

Adorno's Marxism: Adorno after Marx and Marx after Adorno

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Chapter 2: Adorno and Benjamin's Philosophy of History

The challenge of the history of the Left to the progressive view of history

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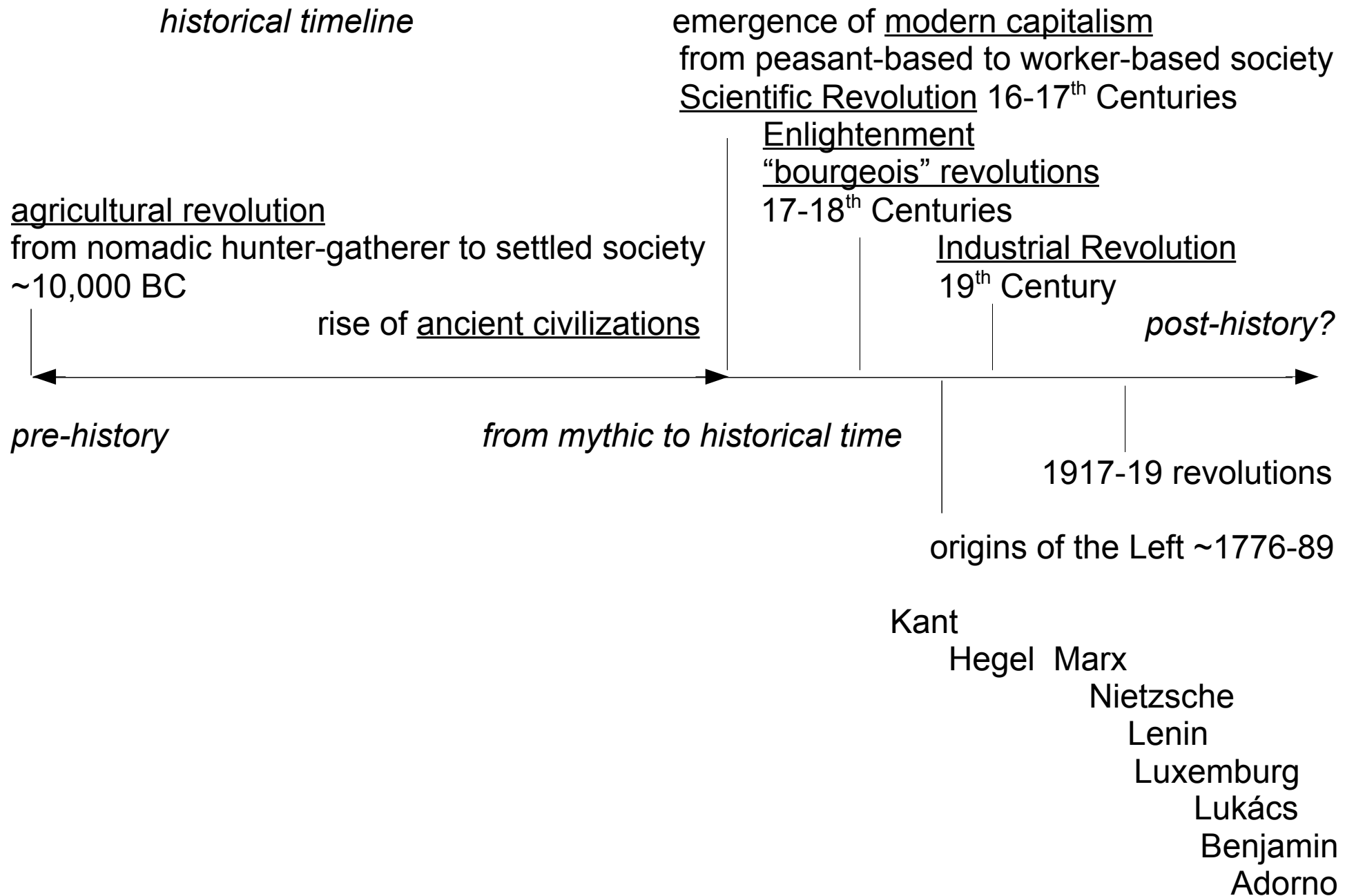
Theologico-Political Fragment

Only the Messiah himself consummates all history, in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates its relation to the Messianic. For this reason 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. From the standpoint of history it is not the goal, but the end. Therefore the order of the profane cannot be built up on the idea of the Divine Kingdom, and therefore theocracy has no political, but only a religious meaning. To have repudiated with utmost vehemence the political significance of theocracy is the cardinal merit of Bloch's *Spirit of Utopia*.

The order of the profane should be erected on the idea of happiness. The relation of this order to the Messianic is one of the essential teachings of the philosophy of history. It is the precondition of a mystical conception of history, containing a problem that can be represented figuratively. If one arrow points to the goal toward which the profane dynamic acts, and another marks the direction of Messianic intensity, then certainly the quest of free humanity for happiness runs counter 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. For in happiness all that is

earthly seeks its downfall, and only in good fortune is its downfall destined to find it. Whereas, admittedly, the immediate Messianic intensity of the heart, of the inner man in isolation, passes through misfortune, as suffering. To the spiritual *restitutio in integrum*, which introduces immortality, corresponds a worldly restitution that leads to the eternity of downfall, and the rhythm of this eternally transient worldly existence, transient in its totality, in its spatial but also in its temporal totality, the rhythm of Messianic nature, is happiness. For nature is Messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away.

To strive after such passing, even for those stages of man that are nature, is the task of world politics, whose method must be called nihilism.



Benjamin's metaphysics of history



ideal-teleological time

messianic : redemption : theological : abstract : homogeneous

empirical-historical time

profane : happiness : materialist : concrete : heterogeneous



linear-progressive

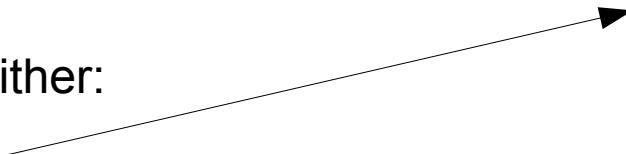
modern : progression : directional : —————▶ : perfection

cyclical

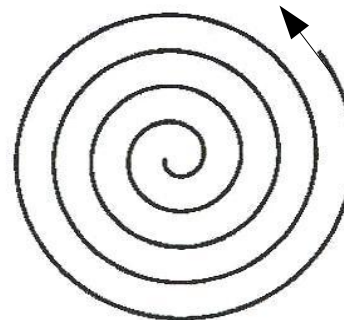
archaic : regression : recursive : ◀————— : downfall

