How Levinas Taught Me to Read Benjamin

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I.

For there to be anything like a rapprochement between Levinas and Marx (or the inheritance of Marx in contemporary historical materialism) it must first involve a movement beyond Marxism's inheritance from Hegelian idealism of something like a teleological construal of the relation of history to eschatology. At the same time, such a rapprochement would have to mean a certain displacement of the Levinasian *aporia* concerning the relation between ethics and politics, eschatology and history. The very difference between an *aporia* and a problem would itself become problematic.

The structure of the relation that Levinas unfolds between history and eschatology, like that between justice and ethics, like that between subjectivity and the absolutely other discloses an anterior posteriority. The "end of history" will have always already taken place. The "end" has already preceded its beginning. From within the ethical optic, a judgment on history will also therefore always already have been passed, no matter how tacitly. To look for an end of history as the *telos* of the historical is, for Levinas, only to repeat an act of identification, itself anti-ethical, a cognitive power-project that nonetheless lives from the forgotten horizon of the ethical relation, the relation that is ultimately a material-transcendental condition of the subjectivity that is able to create a violence, not only against this or that other, but a structural violence that
envelops all subjects. The endless repetition of the violence of the real society is not a result of a lack of strength in a moral will which can be reformed. Nor is it the result of a mere misunderstanding that beyond being and non-being there does not exist an otherwise-than-being. But there is also no movement in this relation between eschatology and history, or between the Same and responsibility to the other within subjectivity.

There is for Levinas, strictly speaking, no "solution" to this problem. This is where, for him, one truly meets an aporia. Such an aporia cannot be broken through, nor evaded. In Levinasian terms there can be no politics of generosity, not because this is analytically, semantically an oxymoron, but because of the logic of the history of the real society, which, resting upon the works of a separated being, must inexorably cover over its being-for-the-other, in the process concealing the holy with the sacred, betraying ethics with justice. Need does not, "over time," disappear into Desire. Nor is Desire in any way a sublimation of need. Moreover, Levinas has effectively barred any and all attempts at a dialectical resolution of this problem. He has done so by constructing the relationship between history and eschatology in such a way that they are bound to each other neither as analytical nor as dialectical opposites. From an analytical point of view, their opposition cannot be undone by reduction of the one to being the appearance or accident of the substance of the other. From this point of view, their relation must remain paradoxical. From a positively dialectical point of view, they are not internally related to one another essentially through negation, and do not therefore admit of a synthesis.

Among all of Levinas' scattered remarks about Marx those that have most bearing on this question have to do with Marx's not having gone far enough in separating his
materialism from the ontological imperialism of Western philosophy and from the subject of that ontology, whose freedom is always conceived as spontaneity, possibility or power. In one of his very first essays, "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," from 1934, Levinas at once underlines both the radicality of Marx's view of the human, summed up in the phrase that "being determines consciousness," and the continuity of Marx with the liberalism of European civilization which, by positing the sovereign freedom of reason, produces a world in which "man is not weighed down by a History in choosing his destiny." On the one hand, "absolute freedom … for the first time finds itself banished from the spirit's constitution." As a result, Marx "breaks the harmonious curve" of the development of European culture. On the other hand, the link that Marxism perceives the spirit to have to a "determined situation" is "in no way a radical one." The power of "individual consciousness" remains sufficient "to shake off the social bewitchment that then appears foreign to its essence" ("Hitlerism" 67). Thus Marx rejoins the European ontologies for which "man is absolutely free in his relations with the world … Speaking absolutely, he has no history" (64). In order to truly break with the notion of absolute freedom it would be necessary to acknowledge that "the situation to which he was bound was not added to him but formed the very foundation of his being" (67). This would entail a view of the human-historical that would invert and undo the Western conception of freedom:

For history is the most profound limitation, the fundamental limitation. Time which is a condition of human existence, is above all a condition that is irreparable … Beneath the melancholy of the eternal flow of things … there lies the tragedy of the irremovability of a past that cannot be erased, and that condemns any initiative to being just a continuation. True freedom, the true
beginning would require a true present, which, always at the peak of a destiny, forever recommences that destiny (65).

The "Germanic ideal" that Levinas is analyzing in this essay, despite the terrible forebodings that he perceives in it, has the philosophical merit of being "the awakening of elementary feelings," the contorted expression of "an elementary force" (64). It is this elementary force, recognizable in the "feeling of identity between self and body" that Marxism will not have fully come to terms with. In not coming to terms with it, Marxism will threaten to repeat not only the absolute freedom of liberalism, but will not have come any closer to a true notion of freedom as bound to the irremovable limitation that is time.

In 1962, with *Totality and Infinity* already published, Levinas will return to this theme in "Transcendence and Height." According to Levinas in this essay, the flaw in Marx is not that his thought is a philosophical realism but that, like Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, or for that matter Heidegger's late thinking, the realism with which Marx is satisfied "is not sufficiently realist to overcome idealism" ("Height" 15). Philosophy, which is virtually synonymous with idealism, is the event in which knowledge "seems to suppress multiplicity and consequently violence. Indeed violence comes from opposition, that is to say, from the scission of being into the Same and Other. Philosophy … assimilates every Other to Same" (13). The search for truth, even in philosophical realism, repeats the idealistic assimilation of the other into the same, and "idealism is found precisely in the philosophers who denounce it most harshly" (14). The idealism of Marx's materialism reveals itself not only in such a search but also in the conception of a socialist society, where the human is only "conceived of as an I or a citizen – but never in the irreducible originality of his alterity, which one cannot have
access to through reciprocity and symmetry. Universality and egalitarian law result from
the conflicts in which one egoism opposes another" (14). It is worth noting in passing that
in this essay Marx is not being criticized for any illiberalism his socialism might bear, but
precisely for the similarity of socialism to that rule. Thus there are more than residues of
idealism in Marx. A sufficient realism would mean

the recognition of an other than I … to be possible, [and that] it is necessary that I
myself am not originally what I remain even in my explorations of the obscure or
the unknown: the peaceful and sovereign identity of the self with itself and the
source of the adequate idea (15).

