1873 and published in 1874 as the second part of his *Unzeitgenössische Betrachtungen* (Untimely Meditations). Benjamin quotes from the opening paragraph of Nietzsche's preface.

19. The Spartacus League was a radical leftist group founded by Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg during World War I. In 1918 it became the German Communist party.

20. Louis-Auguste Blanqui (1805–1881), French revolutionary socialist and militant anticlerical, was active in all three major upheavals in nineteenth-century France—the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 and the Paris Commune—and was imprisoned following each series of events. Quotations from Blanqui and Benjamin's commentary on him play a key role in *The Arcades Project*.


24. The July Revolution took place July 27–29, 1830. It toppled the government of Charles X and led to the proclamation of Louis Philippe as "Citizen King" (July Monarchy).


26. "A unique experience with the past" translates "eine Erfahrung mit der Vergangenheit, die einzig dasteht." The last word chimes with *einsteh* in the first sentence of this section.

27. "Messianic arrest of happening" translates "messianische Stillstellung des Geschehens." "Oppressed past" translates "unterdrückte Vergangenheit," which also suggests "suppressed past."

28. These last two sections, which appear under the separate headings "A" and "B" at the end of an early, untitled draft of the essays on history, were dropped in Benjamin's later drafts of the text. On account of their intrinsic interest, they are printed as a supplement to the text in the *Gesammelte Schriften*.

29. "The small gateway" translates "Die kleine Pforte," an echo perhaps of Martin Luther's phrase "die enge Pforte" ("the narrow gate"), in his rendering of Matthew 7:13–14 in the New Testament: "Enter by the narrow gate. . . . For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life."

Empathy with the past serves not least to make the past seem present. It is no coincidence that this tendency accords very well with a positivist conception of history (as seen in Eduard Meyer). In the field of history, the projection of the past into the present is analogous to the substitution of homogeneous configurations for changes in the physical world [**Körperwelt**]. The latter process has been identified by Meyerson as the basis of the natural sciences (*De l'explication dans les sciences*). The former is the quintessence of the "scientific" character of history, as defined by positivism. It is secured at the cost of completely eradicating every vestige of history's original role as remembrance [*Eingedenken*]. The false aliveness of the past-made-present, the elimination of every echo of a "lament" from history, marks history's final subjection to the modern concept of science.

In other words, the project of discovering "laws" for the course of historical events is not the only means—and hardly the most subtle—of assimilating historiography to natural science. The notion that the historian's task is to make the past "present" [das Vergangene zu "vergegenwärtigen"] is guilty of the same fraudulence, and is far less transparent.

XVIIa

In the idea of classless society, Marx secularized the idea of messianic time. And that was a good thing. It was only when the Social Democrats elevated this idea to an "ideal" that the trouble began. The ideal was defined in Neo-Kantian doctrine as an "infinite [unendlich] task." And this doctrine was
the school philosophy of the Social Democratic party—from Schmidt and Stadler through Natorp and Vorländer. Once the classless society had been defined as an infinite task, the empty and homogeneous time was transformed into an anteroom, so to speak, in which one could wait for the emergence of the revolutionary situation with more or less equanimity. In reality, there is not a moment that would not carry with it its revolutionary chance—provided only that it is defined in a specific way, namely as the chance for a completely new resolution of a completely new problem [Aufgabe]. For the revolutionary thinker, the peculiar revolutionary chance offered by every historical moment gets its warrant from the political situation. But it is equally grounded, for this thinker, in the right of entry which the historical moment enjoys vis-à-vis a quite distinct chamber of the past, one which up to that point has been closed and locked. The entrance into this chamber coincides in a strict sense with political action, and it is by means of such entry that political action, however destructive, reveals itself as messianic. (Classless society is not the final goal of historical progress but its frequently miscarried, ultimately [endlich] achieved interruption.)

The historical materialist who investigates the structure of history performs, in his way, a sort of spectrum analysis. Just as a physicist determines the presence of ultraviolet light in the solar spectrum, so the historical materialist determines the presence of a messianic force in history. Whoever wishes to know what the situation of a “redeemed humanity” might actually be, what conditions are required for the development of such a situation, and when this development can be expected to occur, poses questions to which there are no answers. He might just as well seek to know the color of ultraviolet rays.

Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train—namely, the human race—to activate the emergency brake.

Three basic concepts can be identified in Marx’s work, and its entire theoretical armature can be seen as an attempt to weld these three concepts together. They are the class struggle of the proletariat, the course of historical development (progress), and the classless society. The structure of Marx’s basic idea is as follows: Through a series of class struggles, humanity attains to a classless society in the course of historical development. = But classless society is not to be conceived as the endpoint of historical development. = From this erroneous conception Marx’s epigones have derived (among other things) the notion of the “revolutionary situation,” which, as we know, has always refused to arrive. = A genuinely messianic face must be restored to the concept of classless society and, to be sure, in the interest of furthering the revolutionary politics of the proletariat itself.

New Theses B

History deals with connections and with arbitrarily elaborated causal chains. But since history affords an idea of the fundamental citability of its object, this object must present itself, in its ultimate form, as a moment of humanity. In this moment, time must be brought to a standstill.

The dialectical image is an occurrence of ball lightning that runs across the whole horizon of the past.

Articulating the past historically means recognizing those elements of the past which come together in the constellation of a single moment. Historical knowledge is possible only within the historical moment. But knowledge within the historical moment is always knowledge of a moment. In drawing itself together in the moment—in the dialectical image—the past becomes part of humanity’s involuntary memory.

The dialectical image can be defined as the involuntary memory of redeemed humanity.

The notion of a universal history is bound up with the notion of progress and the notion of culture. In order for all the moments in the history of humanity to be incorporated in the chain of history, they must be reduced to a common denominator—“culture,” “enlightenment,” “the objective spirit,” or whatever one wishes to call it.

New Theses C

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

The basic conception in myth is the world as punishment—punishment which actually engenders those to whom punishment is due. Eternal recurrence is the punishment of being held back in school, projected onto the cosmic sphere: humanity has to copy out its text in endless repetitions (Eluard, Répétitions).4

The eternity of punishment in hell may have sheared off the most terrible spike from the ancient idea of eternal recurrence. It substitutes an eternity of torment for the eternity of a cycle.

Thinking the idea of eternal recurrence once more in the nineteenth cen-
The Now of Recognizability

The saying that the historian is a prophet facing backward can be understood in two ways. 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. This view corresponds exactly to the historical theory of empathy, which Fustel de Coulanges encapsulated in the following advice: “Si vous voulez revivre une époque, oubliez que vous savez ce qui s’est passé après elle.”—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 is kindled by the peaks of earlier generations as they sink further and further into the past. Indeed, the historian’s own time is far more distinctly present to this visionary gaze than it is to the contemporaries who “keep step with it.” The concept of a present which represents the intentional subject matter of a prophecy is defined by Turgot—not without reason—as an essentially and fundamentally political concept. “Before we have learned to deal with things in a given position,” says Turgot, “it has already changed several times. Thus, we always find out too late about what has happened. And therefore it can be said that politics is obliged to foresee the present.” It is precisely this concept of the present which underlies the actuality of genuine historiography (N8a,3; N12a,1). Someone who pokes about in the past as if rummaging in a storeroom of examples and analogies still has no inkling of how much in a given moment depends on its being made present.

The Dialectical Image

(If one looks upon history as a text, then one can say of it what a recent author has said of literary texts—namely, that the past has left in them images comparable to those registered by a light-sensitive plate. “The future alone possesses developers strong enough to reveal the image in all its details. Many pages in Marivaux or Rousseau contain a mysterious meaning which the first readers of these texts could not fully have deciphered.”) The historical method is a philological method based on the book of life. “Read what was never written,” runs a line in Hofmannsthal. The reader one should think of here is the true historian.)

The multiplicity of histories resembles the multiplicity of languages. Universal history in the present-day sense can never be more than a kind of Esperanto. The idea of universal history is a messianic idea.

