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MA THESIS:
MESSIANISM & HISTORICAL MATERIALISM IN WALTER BENJAMIN'S
DISCOURSE AND THE QUESTION OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY.

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Introduction

1. Core Subject Matter and Thesis Structure.

Walter Benjamin's unfinished *Arcades Project*¹ came out in English in 1999, kindling an avalanche of academic interest in the following decades. Rightly Vanessa R. Schwartz (2001)² pictured this prolific storm as the launch of the so-called *Benjamin studies*, namely the academic discourse of an interdisciplinary scholarship broad enough to append the work of a stupendously diverse pool of fields, ranging from architecture and urban studies to art, history, theology, literature, political theory, political ecology, and perhaps the whole spectrum of humanities and social sciences. Cognizance of the *Arcades Project* put the entirety of Benjamin's work under scrutiny anew and revived scholarly interest in the manifold interplays of its thematic plurality. Nearly eighty years after the writer's death, his texts appear as anything but an exhausted source of inspiration for academic enquiries.

What has grasped my own interest is that Walter Benjamin's outlook on the role of memory in the generation of a momentum for social change at the present time has been one of the many subjects of controversy. Especially when Benjamin's name has started to appear in scholarly texts that discuss the interaction between collective memory and action, there seems to be much ground for investigation into how this reception may be compared to others, the conclusions of which seem to refute such uses. For example, in 2009 Mark S. Dolson wrote that in Benjamin "*the present [is viewed] as helpless against the inexorable march toward capitalist-driven progress*" and that his notion of temporality "*seems to leave no room for human agency for action with respect to actually changing the circumstances of the present so as to make the future a better place*". In Dolson's words "*to Benjamin, we all seem to be marionettes at the mercy of the forces of modernity and capitalism*"³. Also, Alison Ross' recent book on the concept

1Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Translated by Howard Eiling & Kevin McLaughing, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 1999.

2Vanessa R. Schwartz, "Walter Benjamin for Historians", *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 105, No 5, Dec. 2001, pp.1721-1743, p. 1721.

3Mark S. Dolson, "Temporality of Crisis, Foucault's Subjugated Knowledge and their Import in Theorizing Revitalisation Movements: A Critical Theoretical Examination", *Anthropological Notebooks* 15 (3):43-63, Slovene Anthropological Society, 2009, p.45.

of revolution in Benjamin details that in Benjamin's corpus revolution is a concept that fails to traverse from individual to collective agency⁴. Inversely, other scholars seem to understand his work in a completely different manner. Andrian Wilding (1996), notes that "*the atrophy attendant upon experience, though pervasive, is not complete or total; whilst remembrance may appear interstitial and threatened, it retains considerable powers*"⁵. These powers of remembrance are also sensed in Christian Garland's (2012) portrayal of Benjamin as "*the philosopher of hope*"⁶, which matches Szondi & Mendelsohn's chronologically older conclusion (1978) that Benjamin finds "*hope in the past*", a past which remains open and "*promises the future*"⁷. "*Hope instead of despair and slivers of possibility instead of certainty of defeat*" sees Aaron Greenberg (2016),⁸ as well.

From my part, I shall argue in this thesis that to reduce the agent of political action to the image of a hopeless marionette in Benjamin's work seems to shirk attention to some critical elements he derives from messianism as well as historical materialism and, at the same time, overemphasizes a Freudian streak in a distorting manner. The two former are discussed in chapters A and B as two influential sources that Benjamin amalgamates in his rendition of history. I argue that much of his work (like his Theses, for instance) is nonsensical unless collective political agency is granted potential. Both messianism and historical materialism are employed in an intricate, fragmentary and often elusive theorization of experience, which, in turn, comes at play in his theses on history.

4Alison Ross, *Revolution and History in Benjamin, a Conceptual Analysis*, Routledge Studies in Twentieth-Century Philosophy, Taylor and Francis Group, New York and London, 2019, p. 8.

5Andrian Wilding, *The Concept of Remembrance in Walter Benjamin*, Ph.D. Thesis, Department of Philosophy, University of Warwick, 1996, p. 38.

6Christian Garland, "Redeeming the Past in the Present: Benjamin's Messianic Materialist Philosophy of History", *The Philosophy of Walter Benjamin*, Conference, December 14th-15th 2012 - Goldsmiths, University of London, InC - Goldsmiths Continental Philosophy Research Group, p. 1.

7Peter Szondi and Harvey Mendelsohn, "Hope in the Past: On Walter Benjamin", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol.4, No.3, Spring 1978, The University of Chicago Press, pp. 491-506, p. 499. The "*promise*" I yet another big subject discussed further in chapter B.

8Aaron Greenberg, "Making Way for Tomorrow: Benjamin and Foucault on History and Freedom", *Journal of Political Thought*, Vol.2, Issue 1, pp. 22-39, Yale University, p. 38.

Chapter C examines how the field of contemporary Collective Memory Studies communicates with Benjamin's "*hope in the past*". It seems that there is a growing interest in the relation between collective memory, collective political action, and hope (Ann Rigney, 2012)⁹. Collective Memory as a discipline is becoming all the more open to social movement theory and their interaction seems to present new avenues for theoretical exploration, in which Benjamin can serve as a pool of insights. Here I discuss that the field remains heavily euro-centric and that certain insights could be fruitfully transferred to subjects like decolonialism, *resistencia ancestral* and indigenous identity and struggles.

Overall, the goal of this thesis is not to reconstruct Benjamin's theories or find the holly ciphers to his texts. Rather, I am aiming at highlighting that certain aspects of his work, especially his understanding of history - permeated by the traditions of messianism and historical materialism - are relevant to the field of Collective Memory Studies which, in turn, can produce insights applicable to the socio-political analysis of contemporary social movements, identity formation etc.

2. Methodological comments and theoretical framework.

Given that chapters A and B focus on the discourse of a specific writer and the literature produced around and about it, my aim is to present certain theoretical elements deemed relevant to the purpose without letting the thematic plethora blur my scope.

This said, I take into account that his writing style can be hardly classified as strictly philosophical, since it might often defy basic rules of systematic structure. Cryptic, mystical, literary, poetic, obscure, elusive, magical, hermetic, arcane, fragmentary, peculiar, anti-philosophical ... are only few adjectives used by scholars to name the attributes of his work. In Adorno's words "*to enter his labyrinth*" one had better come to terms with the fact that "*analytic techniques of composition, development, the whole mechanism of presupposition, assertion, and proof, of theses and conclusions*" are to be

⁹Ann Rigney, "Remembering Hope: Transnational Activism Beyond the Traumatic", *Memory Studies*, Vol.11, No.3, pp.368-380, July 2018.

“*excluded*”¹⁰. What are we, then, left with? I shall argue the epistemological insights put forward by Benjamin himself and, for this reason, we shall briefly discuss *constellations*.

2.a On Constellations

According to Andrea Krauss (2011), the *Epistemology of Constellations* was introduced by Benjamin himself and was further developed by T. Adorno¹¹. Krauss garners the key constituents of this methodological approach, of which I cite those I deem most critical:

*A Constellation points towards a **theory of reading**.*

*Constellations expose an **object-formation**, in which reading finds itself referred in a specific way to other possible readings.*

*A Constellation designates both **the instrument and the object** of reading, mutually intertwined with each other **in a complex interaction**.*

*It allows the most **diverse discourses** and genres to come together **above and beyond the borders of disciplines**.*

*The **limit of thought** that is in itself neither thinkable nor representable becomes **recognizable in the transgression** of the “internal boundaries that structure the established **“topography” of thought**.*

***Discontinuity becomes the origin of philosophical representation** (Darstellung) [...], which transposes a disciplinary conflict or the interdisciplinary negotiation of discursive validity claims.*

Here is why these assumptions are relevant to my study: first of all, the existing literature on Benjamin’s texts, aside from being nearly infinite, has given, in my opinion, some credence to Adorno’s observation that they “*invite misreading*”.¹² This becomes manifest in the variety of interpretive outcomes that compose this body of literature.

10Theodor W. Adorno, “A Portrait of Walter Benjamin”, *Prisms*, translated by Samuel & Shierry Weber, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1983, pp. 227-242, p. 235-236.

11 Andrea Krauss, “Constellations: A Brief Introduction”, *MLN*, Vol.126, No. 3, German Issue: Constellations/Konstellationen, April 2011, pp.439-445, p.441.

12Theodor .W. Adorno, “Introduction to Benjamin’s Schriften”, *On Walter Benjamin, Critical Essays and Recollections*, Edited by Gary Smith, 1988, cited in Andrian Wilding, 1996:9.

Michael Löwy¹³, (admittedly, a personal favorite among the many writers discussed in this thesis) -and whom Alison Ross sees as a sympathizer¹⁴- speaks of three divergent schools of thought in the reception of Benjamin's work: the Marxist (i.e. as seen by Brecht), the theological (by Scholem), and that of irreconcilable contradictions (by Tiedemann). Habermas¹⁵, on the other hand, whom Löwy places in this latter group, also discerns Hannah Arendt's viewpoint as a distinct one, which sets out to picture Benjamin as a neo-conservative. This alone reveals that if one is to opt for a rigid classification, they are likely to find those sources that will enable them to back a portrayal of their liking. This phenomenon may reflect, as I understand it, the problematic of *thought topography* and its limitations. No interpretation is absolutely conclusive, but, simultaneously, none feels like an absolute misreading if read within the strict *thought topography* each marks for itself. In fact, it might even reflect some of Benjamin's ideas on the task of the critique, and the life and afterlife of texts (discussed further on). This is why I consider Adorno's "*invitation to misreading*" to be holding some truth – though, I dare say the term "*misreading*" may come across as an inkling of arrogance from Adorno's part.

The *object* I seek to discuss (or constellate, if you prefer) is that of remembrance and, to this end, my *instruments* will be the traditions of messianism and historical materialism approached in mutually transgressive manners in order to picture their integral role in understanding remembrance. The aim is not to reconcile messianism and historical materialism, but to observe their peculiar interactions in Benjamin's constellation of history.

13Michael Löwy, *Walter Benjamin: Avertissement d'incendie - Une lecture des thèses "Sur le concept d'histoire"*, Presses Universitaires de France, 2001. Translated into Greek by Rebecca Pessah, Plethron Press, 2004, p. 43.

14Alison Ross, 2019: 8.

15Jurgen Habermas, Philip Brewster and Carl Howard Buchner, 'Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin', *New German Critique*, No.17, Special Walter Benjamin Issue, Spring 1079, pp.30-59, p. 31.

2.b On Elective Affinities as a method.

Since the main methodological compass of my study is that of constellations, *affinity* emerges as a key concept, which begs close attention. Tracing insights into what messianism and historical materialism bring to the discussion of history in Benjamin requires clarifications on how these elements are to be perceived in relation to one another and as a whole. The notion of elective affinities, as we will see further, has been put forward as a reconciliatory methodological solution. However, I find that there is much to be discussed about this approach, which I consider to be methodologically debatable. Elective Affinity is, if anything, a rather elusive term in philosophy and social theory. Its roots travel us back to the alchemists of the middle age, then the first steps of scientific chemistry and, eventually, to Goethe and Weber. Here I will briefly discuss the two latter as the most pertinent to my study.

Max Weber was the one to introduce - no matter how vaguely -the term *elective affinities* in social theory especially through his study on *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904). The epistemological question is how an elective affinity between two elements (religion and class interests, in Weber's discourse) is to be understood. Is religion ontologically distinguishable from class interests? Does the one represent the sphere of ideas while the other the material world? Should we give primacy to either of the two, and if so, which one and why?

Richard Herbert Howe's (1978) essay on *Max Weber's elective affinities* provides an account of how Weber became heir to the term *affinities* from earlier usages: "*From chemistry and Bergman would come the basic paradigm of elective affinity; from literature and Goethe, its application to the portrayal of social relationships; from philosophy and Kant, the art of divorce of the empirical from the rational and the affinity of all things in their possibility*"¹⁶. In this text the term *constellations* appears twice, yet it is denied elaboration. Howe supports that "*the task of Weber's science is to portray its changing constellations*",¹⁷ and that these constellations arise from the inner affinities of "*meanings*": "*To be sure, the actor's choice of possible actions is*

¹⁶Richard Herbert Howe, 'Max Weber's Elective Affinities: Sociology Within the Bounds of Pure Reason', *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol.84, No.2, Sep., 1978, pp.366-285, p. 382.

¹⁷Richard Herbert Howe, 1978:382. This is actually the final statement in this essay.

circumscribed by the inner affinities of the element of his lexicon. Just as these structure its elements into networks of meanings, so do they structure his possible actions into constellations"¹⁸. Even though a more elucidating analysis on what a constellation stands for may be absent, the essay clearly attributes its formation to an inner lexicon, that is language: "*For Weber, in the great tradition of German philosophical scholarship, the order of a language was the virtual order of a society*"¹⁹.

It comes as no surprise that J.J.R. Thomas (1985) places Howe's interpretation of Weber's elective affinities on the idealist end alongside that of Winter, who acknowledges that affinities are established between concepts or ideas *only*²⁰. Other scholars cited in the same study (like H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills) advocate for a dualist approach, namely one that is, on the one hand, loyal to the "*Cartesian division of mind and matter*" but, on the other, places more emphasis on the class interests, which "*determine*" the optimal religious dogma for their service²¹. A third explanation sees *coincidence* and *congruence* rather than causality and determinism (i.e. Parkin or Giddens)²². Finally, Hills regards elective affinity as a "*bargaining process*", whereby any given religion, for example, can become flexible enough to engulf and reflect competing interests of believers who may not necessarily belong to the same class.²³

What is nowadays an indubitable fact is that scholars of social theory, who are evidently influenced by Weber's elusive usage of the term, have gone as far as to call *elective affinities* a method. Michael Löwy, for example, has explicitly discussed it as such in his 1988 book *Redemption and Utopia*. There, he presents a taxonomic description of the various ways elements might approximate one another by means of an *elective affinity*. More specifically, he cites four types²⁴:

a) ***structural homologies*** found in the sociology of literature²⁵ as a derivative of Baudelairian thought. They pertain to a *static* affinity, thus a merely possible one.

¹⁸Richard Herbert Howe, 1978:381.

¹⁹Richard Herbert Howe, 1978: 382.

²⁰J.J.R. Thomas, "Ideology and Elective Affinity", *Sociology*, Vo.19, No.1, February 1985, pp.39-54, p. 46.

²¹J.J.R. Thomas, 1985: 41.

²²J.J.R. Thomas, 1985: 41.

²³Cited in J.J.R. Thomas, 1985: 43.

²⁴Michael Löwy, *Redemption et utopie: Le Judaïsme libertaire en Europe centrale; une étude d'affinité elective*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1988. Translated into Greek by Thanasis Papadopoulos, Psychogios Publishing, 2002 p.30-31.

b) *les elections*, namely a stronger form of affinity that is of *dynamic* nature, in which the elements are interactive - yet each preserves its singularity.

c) *junctions*, which, as Löwy explains, are to be seen as *combinations* or a “*mingling*”. These, in turn, may result in three distinct forms of relation of increasing affinity, that is “cultural symbiosis”, partial or full mergence.

d) *the new form* (or *morph*), which is not of Weberian nature. Rather, Löwy explains, the *new form* can be best exemplified by Goethe’s conceptualization of the term elective affinities in his same-titled book.