The social relation still obscured within Marx's conception of socialism would be a bond
that does not annihilate the I but "binds it to the other in an incomparable and unique
way," a way that is utterly unlike the way in which matter is bound up or in the way an
organ is bound up. Such "mechanical and organic solidarities would dissolve I into a
totality" (17). One can go beyond the imperialism of the same only when the other has
nothing in common with me (16). And, as though to head off in advance the notion that
certain Habermasians might entertain that discourse ethics would be a cut above such
solidarities, Levinas will note that such a bond, not being an initial act of reflection, is
therefore anything but "the entry of the I into a suprapersonal, coherent and universal
discourse" (18).

The third instance of Levinas linking his criticisms of Marx to the latter's
insufficient realism, that is – by implication – to a more than residual idealism which
could underwrite a historico-teleological eschatology, takes place in the 1970 essay, "No
Identity." Written in response to the events of May '68, Levinas is here concerned not so
much with the problem of overcoming idealism as he is with the radically inhuman
insufficiency of those movements of thought that have replaced idealism. His targets are
the sciences of man and Heideggerian anti-humanism. Although Levinas sees the critique
of humanism espoused by both of these movements as tacitly including a defense of man
"understood as a defense of the man other than me" ("Identity" 150-1), they are united in
that both contest the "inward world" of vulnerability that responsibility presupposes.
They have, therefore, in one way surpassed the humanism of Hegel and Marx. Such
humanism was based upon the notion of the recovery of a world of unfulfilled and
alienated intentions and was therefore linked back to a subjectivity the core of which was
the identity of the ego with itself. For Marx, the deviations of the will not at home with
the world of its intentions was traceable back to social alienation. But, for Levinas, this
does not mean that Marx has overcome Hegel. Standing him on his feet does not undo the
imperialism of the head. Instead it means that "by exalting socialist hopes, one
paradoxically rendered transcendental idealism plausible!" (143). Marx has not yet
abandoned the world of radical inwardness, but it is still conceived along idealist lines.
For Levinas, today's anxiety is more profound. The "revolutions gone bad" have led to a
state in which "the disalienation itself is alienated" (143), a condition in which we are
alienated from the very project of disalienation as the project of an ego ultimately at
home with itself, of an ego that is ultimately the Same. Yet the anti-humanisms contest
the imperialist subjectivity of idealism at the cost of abolishing an "impossible
inwardness … an impossibility we learn of neither from metaphysics or the end of
metaphysics" (149). One important manifestation of such inwardness, which is itself the
vulnerability and susceptibility of responsibility, lies however in the very memory of
universal alienation: "The condition (or the uncondition) of being strangers in the land of Egypt brings man close to his neighbour. In their uncondition of being strangers men seek one another. No one is at home. The memory of this servitude assembles humanity" (149). The memory of this servitude implies that no one can save himself without the others (149). Between and beyond both the form of memory that belongs to universal history and the radical forgetting of inwardness which issues from anti-humanism, there would therefore lie a memory of inwardness and an inwardness of memory, a memory of the human "made of responsibilities" she did not assume, a remembrance of a "debt … absorbed only by being increased" (149). The expression of this unassumed debt involves the experience of a time other than the time of universal history.

This theme is already present in Totality and Infinity. There Levinas, linking interiority inalienably to memory, conceives of mortal existence as already disqualifying the time of universal history as the measure of the reality of the subject. Mortal existence flows in a dimension of its own. "Interiority institutes an order different from historical time … an order where everything is pending, where what is no longer possible historically remains always possible" (Totality 55). The time of universal history, especially the "thesis of the primacy of history constitutes an option for the comprehension of being in which interiority is sacrificed" (57, emphasis added). Countering and resisting universal history, along with the synchronizable time upon which it depends, is the memory of mortality and of separation – a memory which, in "No Identity" becomes the "uncondition" of all being strangers. The memory, Levinas' memory of radical separation available universally out of mortality but forgotten in both
the universal histories (in Hegel and Marx), and in the anti-humanisms, becomes "the way of access to social reality starting with the separation of the I … not engulfed in universal history, in which only totalities appear" (Totality 58). Thus memory, at least a certain memory, will operate as eschatology. And as such the "eschatological … draws beings out of the jurisdiction of history and the future; it arouses them in and calls them forth to their full responsibility. Submitting history as a whole to judgment … it restores to each instant its full significance in that very instant" (23). Memories of servitude and estrangement, inseparable from radical separation and interiority, do not function to constitute the moments of universal history, but estrange the subject from that history which engulfs it but is not ultimately its own. This calls not for a second alienation, an alienation from alienation, but an alienation from that which can alienate itself. "Memory as an inversion of historical time is the essence of interiority" (56). Universal history belongs to the functional relatedness of works, including the work of the social "fact" itself, but the inverted historical time of interiority announces the possibility of a continuous act of breaking with the historical totality. Acts are not works, but are in fact radically distinct from works: "Each instant of historical time in which action commences is, in the last analysis, a birth, and hence breaks the continuous time of history, a time of works and not of wills" (58).