progression in time

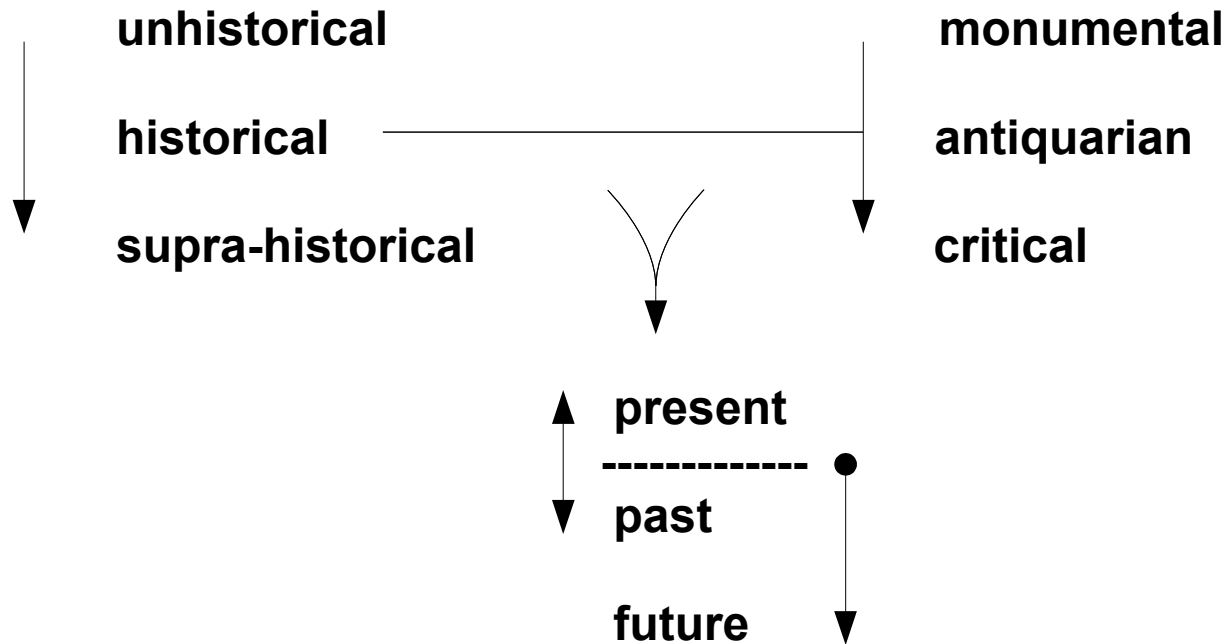
either:



or:



Nietzsche on the use and abuse of history for life



dialectic of myth and enlightenment



[Epigraph:]

"In pre-modern societies, the ends of life are given at the beginning of life: people do things in their generation so that the same things will continue to be done in the next generation. Meaning is immanent in all the ordinary customs and practices of existence, since these are inherited from the past, and are therefore worth reproducing. The idea is to make the world go not forward, only around. In modern societies, the ends of life are not given at the beginning of life; they are thought to be created or discovered. The reproduction of the customs and practices of the group is no longer the chief purpose of existence; the idea is not to repeat, but to change, to move the world forward. Meaning is no longer immanent in the practices of ordinary life, since those practices are understood by everyone to be contingent and time-bound. This is why death, in modern societies, is the great taboo, an absurdity, the worst thing one can imagine. For at the close of life people cannot look back and know that they have accomplished the task set for them at birth. This knowledge always lies up ahead, somewhere over history's horizon. Modern societies don't know what will count as valuable in the conduct of life in the long run, because they have no way of knowing what conduct the long run will find itself in a position to respect. The only certain knowledge death comes with is the knowledge that the values of one's own time, the values one has tried to live by, are expunge-able. . . .

"Marxism gave a meaning to modernity. It said that, wittingly or not, the individual performs a role in a drama that has a shape and a goal, a trajectory, and that modernity will turn out to be just one act in that drama. Historical change is not arbitrary. It is generated by class conflict; it is faithful to an inner logic; it points toward an end, which is the establishment of the classless society. Marxism was founded on an appeal for social justice, but there were many forms that such an appeal might have taken. Its deeper attraction was the discovery of meaning, a meaning in which human beings might participate, in history itself. When Wilson explained, in his introduction to the 1972 edition of *To the Finland Station*, that his book had been written under the assumption that 'an important step in progress has been made, that a fundamental "breakthrough" had occurred,' this is the faith he was referring to. . . . Marx and Engels were the *philosophes* of a second Enlightenment."

-- Introduction by Louis Menand (2003),

Edmund Wilson, *To the Finland Station* (1940)

Précis

The relevance of history is not given but made, in a dialectical sense. As Marx put it, humanity makes history but not under conditions of its own choosing (*The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1852). History is made but in ways that also produce us, and so we need to be conscious of how history is made and reflect upon its significance, rather than taking it for granted. Furthermore, “history” itself is a modern discovery: history is historical. This is not least why Walter Benjamin spoke, in his 1940 “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” of the “writing” of history, historiography on the Left being urgent for emancipatory politics, for the possibilities for social emancipation are not only historical but point to potentials beyond the historical, to the possibility of getting beyond history, for which capital might be the beginning and the end.

Benjamin's concept of “constellation” refers to the sense that historical moments might not have pertinence to the present in a linear-progressive way. Rather, these historical constellations appear as structuring figures in the constitution of the present, as enduring problems yet to be worked through. Hence something that happened more recently might not have more immediate relevance to problems of the present than something that happened longer ago. Something later might expire faster because it is less essential to the present than something earlier might allow us to grasp.

Such constellations in the appearance of history are involuntary: as Benjamin put it, they “flash up;” as Marx put it, they “weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living.” So history cannot be an inventory of “lessons already learned.” According to Nietzsche, responding to the Hegelian account of history as the story of reason and freedom, there is in history a dialectic of enlightenment and mythologization. For, as

Benjamin put it, “even the dead are not safe.” The significance of the past changes as a function of the present. The meaning of history is itself a symptom to be worked through. This is why Benjamin spoke of regarding history from the standpoint of its redemption. What value do past thoughts and actions have? The history of the Left furnishes a set of questions and problems that we are tasked to answer according to the way the problem of freedom presents to us. But, as Adorno put it (in *Negative Dialectics*, 1966), “What has been cast aside but not absorbed theoretically will often yield its truth content only later. It festers as a sore on the prevailing health; this will lead back to it in changed situations.”

For Benjamin, this non-linear function of the past in the present constitutes the critical purchase of the melancholic-neurotic compulsion to repeat, the capture of the present by the past, but as a symptom to be worked through, in the Freudian sense that a symptom potentially yields, together, both knowledge and freedom.

Review of Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of this dissertation on “Adorno's Marxism,” on “Adorno in 1969: the problem and legacy of the '60s Left in theory and practice,” established the relation between the origins of Adorno's critical theory in the social-political history of the 1920s and '30s, in the aftermath of the failed international anticapitalist revolution that opened in 1917-19 and found most acute expression in Russia, Germany, Hungary, and Italy. The unfulfilled tasks of social emancipation presented by this history, whose key moments unfolded only during Adorno's adolescence, provided the basis for Adorno's critique of the 1960s “New” Left. The inability of the Left of the 1960s and later to assimilate or appropriate Adorno's critique of this history of the Left and its legacy, fundamentally affected the

reception of Adorno's work and led to much confusion about it. Adorno's critical theory became enigmatic, but this was only a part of the greater occultation of Marxian critique and anticapitalist politics that had already occurred long before, in the trajectory of early 20th Century Marxism and its origins in a dynamic of crisis, revolution, counterrevolution and reaction, in, through and following World War I, and the pattern set by the historical vicissitudes of the Left in the 1920s and '30s.