Actually, Löwy places Weber’s elective affinities somewhere in-between *les elections* and *junctions* and highlights their suitability as a method for the field of sociology of culture²⁶. He also supports that elective affinities do not arise “*within a void or the skies of pure spirituality*”. Instead, their formation is fostered or hampered by historical or social contexts²⁷. Consequently, we could infer that he would disagree with Winter’s as well as other scholars’ idealist interpretations.

Löwy further analyzes this facet, namely the socio-historical interplay, in his 2004 essay on Weber’s elective affinities, where he discusses *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* alone²⁸. Intriguingly, though his account may have a lot in common with some other scholars discussed in Thomas’ essay (i.e. absence of causality, for instance), he theorizes for multiple ligaments between the pairs of *religion-interests* and *spiritual-material*. In particular, he speaks of *forms of religious faith* (*formes de la foi religieuse*) and *professional ethics* (*l’éthique de la profession-vocation*), each of which contain

25Michael Löwy (1988), 2002:30. Here Löwy mentions Lucien Goldman’s *Sociology of Literature*. However, as I understand it, Goldman speaks of *homology* as a not merely possible relationship, implying a “not-so-weak” form of affinity. His homology describes relations between ‘*structures and functions*’, following Piaget’s *interactionist methodology*, and pictures the exchanges between art and society, literature and class interests. Following Löwy’s taxonomy, Goldman’s homology seems to better fit in type *b*. About *homology*, see **Lucien Goldman**, *Essays on Method in the Sociology of Literature*, Translated and edited by William Q. Boelhower, Telos Press St Louis, Mo., 1979, p. 31-34.

26Michael Löwy (1988), 2002:31.

27Michael Löwy (1988), 2002:33.

28Michael Löwy, “Le concept d’affinité élective chez Max Weber”, *Archive de science sociale des religions*, 49e Année, No.127, Max Weber, La Religion et la Construction du Social, Jul.-Sep. 2004, pp.93-103.

internal affinities as well as *external*, meaning to one another²⁹. Furthermore, he discerns ten *modalities of affinities* in Weber's study, which are found either *inside* religion or economy as well as *between* the two (i.e. world visions and social class interests)³⁰. Nonetheless, he does not expand on how *modality* is to be perceived. Is it perhaps another word for *types* or does it signify something different?

Löwy's discussions on affinity as both a general term and in its Weberian sense seems to have augmented the development and use of elective affinities as a method in social theory by other scholars³¹. In my view, much more epistemological analysis must take place before we are in position to theorize for a distinct methodology under this title. Actually, the way it is introduced by Löwy in his 1988 book invites the underlying criticisms Goethe launched in his own same-titled novel.

Finally, I also find it puzzling that Löwy has not, to my knowledge, put under scrutiny Benjamin's fragment on *Analogy and Affinity* (*Analogie und Verwandtschaft, 1919*) in these discussions, at least in his discourse on non-Weberian connotations of affinity. Before delving deeper into Benjamin, it is important to examine how Goethe's novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* is seen in contemporary epistemology and explain what criticism Löwy's appropriation of the term may sustain.

29Michael Löwy, 2004:94-95

30Michael Löwy, 2004:96

31See, for example, Marc Berdet's PhD in Sociology, *Social Movenets and Phantasmagorias in The Arcades Project. A Ragpicker's Historical-Sociological Reasoning*, University Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne, CETCOPRA, 2009, for which Löwy served as a member of the jury. The term appears seven times in the summary, inside and outside quotation marks.

2.c Affinity in Goethe.

In Christian P. Weber's (2016) essay on the subject matter, we find an elucidating account, which shows that the term exemplifies the haziness of boundaries between poetry and science insofar as *metaphors* cut across both as a cognitive creation leading to representations capable of yielding knowledge³². From bio-genetics to computer programming and beyond, metaphors help scientists articulate theories about objective facts. The epistemological question under contemplation here is whether metaphors can be used with equal ease in social sciences for the same purposes (i.e. to identify objective facts about society and social phenomena) without adverse effects on our capacity to distinguish between fact and fiction, and without social theorists being chastised as poets. Christian Weber turns to Evelyn Fox Keller's views on language in order to back his suggestion that "*figurative speech is the common denominator and mediator through which the opposite trajectories of science and poetry are interconnected and interact*"³³. Elective affinity is, in this sense, a metaphor with "*intrinsic powers*"³⁴ that introduced groundbreaking changes in the way unprecedented social transformations (i.e. the French Revolution and the birth of nation) were interpreted.

Goethe wrote his novel *Die Wahlverwandschaften* amidst such changes not only in society, but also in natural sciences like chemistry, geology, biology, and physiology³⁵. Elective affinities understood as a form of metaphor was introduced in these sciences and then traversed towards the interpretation of social changes in order to picture social phenomena. The birth of nation was presented as exemplary of the very same *natural phenomenon* called elective affinities³⁶. So, Goethe's novel sets out to picture the

32Christian P. Weber, 'Elective Affinities/ Wahlverwandschaften: The Career of a Metaphor', *Fact and Fiction, Literary and Scientific Cultures in Germany and Britain*, The University of Toronto Press, 2016, pp. 97-129, p. 98.

33Christian P. Weber, 2016: 98.

34The writer refers to Hans Blumenberg's theorization. Christian P. Weber, 2016:98.

35Weber analyzes all five natural sciences as examples that utilized the notion elective affinities (i.e. Goethe's usage of the term in his geological observations about the formation of granite). He also adds its applicaiton in social commentary through the metaphoric use of the term in Goethe's same-titled novel. Christian P. Weber, 2016:98-126.

36Christian P. Weber, 2016: 113.

illusionary effect of what we could call a metaphor of a metaphor of a metaphor... which eventually naturalizes a social phenomenon.

This brings in mind what John Neubauer (2003) calls “*literary technology*”, a process of arbitrary appropriation of terms found in positive sciences, which yield an illusionary effect on the explication of social phenomena. Neubauer, however, does not seem to reject that there can exist successful applications. He discusses Lucretius’ *De rerum natura*³⁷, namely a text that Goethe himself found to be a paradigm of a writer’s “*productive skill of sensory perception, which makes him capable of vigorous representations*”³⁸. Although Goethe is not mentioned in Neubauer’s text (and this is not at all a criticism), we see that both writers agree that Lucretius’ *De rerum natura* is a successful example of metaphor usage. According to Neubauer, it “*has given new life to the Epicurian physics and ethics*”³⁹ and allowed the term “*clinamen*” to reappear both in literature and in Chaos Theory later on⁴⁰. Neubauer admits that there is, indeed, a realm of “*convergence*” between “*literature and science*”, but he is extremely cautious against misrepresentations⁴¹. Skepticism is directed towards the “*popularization and vulgarization*” of Relativity Theory⁴², which has led some “*humanists*” to adopt an extreme phenomenological viewpoint that nullifies science as a whole⁴³. I would, overall, comment that the argument of an “*audience-driven technology of literature*”, whereby theories of positive sciences are gradually inserted in social sciences to deliver narratives certain audiences desire to receive can help us understand the risks of such transferences. The problem, as I understand it, is not simply the appropriation of terminology, but its sometimes dodgy reinvention of meaning, which fails to explicitly free these terms from essentialist connotations.

37John Neubauer, “Reflections on the ‘Convergence’ between Literature and Science”, *MLN*, Vol.118, No.3, German Issue, April 2003, pp.740-754, p.744.

38In a letter from Goethe to Knebel (1821) found in: Goethe, Johann W. *Goethes Briefe und Briefe von Goethe*. Hamburger Ausgabe in 6 vols. Ed. Karl Robert Mandelkow. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1988. See Christian P. Weber, 2016:102.

39John Neubauer, 2003:746.

40John Neubauer, 2003:747-8.

41John Neubauer, 2003:749.

42John Neubauer, 2003:743 &745.

43John Neubauer, 2003:744.

Such concerns regarding the transference of metaphors and allegories from core science to social theory are identifiable in Goethe's *Die Wahlvewandschaften* as Christian Weber's analysis shows. For Goethe, to access the material world and manage to represent it successfully, like Lucretius did, what needs to be employed is *imagination*, which can be of three types: *reproductive*, *productive*, and *circumspective*. The first generates "*objective representations of natural things*" in the form of "*images*" because it is grounded upon the "*mimesis*" derived from the senses without the interface of our conceptual thinking. The second type involves conceptual thinking, meaning the production of "*concepts*" and, in this way, augments the symbolic dimension of the representation formed. The menace, however, looms out of the referent: unless a metaphor is established as a reflection of the material world, and is instead a concept that symbolizes another concept, then what we end up with is merely "*rhetorical or artificial truth*". For "*poetic truth or true poetry*" to emerge from a representation, it takes the activation of the third type of imagination, namely the *circumspective*, which is "*a combination of reproductive and productive*" imaginations. This is our capacity to craft representations that incorporate both images and ideas, both forms and concepts⁴⁴. This metaphor is the *simile/allegory* and results from a cycle of "*substitutions and displacements*": from things to images, to concepts, to metaphoric tropes, and back to things⁴⁵. Allegory, as Christian Weber notes, is "*more reflective*" and less spontaneous, for it manages to "*reassess the imagination's substitutions and displacements and perform a critique of the human language*"⁴⁶. These Goethean insights are, as I shall argue later on, relevant to the way Benjamin sees the "*dialectical image*".

The Goethean critique of the use of the term "elective affinities" as presented by Christian Weber and, to certain extent, Neubauer's *audience-driven technology of literature* address adequately Löwy's question in his 1998 book, where he wonders why shouldn't social theorists just enrich their lexicon by borrowing terms from cultural, scientific or other discourses in order to illustrate the social phenomena we ponder over⁴⁷. The answer is definitely not an absolute negation. However, there's a high risk of arriving at illusionary conclusions and description of social phenomena as subject to laws of nature.

44Christian P. Weber: 2016:102.

45Christian P. Weber: 2016:103.

46Christian P. Weber: 2016:103.

47Michael Löwy, 1998:24.

3. From Affinity to History: Benjamin.

Beyond Max Weber & Goethe, it is high time we turned to Benjamin's own reflection on the subject of affinity. In the much less discussed fragment *Analogie und Verwandtschaft* from 1919, Kirk Wetters (2014) sees some interesting rudiments of Benjamin's later discussions on language and history⁴⁸. I shall note that it is puzzling that the translators of this fragment opted for the broader English term *relationship*⁴⁹, which makes its contrastive reading to Benjamin's texts on *Gundolf's Goethe* or *Goethe's Elective Affinities*⁵⁰ harder for the English-speaking audience. In my opinion, a choice as such deserved at least some kind of suitable (philosophical, translational or other) explanation. It is clear that the German word *Verwandschaften* alludes to "relatives" and "family", so I am not saying that the term *Relationships* is wrong. Rather, I simply point out that there might be confusion due to its various English synonyms used in this body of literature.

In 1917, Benjamin wrote that Gundolf's biography of Goethe creates "*a falsification of a historical individual [...] by transforming him into a mythical hero*" and that his work is a "*falsification of knowledge*" as a whole⁵¹. The criticism concludes: "*From the philosophy of language as well as epistemology, the question arises about the objective possibility of semblance and error. Such illusions and errors are what makes Gundolf's language possible. His book is a veritable falsification of knowledge*"⁵². Benjamin takes issue with Gundolf's formalist methodology, which gives primacy to Goethe's own written works while neglecting their historical context. The resources Gundolf used, according to Benjamin, were subjected to a false analogy, whereby *value* substituted and displaced *significance*⁵³. Gundolf treated oral traditions and conversations, according to

48Kirk Wetters, "Demonic Ambivalences: Walter Benjamin's Counter-Morphology", *The Demonic History, From Goethe to the Present*, Northwestern University Press, 2014, pp.112-143, p.115.

49Walter Benjamin, "Analogy and Relationship", in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 1, 1931-1926*, edited by Michael W. Jennings & Marcuss, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 1999., p. 207-2012. (Hereafter cited as SWV1).

50Walter Benjamin, "Comments on Gundolf's Goethe" & "Goethe's Elective Affinities", in *SWVI*: 97-99 and 297-360.

51Walter Benjamin, "Comments on Gundolf", *SWVI*, 1999:98.

52Walter Benjamin, "Comments on Gundolf", *SWVI*, 1999:99

53Walter Benjamin, "Comments on Gundolf", *SWVI*, 1999:97.

Benjamin, as of lower value instead of recognizing that they can signify something different from Goethe's own written work. Another problem is that Gundolf ascribed "negative value" to them but, at the same time, turned them into "written testimony" without, however, attaching those "mythical", as Benjamin calls them, conceptions suitable to such resources. Eventually, oral traditions and conversations are treated as written work of lower value. Benjamin finds that what is missing is an investment in concepts, which would enable us to see Goethe as an individual in his historical context instead of a "demigod"⁵⁴.

"The confusion of analogy and affinity is a total perversion"⁵⁵ - writes Benjamin in *Analogie und Verwandtschaft* in 1919 - which leads to "forced" or "falsified insights". Wetters' consideration of this fragment can guide us through: an analogy is a representation of "the similarity of relations". An affinity (*Verwandschaft*), on the other hand, is an "expressionless" but "immediately perceived" relation (like the one between certain feelings evoked by certain types of music⁵⁶). Affinity is perceived and "sensed", but not necessarily understood. Reading affinities as analogies and the reverse serves "authoritarian ends"⁵⁷. There might be an "open relation of affinity" between an object of knowledge and its *Origin*, for instance, but this does not mean solely a repetition of the very same; it does not translate into identity. Falsification stems from the fact that we choose to see causal connections and identities forced through analogical thinking, when this, which there is, is emergence, "unfolding", and "metamorphosis". According to Wetters, Benjamin's endeavor seeks to free the linguistic terms from inherent and rigid pre-determinations. Understood more broadly in the field of knowledge, the Goethean idea of metamorphosis is appropriated in Benjamin's philosophical armature against the a-priority of ideas and their "utopian fulfillment"⁵⁸. Wetters sees that the later notion of "dialectical image" can be also related to the discussion on analogies, affinities and the *Origin*⁵⁹.

54Walter Benjamin, "Comments on Gundolf", *SWVI*, 1999:98.

55Walter Benjamin, "Analogy and Relationship", *SWVI*, 1999:207-209. Here I preserve Wetters' translation of the word *Verwandschaft* as affinity.

56Walter Benjamin, "Analogy and Relationship", *SWVI*, 1999:207.

57Kirk Wetters, 2014:120.

58Wetters writes: "His morphology thus follows Goethe in breaking with the latent Platonism of philosophical tradition, which is simultaneously overinvested in a priori ideas and their utopian fulfillments".

59Kirk Wetters, 2014:121.