The continuous time of history is a time of works, which according to Levinas necessarily escape the intentions and meanings of their authors, as we have seen. And, in a sense, the whole of Levinas' work (and it is just that) is an effort to invert historical time through the remembrance of an interiority that is older than what can be captured by
universal history or ontology. Such an interiority is anything but the noumenal freedom of Kant's transcendental ego, or Hegelian Spirit, or class-consciousness working through history, or as history. Neither would interiority be the disclosure of Being, whose essence in Heidegger is for Levinas the unfolding of a "certain meaning, a certain peace that borrows nothing from a subject, expresses nothing that would be inside a soul" ("Identity" 143-4). The interiority that Levinas would oppose to the continuous time of history involves the breaking up of everything in the subject that would reinstitute the synchronous time of the Same. And therefore this absolutely separate and singular interiority would also have to be, but against all logic, a relation, a relation across an absolute distance, which is the form of the ethical relation, its phenomenological eidos. Marxism, in bringing more than a residue of idealism to its effort to link interiority to a "determined situation," will either mistranslate interiority and separation into a not-yet-achieved-but-in-the-process-of-becoming-so absolute freedom, or else it will become another of the human sciences, with its own particular parcel of insight into the nature of the real society. Or perhaps it will manage to combine aspects of both.

Yet Levinas' justifiable criticisms of Marx do not lessen or necessarily justify the risk he runs of producing an ahistorical impasse in the relation between ethics and justice. The inversion of historical time taking place within the memory of interiority and performed, in a sense, in ethical actions, rather than in works, leave history and totality in place, even if not entirely to their own devices. And, more than that, ethical acts may foster the illusion that since interiority is always with us as the inexpungible subjectivity of the subject presupposed by all the efforts of being, there is meaning and freedom
simply in *spite* of history. The challenge, then, would be to develop a relation of subjectivity to history, both theoretical and practical, that, while retaining an absolute separation of the subject distinct from the always synthesizable internal contradictions of totality, along with inwardness and its "eschatology of messianic peace" (*Totality* 22), could also, in pointing beyond history leave history open to its own de-totalization.

II.

Such a de-totalization of history in and as historical memory is figured metaphorically in Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Concept of History." Although not carried through as was intended in his unrealized *Arcades Project*, the "Theses" present something at least similar to a program for the recasting of the writing of history that would satisfy or come very close to satisfying the very stringent conditions of de-totalization required by Levinas' "memory as an inversion of historical time." In doing so, moreover, they suggest the non-impossibility of a messianic peace that would mean something "more" than the meaning Levinas is able to wrest from the jaws of mortality and totality. The "Theses" are certainly inadequate to do anything like this by themselves, or even in conjunction with any of the works Benjamin was able to finish. Yet something crucial in Benjamin's thinking did not simply die with him in the Pyrenees, but had already perhaps found a certain fecundity not only in Adorno's program for a "radical natural-history," but also in the realizations of that program in other works of the Frankfurt School.
The "Theses" have been interpreted almost exclusively in relation to Marxist historical materialism and, in that context inevitably found wanting as an unwelcome intrusion of mystical and voluntarist notions into a rational method of historical explanation. Levinas, although he never mentions Benjamin, affords a better clue as to what Benjamin might have been trying to accomplish. The major distinction animating and structuring Levinas's work is that between ethics, or the ethical relation, and ontology, or the disclosure of being. One of the principal ways this distinction is elaborated is in terms of the contrast between the synchronizable time assumed by the historical memory belonging to the ontological project and the diachrony of the ethical relation, or the non-synchronizability within sensibility of the subject's past – a past older than any past which is the subject's "own." This distinction between synchronic temporalization and diachrony can enable a different understanding of the central concept of the "Theses," empty homogeneous time. It is first of all necessary to look at the "Theses" in light of their central concepts of "empty homogeneous time" and their dialectical correlate, "the time of the now."

The "Theses" are not the encoding in "theological" terms of a method of secular historiography that would simply revise Marx's scientific materialism and give it the power, as the first thesis announces, "to win every time."

If anything, they are methodically anti-methodical. They are concerned with the possibility of the suspension of method, inasmuch as method already presupposes that which the "Theses" are attempting to undo: experience as structured by empty homogeneous time. If method comes from the Greek *methodos* and means "way through," the "Theses" investigate the
way back behind the methodical and methodologizing subject. Empty homogeneous time bears a striking resemblance to, if not complete congruence with Kant's conception of time in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where time is the aesthetic form for the intuition of an object. Benjamin, although he makes empty homogeneous time negatively fundamental to his opposition to historicism, does not here formally or intensively explicate this concept. Instead, what positive meaning it has in the "Theses" is to be gleaned at once from the aims, methods and functions employed by historicism as well as from the contrast he is sketching with the experience given to the "historical materialist," *bien entendu*, the experience of a "time of the now."

Empty homogeneous time is the subjective condition of an experience in which being appears as a world of distinct and differentiated, but related and synthesizeable or unifiable objects or events which, as such, are susceptible of being organized causally ("Theses" XVIIIA) and in which therefore each event-object becomes a transition to the next (XVI). Under the form of empty homogeneity history can and will be grasped by historicism as a continuum, a series in which all objects are like "the beads of a rosary" (XVIIIA). In a series the object before us is only related to other objects through the relation of posteriority or anteriority. Each of the objects is related to all the others, but only by its relative anteriority to some and posteriority to others. Although all the events are strung together and belong to a single continuum, each event can only be related to another in terms of its coming before or coming after. One cannot take one bead to be another. The whole rosary, the whole series, is nothing but this sum of discrete entities related to each other through a continuous thread of "a causal connection between various
moments in history" (XVIII A). Events which are anterior are, from the point of view of those which are posterior, now permanent; they do not shift or change or re-arrange themselves in a new configuration. "A" which was always "A," led to "B," which was always "B" and which led to "C," and so on. Thus historicism orients its task through the premise that "The truth will not run away from us" (V). To recognize "the way it was" becomes the watchword of historical memory (VI), which in turn seeks and finds "the 'eternal' image of the past" (XVI). The past becomes a past-present and historicist historiography "rightly culminates in universal history" which, lacking "theoretical armature" only has an additive method (XVII).