Early 20th Century history in retrospect -- introduction to the history of the Left

As Adorno put it in his 1962 essay "Those Twenties," responding to post-WWII cultural nostalgia for the period of the Weimar Republic in Germany, the liberal democracy between post-WWI counterrevolution and the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, the crisis manifesting the radical potential to begin to move beyond capital had already occurred before WWI: WWI itself was the product of the failure to make good on this crisis, and the failure of the revolutions in 1917-19 in Russia and Germany were inextricably linked in a world-historical context. Failure of revolution in Germany at the close of the war, exemplified by the isolation and suppression of Rosa Luxemburg's Spartacus League, conditioned the trajectory of the revolution in Russia and resulted in Stalinism, as well as fascism (in Italy etc.), Nazism (in Germany), World War II and the Holocaust. For Adorno all of this subsequent history had been already in a sense settled and prefigured, set in motion by the defeat of Luxemburg's Spartacists in 1919. For the generation of Marxists to which Adorno belonged, this failure was the lodestar for all their subsequent thought. For Adorno, the Weimar period, the "roaring Twenties," though appearing as a period of liberalization, of social-political polarization and turmoil, cultural radicalism

and innovation, as well as the apparent resurgence of a revolutionary Left at a global scale during the Great Depression of the late-'20s - early '30s that followed, had been already too late. It is this "lateness" of the historical period of the 1920s-30s that characterizes what Fredric Jameson has called Adorno's "late Marxism."

Adorno and Benjamin's Marxism

Implicit in Adorno's Marxism is a philosophy of history for the 20th Century and the role of the Left in this history, one developed first and foremost by Adorno's mentor and friend Walter Benjamin. The relation of Adorno's Marxism to Benjamin's critique of and negative reconfiguration of the philosophy of history is the subject of this chapter.

In discussing Adorno's relation to the thoughts and actions of the antecedent 2nd International Marxist radicalism that culminated in the events and actions of 1917-19 and were exemplified in the history of the Left by the figures Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky, this discussion might follow a standard intellectual history of background and influences.

However, a perhaps more controversial claim will be that not only is Adorno's thought properly illuminated only with reference to historical figures of revolutionary Marxism, but that such Marxist politics might find true illumination and expression only in Adorno's (retrospective) critical theoretical digestion of it.

Indeed, similar points could be made in the history of philosophy and critical theory, that the French Revolution and its trajectory might find its most adequate self-understanding in the works of Kant, Schiller and Hegel rather than in the speeches and acts of Lafayette, Robespierre and Napoleon, and that the true social-political stakes of the Industrial Revolution and the emergence of the modern workers movement in the

19th Century might find adequate self-consciousness only in Marx's critique of them rather than in the contemporary apologias of bourgeois political economy or in the socialist political responses of the moment. In Lukács's "Hegelian Marxist" characterization of this, following Hegel's observation that "the Owl of Minerva flies only at dusk," perhaps something in the process of becoming is only adequately known in the struggle to overcome it; the only adequately "historical" knowledge is found in the combination of critical theory and transformative practice, as a function of the possibility to move a historical phenomenon beyond itself. Thus Marxian socialism in theory and practice understands itself as being immanent to capital and its historical transformations.

But, perhaps most disturbingly, this relation to theory and practice has its converse side: not only is adequately emancipatory-transformative practice required producing new insights in theory, but also, since our ability to know the world is tied to our ability to change it in an emancipatory manner, losing the ability to change the world profoundly affects (negatively) our ability to adequately know it.

In Chapter 1, the history of international revolutionary Marxism that culminated in the politics of 1917-19 found self-consciousness initially as theoretical digestion in the great works by Lukács and Korsch published in 1923 that inspired the critical theorists of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research.

Benjamin and Lukács

Adorno, who was a younger figure who remained largely peripheral to the Frankfurt Institute of Horkheimer and Marcuse in the late 1920s - early '30s, was initially, in his high school years, an acolyte of his family friend and tutor in the German Idealist

philosophical tradition, the cultural critic Siegfried Kracauer. But at the time of Lukács and Korsch's great publications in 1923, which coincided with the definitive close of the revolutionary period that had opened in 1917, the 19 year-old Adorno had met, through Kracauer, perhaps the most powerful mentor for the further development of his thought, Walter Benjamin, who was 11 years his senior.

Adorno, who outlived Benjamin after his suicide in 1940 by almost 30 years, was forever marked in his works by the effect of Benjamin's *oeuvre*. Adorno learned his Marxism through his critical engagement with Benjamin and his work, for which Adorno served as a sometimes exasperatingly impatient critic and goad.

Adorno spent his first year as a "habilitated" lecturer teaching an intensive seminar on Benjamin's book on *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, the culture of the Baroque as early modernity. Adorno's inaugural lectures in 1931 on "The Idea of the History of Nature" and "The Actuality of Philosophy" are defined by his engagement with Benjamin's thought in light of the Marxian critical theory that had been given form by Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, a work which had convinced Benjamin of his Marxism. Adorno had met Lukács in Vienna in 1925, but had already been impressed at that time by the significance of Lukács's retreat from his 1923 work under pressure from Soviet Communist "orthodoxy." Lukács's work was seminal for Benjamin and Adorno in this dual sense that it had opened possible developments for critical Marxist theory but its reception and impact were inseparable from the defeat and retreat from the revolutionary moment of 1917-19 Lukács had sought to digest. This tension in Lukács's work and its significance, was productive, not for Lukács's further work, which became conservative in its own manner, but rather for those who followed Lukács's initial

attempted thinking-through of the radical departure from “vulgar Marxism” by the Marxist radicals Lenin and Luxemburg. The further development of this departure for Lukács's work fell to thinkers like Benjamin and Adorno. However, their following Lukács was itself necessarily in the nature of a critical response, as changing historical conditions of counterrevolution and reaction in the 1920s and '30s motivated a complication and disputation of what revolutionary Marxism had become in the Stalinized international Communism of this period, a new affirmative ideology.

Thus Benjamin's work of this period formed for Adorno a response to and complement of Lukács's theoretical critique of “reification” that was meant to corroborate the Bolshevik departure in practice from the passive, contemplative and opportunistically adaptive “vulgar Marxism” of conservatized 2nd International Social Democracy. Indeed, as Adorno's understood it, Benjamin's work involved, *pace* Lukács, an “endorsement” of “reification,” in “critical objectification,” which sought to work through “reified appearance” “immanently.” This was the founding insight of Benjamin's literary and cultural criticism, the productive attempt to find the (past) emancipatory potential that (still) charged the aesthetics of appearance in modern cultural forms, from Baudelaire and the popular cultural forms of the 19th Century (in the *Arcades Project*), Proust and Kafka, to Dada, Brecht, the Surrealists, and photography and cinema -- all of the supposed expressions of resigned cultural “modernism” which for Lukács (and others) was exemplary of the decline of bourgeois society in crisis and reaction.