At this point, we should make a special reference to Benjamin's philosophical relation to Kant since it will be central in the analysis to follow. According to Anson Rabinbach's study (1979) on Benjamin's "*Doctrine of the Similar*", "*his philosophy of language contained the possibility of a mediation to the mode of perception of historical materialism*"⁶⁰. Benjamin questioned Kant's "*reception of perception*" and, with it, his theory of knowledge and history without, however, abandoning the need for objectivity⁶¹. Julia Ng (2012) provides an introduction to Benjamin's reception of Kantian philosophy: it was its study that sowed the first seeds of what was to bloom into a lifelong intellectual and personal relationship between Benjamin and Scholem, starting off in 1915⁶². The latter's studies in contemporaneous mathematics and philosophy, and the former's scholarship under neo-Kantian mentors, like Rickert, would soon lead them to a joint inquiry into the limits of Kantian philosophy of experience in light of the, back then, newly discovered non-Euclidean geometries⁶³. Soon Benjamin would contemplate the grand task of devising a "*Kantian philosophy of metaphysics*" or a "*language-theoretical observation of mathematics*"⁶⁴. This inspiration would eventually lead him to the study of the *Trauspiels* and allegory in the years to come and, further on, to the articulation of an elusive political theory that would draw from his theory of knowledge⁶⁵.

His treatment of the term *Origin*, as B. Hanssen (1995) observes, goes against both historicism and neo-Kantianism while putting forward the unification of historical and natural sciences⁶⁶. Azade Seyhan (1984) comments on Benjamin's bid for "*a graspable shape on the world of experience and the elusive moments of historical coherence*"⁶⁷. Benjamin's expounding of the notion of origin had come into play in his essay on

60Anson Rabinbach, "Introduction to Walter Benjamin's 'Doctrine of the Similar'", *New German Critique*, No.17, Special Walter Benjamin Issue, Spring 1979, pp.60-64, p.60.

61Anson Rabinbach, 1979: 61.

62Julia Ng, "Walter Benjamin's and Gershom Scholem's Reading Group Around Hermann Cohen's Kants Theorie der Erfahrung in 1918: An Introduction", *MLN*, Vol.127, No.3, German Issue: Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem, and the Marburg School, April 2012, pp.433-439, p.433.

63Julia Ng, 2012:434.

64Julia Ng, 2012:436.

65Julia Ng, 2012:433.

66Beatrice Hanssen, "Philosophy at its Origin: Walter Benjamin's Prologue to the *Ursprung des deutschen Trauspeils*", *MLN*, Vol.110, No.4, 1995, p.823.

Translation, when he perceived kinship as not necessarily a property that is to be seen as similarity⁶⁸. The vitality in the connection between “*unforgettability and translatability*” or “*life and afterlife*” between the original text and its translation⁶⁹ is also reflected, in my view, in the dialectic between “*repetition and singularity*” in his later concept of “*dialectical image*” as well the notion of “after-history” of objects of historical knowledge. I would agree, therefore, with Mathiew Wilkens (2006) that despite the changes, contradictions or incompatibilities⁷⁰ between the ways Benjamin treats allegory in his earlier and later work (on *Trauspiels* and Baudelaire), there is substantial and much neglected common ground for a comparative theorization, which can commence from the notion of “*representation crisis*” that both eras (17th & 19th centuries) underwent. Both cases can be seen as pertinent to Benjamin’s epistemological concerns about the philosophy of knowledge⁷¹.

Above all, though, stands Benjamin’s inclusion of aesthetico-experiential insights in theoretical quests of socio-political nature. As with art, so with history: objects of knowledge are considered open to completion by the critic and the historian, respectively. Hanssen remarks that “*the Epistemo-critical Prologue is a call for a different kind of history, one no longer purely anthropocentric in nature, nor anchored solely in the concerns of a human subject*”; one that is of “*anti-idealistic*” form⁷². Yet, I would hesitate to call it predominantly “*ethico-theological*”⁷³. As Matthew Wilkens argues, Benjamin’s study of the Baroque Drama exposes “*the social context*” of the Baroque Era, in which allegory expressed what was not to be directly expressed in a period of transitory exchange between theology and science: the interaction between the profane and the divine⁷⁴.

67Azade Seyhan, “Walter Benjamin and the Critique of Fragmented Academic Sensibilities”, *Pacific Coast Philosophy*, Vol.19, No.1/2, Nov. 1984, pp.22-27, p.22 & 25.

68Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator”, *SWVI*, 1999:255.

69Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator”, *SWVI*, 1999:254-255.

70Other writers, actually, see that his theory of allegory remains consistent through. See Bainard Cowan, “Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Allegory”, *New German Critique*, No. 22, Special Issue on Modernism, Winter 1981, pp.109-122, p.109.

71Matthew Wilkens, “Towards a Benjaminian Theory of Dialectic Allegory”, *New Literary History*, Vol.37, No.2, Critical Inquiries, Spring 2006, pp. 285-198, p.291.

72Beatrice Hanssen, 1995: 809.

73Beatrice Hanssen, 1995:829.

74Matthew Wilkens, 2006:286.

The socio-political context in which Benjamin deploys his own ideas on this interaction is of no little importance to our grasping of his admixture of messianism and historical materialism. My understanding is that in Kantian and neo-Kantian philosophy the interaction between profane and divine acquires a future-gazing quality and, as such, nurtures the development of political postulates to which theology is anything but irrelevant. I shall argue that Benjamin responds to this with a dislocation of the interaction between divinity and profanity from futurity and, instead, opts for its appointment to the realm of experience, where the present meets the past; where the past is “*unfolded*” in simultaneity with the present and “*metamorphoses*” both. This way he attempts to uproot teleology from the very heart of our understanding of history.

Part A: Walter Benjamin and Messianism.

A.1 Historical context of Benjamin's Messianism.

*“There’s Heinle, a good fellow. Drinks, eats a lot,
and writes poems. They are supposed to be very
beautiful - I will soon get to hear some. An
eternal dreamer and German. Not well
dressed.”⁷⁵*

Before discussing the content of Benjamin's messianism, it is, I deem, of significance to frame the historical context of its birth. To this end, we shall first turn to Anson Rabinbach (1985) and his bibliographically rich summary on the matter⁷⁶. According to Rabinbach, Benjamin's (as well as Bloch's) early texts exemplify a “*pure type*”, as he phrases it - inside quotation marks -, of the messianic element found in the writings of the Jewish-German intellectuals in the period just before the First World War⁷⁷. Unlike many of their 19th-century counterparts (i.e. Hermann Cohen), who may have unprophetically seen no clash between their *German-ness* and *Jewish-ness*, the 1914-generation was mostly faced with war, anti-Semitism and a persistent demand for definitions of their identity in relation to various forms of nationalism. The image of a well-integrated *Jewish-ness* into the German society had started to prove an illusion, prompting Benjamin's generation to interweave new narratives for their Jewish identity, which found their “*essence*” in messianism, Rabinbach argues.⁷⁸

In Jennings and Eiland's (2014) biography we read that in April 1912, Benjamin enrolled as a first-year university student at the Albert Ludwig University in Freiburg, when the household name there was the neo-Kantian Heinrich Rickert, whom Benjamin

⁷⁵Benjamin writing to Herbert Belmore in 1913. In Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno (editors), *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910-1940*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1994, p. 18.

⁷⁶Anson Rabinbach, “Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse: Benjamin, Bloch and Modern German Jewish Messianism”, *New German Critique*, No. 34, Winter 1985, pp. 78-124.

⁷⁷Anson Rabinbach, 1985: 81.

⁷⁸Anson Rabinbach, 1985: 78-81.

followed as a scholarly disciple⁷⁹. Benjamin's enquiries into the limits of neo-Kantian philosophy, which had gained prominence through the works of the Marburg school and Hermann Cohen, was first nurtured during this period, and were very much permeated by Rickert's opposition to Comtean positivism and vitalism⁸⁰. In Freiburg, Benjamin found room not only for academic and intellectual pursuits, but also for active engagement in the highly diverse German Youth Movement. His 1911-1915 writings still resonate the visions of Gustav Wyneken, an influence that, in 1912, Benjamin would identify as "*the most decisive intellectual event*" of his youth (Brodersen, 1977)⁸¹.

It is in this era's texts that Rabinbach finds Benjamin's correspondence with the writer Ludwig Strauss – back then, a young Zionist who challenged Benjamin to take a clear stance on the thorny "*Jewish Question*"⁸². In August 1912, Benjamin would travel in today's Ustka, Poland, accompanied by Franz Sachs, who introduced him to Kurt Tuchler. Liaising with the latter, Benjamin would take the first steps towards his contemplative activity on Zionism as "*a duty*"⁸³. Soon, nevertheless, he would write to Stauss about his downright rejection of the political agenda of nationalist Zionism: "*a nationalism that does not examine everything- above all the most human and important questions- is quite worthless, is nothing more than a dangerous force of sloth*", he wrote⁸⁴. So, it should be understood that Benjamin's messianism did not support the state-oriented programmatic agenda of nationalist Zionism that grew popular in the era discussed and, simply put, the Kingdom of God did not at all reflect an inspiration for the founding of a Jewish-theocratic state in Palestine⁸⁵.

But it was not solely the Jewish nationalism that Benjamin spurned. Two years later, and after he had attended Georg Simmel's lectures in Berlin in the Fall of 1912⁸⁶, his close friend Fritz Heinle and his fiancé, Rika Selingson, committed suicide in protest against

79Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin, A Critical Life*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge-Massachusetts, London, England, 2014, Chapter 2, pp.32-73.

80Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, 2014: 33.

81For a detailed account on Benjamin's participation in the ranks of Wynekenian students' activism of the Freiburg faction, see Momme Brodersen, *Walter Benjamin, a Biography*, Verso, London & New York, 1997 edition, p.46-78.

82Anson Rabinbach, 1985: 94.

83Momme Brodersen, 1997:42.

84Momme Brodersen, 1997:45.

85Anson Rabinbach, 1985: 94.

86Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, 2014:49.

the outbreak of the war⁸⁷. This event shook Benjamin profoundly and soon led him to break off from the School Reform Movement and Wyneken's pro-war, German-nationalist preaching⁸⁸. In his last letter to him, Benjamin starts with this phrase: "*With these lines I am totally and unconditionally disassociating my self from you*"; and goes on to accuse him of "*sacrificing youth to the state which had taken everything from you (/them*)*"⁸⁹.

A similar rejection was also expressed to Martin Buber's invitation for Benjamin's contribution to his journal *Der Jude* launched in 1916⁹⁰. It is worth noting that Benjamin had invited Buber to one of the gatherings he had organized in the circles of the Wynekenian Freiburg faction of the Youth Movement back in 1914, at a time that he was serving as a member of its committee⁹¹. What is intriguing about Buber, as mentioned in Barash's account (2015), is that by 1916 he had adopted a pro-war rhetoric not out of German-nationalist sentiments, like Cohen had done; but, rather paradoxically, as a result of his apocalyptic Jewish-nationalist messianism, which, yet, came forth as universalist and anti-statist⁹². During the first period of the war, Buber thought of it as a welcome destructive force, the ruins of which would bring humanity closer to its messianic fruition, as his war diaries prove⁹³. It was only after Gustav Landauer's criticism that he gradually changed his mind⁹⁴, and in later remorse went thus far as to order "*his literary executor not to allow the publication of anything written before 1916 if it had not already been published before his death*"⁹⁵.

87Momme Brodersen, 1997: 49.

88Anson Rabinbach, 1985: 104.

89Gerom Scholem and Theodor Adorno (editors), *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910-1940*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, p. 75.

*Here we should note that the same fragment is also present in Anson Rabinbach, 1985:104, with the difference that it is translated as "everything from *them*", meaning the youth, and not "from *you*", meaning Wyneken himself as in Scholem and Adorno's edition. In either case, the spirit of Benjamin's letter leaves no room for misunderstandings.

90Anson Rabinbach, 1985:105.

91Momme Brodersen, 1997: 64.

92Jeffrey Andrew Barash, "Politics and Theology: The debate on Zionism between Hermann Cohen and Martin Buber", *Dialogue as a Trans-disciplinary Concept, Martin Buber's Philosophy of Dialogue and its Contemporary Reception*, book edited by Paul Mendes-Flohr, Series 83: Studia Judaica, De Gruyter, Berlin 2015, pp. 49-59.

93Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber's Life and Work*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1988, p. 193.

94Michel Löwy, 1988. See the Greek Edition, 2002: 92.

95Maurice Friedman, 1988: 178.

Rabinbach's interpretation is that the calamity of the Great War played a key role in Benjamin's introduction of the messianic element in his 1916 essay *On Language as Such and the Language of Man*, the political inklings of which can be identified, most straightforwardly, in his rejection letter to Buber. Actually, his *divine language* alienates itself from and, in a way, responds to the generalized and multitudinous attempts of many prominent members of the Jewish intelligentsia of that time, like Cohen or Buber, to instrumentalize theological narratives by means of infusing nationalist proclamations into them, be it either Jewish- or German-oriented. Benjamin's early messianism is, in this sense, according to Rabinbach, an expression of "*anti-politics*", which, placed within the question of language, points to its reduction into a coercive pro-war political means⁹⁶.

In a similar fashion, Bloch was also shaken by the fact that his much admired professor, Georg Simmel, delivered a pro-war lecture in Heidelberg in 1916⁹⁷. By that time, however, Bloch had affiliated himself with Max Weber's circles, who sponsored his sociological research projects in Switzerland⁹⁸. There, he would be introduced to Benjamin in 1919 through Hugo Ball, a prominent figure in Zurich's Dadaist movement. It was them whom acquainted Benjamin with the readings of Sorel - by all accounts a critical influence on his essay *On the Critique of Violence*. In retrospect, Benjamin would recall the positive effect of Bloch's criticism against his early "*rejection of every contemporary political trend*"⁹⁹, while his *Critique of Violence* is a clear manifestation of his endorsement of anarchist ideas. Indeed, upon undertaking the task of writing this essay, he also wrote to Max Nettelau asking for advice on bibliography¹⁰⁰. However, anti-authoritarianism as a concept was not unknown to Benjamin at the time of his contacts with Ball, Bloch, and Nettelau. Wyneken's theory of education had also been a "*root of utopia*" for him¹⁰¹. During his school years he had upheld the abolition of hierarchical relationships between students and teachers¹⁰², though in a completely different context hallmarked by a Nietzschean focus on culture embedded in Wyneken's later German nationalism that Benjamin would eventually rebuff. All these early utopian influences

96Anson Rabinbach, 1985:105.

97Anson Rabinbach, 1985: 109.

98Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, 2014:106.

99Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, 2014:107.

100Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, 2014:131.

101Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, 2014:25.

102Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, 2014:21.

came to form Benjamin's "early anarchism", for which he felt no shame retrospectively, as he wrote to Scholem in 1926¹⁰³. These ideas came to blend with another set of intellectual concerns (discussed in the following paragraph) and were undoubtedly part of a constellation that would later grow into an admixture of "anarchism with God and Marx", in Ari Hirvonen's (2013) words¹⁰⁴.