The historical memory associated with experience structured by empty homogeneous time carries with it, according to Benjamin, a certain specific mood: acedia, a sadness or "indolence of the heart" which lies at the origin of historicist empathy. In order to empathize with, and thus fully experience a past-present, historicist historiographers "must blot out everything they know about the later course of history" (VII). The past-as-eternal, the past fully present requires this mood for its disclosure. And this mood will therefore also imply an empathy with the victors. Blotting out all subsequent history, the past-present appears as "cultural treasures" which

without exception … have an origin which [the historical materialist] cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism (VII).

The fully historicist historian in the "Theses" plays the part of a logical exemplar of the workings of empty homogeneous time in the memory of a subject. But he is an ironical
exemplar in the conformism he actually expresses. Inasmuch as an historicist aims at leaving his own and all intervening times behind him in order to fully absorb and recreate a past present, really there for the re-presentation as an "eternal" image, he should not conform – at least to his own time. But inasmuch as he approaches the image of the past as a past present which is an element, a "bead," within empty homogeneous time, he constitutes an object, a thing, which is complete and finished – a "cultural treasure," a piece of eternity. His conformity is with the very power of victory and the victory of power, the evidence of power maintaining itself in being. His empathy with the victors is not necessarily desired at the start, but something like a necessary structural effect of his allegiance to the experiential form of empty homogeneous time. Empty homogeneous time is not the effect of the psychological desire to empathize with the victor. Empathy with the victor is the effect of the continuous operation of empty homogeneous time and, of course, of the lack of any reflexive ability to dissolve the latter or break it up.

Now, in the "Theses," the historicism of figures such as Ranke, Gottfried Keller, Fustel de Coulanges is not Benjamin's only or even principal object of criticism. The principal criticism, along with his unmitigated scorn, is reserved for the conformism of Social Democracy. It would probably not be too far wrong to think of the attention paid by Benjamin to historicism as partly a warning to himself (and to those who would follow) to avoid the trap of historicism in the search for an alternative to the philosophy of history taken up in Social Democratic theory and practice. Memory is at work in both historicism and in the Social Democratic theories of history as progress. And it is at work in both as structured by empty homogeneous time. "Social Democratic theory, and even
more its practice, have been formed by a conception of progress which did not adhere to reality." The individual dogmatic tenets of the belief in progress are, according to Benjamin, open to criticism, but,

> When the chips are down, criticism must penetrate beyond these predicates and focus on something that they have in common. The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time. A critique of such a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself (XIII).

The individual tenets that comprise the doctrine of progress are controversial and can be challenged in one way or another without reaching the doctrine of progress itself. But the critique of that concept requires the identification and suspension of the form of empty homogeneous time. The task of the historical materialist will be not the recapture of a past-present *a la* historicism, as though that were an adequate step beyond all past concepts of and beliefs in progress. Nor will it be the totalization of the objective historical process issuing in a teleological eschatology. Social Democratic notions of progress are already modulations of such beliefs. Messianic redemption operates in history, but much more indirectly, much more quietly than in the majestic and terrible "necessities" seemingly uncovered in theories of objectively inevitable social transformation.

One might, at this point or on this score, have expected Benjamin, like Levinas, to include Marx among those subscribing to a teleological understanding of history. But there is no mention of Marx as a scientist of revolution, replacing inwardness with the externality of dialectical logic. Instead Marx is curiously enlisted, along with the Spartacists and Blanqui, both of whom from the Social Democratic perspective are at the
Marx's antipode, to indicate the mood that would be fitting for an uncorrupted concept of history. And this mood is variously described as anger, hatred and vengeance. Marx is enlisted in attributing to the working class the role of "the last enslaved class, as the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of the downtrodden" (XII). "The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Anti-Christ" (VI). The name of Blanqui was universally associated not only with conspiratorial coup d'états, but also with explosions of anarchical violence. Well, at this point one might be tempted to believe that Benjamin is at best calling down the jealous anger of a vengeful God upon present oppressors. But the role of vengeance and hatred is actually somewhat different.

If acedia is the mood in which the attempt can be made to disclose a past-present, then hatred of what had been done to the dead, remembrance of "enslaved ancestors rather than liberated grandchildren" (XII) would be that which tears one away from empathy with the victors. It is the mood in which no attempt is needed for the self-disclosure, not of a "past-present," but a "present-past" as it were, but "present" only in a very attenuated sense, only as that past that "flits by" in the "instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again" (V). Without this interruption of the present-on-its-way-to-the-happier-future, "even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious" (VI). Horkheimer had once objected emphatically and viscerally to this suggestion that the dead could be "redeemed," because once dead they are truly dead. Nothing more can be done for them. But Horkheimer seems to have been guilty of a certain literalism. The redemption of the dead is their
posthumous removal from that homogeneous empty time of universal history (which was never their time to begin with) that is in turn part and parcel of my subjectivity as a "progressive" being. And we are each and all "dead" in this sense, as Levinas recognizes, as merely "unique" moments of the historical totality as opposed to meta-/infra-historical singularities. The "holding on" to this memory as it comes of itself is "the attempt made anew ['in every era'] to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it" (VI). The historical materialist will have the task of brushing "history against the grain" (VI) in this sense: not simply in terms of reinserting the losers into the position of eventual victors in a future-present belonging to a process "regarded as irresistible, something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course" (XIII); and not, in the manner of historicism, through an empathic leap into the past of the victors. History brushed against the grain does not mean another interpretation of universal history, or a universal history of the victim or other, or the accumulation of tidbits of forgotten lore even if they did belong to the victims, but the continual openness for the momentary and transient recapture of exactly that which universal history as such cannot acknowledge: the absolute meaning in the expression of the hopeful suffering of the past. "Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe" (VI). Only a being capable of suffering the suffering of others is capable of hope.