History, the persistence of reification and “progressive barbarism”

However, with the failure of revolution, the historical significance of this culture of late modernity and its further implications and possibilities had changed. As Luxemburg had put it in the crisis of WWI, echoing Marx and Engels, modern society faced the choice of “socialism or barbarism.” But, since socialism was not achieved, Benjamin found his consciousness critically tasked with finding the paradoxically “progressive” character of the “barbarism” that resulted. Rather than being overcome as Lukács had forecast, the “reified appearance” of capitalism took on a new saliency. Benjamin set about the task of bringing such forms of reification, which needed to be considered as forms of self-objectified Spirit, as new forms of freedom and its further tasks, and not merely its obstacles, to critical self-consciousness, not affirmatively, but symptomologically, for they had not been overcome in practice but remained to be worked through, and so affected the critical theory of modernity.

Thus, regarding “reification,” Adorno’s work (in Gillian Rose’s characterization) necessarily charted the “hard road between Lukács and Benjamin,” attempting to grasp the substance of Marxian critical theory between the antinomic aspects of the commodity form that appear as the problems -- and immanently critical potentials -- of the “dynamic” and the “static” dimensions of social life in capital. Where Lukács emphasized the emancipatory potential of the dynamic of society mediated by commodified labor, Benjamin emphasized the symptomology of the static “congealing” of value as something to be worked through rather than simply as false or melancholically resigned consciousness. In Adorno’s treatment, following Benjamin, this also meant a changed significance of the dynamic character of modern social life, however, with implications

for how historical temporality was apprehended. In Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, the adequate "consciousness of the proletariat" was the critical historical consciousness of this dynamic of capitalist social development. If, for Lukács, the reification that resulted from the unfulfilled potential of the dynamic of capital meant the "temporalization of space and the spatialization of time," then, for Benjamin, following Kracauer's cultural criticism (in his essay on "Photography," 1927), adequately emancipatory knowledge of history was captured and in a sense blocked by a historicist "absolute continuity of time," a seamless causal chain that rendered historical meaning temporally homogeneous and hence potentially fatalistically meaningless. For Kracauer, such historicism amounted to the attempted "photography of time," as photographic representations of space were marked by the "absolute continuity" and homogeneity of the picture plane and its rendering of space. The acceptance and need for this kind of spatial representation in photography was understood as specifically modern. Thus the way "nature" was presented by photography signaled the "go-for-broke game of history," presenting all of space as an "inventory" of potentially homogeneous knowledge, just as historicism presented all of time as a limitless archive.

For Benjamin, the problem of historical meaning was thus inextricably bound up with the dynamic that provoked consciousness of history itself. "History" was a product of modernity, and was itself a form of appearance of social modernity under capital. "History" was historical, and thus subject to a "historico-philosophic" critique of what its appearance signaled and meant.

“Philosophy of history?” -- Hegel and Nietzsche

Thus the central thematic for engaging Adorno's critical engagement with Benjamin's work, something that connects the early and late Benjamin, and Adorno's engagement with Benjamin and life-long further elaboration of his ideas, is the “negative” philosophy of history Benjamin had developed. An examination of Benjamin's 1940 “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” his final work, and of earlier writings by Benjamin that help illuminate this work, will provide the categories for grasping the stakes of Benjamin's critical grasp of the symptomatic “philosophy of history” of advanced modernity -- how “history” appears to those living through its conditions.

With the phrase “philosophy of history” two figures immediately come to the fore: Hegel and Nietzsche. Both Nietzsche and Hegel sought to interrogate and problematize the very possibility of a philosophy of history, or of grasping a coherent meaning to history, and so both are foundational for and help to situate Benjamin's attack on the “historicism” originating in the 19th Century and symptomatically characterizing “historical” consciousness since then. The question becomes what it means to think about history. -- Further, for Benjamin and Adorno, Marx's observation that history “weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living” is related to Nietzsche's observation that (modern) historical consciousness was pathological and symptomatic and potentially if not manifestly invidious for (present) life. -- For Marx and Nietzsche, (each in their own way) following Hegel, (the meaning of) history was something not to be deified but rather overcome.

So, crucially, for Benjamin and Adorno, neither Hegel nor Nietzsche can be considered “historicist” thinkers, despite (myriad mistaken) attempts (from Right-

Hegelian German academicism to “post-modern” Foucauldian “genealogies”) to base an epistemology or method on their critical philosophical investigations into the meaning of history, their attempts to raise the appearance of history to critical self-consciousness. Marx sought to follow Hegel in such critical specification of history, and Nietzsche can be considered a contributor parallel to Marx whose work gained a renewed importance as a kind of bad conscience to the vulgarization of Marxism in the late 19th Century, when Marxism began exhibiting the same hypostatized progressive view of history that liberalism had demonstrated earlier. Vulgarized Marxism thus had become an affirmative philosophy of history to which Nietzsche's thought could be productively opposed and brought into tension.

The “progressive” view of history

At the outset, one must distinguish such progressivism from Marx's (and the Marxists') apparent “historical” optimism about the possibility of emancipation beyond capital through socialism. Similarly, the regressive character of society conditioned by capital that Marx observed after the failure of the revolutions of 1848 (exemplified for instance in what Marx called the “vulgarization of bourgeois thought”) -- and Benjamin and Adorno observed after 1917-19 -- must be distinguished from theoretical or practical political pessimism. Also, a related distinction must be made of critical-theoretical grasp of social-historical necessity from practical political possibility. (Such a distinction will not be grasped adequately by, for instance, Gramsci's [and Trotsky biographer Isaac Deutscher's] phrase about “pessimism of the intellect” and “optimism of the will.”) Otherwise, historical consciousness becomes difficult to separate from historical fatalism

-- historical consciousness can be by turns affirmative or critical. Such a distinction finds expression in the classical German Idealist distinction of the “is” from the “ought,” and how to understand how what can and should be done, conditions the actuality of the extant, how the present is not merely a result but a possibility charged with further potential. Any thinking about history can only be meaningful to the extent that it allows the communication and intrinsic interrelation of past, present and future.

To do so critically requires the defamiliarization of these categories in thinking, in the spirit of Kant's “Critiques” that sought to explore and specify the (logical) conditions of possibility for the rational meaning of our -- necessarily *metaphysical* (i.e., non-empirical, transcendental) -- categories of thought. For past, present and future refer not to things but moments of cognition, moments of thinking and knowledge, as well as moments for considering possibilities for acting rationally, in the sense of being able to “own” in cognition one's actions and their effects. Thus the problem of historical action in practice is bound to metaphysical categories of experience, raising problems for thinking about what it means to act in a progressively transformative manner, and the possibilities for doing so in freedom, meaning preserving and not foreclosing further possibilities.