As regards the *godly* part, in the years between the *Language* essay and the *Critique of Violence* Benjamin also authored three other pieces that demonstrate points of convergence with Bloch - these were titled *On Perception* (1917), *On the Program of the Coming Philosophy* (1918), and the so-called "Theological-political fragment" (most likely written in 1921)¹⁰⁵. As Bloch had taken a critical viewpoint towards Cohen's Kantian a-priority of knowledge in his 1908 dissertation, so did Benjamin in most of these texts. This, of course, brings us to a second important point raised by Rabinbach: that the messianic current that Bloch and Benjamin typify opposed to the spirit and implications of Cohen's *Judaism as the Religion of Reason* (1919). Annika Thiem (2016) observes -and this, I suggest, is also related to the context of war - that Benjamin rejects the Kantian eschatology of progress, which permeates the secularized version of Cohen's messianic narrative about a history that is itself teleologically orientated towards the Kingdom of God. Thiem (2016) reminds us of the fact that Benjamin defines theology as the "metaphysics of experience", which propels, as she sees it, "a shift from ideas and (ideals) to material experience".¹⁰⁶ To him, theology is not a matter of personal faith¹⁰⁷. The metaphysical element comes forth in the ephemeral, profane,

103Ari Hirvonen, "Marx and God with anarchism: on Walter Benjamin's concept of history and violence", *Continental Philosophy Review*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2013, p. 539.

104Ari Hirvonen, 2013: 519-543.

105The first two found in *SWVI*, 1999: 93-99 and 100-110, respectively. The third found in *Walter Benjamin, Reflections, Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, edited by Peter Demetz, Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston & New York, 2019 edition, pp.329-330. It is unclear whether it was written in 1921 or in 1937. Adorno chose its title and presented it as one of the late texts of Benjamin. Scholem, however, supported that its authorship better suits the younger Benjamin, especially because of its explicit references to Bloch, its obvious allusions to Rosenzweig - and, I would add, to the notion of transience as relevant to Benjamin's contemplation over Kant. See Eric Jacobson, "Understanding Walter Benjamin's Theologico-Political Fragment", *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, Vo.8, No.3, 2001, pp. 205-247.

106Annika Thiem, "Benjamin's Metaphysics of Transience", *Walter Benjamin and Theology*, edited by Colby Dickinson and Stephane Symons, Fordham University Press, New York, 2016, p.33.

107Annika Thiem, 2016: 48.

material world. It manifests itself in what makes the spacio-temporal transience of experience graspable, which, in turn, informs a different understanding of history¹⁰⁸.

We can, hence, come to the following two conclusions: first, in the wake of the Great War, the Judaic theological discourse was in its essence political and swirled within competing political postulates, to which messianism provided a theological layer for programmatic agendas. On the one hand stood the idea of assimilation and, on the other, that of the institution of a Jewish theocratic state in Palestine. Benjamin's opposition to both reverberated a call for disentanglement of the theological discourse from the popular political ends, as I understand it. This viewpoint manifests itself explicitly in his letter to Buber through an elucidating summary of the *Language* essay, which simultaneously reveals its political dimensions. Second, his theological references can be hardly seen as irrelevant to his intellectual engagement with Kant. Inversely, their meeting point, I assume, is at the limits of knowledge and its expansion to the realm of transient experience, which is what Benjamin calls theology. The significance of a "theology" defined as such lies in its power to inform a grasping of history beyond teleological sequentialism.

A.2 Benjamin and Theocracy.

A question that arises perhaps not only with relation to Benjamin's messianism, but also with all messianism-s associated with libertarian, anarchist, and anti-authoritarian political ideas, is their relation to theocracy. "*Can there be a conception of Messianism without theocracy; i.e. is there such a thing as a theocracy truly utopian, free from domination and hierarchy? An anarchist kingdom of God?*", wonders Eric Jacobson (2003) in a passage about the role of Benjamin's Messiah¹⁰⁹. Jacobson's question invites cogitation on the conceptual triangle formed by the notions of theology, ethics, and politics with respect to agency, purpose, and legitimacy. Earlier, we saw Benjamin's stance being called "*anti-political*" in our engagement with Rabinbach. This characterization deserves further thoughts and a closer look into the notion of *politics* itself. In doing so, we shall turn to Samuel Hayim Brody (2015) and his analysis on *Theopolitics and Political Theology*.¹¹⁰ A discussion as such with Benjamin in mind

108Annika Thiem, 2016: 42.

109Eric Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the profane, The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2003, p.45.

110

could not but include references to the so-called *Theological-political Fragment*. Elements from the introductory discussion on the notion of *falsified authority* sourced from *Analogy and Affinity* also reemerge, though more implicitly.

Let's start with Brody (2015): he details that Machiavelli (1469-1527) was the first to augment the emergence of politics as an autonomous domain, since he is considered “*to have emancipated politics from its subordination to ethics and religion*” by declaring that the one and only goal of politics is the preservation of authority: the *Prince's* desire is “*to maintain his state*”, Machiavelli argued¹¹¹. So, politics appears here as the artistry of keep ruling or preserving one's ruling position, and, as such, marks a departure from any purpose of higher order (ethical or theological). Transference of this principle to a modern secularist setting would, then, imply that politics substantiates itself merely in the maintenance of the state. This, of course, does not leave room for questions about what the prince or the state *is* or how each legitimizes its political agency and seizure of authority. All we are left with is a political realism rich in presuppositions of acceptance of an authority endowed to do *the job* of politics no matter what its endowment may be grounded upon.

In this context, Brody, also, draws interesting parallels between Machiavelli and Weber's idea of politics as the “*ethics of responsibility*” in a fully objectivized sphere of human life. He portrays the establishment of modern political science as grounded upon “*an isolation of politics*”. Its reduction, I'd say, to an almost a-political implementation of technique, having accepted that there is one objective truth that engenders responsibility. Brody comments that Weber's “*plea for objectivity*” eventually introduces ethics “*through the back door*”, since it demands compliance with a pre-defined interpretation of the given state of affairs, which at the end of the day is a stealthy conviction¹¹².

Taking a closer look into Brody's discussion, we see that he compares two specific thinkers of a particular era: Martin Buber and Carl Schmitt, at a time that Buber had

Samuel Hayim Brody, “Is Theopolitics an Antipolitics? Martin Buber, Anarchism, and the Idea of the Political”, in the book *Dialogue as a Trans-disciplinary Concept*, edited by Paul Mendes-Flohr, De Gruyter, Berlin, 2015, pp. 61-88.

111Samuel Hayim Brody, 2015:64.

112Samuel Hayim Brody, 2015:65.

blended anarcho-federalism¹¹³ with Hasidism¹¹⁴, while Schmitt had clearly shown signs of which side of the barricades he would choose to support¹¹⁵. Brody draws a line between the categories of “*Theopolitics*” used by Buber and “*Political “Theology”*” by Schmitt: “*If political theology deploys the power of the divine in the service of the authoritarian state, theopolitics denies any possibility whatsoever of legitimizing institutional human power*”¹¹⁶. Starting from this, we may first infer that Political Theology intends to fortify the state’s authority via the establishment of an unmediated interaction between the state’s *Gewalt* and God’s might. Inversely, *Theopolitics* takes a step into theological discourse in order to block the state’s *Gewalt* stairway to heaven as long as it suggests that no human authority can gain legitimacy out of a theological discourse whatsoever. What is crucial to recognize here is that *Theopolitics* differs from Political Theology because it places theocracy out of reach of politics, meaning that it does not allow association between the state and God for a legitimization clearance. This distinction also hints at the underlying interconnectedness of political theology with the secularized, “back-door ethics” of modern political realism.

Before any explanation about what all these have to do with Benjamin, we shall contemplate whether Jewish messianism, in general, is in the same sense distinguishable from “*Political Theology*”. This perhaps will help us see more clearly why Löwy’s idea of an *attractio electiva* between Jewish messianism and libertarian ideas might appear as a questionable postulate. For, as discussed in the introduction, the term elective affinity, if used in the Weberian sense, may allude to a naturalized linkage, when what there is, is an analogy or a possibility. Evoking Max Weber, Löwy actually speaks of a “*possibly revolutionary character of the ancient Judaic tradition*”¹¹⁷. But can this *possibility* be translated into elective affinity, and if so, of which type (or modality) exactly? Jewish messianism has been also embedded in downright normative political narratives and should, consequently, be recognized as *possibly* authoritarian, if that is so. Shall we then

113See Bernard Susser, “The anarcho-Federalism of Martin Buber”, *Publius*, Vol. 9, No.4, *Federalism as Grand Design*, 1979, pp.103-115.

114 Samuel Hayim Brody, 2015:62.

115See Annika Thiem, “Schmittian Shadows and Contemporary Theological-Political Constellations”, *Social Research*, Vol. 80, No.1, *Political Theology?*, pp.1-32, 2013.

Also, Horst Bredekamp, Melissa Thorson Hause, and Jackson Bond, “From Walter Benjamin to Carl Schmitt, via Thomas Hobbes”, *Critical inquiry*, Vol. 25, No.2, “*Angelus Novus*”, *Perspective on Walter Benjamin*, 1999, pp. 247-266.

116Samuel Hayim Brody, 2015:66.

117Michael Löwy (1988), 2002:35 (translated from Greek).

conclude that there is yet another elective affinity between Jewish messianism and normative political postulates?

Discussing Jewish messianism as relevant to a normative political discourse is relatively easy, since the example of Hermann Cohen alone suffices to make a strong case for the possibility of a different political postulate stemming from it¹¹⁸; one that “*engages the political authority of the state*” and endows it with the *necessary* Kantian *Gewalt* to harmonize society through human-on-human domination in accordance with the universalized ethics of rationalism¹¹⁹, which claims to hold an objective interpretation of God’s *Will* (Christopher Schmidt, 2016)¹²⁰. Let’s remember that Cohen sought to emphasize the connection between Judaism and Protestant Christianity, arguing that they share a common idealism, which is sourced from the Old Testament and Greek philosophy¹²¹. This secularizatory messianism is often associated with Friedländer’s historical account of Gnosticism as a pre-Christian Jewish current rooted in the Hellenistic-Jewish community of Alexandria and the philosopher Philo (Michael Brenner, 1999)¹²², who lived there during the first half of the first century BCE¹²³. Liberal Judaism, which Friedländer supported, saw Jewish Gnosticism, historically speaking, as an attempt of Hellenized Jews “*to transform Judaism into a universal religion*”, back then in Alexandria¹²⁴. Politically, Liberal Jewish messianism of the Wilhelminian era put forward a shift from particularism (what we earlier called nationalist Zionism, also known as practical Zionism) to universalism, and from religious legalism

118Michael Löwy mentions Cohen’s version but does not provide any further details apart from the comment that Jewish Messianism and the idea of progress simply do not fit together. See Michael Löwy (1988), 2002:39.

119Jeffrey Andrew Barash, 2015:53.

120Christopher Schmidt, “Rethinking the Modern Canon of Judaism-Christianity-Modernity in Light of the Post-Secular Relation”, in the book *Is there a Judeo-Christian Tradition?*, edited by Emmanuel Nathan and Anya Topolski, De Gruyter, Berlin, 2016, p.181.

121Jeffrey Andrew Barash, 2015:50.

122Michael Brenner, “Gnosis and History: Polemics of German-Jewish Identity from Graetz to Scholem”, *New German Critique*, No.77, Special Issue on German-Jewish Religious Thought, 1999, p. 51.

123On Philo and Judaism in Alexandria, see Jutta Leonhardt, *Jewish Worship in Philo of Alexandria*, No 84 of the series Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 2001.

124Michael Brenner, 1999:51.

to secularism¹²⁵, echoing the spirit of Abraham Geiger and the Reform Movement of the 19th century¹²⁶.

The whole idea of a Judo-Christian unity through its common reference to idealism, is pretty much inscribed in what Christopher Schmidt (2016) calls “*the modern canon of Judaism-Christianity-Modernity*”, in which messianism enjoys centrality¹²⁷. This messianism sees the eschatological march of history towards the realization of the Kingdom of God unfolding in three episodes, each of which is a step of fulfillment and dissolution of the previous in a teleological succession towards *Good*. Therefore, what we see in Cohen is a version of Jewish messianism fully absorbed in the promises of the politics of modernity, since modernity itself is construed as the historical era of what Hegel named the “*Aufhebung*” of Christianity, which, in turn, is considered to be a teleological fulfillment and displacement of Judaism¹²⁸. This is how divinity is conscripted into the armed forces of the secular state, traversing towards the secularist idea of teleological progress, which is in essence messianic, since it sees itself as humanity’s *grant-finale* step into the Kingdom of God. We can conclude that, indeed, by engaging Jewish messianism into the discussion of politics does not mean that we have good reasons to expect our arrival at anti-authoritarian postulates necessarily. The canon discussed actually seeks to establish a link between the modern eschatology of progress with Jewish messianism by picturing the latter as its bygone and overcome origin.

This canon has found plenty and diverse opponents over time: the conservative, anti-reform, orthodox Jewry saw it as a gnostic heresy¹²⁹; the Wilhelmian Protestants as an obstacle hampering their domination in the construction of a purely Christian German identity¹³⁰, while post-modern thinkers have strived to prove modernity’s legitimacy out of and for its own sake¹³¹. Among the many critics has been Franz Rosenzweig, who provided a narrative for an alternative Judo-Christian confluence; one that aimed at

125Christopher Schmidt, 2016:171.

126Michael Brenner, 1999:46.

127We read in Schmidt that this canon was initially put forward by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing as an antithesis to St. Paul’s “*sinful Ego*” found in the Epistle to the Romans. The rational human being would not do evil deeds, since rational is the good, upon which “*the heavenly Jerusalem would be established*”. Christopher Schmidt, 2016: 175.

128Christopher Schmidt, 2016: 170-171.

129Michael Brenner, 1999:46, referring to the historiographic portrayal of Jewish gnosticism as a heresy by the conservative Hernich Graetz.

130Christopher Schmidt, 2016: 176.

131Christopher Schmidt, 2016:174, discussing Blumenberg’s *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Massachusetts, 1985.

breaking the rule of succession¹³². There is general consensus that Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption* influenced Benjamin significantly. Rosenzweig asserted that the intention of his book was "to demonstrate that the three concepts of thought -God, World, and Man- cannot be deduced one from the other, but that each one of them has an independent essence" (Floyd, 1993)¹³³. Myriam Bienestock (2003) mentions that the *Star of Redemption* is a text that reflects a crisis in Jewish historiography and memory, and manifests Rosenzweig's objection to an understanding of Judaism through the category of historical development, since historicism, as seen by Rosenzweig, tends to deify historical reality¹³⁴. Bonnie Honig (2007) also concurs that Rosenzweig rejects the rationalists' dismissal of the past as subjugated to "a larger progressive trajectory, which deprives the past of its potential power and meaning to us"¹³⁵. Eiland and Jennings (2014) note that what left an indelible mark upon Benjamin was Rosenzweig's critic against idealist "pretensions to totality", especially as expressed by Hegel¹³⁶. Schmidt (2016) sees that the *Star of Redemption*, written by Rosenzweig during his presence in the battlefield of the Great War, is a direct response to the canon of progressive, historical continuity discussed above¹³⁷.

The religious confluence put forward by Rosenzweig permeated the spirit of the Frankfurt Circle, "an intellectual community based on shared beliefs that would continue the goals of the Forte Circle", according to Eiland and Jennings (2014). The Forte Circle, in turn, formed in 1914, had brought together a diverse pool of influential intellectuals, ranging from the anarchist-socialist Gustav Landauer to the Christian conservative Florens Christian Rang¹³⁸. Jennings (2011) describes the two circles as "ecumenical projects". The basic idea behind the Frankfurt Circle was to call "for an interfaith rapprochement" that would discuss "just politics".¹³⁹ Along with Benjamin's

132Christopher Schmidt, 2016:177.