The Social Democratic doctrine of progress has become conformism, a "tool of the ruling classes" (VI), a confirmation of labour as the exploitation of nature insofar as the form of empty homogeneous time underlying the notion of progress makes for the
possibility of believing that the working class was "moving with the current;" that technological development was "the fall of the stream with which it thought it was moving" (XI). *Both* historicism and Social Democracy thus empathize with the victors. The Social Democrats, however, empathize with the future victors rather than the past or present victors. And none of the dead, including all those presently and even potentially alive are safe from that.

If empty homogeneous time were truly a transcendental condition *tout court* of subjective experience, then there could be no hope of redeeming the signification of the hopes of the past, of "fanning the spark of hope in the past," which is the "gift" of the historical materialist. But there is precisely an "inversion" of the empty homogeneous time of universal history in "the time of the now." The time of the now ought not to be read as an alternative form for the production of the experience of an object via the operations of a transcendental subject. The time of the now lies at the antipode of the idealist subject's temporalization of time. Nor should it be read as a mystical claim to an ineffable knowledge. This is the case even though Benjamin may be borrowing from both Kant and mysticism, dialectically secularizing the latter while simultaneously re-enchanting the former. According to Benjamin, historical materialism is based upon a "constructive principle" (XVII) and this may lead the reader to infer or assume that the "historical materialist" is engaged in an act of re-constitution, an alternative interpretation. But he is actually involved in something that is both less and more than re-interpretation. Rather than constituting the object of historical understanding, the historical materialist is allowing that object to, or finding himself in a situation where that
object will, de-constitute him as constitutor. This is because the "constructive" principle informing the historical materialist is not another thought or, in terms of our "rosary," another unifying thread linking events, each of which is a transition, in a causal series that has a beginning, middle and end, or eschaton. Rather than being the thought of an object like a rosary or one of its beads, the principle in question here, if it can be called that, belongs to a different kind of thought altogether. "Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well" (XVII). In the arrest of thoughts – which is still a thinking – there is a "sign of a messianic cessation of happening" (XVII). Is it the sign or the cessation that is messianic? Or is it both? The arrest of thought is the sign of a messianic cessation of happening. Not entirely unlike phenomenological bracketing (epoche originally means "cessation" and is applied to the flow of categorization), the thinking within the arrest of the flow of thoughts is messianic because it is torn from happening. The arrest of thought (coming to me from whom?) is a messianic sign, a trace perhaps, because it awakens the dead to me.

Thus there is the possibility of an entirely different historiography than that of either historicism or the theories of progress, and which does not belong to the subject both constituting and constituted by or in empty homogeneous time. "History is the subject of a structure whose site is not empty homogeneous time, but time filled by the presence of the now" (XIV). Such a time of the now is not the re-presentation of a past as a past-present, but a time in which all time stands still, yet a still-standing which is not eternity, nor an all-knowing vision from the standpoint of eternity. "Historicism gives the 'eternal' image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the
past" (XVI). The "unique experience with the past" would be, from our "normal" third person perspective, that which could only be taking place in the present, or in a "later" transitional moment of a series – my moment of danger in the present whose causes can be traced to specific past events. What is supplied by historical materialism is the momentary capture of that "other" now as it comes to me in a time which is filled by its coming to me now. What I am therefore supplied with, what is given to me in the accusative (or perhaps the dative) is a "present which is not a transition" – this present is something a "historical materialist cannot do without" (XVI). Such a present, which is not a transition, is not strictly speaking open to conceptualization. It flits by as an image, and as an image cannot be, like a concept, placed within a continuum construable as some sort of logical, inferential chain, whether straight or spiral. In this passing by of an image in the time of the now the measurable time of the clock is cancelled. The "event" from the "past" takes place both "then" and "now." "Thus the calendars do not measure time as clocks do" (XV). For in calendars, "basically it is the same day that keeps recurring in the guise of holidays, which are days of remembrance" (XV). In the image constructed by the historical materialist out of the flow of such remembrance history as a continuum is exploded, its "grain" is experienced as something perhaps incidental, perhaps inimical to what the wood is all about. That which is re-experienced, which recurs in my memory but which is not the same, is "blasted … out of the continuum of history" (XIV). In the time of the now the historical materialist will resemble the chronicler "who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones," thus "acting in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened
should be regarded as lost for history" (III). Outside of the structure of history as a synthesizable series, the "normal" criteria of causal relevance to subsequent events would not apply to the giving of some sort of shape to the remembering which is taking place now. Thus Benjamin will say, "[N]o fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years" (XVIIIA).

The shape that remembrance will assume, a shape which is neither a unified construct nor, strictly, even the result of a selective principle, is the effect of an arrest of thought itself.

Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past (XVII).

Benjamin will never say that the historian initiates an arrest of his own thought, but only that the historical materialist does encounter his thought being arrested. The relative pronoun "it" in the first sentence quoted immediately above refers not to the historian as agent, but to the arrest of thought itself. It is the being-arrested that produces the monad, the dialectical image, the constellation that the historical materialist "grasps … which his era has formed with a definite earlier one" (XVIIIA).

In the monad, which would be from the perspective of empty homogeneous time an "enormous abridgement" (XVIII), the historical materialist "takes cognizance" of a "Messianic cessation of happening." This is what allows him
To blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history – blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this method the lifework is preserved in this work and at the same time cancelled; in the lifework the era and in the era the entire course of history (XVII).