The messianic world is the world of universal and integral actuality. Only in the messianic realm does a universal history exist. Not as written history, but as festively enacted history. This festival is purified of all celebration.
There are no festive songs. Its language is liberated prose—prose which has burst the fetters of script [Schrift] and is understood by all people (as the language of birds is understood by Sunday's children).—The idea of prose coincides with the messianic idea of universal history (the types of artistic prose as the spectrum of universal historical types [the passage in "The Storyteller"]).

A conception of history that has liberated itself from the schema of progression within an empty and homogeneous time would finally unleash the destructive energies of historical materialism which have been held back for so long. This would threaten the three most important positions of historicism. The first attack must be aimed at the idea of universal history. Now that the nature of peoples is obscured by their current structural features as much as by their current relationships to one another, the notion that the history of humanity is composed of peoples is a mere refuge of intellectual laziness. (The idea of a universal history stands and falls with the idea of a universal language. As long as the latter had a basis—whether in theology, as in the Middle Ages, or in logic, as more recently in Leibniz—universal history was not wholly inconceivable. By contrast, universal history as practiced since the nineteenth century can never have been more than a kind of Esperanto.)—The second fortified position of historicism is evident in the idea that history is something which can be narrated. In a materialist investigation, the epic moment will always be blown apart in the process of construction. The liquidation of the epic moment must be accepted, as Marx did when he wrote Capital. He realized that the history of capital could be constructed only within the broad, steel framework of a theory. In Marx's theoretical sketch of labor under the dominion of capital, humanity's interests are better looked after than in the monumental, long-winded, and basically lackadaisical works of historicism. It is more difficult to honor the memory of the anonymous than it is to honor the memory of the famous, the celebrated, not excluding poets and thinkers. The historical construction is dedicated to the memory of the anonymous.—The third bastion of historicism is the strongest and the most difficult to overrun. It presents itself as “empathy with the victor.” The rulers at any time are the heirs of all those who have been victorious throughout history. Empathizing with the victor invariably benefits those currently ruling. The historical materialist respects this fact. He also realizes that this state of affairs is well-founded. Whoever has emerged victorious in the thousand struggles traversing history up to the present day has his share in the triumphs of those now ruling over those now ruled. The historical materialist can take only a highly critical view of the inventory of spoils displayed by the victors before the vanquished. This inventory is called culture. For in every case these treasures have a lineage which the historical materialist cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great geniuses who created them, but also to the anonymous toil of others who lived in the same period. There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. The historical materialist keeps his distance from all of this. He has to brush history against the grain—even if he needs a barge pole to do it.

Categories for developing the concept of historical time.

The concept of historical time forms an antithesis to the idea of a temporal continuum.

The eternal lamp[^20] is an image of genuine historical existence. It cites what has been—the flame that once was kindled—in perpetuum, giving it ever new sustenance.

The existence of the classless society cannot be thought at the same time that the struggle for it is thought. But the concept of the present, in its binding sense for the historian, is necessarily defined by these two temporal orders. Without some sort of essay of the classless society, there is only a historical accumulation of the past. To this extent, every concept of the present participates in the concept of Judgment Day.

The saying from an apocryphal gospel—"Where I meet someone, will I judge him"[^21]—casts a peculiar light on the idea of Last Judgment. It recalls Kafka's note: "The Last Judgment is a kind of summary justice."[^22] But it adds to this something else: the Day of Judgment, according to this saying, would not be distinguishable from other days. At any rate, this gospel saying furnishes the canon for the concept of the present which the historian makes his own. Every moment is a moment of judgment concerning certain moments that preceded it.

Excerpts from the Fuchs essay.^[23]

The passage on Jochmann's visionary gaze should be worked into the basic structure of the Arcades.^[24]

The seer's gaze is kindled by the rapidly receding past. That is to say, the prophet has turned away from the future: he perceives the contours of the future in the fading light of the past as it sinks before him into the night of times. This prophetic relation to the future necessarily informs the attitude of the historian as Marx describes it, an attitude determined by actual social circumstances.

Should criticism and prophecy be the categories that come together in the "redemption" of the past?

How should critique of the past (for example, in Jochmann) be joined to redemption of the past?