133Wayne Whitson Floyd Jr., "Transcendence in the Light of Redemption: Adorno and the Legacy of Rosenzweig and Benjamin", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol.61, No.3, 1993, p. 541.

134Myriam Bienestock, "Recalling the Past in Rosenzweig's "Star of Redemption"", *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 23, No.3, 2003, p. 227-228.

135Bonnie Honig, "The Miracle of Metaphor: Rethinking the State of Exception with Rosenzweig and Schmitt", *Diacritics*, Vol.37, No. 2/3, 2007, p. 80.

136Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, 2014:179.

137Christopher Schmidt, 2016:176.

138Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, 2014:152.

139Michael W. Jennings, "Critique of Violence: Benjamin's Politics, ca. 1922", *The Weimar Moment: Liberalism, Political Theology, and Law*, edited by Leonard V. Kaplan and Rudy Koshar, Lexington Books, Plymouth, 2012, pp.113-118.

knowledge of the Forte Circle's work highlighted by Eiland and Jennings, Uwe Steiner and Colin Sample (2001) rightly, in my view, point out Benjamin's influence by Hugo Ball and his 1919 publication *Toward the Critique of the German Intelligentsia*, which appeals to the "solidarity of the European mind against the theocratic claim of any and every metaphysics of the state"¹⁴⁰.

It is no coincidence that Benjamin openly expresses his opposition to theocracy by evoking Bloch's *Spirit of Utopia* in his "Theological-political Fragment". Rosenzweig's "independent essence" of God, World, and Man attempts to dissolve the totality of an *all-becomes-one-toward-an-eschaton* postulate and reveals itself in Benjamin's "Theological-Political Fragment" right from the very start. Here, we read a translation found in Eric Jacobson's essay (2001)¹⁴¹:

"First the Messiah completes all historical occurrence, whose relation to the messianic (in this sense) he himself first redeems, completes and creates. Therefore nothing historical can intend to refer to the messianic from itself out of itself. For this reason, the kingdom of God is not the telos of the historical dynamic; it cannot be set toward a goal. Historically seen, it is not goal but end. Thus the order of the profane cannot be built on the idea of the kingdom of God; theocracy, therefore, has no political, but only religious significance. To have repudiated the political meaning of theocracy with all intensity is the greatest service of Bloch's Spirit of Utopia".

This allows us to return to Jacobson's question: "Is there an anarchist Kingdom of God?": the possibility of a state of affairs without human-on-human domination is relevant to the profane sphere and it has no religious dimensions, since it is not itself the Kingdom of God. It is perhaps a valid question when posed in a strictly theological discourse, but its inner tension subsides as soon as we think politically, for the Kingdom of God has no political meaning for Benjamin. As regards *Theopolitics*, it is, I find, a more suitable term than political theology when it comes to Benjamin's discourse because it reinforces a standpoint that acutely rejects any possible relation between human authority and God, be it direct (i.e. as in Schmitt's political theology) or indirect (i.e. its enlightened, secularized version, where rational thinking serves as a mediator).

140Uwe Steiner and Colin Sample, "The True Politician: Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Political", *New German Critique*, No.83, Special Issue on Walter Benjamin, p. 46.

141Eric Jacobson, "Understanding Walter Benjamin's Theological-Political Fragment", *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No.3, 2001, pp.207-208.

Having established this unalienable gap between the profane and the divine, Benjamin continues the same fragment with a notoriously elusive passage, which introduces one of the most critical elements in his conception of history in the years to come; that is the interaction between the profane and divine:

“The order of the profane has to be established on the idea of happiness. The relation of this order to the messianic is one of the essential elements in the teachings of historical philosophy. It is the precondition of a mystical conception of history, whose problem permits itself to be represented in an image. If one directional arrow marks the goal in which the dynamic of the profane takes effect, and another the direction of messianic intensity, then clearly the pursuit of happiness of free humanity strives away from every messianic direction. But just as a force is capable, through its direction, of promoting another in the opposite direction, so too is the profane order of the profane in the coming of the messianic kingdom. The profane, therefore, is not a category of the kingdom but a category- that is one of the most appropriate – of its most quiet nearing. For in happiness everything earthly strives for its decline, and only in happiness is the decline determined to find it. While clearly the unmediated messianic intensity of the heart, of the inner, individual person, passes through tragedy, in the sense of suffering. To the spiritual restitution in integrum, which introduces immortality, corresponds a worldliness that ushers in the eternity of the decline and the rhythm of this eternal passing away, passing away in its totality – worldliness passing away in its spatial but also temporal totality – the rhythm of messianic nature is happiness. For the messianic is nature in its eternal and total transience.

To strive for this, even for those stages of humanity that are nature, is the task of world politics whose method is called nihilism.”¹⁴²

Ivan Boldyrev (2014) sees that Benjamin, just like Bloch, illustrates the end of history as external to the earthly, profane, worldly history. As a result, they reject a teleology that would have history “*“automatically” engender redemption within itself*”. It is exactly this that rules out the idea of a historical progress towards the Kingdom of God¹⁴³; and this, consequently, comes with implication for the “*historical philosophy*”. As Thiem (2016) observes, despite the strict division between profane and divine put forward in

142English translation found in Eric Jacobson, 2001:208.

143Ivan Boldyrev, *Ernts Bloch and His Contemporaries: Locating Utopian Messiansim*, Bloomsberry Publishing Plc, London and New York, 2014, p.120.

the previous paragraph, here Benjamin alludes to an illusive interaction, stemming from the experience of our spacio-temporal transience¹⁴⁴. The perception of the present as transition will become a principle for Benjamin's proposed historiographical task as he will detail in his Theses almost 20 years later¹⁴⁵. Thiem suggests that Benjamin's "*messianic framing of history*" serves his intention to go against theocracy and, simultaneously, frees theology from its bounds to promises for an overcoming of our decline, demise and passing away¹⁴⁶. She, also, contrasts Benjamin's messianic conception of history to that of Kant, who sees individual suffering as dissolved in the teleology of progress¹⁴⁷. Suffering in Benjamin is not seen as redeemable through the species' progress. For Benjamin, our passing away is full, complete, and redeemed only in happiness; in happiness as a condition of life. An astute encapsulation in Thiem's analysis is, in my view, the following: "*Benjamin figures demise as redemptive only when passing away becomes fully and totally possible, when individuals, nature and history can all pass away without continuing to haunt the present as the unredeemed past*"¹⁴⁸.

Nihilism as a method of politics is yet another point of obscurity. Some scholars have associated Benjamin's nihilism with the Nietzschean connotation of "active nihilism", which Richard Wolin (1994) wittily summarized as the idea that "*if something is falling, it should be given a final push*"¹⁴⁹. This could perhaps remind us of Buber's early pro-war rhetoric discussed previously, but it seems incompatible with Benjamin's idea of happiness as a collective pursuit. Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky (2016) points out that nihilism as a method of politics is crystalized as a destructive force in the *Critique of Violence*, but this force, the divine violence, does not intend to finish off our irremediable decline. Rather, it goes against the mythical (law-positing and law-preserving) violence and, as seen by Butler, signals a fight "*for the absence of violence*"¹⁵⁰. If it were otherwise, happiness would have to equal to the pursuit of death

144Annika Thiem, 2016, p.50.

145Walter Benjamin, 1940. See Thesis XVI:

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>

146Annika Thiem, 2016:50.

147Annika Thiem, 2016: 33.

148Annika Thiem, 2016:53.

149Richard Wolin, Walter Benjamin, *An Aesthetic of Redemption*, University of California Press. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1994, p.16.

150 Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky, "Rhythms of Living, Conditions of Critique, On Judith Butler's Reading of Walter Benjamin's Critique of Violence", *Walter Benjamin and Theology*, edited by John D. Caputo, Fordham University Press, 2016, pp.300-301

and precipitation of suffering, yet Benjamin's nihilism, according to Peter Fenves (2016), is not at all a call for the "*annihilation of the self*"¹⁵¹. Charles H. T. Lesch (2014) interprets Benjamin's nihilism as a turn to ethics via religion and remarks that for Benjamin, unlike Kant, the utopian society is a practical possibility, yet not through politics in its normative sense, meaning the mythologized power of the state. Against the mythological unification of law and justice, Lesh sees that early Benjamin proposed an obliteration of politics as we know it through "*a liquidation of all Gewalt*"¹⁵². Löwy also notes that in Scholem's account Benjamin used nihilism as synonymous to anarchism, and this makes good sense if we allow for Benjamin's own reference to his "*'earlier' anarchism*" in his letter to Scholem as late as 1926¹⁵³.

151Peter Fenves, "Completion instead of Revelation, Toward the 'Theological-Political Fragment'", *Walter Benjamin and Theology*, edited by John D. Caputo, Fordham University Press, 2016, P.85.

152Charles H. T. Lesch, "Against Politics: Walter Benjamin on Justice, Judaism, and the Possibility of Ethics", *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 108, No.1, 2014, pp.218-232.

153Ari Hirvonen, "Marx and God with Anarchism: on Walter Benjamin's Concepts of History and Violence", *Continental Philosophy Review*, Vol. 45, 2013, p. 539.

A.3 History and Redemption.

The notions of happiness, history, and the messianic reemerge altogether in Benjamin's Thesis II *On The Concept of history*, written in 1940, meaning nearly 20 years after the *Fragment*:

“ 'Among the most noteworthy characteristics of human beings', says Lotze¹⁵⁴, 'belongs... next to so much self-seeking in individuals, the general absence of envy of each present in relation to the future'. This reflection shows us that the picture of happiness which we harbour is steeped through and through in the time which the course of our own existence has conferred on us. The happiness which could awaken envy in us exists only in the air we have breathed, with people we could have spoken with, with women who might have been able to give themselves to us. The conception of happiness, in other words, resonates irremediably with that of redemption. It is just the same with the conception of the past, which makes history into its affair. The past carries a secret index with it, by which it is referred to its redemption. Are we not touched by the same breath of air which was among that which came before? Is there not an echo of those who have been silenced in the voices to which we lend our ears today? Have not the women, who we court, sisters who they do not recognize anymore? If so, then there is a secret agreement between the generations of the past and that of our own. For we have been expected upon this earth. For it has been given us to know, just like every generation before us, a weak messianic power, on which the past has a claim. This claim is not to be settled lightly. The historical materialist knows why”¹⁵⁵.

The comparative analysis of the two texts has yielded diverse interpretive outcomes. Some scholars see the Theses as Benjamin's return to theology after a Marxist spell in between (i.e. Scholem¹⁵⁶) or an attempt to surmount Kant's spurious concept of experience through religion (i.e. Wolin¹⁵⁷). A third expounding, like that of Löwy, sees a non-conflictual concurrence of both theology and politics, whereby terms carry dual

154Lotze appears in *AP*, as well. See Chapter N: On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress”. Relevant to Thesis II is especially paragraph [N13a,3], p.479. Löwy also takes notice of this; see Löwy, 2004, p.60-61.

155Walter Benjamin, 1940. See Thesis II:

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>
(translation slightly modified).

156James McBride, “Marooned in the Realm of Profane: Walter Benjamin's Synthesis of Kabbalah and Communism”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 57, No.2, 1989, pp.241-266.

157Ari Harvonen, 2013: 531.

meanings and fall consistently in two seemingly antithetical systems of thought, as already discussed. Others, like Hamacher (2005), support that Benjamin's Messianism is not a "straightforwardly Jeudo-Christian theology"¹⁵⁸.

It is true that Benjamin never abandoned his appropriation of theological terms. One thing that is, in my opinion, incontestable is that in both early and late writings he remained consistent in his criticism against the teleology of progress, which does not ever manage to truly shed its theological cloak. For this reason, I consider the category of *Theopolitics* to be a useful compass that elucidates how Benjamin's political discourse, embroidered with theological terms and thoroughly soaked in messianic nuances as it is, goes against the very essence of political theology. For a political theology freed from a divine *telos*, discharged of its promise to make humanity's future appointment with God come true, liberated from a teleological outlook on futurity... is hardly a political theology, isn't it?

This said, the suitability of the term "materialist theology" – used, for instance, by Sami Khatib (2013)¹⁵⁹ is equally debatable, since it misses a key point, in my opinion; namely Benjamin's intention to warn against the absorption of historical materialism in the normative spell of evolutionism. Rightly Khatib highlights that Benjamin interpreted the "revolutionary desire to realize the Kingdom of God" as a defining feature of modernity¹⁶⁰. However, this cannot lead us to assert that Benjamin's understanding of the messianic is informed by the same principle, as Khatib himself details. Quite the opposite seems to be the case if we allow for Benjamin's reflection in the Arcades Project: "Just as the Communist Manifesto ends the age of professional conspirators, so the Commune puts an end to the phantasmagoria holding sway over the early years of the proletariat. It dispels the illusion that the task of the proletarian revolution is to complete the work of 1789 hand in hand with the bourgeoisie"¹⁶¹. The heuristic use of

158Werner Hamacher, " 'Now': Walter Benjamin on Historical Time", *Walter Benjamin and History*, edited by Andrew Benjamin, Continuum, London and New York, 2005, p.40.

159Sami Khatib, "The Messianic Without Messianism, Walter Benjamin's Materialist Theology", *Anthropology & Materialism* [Online], 1, 2013, <http://journals.openedition.org/am/159> ; DOI : 10.4000/am.159, pp. 1-17.

160Khatib quotes from Benjamin's 1919 *Kunstkritik* text: "The revolutionary desire to realize the Kingdom of God is the elastic point of progressive civilization [Bildung] and the beginning of modern history. Whatever has no relation to the Kingdom of God is of strictly secondary importance". Sami Khatib, 2013, p.4.

161Walter Benjamin, AP:12.

Derrida's tautology between his own "*Messianic without Messianism*" and Benjamin's "*weak messianic power*"¹⁶², which is central to Khatib's analysis, seems to be paying little heed to what Owen Ware (2004) underscores, successfully in my opinion, in his comparative perusal: that Benjamin's conception of messianic time "*breaks from any faith in the imminence of future salvation*"¹⁶³, whereas in Derrida the messianic itself, even when accounting for the categorical difference between *eschaton* and *telos* in his repudiation of the doctrine of progress, remains enveloped in the idea of an affirmative promise for the future (Owen Ware, 2004¹⁶⁴; Ari Hirvonen, 2004¹⁶⁵). Ware also emphasises that, for Benjamin, a suspension of a teleological understanding of history is a prerequisite in the fight against fascism and, also, that so long as socialism remains loyal to the same presuppositions as its opponent, the battle is futile¹⁶⁶. Let us not forget that the Theses were written under the shadow of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, and the criticism launched against evolutionist presuppositions does not only address the "ruling class", but also the Soviet Union¹⁶⁷. Such presuppositions, which "*we call progress*" or the storm "*blowing from Paradise*", force the "*angel of history*" to leave the "*pile of debris*" untouched and unredeemed against his will¹⁶⁸. In this respect, the Theses can be viewed as an attempt not to reaffirm an *a-theological* historical materialism, but to expose and change its already existent, yet denied and concealed, messianic orientation from a promised future to the *irrealis* of "*non-actualized possibility*" of the past¹⁶⁹, as Hamacher (2005) phrases it. In my opinion, by placing the messianic locus in the transient experience of the present, which allows a dynamic interaction with the past, Benjamin seeks to rescue historical materialism from actually

162 Jacques Derrida's intellectual indebtedness to Benjamin becomes overtly manifest through a haphazard tautology: "*The following paragraph names messianism or, more precisely, messianic without messianism, a 'weak messianic power' ...*". See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*, Routledge, London and New York, 1994, p.181. Also mentioned in Owen Ware, "Dialectic of the Past/ Disjuncture of the Future: Derrida and Benjamin on the Concept of Messianism", *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, Vol.5, No.2, 2004:99.