What is to be noted about this succession of blasts is that it in fact ends up removing the work from the retrospective synopsis of the homogeneous course of history. The totality or context or horizon that would normally be employed or referred to in order to give the lifework meaning, which would first be the era, is that from which the lifework is blasted. The same takes place in the relation of the work to the lifework. No event, whether it is conceived as an atom within the series or whether it is conceived as itself a lesser series within a larger series is any longer meaningful by virtue of its position within the series. Seriality itself will have been interrupted. The upshot is that each work both preserves the lifework and at the same time cancels it. The enormous abridgment that takes place within the monad preserves each event and all of history inasmuch as the beads of the rosary have become unstrung. It is "the course of history" that gets cancelled, certainly not history itself. The redemptive-messianic "act" is not the entrance into history of a force alien to it, but the removal of the works of the others from the series that can be strung from beginning-point to end-point through empty homogeneous time; it is their reception in each case as singular, and of having had that singularity forgotten in their presence in a series. History assumes the shape of one single catastrophe in which each work can be read as its allegorical expression.
The standpoint of redemption is the perspective, or non-perspective, or optic of Benjamin's famous angel of history.

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that he can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (IX).

One of the most compelling things about this image is the powerlessness of the angel. Such powerlessness is not momentary or accidental. Were the storm from Paradise over, the angel might be able to bring his wings together and move or even turn around, but his desire to make whole and awaken the dead would already have been fulfilled. His presence is called for only so long as the catastrophe grows at his feet. The angel does not have to remember. At the angelic level the catastrophe as catastrophe is always before him. But in addition to the angel, Benjamin mentions, as instances of human figures who do not experience time as empty homogeneity several others: the historical materialist, the revolutionary classes, the Jews and the soothsayers. The first three will have some remembrance of history as a single catastrophe; the last, although they do not experience time as empty and homogeneous are, unlike the angel, turned to the future. Those who turn for enlightenment to the soothsayers, the seers of the future as present, "succumb to the magic of the future" (XVIIIIB). One must imagine that succumbing to the magic of the future means a false enlightenment in which the desire to resurrect the dead is gone and, along with it, awareness of the catastrophe. Those who listen to the soothsayers are ripe for repeating the catastrophe. They cannot even sense that the state of emergency "the
tradition of the oppressed" teaches "is not the exception but the rule" (VIII). They are amazed that things like fascism are still possible in the twentieth century. It is the Jews, forbidden from investigating the future, who are (theologically) brought into the practice of remembrance (XVIIIIB). It is the "historical materialist" who has secularized this practice of remembrance. And it is, for Benjamin, the "revolutionary classes at the moment of their action" who have the "awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode," as evinced by the following event, an event inside and outside universal history: "In the July revolution an incident occurred which showed this consciousness still alive. On the first evening of fighting it turned out that the clocks in towers were being fired on simultaneously and independently from several places in Paris" (XV). Unlike those who succumb to the voice of the soothsayers and the magic of the future, the others will have recognized that "their coming was expected on earth," that, like "every generation," they are endowed with "a weak messianic power" to which the past has "a claim that cannot be settled cheaply" (II).

But the weak messianic power, which for Benjamin thus includes the power of a remembrance that encounters me, to whose fleeting transit I can only respond with an image, and not the synthetic re-presentation of a past-present, is, after all, a messianic power. It is not the weakened power of a more-than-human messiah who is in turn (mis-)conceived as the projection of the power of the human agent. Its messianicity does not lie in any power to command the course of universal history, to return objectivity to its ostensible grounds in the subject. The messianicity in question here is "the retroactive force to call into question every past and present victory of the rulers," a calling into
question that is of the essence of what is spiritual in the class struggle: "it is not in the form of spoils that fall to the victor that [spiritual things] make their presence felt in the class struggle. They manifest themselves in this struggle as courage, humour, cunning and fortitude" (IV). The spiritual things are not manifested as hatred and vengeance. A messianic power, however weak, could only be a power that redeems, the redemptive itself. And it seems that what is redeemed here are three things: first would be the works of the past – each and every one – as the expressions of a life, now blasted out of the continuum, a life that always signifies more (or otherwise) than could be known through its location or role in universal history; second would be the redemption of the redeemer himself (as a human agent), freed from the illusions of universal history ("from the snares in which the traitors have entrapped them" [X]; from the resurrection of the old Protestant ethic [XI]; from the vulgar Marxist conception of labour [XI]); third, surprisingly enough, would be happiness. In what way does happiness need and find redemption? In our remembrance, the desire for the happiness of the past other removes happiness from the sphere of envy and selfishness: "The kind of happiness that could arouse envy in us exists only in the air we have breathed, among people we could have talked to, women who could have given themselves to us. In other words, our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption" (II). Would it be too much to think that it is redemption in these senses that is won every time by the puppet that is called historical materialism, when it enlists the services of a wizened and ugly old theology that must keep out of sight (I)? The possibilities of redemption strike the one who remembers (or is brought to remembrance) and in his remembering has responded with a desire to redeem
the unheard of appeal of "the dead." And redemption strikes the redeemer not by delivering the spoils of victory, but only as detaching the redeemer from the very structure underlying the possibility of universal history.

III.