To grasp the eternity of historical events is really to appreciate the eternity of their transience.

Notes

Benjamin wrote these fragments (selected from a larger body of material published in the *Gesammelte Schriften*) in the course of composing “On the Concept of History.”

1. Eduard Meyer (1855–1930) was a well-known German historian who attempted to justify Germany’s position in World War I. He was the author of *Geschichte des Altertums* (History of the Ancient World; 5 vols., 1884–1902) and other works.

2. Emile Meyerson (1859–1933), French chemist and philosopher, was best known for his work *Identifier et réalité* (Identity and Reality; 1908), in which he develops a position opposed to positivism. *De l’explication dans les sciences* (On Explanation in the Sciences) was published in Paris in 1921.

3. The Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany), or SPD, was founded by Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel in 1863, originally as a Marxist revolutionary organization. In the course of the nineteenth century, partly in response to Chancellor Otto von Bismarck’s anti-Socialist laws of the 1880s, its policy shifted from revolutionary to social-reformist. Becoming Germany’s largest political party after World War I, it adopted a moderate reformist policy and participated in the government of the Weimar Republic. The party was banned by the Nazis in June 1933.

Neo-Kantianism arose in the mid-nineteenth century as a many-sided response to both Positivism and Romantic Idealism. Its leading exponents in Germany included the philosophers Hermann Cohen, Wilhelm Windelband, Alois Riehl, and Heinrich Rickert. It was in particular the Marburg school of Neo-Kantianism, under the leadership of Cohen, that propounded the ideal of knowledge as an infinite task (*Aufgabe*). Conrad Schmidt (1863–1932), German economist and philosopher, was initially allied with Marx and Engels, but in the 1890s he lent his support to bourgeois revisionist elements within the Social Democratic party. August Stadler (1850–1910), a Neo-Kantian philosopher, was a disciple of Hermann Cohen. He was the author of *Kants Teleologie und ihre erkenntnistheoretische Bedeutung* (The Epistemological Significance of Kant’s Teleology; 1874) and other works. Paul Natorp (1854–1924) was one of the leading Neo-Kantian philosophers, a professor at Marburg and the author, notably, of *Platos Ideenlehre* (Plato’s Theory of Ideas; 1903) and *Sozialidealismus* (Social Idealism; 1920). He argued that the development of national education, in the form of a “social pedagogics,” necessarily preceded any legitimate social or economic change. Karl Vorländer (1860–1928), German philosopher, attempted to combine the Neo-Kantianism of the Marburg school with Marxist socialism. He edited Kant’s collected works (9 vols.; 1901–1924) and published books such as

4. Ball lightning (*Kugelblitz*) is a rare form of lightning in the shape of a glowing red ball. It is associated with thunderstorms and thought to consist of ionized gas.

5. Paul Eluard (pseudonym of Eugène Grindel; 1895–1952), French poet, was an early Surrealist and one of the leading lyric poets of the twentieth century. His major collections include *Capitale de la douleur* (Capital of Sorrow; 1926), *Les Yeux fertiles* (The Fertile Eyes; 1936), and *Rêpétitions* (1922). After the Spanish Civil War, Eluard abandoned Surrealist experimentation.

6. In Greek mythology, the Danaïdes were the fifty daughters of Danaus. As punishment for murdering their fifty husbands on their wedding night, they were condemned to futile labor in Hades: until the end of time, they would pour water into a vessel that was pierced with holes and thus could never be filled.


9. The Latin word *limes*, meaning “boundary line,” referred specifically to any of the fortified frontiers of the Roman Empire. These included the Limes Germanicus (marking the limits of Rome’s German provinces), the Limes Arabicus (the Arabian frontier), and the Limes Britannicus (the British frontier, or Hadrian’s Wall).