163 Owen Ware, 2004: 103.

164 Owen Ware, 2004: 112.

165 Ari Hirvonen, "Promising Justice: Derrida with Jewish Jurisprudence", *Law and Critique*, Vol. 12, No.2, 2004, p. 180.

166 Owen Ware, 2004: 101.

167 Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, 2014:657-658.

168 Walter Benjamin, 1940. See Thesis IV:

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>

169 Werner Hamacher, 2005: 38.

becoming a “materialist theology” through its subsumption in a teleological political discourse of progress.

In a way, I would dare interpret Benjamin’s discourse as the a-theologization of futurity. As Benjamin’s messianic gravity lingers towards the past, it signals a re-orientation of perspective by enclosing the messianic in our cognitive interaction with the past and, thus, our grasping of history. In Hamacher’s view, Benjamin’s theology is “*a theology of the missed or the distorted – hunchbacked - possibilities, a theology of missed, distorted, hunchbacked time*”¹⁷⁰. It reinforces that a political discourse can break free from teleological averments by rescinding a futurity understood as destiny. This crucial dislocation installs the messianic in the heart of our historical cognition that sees the past as a transceiver of political agency. The *missed, distorted, hunchbacked possibilities* are not possibilities “*forever lost*”¹⁷¹, yet the “*weak messianic power*” does not imply that redemption is promised, since it pivots on remembrance alone- on its precarity and fragility ¹⁷².

Jacobson defines Benjamin’s redemption as “*the completion of the world through its fulfillment in the world*”¹⁷³ while Thiem emphasizes that it is “*thoroughly immanent and profane*”¹⁷⁴, which fact is also concluded by Hamacher as we have seen. The reason why redemption - an otherwise theological category - can acquire a profane significance is that it is sourced from our experience of memory and our ability to relate ourselves and the present state of affairs to the oppressed of the past. To Horkheimer’s comment that redemption can only be “*idealistic*” and “*theological*” because “*the slain are really slain*”, Benjamin responds with the idea that the past itself is actually contrived in the present time through remembrance: “*in remembrance we have an experience which forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted to us to try write it with immediately theological concepts*”¹⁷⁵. The dead are truly dead, yet the experience of the remembrance of their death may not necessarily buttress a sense of conclusiveness of their defeat: “*what science has ‘determined’, remembrance*

170Werner Hamacher, 2005: 40.

171Walter Benjamin, 1940. See Thesis III:

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>

172Walter Benjamin, 1940. See Thesis V:

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>

173Eric Jacobson, 2003:31.

174Annika Thiem, 2016: 52.

175Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project* (Chapter N, On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress, [N8,1]), 1999, p. 471.

can modify”¹⁷⁶. Hence, redemption hinges on the transformative powers of remembrance exerted upon history -and its writing.

Benjamin launches trenchant criticism against bourgeois historicism and the regulative idea of progress. The lulling narration of history¹⁷⁷, meaning as if the past were a chain of events (or “*beads of a rosary*”),¹⁷⁸ results in the exoneration of present rulers. In Thesis XII, he also calls attention to the effect produced by a disassociation of redemption from the past and its linkage to the future. When the working class considers itself to be the redeemer of the future generations and the liberator of grandchildren, rather than of enslaved ancestor, it loses its “*hatred*” and its “*spirit of sacrifice*”, both of which are “*nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors*”¹⁷⁹. Redemption, as I understand it, is achieved through a mode of remembrance which disservices the victors of history by resisting to definitively surrender the past and the dead to their triumphant narratives.

Benjamin speaks of the “*homogenous, empty time*” upon which the narrative of the eternal progress of human race rests¹⁸⁰. Historicism fills this time up with facts in order to fabricate a conception of time as a linear continuum¹⁸¹. This generates an “*eternal picture of the past*”¹⁸². What remains of time is only its quantitative dimension, meaning time conceived as measured by clocks. Against this, Benjamin considers a qualitative perception of time illustrated through the example of calendars¹⁸³, whereby a day of

176As above.

177Walter Benjamin, 1940. Benjamin speaks of “soothsayer” in paragraph B of the addendum. See

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>

178Walter Benjamin, 1940. See A in the addendum:

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>

179Walter Benjamin, 1940. See Thesis XII as well as IV (“...*call every victory which has been won by the rulers into question*”):

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>

180Walter Benjamin, 1940. See Theses XIII and XIV:

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>

181Walter Benjamin, 1940. This he calls the “*additive*” method, See Thesis XVIII:

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>

182Walter Benjamin, 1940. See Thesis XVI:

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>

183Walter Benjamin, 1940. See Thesis XV:

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>

collective commemoration breathes new life to a past event, effecting a sense of dissolution of the temporal distance between past and present (Adrian Wilding, 1996)¹⁸⁴.

Adrian Wilding (1996) comments that Benjamin derives insights from Proust's conception of involuntary memory and the latter's relinquishment of any attempt to represent the past "as it really was"¹⁸⁵: "*Historiography in the strict sense is thus an image taken from the involuntary memory, an image that suddenly presents itself to the subject of history at the moment of danger... What occurs to the involuntary memory is – and this distinguishes it from voluntary memory- never a course of events but solely an image*"¹⁸⁶. Historical homogeneity is destroyed when a historical object escapes from the continuum and comes forth in the form of a *dialectical image*¹⁸⁷. Apart from destructive, memory is also creative in that it generates a flash-like representation of the past. In the realm of remembrance the present becomes "*Jetztzeit*", meaning fleeting moments that "*comprise the entire history of mankind in an enormous abridgement*"¹⁸⁸. Historical objects are conceived as *monads* and this permits them to blast off the continuum: "*If the historical object is to be blasted out of the continuum of the historical process, it is because the monadological structure of the object demands it. This structure first comes*

184Adrian Wilding elaborates on the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of time, the difference between clock and calendar as instruments of measurement and also adds that Benjamin endorses the idea that the introduction of wage labor was critical in our perception of time as linear. See Adrian Wilding, *The Concept of Remembrance in Walter Benjamin*, Ph.D Thesis, Department of Philosophy, supervised by Andrew Benjamin, University of Warwick, 1996, <http://go.warwick.ac.uk/wrap/4334> 1996:21-24.

185Adrian Wilding comments that Benjamin endorses Proust's idea that in remembrance the past emerges in accordance with the significance certain events may have to us rather than their chronological place in our life, 1996:46-47.

186Adrian Wilding, 1996:48, citing Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* (7 volumes), edited by Rolf Tiedemann & Hermann Schweppenhauser, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974-85, Vol.1, p.1243.

187Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project* (Chapter N, On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress, [N2,a3] & [N3,1]), 1999, p. 462-63.

188 Walter Benjamin, 1940. See Thesis XVIII:

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm> . The translation provided here ("*massive abridgement*") follows that found in Adrian Wilding, 1996: 86. The one on marxists.org website translates the word "*ungeheueren*" as "*monstrous*". Given that here the word is an adjective (and not a noun, i.e. Ungeheuer, meaning monster), I find that the choice "massive" is more appropriate, since it appears as an attribute of size rather than form or other quality. "Massive" is the English translation provided in Pons Dictionary, as well:

https://en.pons.com/translate?q=Ungeheuer&l=deen&in=ac_de&lf=de&qnac=ungeheueren

to light in the extracted object itself. [...] It is owing to this monadological structure that the historical object finds represented in its interior its own fore-history and after-history”¹⁸⁹. Wilding points out that Benjamin’s monadological approach lays the ground for a new theorization of universality that is not regulated by the “*predetermined schema*” of progress¹⁹⁰. As soon as historical objects escape from the continuum, there appears their creative potential and their power to encapsulate the universal in their partiality dynamically, meaning their capacity to yield their own pre- and after-history and form a constellation with the present era that no longer embeds the relation of past to present in a formalist, sequential perception of time.

Wilding (1996) also suggests that the monadological approach is put forward by Benjamin as a methodology that is pertinent to all forms of knowledge, historical included, and that it constitutes a broader delineation of the relation between particularity and universality. Benjamin appropriates his monadological insights from Leibnitz: the monad in Leibnitz has a static as well as a dynamic character. The static quality is its ability to represent, however partially, the whole. The dynamic, on the other hand, is the monad’s capacity to “*unfold the whole*”¹⁹¹. Benjamin transfers these nuances, first, to the Epistemo-Critical Prologue so as to develop a critique contra induction as well as deduction as methods capable of yielding truth¹⁹². He infuses Leibnitz’s insight into the age-old discussion about the relation between things and ideas (or phenomena and truth) to arrive eventually at the conclusion that “*ideas are to things as constellations are to stars*”¹⁹³. In the context of art critique, Benjamin discusses the historical facet of artifacts and goes against both the empiricist history of art (inductive method) as well as the genre-classification approach (deductive method). Instead, he proposes the category of Origin as a basis for an “*objective interpretation*” of a work of literary art, which allows for the dynamic effect of historical change upon the significance of the art object (Hanssen, 1995)¹⁹⁴. Just like the historical event, works of art unfold ideas that are co-structured by their pre- and after-history. As Hanssen puts it, Benjamin’s theory of Origin endeavors to surpass the “*dualism between historical contingency and the ahistorical transcendent Ideas*” via an alternative reading of Plato’s

189Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project* ,[N10,3], 1999, p.475.

190Adrian Wilding, 1996: 104.

191Adrian Wilding, 1996:100-101.

192Adrian Wilding, 1996:98.

193Adrian Wilding, 1996:99.

194Beatrice Hanssen, 1995:811-812.

σώζειν τὰ φαινόμενα¹⁹⁵. Wilding sees a Leibnizian twist in this reading of Plato, which Benjamin himself speaks of in a letter to Rang, when writing that he is “*adopting Leibniz’s concept of the monad for the definition of ideas*”¹⁹⁶. Historical objects present a similar monadological structure as ideas, and just like the phenomena/stars are rescued in the idea/constellation, so the historical phenomena/ *the past as it really was* is *redeemed* in the object of historical knowledge that emerges through remembrance. The key difference between the Platonic *anamnesis* and the Benjaminian remembrance, however, is that the former refers to a discovery of an a-historical entity, one that remains unchanged by the action of its discovery; the latter, on the other hand, refers to a dynamic, creative interaction between the subject and the object of historical knowledge hallmarked by the transience of nature.

Despite the analytical wealth and depth in Wilding’s discussion on the concept of remembrance, there seems to be a striking omission among the names of thinkers that, in one way or another, influenced and informed Benjamin’s expounding on the subject matter: Goethe. Benjamin writes that “*The dialectical image is that form of the historical object which satisfies Goethe’s requirements for the object of analysis: to exhibit a genuine synthesis. It is the primal phenomenon of history*”¹⁹⁷. Nigel Dodd (2008) points out that the notion of “primal phenomenon” alludes to Goethe’s “primal plant” and his studies in botanology, where he treats creation in a non-Darwinian fashion, substituting the idea of evolution with *metamorphosis* in an attempt to fathom change through a form of analogical thinking that provides “*clarity without closure*”¹⁹⁸. Dodd suggests that the idea of clarity is reflected on Benjamin’s “legibility” and interpretability of the “dialectical image” whereas the absence of closure could as well correspond to the fact that historical objects are considered redeemable¹⁹⁹. As we have seen, similar parallels can be drawn with respect to the art object, its interpretation, and its changing significance over time. However, Nodd finds Benjamin’s introduction of the monad in his discourse to be a jeopardy that comes in stark contrast with his core postulate that “*truth is not timeless*” (which implies Goethe’s absence of closure)²⁰⁰. Although Benjamin invests the notion of “*becoming*” in monads, when read within their

195 Beatrice Hanssen, 1995:811-812.

196 Adrian Wilding, 1996: 99-100.

197 Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project* ,[N10,3], 1999, p.474

198 Nigel Dodd, “Goethe in Palermo”, *Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 8, No. 4, 2008, p. 415.

199 Nigel Dodd, 2008: 421 & 425.

200 Nigel Dodd, 2008: 424.

own philosophical context, monads, according to Nodd, ultimately imply autarky and closure, thus ceasing to retain dynamic powers²⁰¹. To see Benjamin more sympathetically would entail that we accept that his appropriation of monadology is simultaneously a de-contextualization²⁰². Schwebel (2012) agrees that Benjamin invests his own special meaning in monads and proposes “*a particular interpretation of the infinite within the finite*”, which sees the minute as an infinite source of details that can lead to numberless interpretations. In this sense, infinity is not a concept of totality understood as divinity (i.e. in idealistic terms)²⁰³.

It was Adorno who first noticed and saluted Benjamin’s anti-idealistic conception of history as it emerged, not from the Theses, but from his *Trauspielsbuch*²⁰⁴. Yet, although Adorno found Benjamin’s principles suitable to a theory of art critique, their transference to the philosophy of history did not seem to be equally upheld²⁰⁵. A crucial point of criticism coming from Adorno concerns the immediacy affected upon the relation between part and whole implied in Benjamin’s monadology. Adorno called it, at worst, “*the fetishism of the immediate*”, and wrote, at best, that “*to interpret phenomena materialistically meant for him [Benjamin] not so much to elucidate them as products of the social whole but rather to relate them directly, in their isolation, to material tendencies and social struggles*”²⁰⁶.

201Dodd here refers to Adorno’s criticism against Benjamin’s monadology. See p.434.

202Adrian Wilding, 1996: 100.

203Paula L. Schwebel, “Intensive Infinity: Walter Benjamin’s Reception of Leibniz and its Sources”, *MLN*, Vol.127, No.3, 2012, p. 609.

204Beatrice Hanssen, 1995: 810.

205Adrian Wilding, 1996:117.

206Cited in Adrian Wilding, 1996:115.

B. Benjamin and historical materialism.

B.1 From mere labor to collective dreaming and awakening.

Benjamin's interlocution with Karl Marx becomes manifest in the profusion of his references to the latter's texts. Benjamin seems to recognize Marx as an intellectual authority that provided "*a solid scaffolding*" for the Arcades Project, and this seems to be the case for his Theses, too²⁰⁷.