If at the heart of Levinas' objection to Marx lies the immanent criticism that Marx was not sufficiently realist to overcome idealism, then Benjamin's reworking (umfunktionierung) of historical materialist historiography had already moved in a strikingly similar direction. Empty homogeneous time, which is also the time for the working through of systems of objective contradictions, is nothing but the temporalization of the idealist subject. The time of the now experienced in remembrance ought to be understood as that "inversion of historical time" which for Levinas "is the essence of interiority." Interiority or radical separation is the condition, above all, for the removal of the subject from his place in the totality and is for Levinas an essential condition of the ethical relation. Redemption is, for Benjamin, also just such a removal for both the dead and their redeemers, the effect of the weak messianic power. For Levinas,

Fate does not precede history; it follows it. Fate is the history of the historiographers, accounts of the survivors, who interpret, that is, utilize the works of the dead ... Historiography recounts the way the survivors appropriate the works of the dead wills to themselves; it rests on the usurpation carried out by the conquerors, that is by the survivors; it recounts enslavement, forgetting the life that struggles against slavery (Totality 228).
For Levinas, the historiography of the victors, being a universal history constructed out of representations, already constitutes a forgetting inasmuch as forgetting is a function of representation itself:

At the very moment of representation the present is not marked by the past but utilizes it as a represented and objective element … Representation is the force of such an illusion … The positing of a pure present without even tangential ties with time is the marvel of representation. It is a void of time, interpreted as eternity” (125, emphases in original). 10

For Benjamin, the time of the now, unlike idealist time, does not admit of representation, let alone the thematization and theorization that would make progress meaningful. The dialectical image or constellation fashioned by the historiographer is not a representation inasmuch as qua image it is not itself a concept or a representation of logical (or even illogical) relationships within a system of referentialities. Nor is the dialectical image the symbol of a beyond.

For Levinas, "eschatology" is able to function as another name for the ethical relation because in the ethical relation history as a whole, as universal history or the history of the totality, is submitted to judgment. For Benjamin, the collapse of empty homogeneous time into the time of the now puts the historical materialist at least for an instant into the position of the angel of history, judging all of history as a catastrophe that demands rescue. The angel, though powerless, desires above all not to remain a bystander. For Levinas, because life is always also enjoyment and therefore much more than the cognitive operations of the Same, and even more than a possible future of non-alienated labour which comprises those cognitive operations, each instant is potentially a time of completion: "Torn up from all the implications, from all the prolongations
thought offers, all the instants of our life can reach completion, precisely because life dispenses with the intellectual search for the unconditioned" (Totality 139). For Benjamin there is a similar completion in the "time of the now' which is shot through with chips of messianic time" (XVIII).

But Benjamin goes farther than Levinas because for him the relationship between history and eschatology has a different structure. Because it has a different structure Benjamin pursued a historiography that Levinas did not imagine. Benjamin will at least allow for the bare possibility of a "collective action" that is in some way the historical de-totalization of universal history. The structure of the relation of history to eschatology to which Levinas holds is also radically novel, compared to the philosophical tradition, in that the eschatological level is maintained within history while remaining eschatological (it does not belong to, but resists the totality). The eschatological is not separated into a beyond, nor is it placed at the end of empty homogeneous time as its telos. Yet the eschatological cannot make any contact with the real society beyond the betrayal of ethics in justice. For Levinas justice betrays ethics in a double sense parallel to the way the Saying is betrayed in the Said. Justice reveals ethics, but it also traduces ethics. In this double sense the betrayal of ethics in justice does not affect totalization as such or alter its course. Eschatology takes place, despite history, in history. For Benjamin, the messianic is both at an absolute distance from the real society and operative within it.

Benjamin, in the very brief "Theologico-Political Fragment," again employs the language of theology, but now to sketch the structure of the relation of the Messianic to history. Also written quite late in his life, the "Fragment" was considered to be of crucial
importance by both Adorno and Scholem. In its exquisitely condensed abstractness it remains in some ways even more hermetic than the "Theses," yet suggests a number of things about the way in which Benjamin was trying to relate history and eschatology. Benjamin begins by separating historical action from the Messiah himself: "nothing historical can relate itself on its own account to anything Messianic. Therefore the Kingdom of God is not the telos of the historical dynamic; it cannot be set as a goal" ("Fragment"). "Theocracy" will therefore "have no political meaning." The order of the profane has its own "idea," quite different but not antithetical to the Messianic. Yet Benjamin will accept from "the philosophy of history" that this radical separation of the two orders, the Messianic and the profane, contains a genuine problem and a genuine relation. The order of the profane "should be erected on the idea of happiness." And the implication is quite clear that the Messianic cannot be erected on such an idea. The Messiah for one thing quite simply does not strive for happiness, but to redeem, to complete. The Messianic addresses a "spiritual restitutio in integrum, which introduces immortality." The Messianic is not only beyond history, it is a-temporal. Yet the juxtaposition of the profane desire for happiness with the Messianic, the way they cross each other, does not pit them against each other. According to Benjamin, this is a problem that can be represented figuratively. If one arrow points to the goal toward which the profane dynamic acts, and the other marks the direction of Messianic intensity, then certainly the quest of free humanity for happiness runs counter to the Messianic direction; but just as a force can, through acting, increase another that is acting in the opposite direction, so the order of the profane assists, through being profane, the coming of the Messianic Kingdom. The profane, therefore although not itself a category of this Kingdom, is a decisive category of its quietest approach ("Fragment").
It might first be noted that Benjamin is all but tacitly making a distinction between a Divine Kingdom and the Messianic Kingdom. He is therefore not reverting to any theocratic or theological politics, but making a claim for a secular and profane redemption. The dynamic of the profane does not bring the Divine Kingdom closer, but only the Messianic one. And the assistance of the profane to the Messianic is possible only through a linking of the idea of happiness to the idea of the transient: "For in happiness all that is earthly seeks its downfall, and only in good fortune is its downfall destined to find it" ("Fragment"). As opposed to the "immediate Messianic intensity of the heart" that "passes through misfortune as suffering," there is (by implication) a mediate Messianic intensity, to which "corresponds a worldly restitution that leads to the eternity of downfall, and the rhythm of this eternally transient worldly existence … the rhythm of Messianic nature, is happiness. For nature is Messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away" ("Fragment").