11. Esperanto is the most important of the international constructed languages. It was created by the Polish ophthalmologist Ludwik Zamenhof (born Lazar Markovitch; 1859–1917), who, under the pseudonym Dr. Esperanto (“one who hopes”), published an expository textbook in Russian in 1887, after years of experiment. His *Fundamento de Esperanto* (Basis of Esperanto; 1905) established the principles of the language’s structure and formation. Esperanto is characterized by a simple grammar (its rules have no exceptions) and by logical word-formation, using prefixes and suffixes to build on a small number of roots. Its vocabulary is formed from the most commonly used words of the western European languages: the name “Esperanto,” for example, recalls such words as *esperanza*, *speranza*, and *esperir*.

12. “Der Historiker ist ein rückwärts gekehrter Prophet.” This is fragment 80 of Friedrich Schlegel’s *Athenäums-Fragmente* (Athenæum Fragments; 1798).

13. “If you want to relive an epoch, forget that you know what happened after it.” The French historian Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges (1830–1889) specialized in the Greco-Roman and medieval periods.

14. Anne-Robert Turgot, *OEUVRES*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1844), p. 673, “Pensées et fragments.” Turgot (1727–1781) was a French statesman and economist who was appointed comptroller general of France by Louis XVI in 1774. His fiscal and political reforms met with opposition from high-ranking circles and led to his
dismissal two years later. Among his works are Lettres sur la tolérance (Letters on Tolerance; 1733–1734) and Réflexions sur la formation et la distribution des richesses (Reflections on the Formation and Distribution of Wealth; 1766).


16. André Monglond, *Le Précornantisme français*, vol. 1, *Le Héros précornantique* (Grenoble, 1930), p. xii. The translation here reflects Benjamin’s German translation of the French original. See *The Arcades Project*, Convolute N15a,1. Pierre Carlet de Chamblain de Marivaux (1688–1763) was a French playwright, essayist, and novelist whose light comedies won great popularity in the mid-eighteenth century. His best-known works include plays such as *Le Jeu de l’amour et du hasard* (The Game of Love and Chance; 1730) and *Le Legs* (The Bequest; 1736), and the novel *Le Paysan parvenu* (The Peasant Upstart; 1736). He was elected to the Académie Française in 1742.

17. Hugo von Hofmannsthall (1874–1929), Austrian poet and dramatist, is best known in the English-speaking world for his collaborations with the composer Richard Strauss, including his librettos for the operas *Der Rosenkavalier* and *Ariadne auf Naxos*. The quotation is from his play *Der Tor und der Tod* (Death and the Fool; 1894).

18. In German folk tradition, children born on Sunday, particularly under a new moon, are likely to possess special powers, such as the ability to see spirits, speak with the dead, or have their wishes fulfilled. The term *Sonntagskind* ("Sunday's child") is also used figuratively to refer to someone who is "born under a lucky star," who has an easy time with things that are difficult for others, or for whom each day is imbued with the spirit of Sunday.


20. In Exodus 27:20, in the Hebrew Bible, God tells Moses on Mount Sinai to maintain a lamp at all times in the sanctuary: "And you shall command the people of Israel to bring to you pure beaten olive oil for the light, that a lamp may be set up to burn continuously." The lamp was to burn continuously as a sign of God's presence.

21. Possibly a reference to a passage in paragraph 5 of the Revelation of Paul, part of the New Testament Apocrypha: "My long-suffering bears with them, that they may turn to me; but if not, they shall come to me, and I will judge them."

22. Benjamin refers to number 40 in an untitled sequence of numbered reflections that Kafka composed ca. 1917–1918: "Nur unser Zeitbegriff lässt uns das Jüngste Gericht so nennen, eigentlich ist es ein Standrecht" ("It is only our concept of time that makes us call the Last Judgment by this name. Actually it is a kind of summary justice"). *Standrecht* literally suggests "standing imperative." See Franz Kafka, *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente*, vol. 2 (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1992), p. 122. In English, *Dearest Father: Stories and Other Writings*, trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins (New York: Schocken, 1954), p. 38. Born in Prague of Jewish parentage, Kafka (1883–1924) is best known for his short stories, such as "The Metamorphosis" (1915) and "In der Strafkolonie" (In the Penal Colony; 1919), and his posthumously published novels *Der Prozess* (The Trial; 1925) and *Das Schloss* (The Castle; 1926).