Metaphysics of history

An early (pre-Marxist) writing by Benjamin, the “Theologico-Political Fragment” circa 1920, introduces metaphysical categories important for Benjamin's later engagements with the problem of historical meaning.

In the "Theologico-Political Fragment," Benjamin raises two dimensions of historical temporality, one in the profane direction of the pursuit of happiness, which is understood as informed by the temporality of the "eternal passing away" of mortal nature, and the other in the sacred direction of Messianic eschatology, with the consummation of history in redemption at the end of time, the end of all temporality, with its paradoxical image of the *restitutio in integrum* or bodily resurrection.

Several schema are raised by Benjamin to help situate the stakes of the meaning of history along these axial tensions of the opposed pursuits of happiness and redemption. The failure to attain happiness is what produces the demand for redemption. Happiness is sacrificed in pursuit of redemption, and redemption is abrogated, its promise forgotten in the pursuit of happiness. So history as the story of happiness's failure is necessarily accompanied by the story of history as the demand for redemption. According to Benjamin, this means that the pursuit of mortal happiness nevertheless "assists" the coming of the "Messianic Kingdom" of redemption by "its quietist approach." Thus Benjamin attempts to establish a dialectic of happiness and redemption, which also involves a dialectic of cyclical and linear temporality: linear by way of an end in redemption, and cyclical by way of the temporality of nature's "eternal passing away."

How Benjamin resolves this dialectical contradiction of the simultaneous informing of meaning in time by its arresting at an end and its uninterrupted movement is to insist on the one hand that the posed Messianic redemption of temporal suffering can only be the "end" and not the "goal" or *telos* of history, and on the other hand that "worldly existence" in both its "spatial" and "temporal" "totality" is "transient," and thus that the "rhythm" of "Messianic nature" is "happiness," the achievement of which is the

“earthly downfall” that everything is “destined to find” in “good fortune.” For the ancient metaphysics, the passage of time was the revelation of a destiny which was its *telos*. It was only with enlightenment that such destiny could be challenged and fate escaped. Thus Benjamin seeks to combine, as dialectically constitutive of temporal meaning, the teleological and the cyclical, or the linear-progressive and the recursive aspects of metaphysical categories for grasping the passage of time.

The obsolescence of traditional metaphysics could be found by Benjamin in the rendering of life as meaningless. As he put it, rather than stages of life corresponding to qualitative phases of meaning, in modernity one ages only as a function of there not being enough time to realize everything one was meant to do. Modern people do not advance through meaningful stages life but rather are consumed by time.

Benjamin and “experience”

An earlier essay by Benjamin, on “Experience” (1913) establishes a tension in the two German words that can be translated into English as “experience,” *erlebnis* and *erfahrung*, the first being merely affecting and the latter being transformative. In this essay, Benjamin raises the problem of the passage of time rendering life “meaningless.” In contrast to an ancient metaphysics of time as a cycle, in which to preserve the meaning of life meant to live as one’s ancestors did, modernity brings the contrary demand, that life be meaningful only the extent to which one departs from the ways of one’s ancestors. To live according to one’s ancestral way of life, to repeat the life of one’s parents -- to repeat their failures and disenchantment of their pursuit of happiness -- became the very image of meaningless existence. The cycle of time became the image of the evacuation of

meaning from life, and the concept of “experience” needed to be preserved for the possibility of the new.

In a subsequent essay “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy” (1918), Benjamin addressed Kant’s attempt to rehabilitate metaphysical categories of experience from their post-theological bankruptcy in empiricist Enlightenment. Where Kant asked what the possibilities were for the meaningfully rational (as opposed to mystifying) use of metaphysical categories for grasping what transcended immediately empirical experience, the “unity of apperception” of the “transcendental subject” that was capable of experiencing experience and being transformed, as opposed to merely processing sense data, Benjamin complained that Kant had conceded too much to the Enlightenment disenchantment of theological categories of metaphysics and thus “reduced experience to a point.” Benjamin announced his project to fulfill Kant’s intention to preserve the meaningfulness of metaphysical categories of experience “on the basis of Kant” but against a neo-Kantian positivism and in favor of a (purportedly more authentically) Kantian speculative metaphysics (thus unwittingly reproducing a Hegelian point of departure). In this way, Benjamin sought to grasp the possibility of an “enlightened” metaphysics, which opens the way to regarding ancient mythological-theological metaphysics as already a form of enlightenment.

History as a symptom: Nietzsche

An important inspiration and field of engagement for Benjamin’s philosophy of history is Nietzsche’s thought, especially his 2nd “untimely meditation” on “The Use and Abuse of History for Life” (1873).

In this essay, Nietzsche establishes two sets of categories for the meaning and “practice” of history: the monumental, antiquarian, and critical modes, and the (contrastingly) unhistorical, historical, and suprahistorical comportments. The latter three comportments are the real sites of contention for Nietzsche, with the former three modalities being forms of a historical comportment. However, there is an axis of past, present and future to which the 2 sets of 3 categories correspond. If in our pre-enlightened and animalistic past we were unhistorical, whereas we are now historical by virtue of being human, then we might look forward to becoming suprahistorical, which would not be to revert to the unhistorical, but to become historical in a transformed way that might transcend and overcome the way Nietzsche observed that history became pathological and symptomatic.

Nietzsche's object of critique is 19th Century historicism, which he characterized as the result of long transformation from a monumental to an antiquarian sense of history. Whereas traditional-ancient historiography was essentially indistinguishable from mythology and allowed the communication of great events and figures of history across time, in the sense of “monuments” of history, a more enlightened and “scientific” sense of history culminating in the (academic) historicism of the 19th Century, had brought the dangers of rendering all of past time equally meaningful -- or equally meaningless. Just as Nietzsche had observed in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) that ever since the Socratic-Platonic enlightenment of Classical Antiquity, the world had become a space whose depths could be plumbed infinitely as an unlimited source of knowledge, Nietzsche observed that time had become an unlimited field of knowledge in which a historian could endlessly consume the “dust” and “quisquilia” of an infinite archive.

Whereas the earlier 18th Century Enlightenment had been suspicious of the inevitably theological roots of historical meaning and regarded history as the story of an ignominious past of benighted superstitions from which the present should be extricated, an “infamy” of ignorance that Voltaire had called to “crush,” by the early 19th Century, especially in the traumatic wake of the French Revolution, an anxiety about historical change manifested in the Romantic nostalgia for the pre-modern and a new sense of the potential loss of meaning. For Nietzsche, this melancholic search for a security of meaning in the past could only take place, in this “antiquarian” preservative sense, at the expense of the present form of life and its possible future development. Thus Nietzsche thought history had come to be “abused” and practiced at a “disadvantage” for life.