There is far more suggested here than can be briefly, albeit speculatively, unpacked. What is of immediate relevance, however, is the notion, contra the structure Levinas sets up in the relation between history and eschatology, first that the historical may promote the quietest approach of the eschatological; but second, it would do so only insofar as happiness is divorced from the notion of permanence in favour of the downfall of all that is "earthly" and that this downfall and therefore happiness is only to be found in "good fortune." Third, nature is taken to be the figure of this eternal and total passing away. Where the "Theses" deal primarily with historiography and the politics of remembrance, the "Fragment" begins a speculation on the possibility of a relation
between history and eschatology that involves neither of the alternatives rightly rejected by Levinas. History and eschatology are neither analytically nor dialectically related, neither pure opposites nor unifiable through a dialectical synthesis.

All of this is, however, still quite insufficient to actually effect a rapprochement between Levinas and Marx that would "alter" both substantially. In these writings Benjamin may have begun to go beyond the more than residual idealism in Marx's concept of history, but problems abound. There are, first of all, the many problems raised by the vague or obscure relation of these programmatic sketches to the rest of Benjamin's achieved and intended work. Certainly, when it comes to the "Theses" there is a fairly clear relation to the planned Arcades Project, and also to those various writings that were sketches of it or first drafts of a portion of it. But absent the finished project, it will be forever premature to pronounce with great assurance what was actually going on in the "Theses." Second, and more important, as many Marxists have pointed out, the "Theses" are not very good Marxism, if they are Marxism at all. By themselves or even in conjunction with his other works, they are not adequate as a lever to push a de-idealized Marxian conception of history into that realm of realism where it could meet up with the sensibility and responsibility of the Levinasian subject. Rather than attempt to do this by Benjaminian means alone, it would be necessary to pick up one of Benjamin's central threads in the "Theses" where Adorno had picked it up a number of years prior to the "Theses," near the beginning of his career in critical theory, and follow that thread through his later elaborations of it, primarily in Negative Dialectics. That thread is the
allegorical one of history as a single catastrophe that can only be understood in terms of a
change in perspective that involves non-identity thinking in constellations.

Notes

1 A version of such a rapprochement is sketched in Gibbs (chap. 10). It is called for in
Drabinski, "Ethical Politics," and in Horowitz and Horowitz, "Ethical Orientation." It is
to some considerable extent achieved in the philosophy of liberation of Enrique Dussel;
see especially, his Philosophy of Liberation. But none of these deals adequately with the
relation between Marx and Levinas and history.

2 So, for example, in Totality, in his discussion of separation, Levinas is clear that the
dialectical constitution of the separated sentient being would destroy the exteriority of the
absolutely other; hence "we are outside of the dialectical conciliation of the I and the non-
I" (148). A few pages later: "The whole of this work aims to show a relation with the
other not only cutting across the logic of contradiction, where the other of A is the non-A,
but also across dialectical logic, where the same dialectically participates in and is
reconciled with the other in the Unity of the system" (150).

3 This is obviously an inadequate estimation of Marx's thinking on the subject. For Marx,
the possibility of shaking off social bewitchment is not so much an abstract possibility of
individual consciousness as a function of historical development mediated by class
conflict, the maturation of a specific form of social contradiction that would allow
for/demand it. Yet there is a large grain of truth in this understanding of Marx inasmuch
as Marx makes use of an historical ontology which grounds the possibility of historical
social development in freedom as the negative moment in labour. See "Hitlerism." For an
interpretation of the political significance of this essay see Horowitz and Horowitz,
"Liberalism" (fn. 3 contains references to the other four extant treatments of "Hitlerism").

4 For a critical account of Habermas's communicative ethics from a Levinasian
perspective, see my "'How Can Anyone Be Called Guilty?' Speech, Responsibility and
the Social Relation in Habermas and Levinas."

5 The argument for such an indestructible interiority as the source of freedom may also all
too easily become an excuse to accept authoritarian ideologies and regimes. See Marcuse.

6 The best account of Levinas's evolving understanding of temporality is to be found in
Drabinski, Sensibility and Singularity.

7 There are a number of fairly substantial treatments of Benjamin's "Theses" that have
important insights to offer: Tiedemann, Osborne, Wohlfarth, Loewy. In book-length
studies of Benjamin, the most notable are Wolin and Buck-Morss. What characterizes
most, if not all of these treatments is the understanding of the theses as a methodological or quasi-methodological attempt on Benjamin's part to ground the notion and practice of dialectical images and to bring dialectical images in line with a messianistic revision of Marxism which, because of its theological inheritance, fails to cohere with the Marxism it would like to reformulate and revivify. According to Tiedemann, for example, Benjamin does not really need to employ the language of theology again in order to do this because Marx had already inherited the thoroughgoing secularization of theology from "great philosophy" (187). My concern here is to attempt a different sort of reading of the "Theses," one that blasts this specific work out of Benjamin's lifework and the lifework out of the era. I wish to follow Benjamin's own description of the activity of the "historical materialist" in my relation to and reading of Benjamin's own work on historical materialism and to place this work in a constellation with some of Benjamin's other writings and those of the Frankfurt School.

8 Thus I am agreeing with Adorno that Benjamin's critique of progress did not want to eliminate progress "from historical reflection" but that "progress" would mean the "very establishment of humanity in the first place" (145).

9 In section N, the "konvolut" of Benjamin's notes for the Arcades Project that includes the materials from which the "Theses" were composed, he quotes from a letter from Horkheimer of March 16, 1937 to the effect that "[p]ast injustice has occurred and is completed. The slain are really slain … If one takes the lack of closure entirely seriously, one must believe in the last Judgment" (471).

10 Levinas goes on, with respect to the representation of the past, that "[t]o represent is not to reduce a past fact to an actual image but to reduce to the instantaneousness of thought everything that seems independent of it; it is in this that representation is constitutive" (Totality 127). This remark makes a wonderful bridge between Benjamin's empty homogeneous time and Adorno's critique of identity theory.

11 At least according to the editors of Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 3, 1935-1938, Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (306, n.1).

Works Cited