Duy Lap Nguyen (2015) analyzes systematically, yet precariously²⁰⁸, how Marx's political economy finds a significant place in Benjamin's late work. Nguyen points to certain points of convergence between Benjamin and Marx, which help us approach the idea of *illusion*. In his Theses, Benjamin speaks of the misconception that labor is the "*source of all wealth and culture*"²⁰⁹. This corresponds, according to Nguyen, to what Marx described as the false "*supernatural power*" ascribed to labor, which engenders the illusionary principle of economic equality and freedom in capitalism²¹⁰. Marx's "*abstract labor*" and Benjamin's "*mere labor*" is the basis for commodity-driven social relations and the myth of equality based on the distribution of goods in accordance with the measurement of value of commodities in labor time²¹¹. Another significant point of convergence between the two, according to Nguyen, is their agreement that the capitalist crises of overproduction are solved with war²¹². In this respect, the "*state of emergency*" is seen as a normalization process aiming to avert an absolute devaluation of commodities via the recruitment of the productive forces in the generation of a saving disaster; one that prevents the abolition of the existing social order and the collapse of property relations, which depend on the illusion created by the *labor-time*-measured value of commodities²¹³. The "*technocratic traces of fascism*" are explicitly mentioned

207Duy Lap Nguyen, "The Angel of History and the Commodity Fetish: Walter Benjamin and the Marxian Critique of Political Economy", *Constellations: An international Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory*, Vol. 22, No.3, 2015, p.341.

208As he says, the basic source of his analysis is the Arcades Project, which is an unfinished work of Benjamin.

209See Thesis X:

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>

210Cited in Duy Lap Nguyen, 2015:343.

211Duy Lap Nguyen, 2015: 344.

212Duy Lap Nguyen, 2015: 345-346.

213Duy Lap Nguyen, 2015: 350.

in the Theses as pertinent to the illusion perpetuated by commodity fetishism and its implications²¹⁴.

Although Nguyen's observations seem to hold truth, and indeed commodity fetishism is widely accepted as an endorsed principle of Benjamin's outlook on how modern society works, other literature sources on the subject matter seem to favor an explication of the "illusion" mostly via Freudian terms rather than politico-economical or, at best, an imbalanced admixture. It is, of course, understandable that, since Benjamin employs the notion of dream, allusions to Freud are inescapable. What is intriguing, however, is that while commodity fetishism is recognized as an informing principle, it is more often than not denied due elaboration. An example as such is Goldstein's analysis (2006). Goldstein, unlike Nguyen, supports that Benjamin draws the notion of *shock* predominantly from Freud, and that he bases his "collective dreaming" on Jung's "collective unconscious"²¹⁵. Although we read that for Benjamin behind the "intoxicating spell of commodities" hides "the nightmare of fascism", the way fascism and commodity fetishism eventually align is a topic that remains untouched²¹⁶. The commodity-driven illusion is treated as mostly a result of the dazzling effect of consumption²¹⁷, to my understanding. Tyrus Miller (1996) also sees that Benjamin employs Marx's theory of commodity fetishism in his deployment of "dream-theory"²¹⁸. Again, how Marx's ideas specifically contribute to this dream theory is denied through

214See Thesis XI:

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>

215Warren S. Goldstein, "Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch's Theories of Dreams", *Humanity and Society*, Vol.30(1), No.17, 2006, p. 31& 52.

216Goldstein, 2006:50.

217Goldstein writes: "Marx began his critique of capital with the commodity (*die Ware*) and consumers' in fetishism for them". (2006:54). A closer look at Marx's Section 4 of *The Capital* Vol. 1, entitled "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof" shows that the word "consumer" does not appear. Marx writes: "In that [religious] world the production of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities. This Fetishism of commodities has its origin... in the peculiar social character of the labour that produces them". See *The Capital*, 1887, p.48: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf>

218Tyrus Miller, "From city-dreams to the dreaming collective, Walter Benjamin's political dream interpretation", *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 22:87,1996.

elaboration. Yet, he clarifies that Freud was not much of an inspiration to Benjamin²¹⁹. As for Jung, there is compelling evidence that he was a counter-inspiration; a figure Benjamin wished to attack through his writings²²⁰. In any case, Miller quotes a passage from Benjamin that can help us better understand Nguyen's argument:

*"The economic conditions, under which society exists, are expressed in the superstructure; exactly as with the sleeper an overfull stomach finds in the dream content not its reflection, but its expression, although it may causally "determine" it. The collective first expresses its living conditions. They find in their dream their expression and in awakening their interpretation"*²²¹.

Benjamin brings up the notion of expression in his discussion on fascism in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935). There he states that *"Fascism sees its salvation in giving the masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. The masses have the right to change property relations; Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property"*²²².

In light of this, we may assume that illusion, dream, and expression are three tightly related notions. Commodity fetishism is perhaps more than a vague idea creeping absurdly into Benjamin's writings while it is also unlikely that it signifies a hazily understood disillusionment in a consumerist society – at least this latter is made clear since Marx doesn't speak of consumption but production (see footnote 218). Consequently, the interpretation of the living conditions, awakening, and the real state of emergency can be as well be perceived with reference to the Marxian idea of capitalism's false pretensions to equality, which, in turn, hinge on the *"supernatural powers"* ascribed to labor. Indeed, Adorno at some point accused Benjamin of

219 Tyrus Miller, 1996, see footnote no.6, p.107-108.

220 A look at Benjamin's correspondence reveals that in 1935, writing to Adorno, he expresses that he needs to *"learn more about Jung"* (p.472). A little later, again writing to Adorno, he writes that it is necessary to differentiate clearly his collective consciousness from Jung and *"bourgeois psychology"* (p.497). In 1937, addressing Friez Lieb, he writes *"I had intended to write a critique of Jungian psychology, whose Fascist armature I had promised to expose"*. Finally, addressing Scholem in the same year: *"I have begun to delve into Jung's psychology – the devil's work through and through, which should be attacked with white magic"* (p.544). All found in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, 1994.

221 Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project* [K2,5], cited in Tyrus Miller, 1996:106.

222 Walter Benjamin, *"The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"*, in *Walter Benjamin, Illuminations, Essays & Reflections*, translated by H. Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt, Schocken Books, New York, 1968, p. 241.

embracing economic determinism in that he described culture as an expression of the economic relations²²³.

Another point to discuss further is the living conditions that contribute to the dream-like state of the collective. Again, Nguyen (2014) highlights that Benjamin draws on Marx in order to picture the effect of capitalism-specific conditions on experience²²⁴. Similarly, Salzani's (2009) elaborate and lucid discussion on Benjamin's "*atrophy of experience*" does not mention Marx, though his references to Benjamin's "*revolutionary program*", the notions of commodity, and labor may suffice to cast his shadow²²⁵. A merit of Salzani's analysis is that it sheds some light on the way aesthetics blends with Marxism. The transference of a commodity-fetishism frame to the discussion on art explains how the workers in economy find a potent counterpart in art through surrealism, since both can change reality. This said, Salzani does not miss to indicate Benjamin's criticism against the surrealist tendency to embrace the dream without seeking awakening²²⁶.

Benjamin distinguishes between the pre-modern and modern forms of experience, naming the former *Erfahrung* and the latter *Erlebnis* (Nguyen, 2014; Salzani, 2009; Goldstein, 2006). *Erfahrung* is associated mostly with experience through immersion, tradition, community, and memory (i.e storytelling, playing etc.). *Erlebnis*, inversely, implies instantaneity, discontinuity, contradiction, and shock²²⁷. Nguyen (unlike Glodstein, as we saw above) supports that the idea of shock internalizes Marx's idea of crises in industrial capitalism²²⁸. Salzani's analysis indirectly points at Benjamin's reading of Marx through György Lukács, as we will see²²⁹.

Erlebnis is an experience in which a new form of boredom is born, when all habits follow the rhythm of the machine, and when passivity becomes a reaction to overstimulation²³⁰. Just like labor, leisure follows the temporal patterns of the machine

223Andrian Wilding, 1996: 114.

224Duy Lap Nguyen, "Capitalism and Primal History in Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project", *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, Vol. 25, No.3, 2014, p.123-143.

225Carlo Salzani, "The Atrophy of Experience: Walter Benjamin and Boredom", in *Essays on Boredom and Modernity*, edited by Carlo Salzani and Barbara Dalle Pezze, Editions Rodopi B.V., Leiden Netherlands, 2009, pp. 127- 154.

226Carlo Salzani, 2009:143

227Carlo Salzani, 2009: 129.

228Duy Lap Nguyen, 2014: 130.

229Carlo Salzani, 2009: 134. See, the Lukácsian idea of *reification*.

230Carlo Salzani, 2009: 131.

while the promised new adventures and thrills prove to be an utter disappointment: “*the city promised me something new each day and by evening I was left wanting*”, “*the dream has grown grey*”, “*when yawning the human being himself opens like an abyss. He makes himself resemble the time stagnating around him*”²³¹. The fakeness of novelty comes forth in expressions of modernity such as fashion (“*madam Death!*”) or news reporting, which are always the same, an eternal repetition, a myth, “*the always new, always identical*”²³². This compulsion with the *not-so-new* novelty Benjamin calls *Schein* and finds it to be a defining feature of experience in modernity²³³. Through this atrophic form of experience, people feel empathy not for people but for commodities. In Salzani’s words “*this empathy becomes, in the construction of history, empathy and identification with the victor*”²³⁴.

In Salzani’s account, Benjamin calls in a Baudelairean destructive force that reveals a revolutionary potential: *spleen*²³⁵. The atrophy of experience caused by the capitalist-specific conditions of life is counteracted by the very sense of betrayal and hopelessness it engenders. The face of hell and death appear behind the false claims of progress and novelty, and, thus, the dream turns into a nightmare²³⁶. *Spleen* understood as sullenness and uneasiness is a power that reveals the fakeness in modernity’s promise for happiness, helping the collective to grasp the demise of their experience. Baudelaire’s spleen becomes Benjamin’s “*bulwark against pessimism*”²³⁷, inviting a child-like, impatient, anticipation for awakening as well as destructive action against *Schein* and the “*reification and fragmentation of time*”, as Salzani phrases it²³⁸. When bringing up reification, Salzani necessarily reinforces Lukács’ influence on Benjamin. Singh (2019) comments that Lukács castigated modern philosophy for its false ontologization of “*problems that arise from its own material conditions*”²³⁹. This way, the lived experience is interpreted upon the basis of false assumptions that tend to ignore the social relations in capitalist society. This is where Benjamin takes a cue to deploy his

231 Benjamin quoted in Salzani, 2009: 133-134.

232 Benjamin quoted in Salzani, 2009: 135.

233 Carlo Salzani, 2009:134.

234 Carlo Salzani, 2009:137.

235 Carlo Salzani, 2009:138.

236 Carlo Salzani, 2009:136 (Erlebnis is pictured as the temporality of hell).

237 Carlo Salzani, 2009:139.

238 Carlo Salzani, 2009:144.

239 Surti Singh, “Dark Play: Aesthetic resistance in Lukács, Benjamin and Adorno”, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, No.1, 2019, p.4.

own account and establish his alliance with surrealism's subversive potential in faith that language can be employed not only in philosophy, but also in literary art with the intention not just to describe, but to transform reality (Witte, 1975)²⁴⁰.

An even more elucidating account on the triangle Marx -Lukács- Benjamin is provided by Gyorgy Markus (2001)²⁴¹. He details that Lukács' notion of reification was critical to the emergence of a Marxian theory of aesthetics, which both Adorno and Brecht utilized. Contra Marx, who saw art as autonomous and untouched from the economic conditions²⁴², Adorno described the commodification of art as a contradictory force that both leads to art's autonomy and, at the same time, contributes to its "*irrevocable liquidation*"²⁴³. Contra Adorno, Brecht's own experience as an artist prompted him to emphasize that any allusions to autonomy are misleading and ideologically colored. For Brecht the "*viewpoint of selling*" changes the relations between artist and audience, but mass production helps to unmask the false assumption of art autonomy while providing the basis for a different use of art; a pedagogical one in the service of the collective²⁴⁴. As Markus points out, Benjamin takes a step further and – resembling perhaps a marxist faith in capitalism's self-destructive contradictions- he finds that technology dissolves the auratic dimension in the collective experience of art, thus providing an opportunity for groundbreaking changes in the meaning-making process through the appreciation of art, which can lead to a different appreciation of reality as a whole²⁴⁵. Markus also explains that Benjamin's reception of commodity fetishism is mostly appropriated as a basis for his development of his own theory of experience and the potential stemming from the distortion of reality. In the everyday mass experience, Benjamin, writes Markus, sought the incentive for the development of a "*counterculture of revolutionary will*"²⁴⁶. In my view, however, this optimistic outlook on art's potency in capitalism as affording opportunities and resources for its destruction does not manifest a broader

240Bernd Witte, "Benjamin and Lukacs. Historical Notes on the Relationship between Their Political and Aesthetic Theories", *New German Critique*, No. 5, 1975, p.22.

241Gyorky Markus, "Walter Benjamin or: The Commodity as Phantasmagoria", *New German Critique*, No. 83, pp.3-42.

242Gyorgy Markus, 2001: 3-4.

243Gyorgy Markus, 2001: 5.

244Gyorky Markus: 6-7.

245Gyorky Markus: 10.

246Gyorky Markus, 2001: 27.

faith in an impending self-inflicted collapse of the social order. It shows, perhaps, a rather eclectic approach to the core arguments of commodity fetishism theory.

Finally, Markus observes that the discussion of art and aesthetics was for Benjamin yet another prominent opportunity to attack the Kantian theory of perception and experience and introduce his argument for an understanding of meaning-formation as socially conditioned and observable in language, since language itself is an experience of meaning formation that follows no natural laws but, instead, social change²⁴⁷. A present experience or interpretation of a work of art produced in a past era and under different social conditions brings about significations informed by the present. There is not crystalized, ever-same meaning ascribed to it²⁴⁸. Similarly, this applies for the historical objects, as we've discussed, when history is linked with remembrance and, hence, experience.²⁴⁹

247Gyorky Markus, 2001: 11.

248Gyorky Markus, 2001: 12.

249Gyorky Markus, 2001:13.

B.2 The tradition of the dead in Benjamin and Marx.

Two of the most frequently cited snippets from Karl Marx's writing in the secondary literature on Benjamin's concept of history come from the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852).

First: "*Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living*"²⁵⁰.

And second: "*The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped away all superstition about the past. The former revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to smother their own content. The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead in order to arrive at its own content.*"²⁵¹

It is very often the case that, depending on whether one wishes to highlight convergence or divergence between Marx and Benjamin on the subject of history opts for the passage that best serves each purpose. As Nguyen argues that little work has been done in reading Benjamin contra Marx with reference to critical political economy, so does Matthias Fritsch (2005) maintain when it comes to memory and history²⁵².

The nightmarish figure of the past in the first passage does indeed seem to bring Marx and Benjamin to agreement, but not at all in a manner like we might guess at first sight. Actually, when read within its context, it becomes clear that Marx's first passage proclaims that the proletariat revolution is meant to be neither the continuation of the bourgeois revolutions nor of any other past struggle. As we saw earlier, Benjamin raised the point of false class-identity, as well. Yet, Marx goes beyond this. Marx starts the text by recalling Engel's view that all "*great historical facts and personages*" make their appearance twice; to this, he adds his own observation: "*the first as tragedy, the second*

250Karl Marx (1852), *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1937 edition, p.5
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/18th-Brumaire.pdf>

251As above, p. 6.

252Mathias Fritsch, *The Promise of Memory: History and Politics in Marx, Benjamin, and Derrida*, State University of New York Press, New York, 2005, p.12.

