeneous course of history, by undertaking the task of “blast[ing] open the continuum of history.”⁵⁸⁷

I take Benjamin’s presentation of his thinking on revolution in the form of images of revolutionary praxis as being intrinsically linked to his concerns pertaining to how the materialist construction of history is meant to “do justice” to the oppressed past. What lies at the core of this imagery is not the minimum programme for a theory of revolution. Rather, the philosopher constructs images of historical (revolutionary) experience, which for him point to the *caesuras* immanent to the historical *continuum*. As such, Benjamin’s images of revolution should be read in the light of the present moment; to put it in the philosopher’s own terms, they “bring the present into a critical state.”⁵⁸⁸ The fundamental demand that they impose on the historian is the reconfiguration of the present position from which he wishes to hold fast the fleeting image of the oppressed past.

⁵⁸⁷ *SW*, 4:396.

⁵⁸⁸ *AP*, 471 (N7a,5).

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