By contrast, Nietzsche thought that the practice of “critical” history, in which one contested the lineages of the present, could open possibilities for a supra- or post-historical sense of the meaning of the past in the “service” of “life.” Nietzsche’s sense of “life” as an open-ended transformative process of “self-mastery” and “self-overcoming” harked back to Hegel’s account of “freedom” as an “absolute,” and Kant’s sense of the “moral culture of freedom” that possibilities for human action could not be circumscribed by determinations of “nature.”

History as the story of reason and freedom: Hegel

In his “Introduction to the Philosophy of History,” Hegel had contrasted the realms of Spirit and Nature as dialectical -- mutually constitutive -- categories. Whereas Nature was the realm of the “ever-same,” Spirit was the realm of “change” and the new. While Hegel recognized change in nature, it was not self-motivated and therefore not really change in

the sense of the self-bringing-forth of the new, which he attributed to Spirit. Thus Nature and Spirit were dialectically interrelated. Spirit was the transcendental property of Nature by which Nature was itself transformed in an autochthonous and intrinsic and not extrinsic and accidental manner.

Hegel began his investigation into the “philosophy of history” with two questions defining the parameters for the very possibility of a “philosophy of history,” whether reason could be found in history, and whether history could be told as the story of the development of freedom. For Hegel, these were inseparable questions for any “philosophy of history” adequate to his own time, after the Enlightenment and the modern revolutions of the 17th and 18th Centuries. For Hegel, there was only reason in history to the extent that it could be told as the story of the self-development and transformation of Spirit in freedom. Thus “freedom” was an “absolute” in the sense that it was irreducible to any prior determination. In this sense, freedom was an “Absolute” value for Spirit, or “humanity,” understood as the “self-moving Substance that is also Subject.” To be an adequate “subject” of self-development meant that humanity had come to be able to recognize itself as “free.” But this freedom was itself an open-ended process, meaning prior forms of humanity such as religion had to be understood as forms of “freedom,” none of which were an end-point but rather a site of further potential possibility. In this sense, freedom could not be “possessed” but only pursued -- Hegel has a great quip about the English thinking they possessed freedom and so having “gone to sleep” as far as the on-going struggle for freedom was concerned; Hegel also has an analogy for giving up on the struggle for freedom that likened this to becoming middle aged and giving up on one’s youthful ambitions, which then rendered the rest of one’s

life a mere marking of time in which one had already ceased to live. For Hegel, freedom was not a state of being but a movement through which one encountered problems as tasks for further action and development, towards qualitative transformation.

Hegel has been misunderstood as a teleological thinker and this discussion of freedom in Hegel's interrogation of the possibility for a "philosophy of history" is a good occasion to correct this misapprehension. Hegel regarded history as meaningful only to the extent that it provided a way of grasping the freedom-problem of the present. Hegel thought that to adequately grasp the tasks of the struggle for freedom in the present meant treating the present as a necessary and not accidental outcome of prior development. This is what it means to grasp "reason in history." For reason and freedom are indissolubly combined in Hegel's understanding of Spirit. One is only free to the extent that one is consciousness of oneself as free, and one is only conscious to the extent that one is free to be conscious of one's freedom; one is only free to the extent that one can act in a self-transformative manner with self-consciousness, and one is only adequately self-conscious the degree to which one is adequately capable of acting on oneself in self-transformation. The limitations of one are the limitations of the other. The history of Spirit is the story of the development of this "identical subject-object" of history. The degree to which humans have failed to act in freedom and come to such self-consciousness they have remained "without history." Hegel understood very well that most of human history in an empirical sense was marked by stagnation and regression and not progress (in freedom and reason): not all of the past provides for meaningful history, which is what the object was for Hegel's "philosophical" investigation of history.

Retrospectively, the only serious limitations of Hegel's critical investigation of the possibility for a "philosophy of history" are those of the liberal social politics of his time to which his thought gave expression. The problem of finding the meaning of the history of modernity fell subsequently to Marx, coming after the beginning of the Industrial Revolution that Hegel did not live to see, to re-specify the freedom problem of modernity and attempt to bring to adequate self-consciousness the freedom struggles of his time, that of the historically new and emergent industrial working class or "proletariat," and what its struggles indicated about the potential further development of humanity. Because human social life became for Marx internally self-contradictory in a historically new way as part and parcel of the Industrial Revolution, humanity became "alienated" from itself, in the Hegelian sense that humanity became tasked to work through what it "is" under capital by way of what it "could be," in, through and beyond capital, to the extent that this potential, or "ought" informed the "actuality" or further possibility of what "is." Marx understood capital as the freedom problem of humanity in modernity, which found most acute expression in the condition of agency for the proletariat, as a symptom, to be worked through. Thus Marx thought that only the self-transcendence of the historical form of humanity exemplified by the proletariat (and the value of commodified labor its economic and social-political activity mediates), through its "self-abolition," could allow for the (further) self-transformation of humanity in freedom. The existence of the proletariat is the problem to be overcome to further the advance of human freedom.

The dialectic of myth and enlightenment: the linear and the cyclical

The problem of the possibilities for a “Marxist” philosophy of history as it was presented to Benjamin by 1940 is aptly captured by the opening aphorism to his essay “On the Concept of History” (AKA the “Theses”), on the chess-playing automaton. It should be quoted at length in order to be able to be addressed in detail:

“There was once, we know, an automaton 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. . . . Actually, a hunchbacked dwarf -- a master at chess -- sat inside and guided the puppet’s hand . . . One can imagine a philosophic counterpart to this apparatus. 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.”

One fundamental misreading needs to be addressed at the outset: This opening image is not favorable but critical. Benjamin was seeking to grasp how Marxism had become, in its “philosophy of history” or “historical materialism” an affirmative ideology of the course of history, an affirmation of the historical “progress” of capital. For the most important fact for Benjamin to address in 1940 was that the Marxist Left had not only not “won all the time” but had continuously lost its struggles. However this constant loss did not disturb Marxism’s sense of understanding the meaning of “history.” For Benjamin, this affirmative character of history demonstrated that the automaton of historical materialism was being motivated by a secret and occulted “theological” metaphysics.

What this “hidden theology” in Marxist “historical materialism” meant to Benjamin was the recrudescence of an affirmative sense of history in which everything that happened was captured by prior meaning, as in the ancient metaphysics of the cycle of time, in which the meaningfulness of everything that might happen was guaranteed within the cosmology of religion. Everything has a precedent in the mythopoetics of history, which is really indistinguishable from legend or myth, and thus nothing could disturb the movement of time. What Benjamin detected in the “historical materialism” of Marxism-become-affirmative ideology of history was a form of enlightenment that had reverted to myth through a positive identification of the historical “progress” of capital with a progress in human freedom, which it obviously (by 1940) was not.

Benjamin thus articulated the affinity and axial identity of the two apparently contradictory ways temporality figured in modernity, the ways time appears to move under conditions of capital: the linear-progressive and the cyclical-recursive. We are all familiar with the colloquial choices of regarding temporality as either “one (damned) thing after another” or a matter of “the more things change the more they remain the same.” Rather than taking the side of a traditional-ancient metaphysics of the cycle of time, the preservation of meaning in change, or the “modernist” one of linear progress that expires the past and consumes the present, Benjamin demonstrated how they were both aspects of one and the same dynamic, both were partially true and one-sidedly false. The danger of a one-sided view of history, of taking either side in the antinomy of temporal meaning under capital, is what Benjamin later in the essay calls “becoming a tool of the ruling classes,” of producing an affirmative philosophy of history. For “progressive” historical optimism is the new mythology of capital and is conservative-

reactionary no less than Romantic melancholy and historical pessimism more traditionally associated with negativity about modernity. Benjamin was no Romantic but neither was he a “progressive” in his view of history, rather he sought a more adequate imagination of emancipation beyond the temporality of capital, beyond the abstract-homogeneous progress of time and the concrete re-instantiation of its resistance or arrest in mocking repetition. For what both betray is recognition of the historical possibility of freedom, which under capital's temporal dynamic needs to be understood not only as the freedom to progress (in unfolding possibilities of qualitative difference and multiplicity) but also freedom from progress (escaping the further elaboration of the ever-same). Just as for Nietzsche nature had become history, at its expense as a source for life, so now for Benjamin history had become nature, at the expense of freedom.

Benjamin sought to complicate this affirmative antinomy of capital's temporality, of repetition through progress, and progress through repetition, with the figure of “regression:” by disputing the character of progress with the specter of a continual regressive counter-movement that “progress” unwittingly sustains; and by revealing the way recursive repetition is only deceptively restorative and static and actually a progress in destruction. In doing so, Benjamin makes use of various images that demonstrate the “spatialization of time and temporalization of space” Lukács observed as a feature of the “reification” of the commodity form. Benjamin's imagery of “dialectics at a standstill” finds its complement in his invocation of a “Messianic time” that is as homogeneous as the temporality of capital.

In one of the “Paralipomena” to “On the Concept of History,” Benjamin wrote that,

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

This tension between revolution as imparting motion and arresting it is found in one of the aphorisms of “On the Concept of History” on the “tiger’s leap:”

“ ‘Origin is the goal’ (Karl Kraus).

History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time [*Jetztzeit*]. Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with now-time, a past which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome incarnate. It cited ancient Rome exactly the way fashion cites a by-gone mode of dress. Fashion has a nose for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is the tiger’s leap into the past. Such a leap, however, takes place in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands. The same leap in the open air of history is the dialectical leap Marx understood as revolution.”

The image of the “leap” is a spatial rendering of time, a rendering of temporal moment as place. To leap off the train of history is the same as to try to stop it in its tracks.

With the Kraus quotation “Origin is the goal,” recursive-cyclical time is invoked. The monumental history communicating across time is paradoxically ambivalent in the case of the French Revolution and Rome: it is the source of both its emancipatory and affirmative character. Revolutionary France “repeated” Rome so as to go beyond it, and

in so doing finally put a definitive end to the prior Classicist sense of historical lineage that its enlightened conception of a better society consummated. In the repetition, history was both fulfilled and thrown askew. This is the content of the “tiger’s leap into the past,” which is both, ambivalently, progressive and recursive. The spiraling cycle of history can go either way, towards a re-instantiation of the present as a version of the past, or towards an escape from it, merely in the guise of the past, of the fulfillment and redemption of the past. This is what Benjamin means by a “time filled full by now-time,” which thus may be “homogeneous” but is not “empty,” so charged as to blast the continuum of history.

The invocation of “fashion” is similarly ambivalent. “Fashion” is either the degradation of the new to mere “innovation” in the sense of a “renovation” of the past, or it is potentially the finding of new “content” in an “old form,” a later fulfillment of a past potential that went unrealized in the past and so demanded future redemption.

The Social Democratic “conforming” to capital’s progress in history, a “positive” philosophy of history that had been reproduced in later (Stalinized) Communism, is for Benjamin the greatest danger for a Marxist “historical materialism.” Benjamin cited with irony the statement by the pre-WWI Social Democratic “philosopher” Joseph Dietzgen that “Every day, our cause becomes clearer and people get smarter,” which history by 1940 had made into a cruel joke. Invoking the Hegelian conception of adequate (historical) knowledge being a function of (the) self-overcoming (of the present), Benjamin wrote that,

“The subject of historical knowledge is the struggling, oppressed class itself. Marx presents it as the last enslaved class -- the avenger who completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of the

downtrodden. This conviction, which has a brief resurgence in the Spartacus League [of Luxemburg and Liebknecht], has always been objectionable to Social Democrats. . . . The Social Democrats preferred to cast the working class in the role of redeemer of *future* generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This indoctrination made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than by the ideal of liberated grandchildren.”

Luxemburg's invocation of the leader of the Roman slave revolt Spartacus as the standard bearer for the most modern of revolutionary politics, a mythologization of what is essentially a politics of enlightened emancipation, Benjamin found favorable to a more adequate historical consciousness of the task of freedom, which is inseparable from the past sacrifices that helped to bring into being its present potential.

For Benjamin, the modernity of social life under capital represented a “tremendous abbreviation” of historical time:

“ ‘In relation to the history of all organic life on earth,’ writes a modern biologist, ‘the paltry fifty-millennia history of *homo sapiens* equates to something like two seconds at the close of a twenty-four-hour day. On this scale, the history of civilized mankind would take up one-fifth of the last second of the last hour.’ Now-time, which, as a model of messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in a tremendous abbreviation, coincides exactly with the figure which the history of mankind describes in the universe.”

This “abbreviation” or compression of the potential with which the past is charged as present in the “time of the now” was itself a feature of the temporality of capital, which sought to consummate all of history in itself only to bring forth a further obstacle to freedom in the form of its temporality.

Capital as basis for history: its beginning and end

A famous phrase by Marx describes how, under capital, changes in the cultural and political, “subjective” “superstructure” occur more slowly than those of the “objective” socioeconomic “base,” which is constantly revolutionized according to a linear-progressive dynamic of a limitless drive of value maximization. Failing to recognize the key aspect of this phrase, about changes occurring “more slowly” in the “superstructure” than in the “base,” subsequent “Marxists” have generalized from the descriptive (and subordinate) imagery of “base” and “superstructure” as if this distinction was Marx’s epistemological point. And mistaking Marx’s understanding of the relation of “political economy” to the totality of social life under capital, the further vulgarization of this mis-generalization has assumed that Marx was addressing a distinction between a more fundamentally “real” “economic” basis and a more “epiphenomenal” and arbitrary political and cultural sphere. But this loses Marx’s sense that concrete forms of material production in the economy are themselves “epiphenomenal” and subject to a more “fundamental” alienated temporal dynamic of the value-form in capital. Industrial production in factories etc. are not the fundamental reality of capital but rather its disposable effects as human beings have tried (and failed) to master its value dynamic.

In terms of concrete ways of life, the past two hundred years have seen more changes than the preceding millennia, and these changes have only accelerated from Marx's time to the present. But such changes at a concrete level have translated not into greater but rather less human control and rational agency. Driving these changes at a concrete social level is a more abstract temporal dynamic that constantly outstrips the concrete ways that people attempt to cope with and master it. Between changing "superstructural" phenomena and the temporally dynamic "base" that grounds such changes, there is a certain "lag." As Marx described in *Capital*, society dominated by this driving temporal dynamic develops not however in an accordingly linear way but rather in "fits and starts." Capital reproduces itself through massive crises in which concrete ways of life -- the ways human needs are met through "production" -- that have been built up are razed to the ground only to be "revolutionized" and reconfigured yet again. For Marx, this recurrence of the same crisis of value is also the reproduction of emancipatory possibilities, of opportunities to as Benjamin put it, apply the emergency brake on the locomotive of history that is the capital dynamic.

It is this incessantly dynamic field of "revolutions" in concrete ways of life, for which according to Marx "all that is solid melts into air," that gives rise to a new and exacting consciousness of "history," beginning in the late 18th and early 19th Centuries. Human beings living under the capital dynamic become tasked to try to make sense of these dramatic -- and destructive as well as "productively" progressive -- changes, to make sense of history and question whether and how human agency exists in and through history. The "Left," to which this history first gave birth (in the French Revolution), is itself inextricably part of this historical dynamic, for which emancipation and enlightened

consciousness are inseparably tied. The “Left” seeks to be the most adequate consciousness and effective action in service of fulfilling concrete emancipatory possibilities presented in the history of capital, while grasping the underlying dynamic as the greatest threat and so limit to the possibilities for further developing the social emancipation the capital dynamic makes possible in people’s concrete ways of life.

But such potential manifests itself in “uneven” and irregular ways, and so involves a non-linear consciousness of the “progress” of history. Subjectively, it is experienced as an accumulating pressure. As Benjamin wrote in “On the Concept of History,”

“What characterizes revolutionary classes at their moment of action is the awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode.”

This consciousness is itself symptomatic of the capital dynamic rather than its “antithesis:” consciousness rooted in concrete temporality cannot be opposed in an emancipatory manner to the “abstract” homogeneous time of capital. On the one hand,

“In the July Revolution [of 1830] an incident occurred in which this [historical] consciousness came into its own. On the first evening of fighting, it so happened that the dials of the clocktowers were being fired at simultaneously and independently from several locations in Paris. An eyewitness . . . wrote as follows: ‘Who would believe it! It is said that, incensed at the hour, / Latter-day Joshuas, at the foot of every clocktower, / Were firing on clock faces to make the day stand still’ ”

The concept of history and the Left

On the other hand, for Benjamin in "On the Concept of History," the limitless archive of time became the mounting "wreckage" of "one single" limitless "catastrophe" that transfixed the gaze of the "angel of history," thus guaranteeing further catastrophe because it "drives him irresistibly into the future" with his "back turned." While the angel would like to stop and abrogate time, "to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed," transforming what "appears before *us*" as a driving "chain of events" into the accumulation of all past destruction into a culminating end of time, he cannot do this for us, for his "wings" are "caught" in the "storm" of "progress."

A historical consciousness that placed its hopes in the spatialization of time would no better grasp emancipatory possibilities than one that placed its faith in the linear drive of the dynamic of capital, consuming the past and leaving it behind -- evacuated of meaning. For the "angel of history" for which such a rendering of the past is not a human subject, but an occulted figure of alienated consciousness. It is no more a model of an enlightened relation to history than is a melancholic fixated on the past at the expense of an adequate openness to the present and future.

What Benjamin offered was not an opposition of regression to progress but a necessary corrective to a mistaken and tragic identification with the aggression of the progressive dynamic of modern life and its incessant transformations. For melancholia is not really about the past but rather the present and its problems, for which the past offers a grasp and way to cope, as well as an indication of the failed mastery it expresses. Benjamin sought to make the demands that consciousness of history presents

symptomatic in the sense of what Adorno, after Benjamin, called “consciousness of suffering.”

For just as the concept of freedom is inadequate if understood as an achieved state rather than as a tasking dimension of movement in transition to further transformation, there is a complementarily more profound understanding of suffering as not merely the experience of harm but the constraint on possibility, the experience of unfulfilled potential. Just as the concept of freedom for the Left needs to be grasped in terms of “the ought,” what *could be* rather than what *is*, so is the concept of suffering that requires redemption needed to preserve its memory. Otherwise past suffering could be safely -- and, according to Nietzsche, happily -- forgotten in the service of life. But since life in modernity is subject to a new form of temporality, we require not the unhistorical but the supra-historical, the transcendence of (modern) historical time on its own basis, from within its own dynamic.

Benjamin sought to inextricably tie the concept of freedom, the pursuit of a progressive opening of further possibility, to the concept of suffering, the felt awareness of unfulfilled potential that demands redemption. As he had laid out in the “Theologico-Political Fragment” of 1920, the direction of realization of happiness finds its paradoxically countervailing, but productively “assisting” principle in the “Messianic” direction of redemption, in which the fulfillment of time finds its marriage in the desire to bring the time of eternal passing-away that happiness finds in “good fortune” to an end. Although such a metaphysics of history had its origins in an ancient basis of meaning in a cycle of time, Benjamin found its new saliency as a needed corrective in the paradoxically linear and recursive temporality of capitalist modernity. After the historical

failures of the Left, the memory of freedom, as unfulfilled potential remaining to be realized, could be found not so much in the desire for and faith in progress than in the longing for redemption and the demand that the "progress" of capital come to a halt.

As Adorno wrote in "*Finale*," at the close of *Minima Moralia* (1944-47),

"The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all [historical] things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of [their potential] redemption. . . . But beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters."

This was no displacement of the demand for emancipation but rather its preservation. For only in emancipation could the past suffering of humanity be "forgotten" and thus potentially properly remembered, not as transfixing paralysis but as the honor due to the sacrifice that made an emancipated future possible -- and necessary. For Adorno, following Benjamin, in the aftermath of failed revolution the apparent futility of the struggle for emancipation beyond capital -- the apparent progressive obsolescence of the Left -- threatened to consume the sense that suffering needed to be confronted and thus freedom -- from the pathology of unfulfilled potential -- realized. Only thus could authentic redemption be achieved, through adequate action in the present, including the thought that seemed equally blocked, against the melancholically resigned fixation on the past or the mania of blind nihilistic progress in a runaway future that takes its place.

A sense of history that remains cognizant of both the potential for freedom and the suffering that results from its constraint, of the struggle for happiness and the redemption of its cruelest disappointments, of a present that is structured by past failures,

is what Benjamin and Adorno sought in their “negative” philosophy of history, which was neither an enchantment nor a disenchantment of progress, but the consciousness of the regression involved in the “progress” which is none, and the memory that it might have been and so yet could be otherwise.