*time as farce*²⁵³. The farce is further explicated as parody made by new revolutions, which draw their revolutionary semiotics from old ones, not with the intention to ridicule them, but, rather, to capitalize on their magnitude: “*the awakening of the dead*” sparks the revolutionary spirit without “*making its ghost walk again*”²⁵⁴. For Marx the proletariat revolution ought to move away from this paradigm. It has to invent its own vocabulary, find its own brand-new language, and “*let the dead bury the dead*” for good. The invocation of the dead is seen more as a threat (a superstition) to the genuineness of the content of the revolution. Only the future is to inform this content. Fritsch interprets this as a call for “*active forgetting*” that prompts the subject of history to realize its mission unhampered by the specters of the past²⁵⁵. This content is to be found in understanding how history works and the role that the laws of history prescribe to the proletariat as its subject²⁵⁶. For Benjamin, however, the past struggles are not nightmarish; they are not perceived as a superstition that holds back the revolutionary vision. Quite differently, remembrance of the past struggles is a source of revolutionary momentum.

This said, the memory of the oppressed and the violence they suffered is of no little significance to Marx, as Fritsch comments. The chapter on the bloody decrees and laws from the 15th century to his days found in *The Capital* is a documentation of legal ruthlessness and a testimony to the memory of its victims²⁵⁷. Fritsch also recalls that Marx had written in the press about the victims of the proletariat and those of the bourgeois. This he interprets as being mirrored in Benjamin’s distinction of the two histories, namely that of the victors and that of the oppressed²⁵⁸. Both thinkers express outrage for the victims who paid the price of the riches of the bourgeois – and this is

253Karl Marx (1852), *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1937 edition, p.5
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/18th-Brumaire.pdf>

254As above, p.6.

255Mathias Fritsch, 2005:20.

256Mathias Fritsch, 2005:25.

257Karl Marx (1867), *The Capital, A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume 1. See Part 8, Chapter 28: “Bloody Legislation Against The Expropriated, from the End of the 15th Century. Forcing Down of Wages by Acts of Parliament”, English Edition of 1887, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf>, p. 522.

258Mathias Fritsch, 2005:18.

precisely the scope of Marx's commemoration, meaning to expose the violent background behind the establishment of capitalism²⁵⁹.

Speaking of fundamental differences, the question of "*promise*" is a key point of divergence between the two thinkers. Although Marx honors the memory of the dead, he allows himself to let go in exchange for a promise for revolutionary victory²⁶⁰. This is hardly sensed in Benjamin; faith in a guaranteed victory in Marx's narrative becomes the source of political quietism for Benjamin, mostly prevalent among the social democrats of his age: the victory of the proletariat revolution as an accurate, scientific forecast passes down to Marx's epigones as the *fata morgana* of the "*infinite task*"²⁶¹, which Benjamin saw as the breeding ground for relinquishment and conformism; an unforgivable undermining of the revolution itself and the "*embourgeoisement of Marxism*"²⁶², in Fritsch's words.

Although Benjamin appropriates many insights from Marx, he hesitates to embrace an economic determinism that yielded a sense of optimistic historical fatalism in the Marxist thought of his contemporaries. The experience of his generation, as he notes, is that "*capitalism will not die a natural death*"²⁶³. Concepts like "*the proletariat*" or the "*classless society*" or Marx's name itself are used repeatedly in Benjamin's Theses, yet the optimism about and faith in an impending, positive change in the living conditions as a result of the progress in the development of the forces of production is substituted with a fragile hope that settles in the remembrance of past resistance. Certainty gives its place to doubt and wariness amidst the rise of fascism, which is, understandably, a source of pessimism for Benjamin. Endangerment threatens not only those who witness the face of fascism, but also the dead, whose tradition of struggles and their claims on the present are at risk of being effaced.

259Mathias Fritsch, 2005:21.

260Mathias Fritsch, 2005: 20.

261Mathias Fritsch, 2005:35.

262Mathias Fritsch, 2005:159.

263Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, [X11,a,3], 1996, p.667.

C. Walter Benjamin and Collective Memory Studies.

There is general agreement (Assman 1995, Kansteiner 2002, Olick 2009, Feindt et al. 2014) that Maurice Halbwachs²⁶⁴ and Aby Warburg²⁶⁵ are rightly pictured as the “fathers” of Memory Studies. According to Assman (1995), they were the first to introduce a theory of Collective and Social Memory that disentangled the broader term *Collective Knowledge* from biological essentialism²⁶⁶. Therefore, they do not see cultures and cultural identities in a speciesist manner, rendering their theories inoperable for and alien to Social Darwinism or Social Spencerism²⁶⁷. It is worth noting that Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* is often compared to Warburg’s *Mnemosyne* of images. It is true that any comparisons can be considered invalid, since the *Arcades Project* is not Benjamin’s own final product. However, his notion of *dialectical image* seems to invite comparative analyses. Benjamin envisioned his project as a work of “showing”- not saying. He cites history- he doesn’t narrate; texts inherit the qualities of visual stimuli. History emerges through discontinuous fragments, inviting the reader to employ interpretation and bring their own topoi into an open-ended task of historical reflection. As Christopher D. Johnson (2012) explains, the dialectical images help Benjamin “*explain historical change without making it a child of reason’s progress*”²⁶⁸. History emerges from a montage-like body of textual cues that breed suspicion towards the “*Enlightenment narrative of historical evolution*”²⁶⁹. Such presuppositions about progress and evolution found their ultimately darkest expression not only in fascism, but also in historical narratives of colonialism (discussed just below).

Assman (1995) coined the term Cultural Memory. He defines it as “*a collective concept of all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a*

264Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*. Edited, translated and prefaced by Lewis A. Coser, The Heritage of Sociology, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1992.

265Aby Warburg, *L’Atlas Mnemosyne*, L’Écarquillé, Paris, 2012.

266Jan Assman, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity”, translated by John Czaplicka, *New German Critique*, No.65, Cultural History/ Cultural Studies, Spring-Summer 1995, pp.125-133. p.125.

267Gregory Claeys, “The ‘Survival of the Fittest’ and the Origins of Social Darwinism”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol.6, No.2, April 2000, pp.223-240, p.228.

268Christopher D. Johnson, *Memory, Metaphor, and Aby Warburg’s Atlas of Images*, Cornell University Press and Cornell University Library, Ithaca, New York, 2012. P.17.

269Christopher D. Johnson, 2012:17.

society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation”²⁷⁰. He distinguishes cultural memory from both “everyday memory” and “science”. Rather, there is a “cultural objectivation process”, which plays a key role in the formation of a cultural self-image²⁷¹. Assman sees links between cultural memory and identity formation that allows Collective Knowledge of non-scientific form to be transmitted for thousands of years. Yet, he tends to restrict collective knowledge to knowledge about history. The link between collective memory and cultural identity can introduce us to the parallels drawn by scholars between Benjamin and Galeano’s historiography (Fischlin, 2002). Collective memory as a source of knowledge that nests in remembrance and verbal tradition can provide insights into a battle against the “official history” or “the history of victors”. Against the epic form of narrative, Galeano turns to what official historiography has neglected: the fragmentary archive of the voices of the marginalized, capturing the indigenous experience of colonialism and post-colonialism through the eyes of the oppressed²⁷². This testimony reinforces what Benjamin calls the transmission of dominant culture and its barbarism from one set of victorious hands into another. In this context, the memory of the past is not solely a mournful story, but a call for resistance. Ann Rigney (2018) highlights the relation between collective memory and collective action, social movements and activism²⁷³. Rigney brings up the names of Bloch and Benjamin as examples of thinkers who could inform a theoretical scope for a collective memory that treats the past as a source of hope.

Another interesting theoretical usage of Benjamin’s ideas in the context of colonialism is that of Michael Watts (2001), who “transports” Benjamin to the Nigerian Delta or Ecuador in order to discuss the “ecological nightmare” and political violence petroleum extraction brought to the local communities²⁷⁴. I find that he infuses notions like

270Assman, 1995:126.

271Assman, 1995:129.

272Daniel Fischlin, “History’s “Refuse”: Benjamin, Galeano, and the “Power to Create”, *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*, Vol. 26, No.1/2, Estudios en Honor a Mario J. Valdes, (Otoño 2001 / Invierno 2002), pp. 107-122.

273Ann Rigney, “Remembering Hope: Transnational Activism Beyond the Traumatic”, *Memory Studies*, Vol.11, No.3, pp.368-380, July 2018.

274Michael Watts, “Petro-Violence: Community, Extraction, and Political Ecology of a Mythic Commodity”, *Violent Environments*, (edited by Nancy Lee Peluso & Michael Watts), Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 2001, p.193.

“*Mythic Commodity*”, “*Shock*”, “*Dreaming*”, “*Phantasmagoria*”, and “*Awakening*” in the realm of political ecology very successfully when he discusses this matter. Here I shall add that, though seemingly unrelated to Benjamin and even more so to Watt’s aforementioned analysis in terms of core subject matter, Lia Haro and Romand Coles (2017) also account for the threat of “*planetary ecological collapse*” in their essay on Neo-Fascism and the rise of far-right globally²⁷⁵ (a topic that Levi and Rothberg, 2018, approach through the notion of “*moment of danger*” as we will see soon).

Wulf Kansteiner’s (2002) acknowledges that eurocentrism is apparent in the field of memory studies, especially in the work of Pierre Nora²⁷⁶, who is a pioneer in bringing historicist insights into the field²⁷⁷. From a postmodernist scope, Kansteiner (2002) calls for a focus on the media through which collective memory is constructed and transmitted²⁷⁸. He also draws attention to Halbwach’s anti-individualist approach and warns against psychoanalytical methodology, which transfer methods of individual memory analysis to the sphere of the *collective* arbitrarily²⁷⁹. Another important scholar is Jeffrey K. Olick²⁸⁰. He (2009) gives credence to Frederic Charles Bartlett²⁸¹, who theorized that individual memory is a socially constructed mental representation. He also speaks of *processes* of transmission, referencing the contributions of Aleida and Jan Assman²⁸², who studied the importance of collective memory in the formation of religious and political identities. Such insights may prompt us to revisit and reflect on the discussion on the approaches to Benjamin via Freund and, even more so, Jung. As I have tried to show, this interpretation needs further examination, for there is a chance of false emphasis. Benjamin does not seem to start from individual psychology in his analysis of

275Lia Haro and Romand Coles, “Eleven Theses on Neo-Fascism and the Fight to Defeat it”, *Theory and Event*, John Hopkins University Press, Vol. 20, No. 1, January 2017 supplement, pp. 100-115, p.101.

276Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, Gallimard, Paris, 1984-1992.

277Wulf Kansteiner, “Finding Meaning in Memory: A methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies”, *History and Theory*, Vo.41, No.2, May 2002, pp.179-197, p. 183.

278Kansteiner, 2002: 190.

279Kansteiner, 2002: 186.

280Jeffrey K. Olick, “Between Chaos and Diversity: Is Social Memory Studies a Field?”, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, Vol.22, No.2, Special Issue: Memory and Media Space, June 2009, pp.249-252.

281Frederic C. Bartlett, *Remembering, A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1932.

282Aleida and Jan Assman, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, C.H. Beck, München, 1992.

the collective dream and phantasmagoria. In this respect, the question whether the transference from an individual to a collective sphere is a failure in Benjamin is, I find, debatable, since the dream itself is the myth of modernity; the myth of progress, equality and freedom; not an individual's dream but one born out of the living conditions and the absence of happiness. The idea of "*homogenous, empty time*" does not engage Benjamin directly in a discourse on identity formation, but we should consider that the very same term is employed in an influential book on this subject matter, namely Benedict Anderson's "*Imagined Communities*", where he studies the origins of nationalism²⁸³.

Feindt et al. (2014) agree with Olick that Assman's approach is restrictive because focusing on single historical events and groups, collective social bodies are treated "*as essential and static entities*"²⁸⁴. A remedial theorization is perhaps that of *Transcultural Memory* by Astrid Erll (2011). She notes that cases of Collective Memory communicate with one another; this is Erll's "*traveling of memory*" in her same-titled essay²⁸⁵. Levi and Rothberg (2018) invites us to see the present as "*a moment of danger*" and return to Benjamin, when investigating how the politics of memory come at play in the rise of far-right transnationally today²⁸⁶. Employing Erll's idea of "travelling memory" and Enzo Traverso's "*confusing cacophony*" of contemporary memories of fascism, they investigate how this memory substantiates itself in today's far-right rhetoric and semiotics. Meanwhile, they also consider today's mnemonic atrophy as well as resistant remembrance.

Timothy Kubal and Rene Becerra (2014) note that the joint study of collective memory and social movements is only a very new discourse in social theory²⁸⁷. In their essay we find a valuable summary of some recent observations, problematic as well as research potential in these two fields, which seem to share much unexplored common ground.

283Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Edition, Verso, London & New York, 2006.

284Gregor Feindt, Félix Krawatzek, Daniela Mehler, Friefemann Pestel and Rieke Trimçev, "Entangled Memory: Towards a Third Wave in Memory Studies", *History and Theory*, Vol.53, No.1, February 2014, pp.24-44, p.26.

285Astrid Erll, "Traveling Memory", *Parallax*, Vol.17, No.4, pp.4-18, 2011.

286Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg, "Memory Studies in a moment of danger: Fascism, postfascism, and the contemporary political imaginary", *Memory Studies*, 11(3), 355–367.

287Timothy Kubal and Rene Becerra, "Social Movements and Collective Memory", *Sociology Compass*, Vol.8, No.6, pp.865-875.

Their case seems to observe reciprocity between collective memory and collective action. Apart from collective memory having a formative impact on social movements – generating, for example, what is broadly called *memory activism*²⁸⁸- there is one more thing to account for: the role of social movements in actually generating collective memory as part of their *framing process* - if framing is understood as “*transformation of old meanings*”. Benjamin’s notion of “*meaning formation*”, as relevant to the framing strategy in the context of interpretive social movements theory, has been indirectly used – through referencing Ann Rigney’s “hope in the past” - by Christoph H. Schwarz (2019) in his study on the “*iaioflautas*” movement (the grandparents' movement) in Spain and its framing of transgenerational solidarity²⁸⁹. In fact, this case study encapsulates a reciprocal and formative interaction between collective memory and social movements. In this respect, the vitality Benjamin attaches to the transformative powers of remembrance can be theorized as of importance to collective political action. A competing claim on history is a prerequisite for the formation of competing political agency and the formulation of socio-economic demands. Politics is always a politics of memory.

Summary

In the introduction we briefly discussed why reconciliation between messianism and historical materialism via the notion of elective affinity, especially when treated as a method, might be a debatable proposition. The prime reason why elective affinities is not endorsed here is that it prevents us from seeing that messianism and historical materialism may not reflect each other in an analogical manner but, rather, each has something distinct to contribute towards Benjamin elusive philosophical structure.

In chapter A, I tried to capture messianism in a broader sense and its role in the political thought of Benjamin’s era. I emphasized that messianism was bound up with the idea of teleology and the enlightened notion of progress. Also, I presented how Benjamin’s

288See, for example, the human rights movement in Argentina and its slogan “*No oblivion no Pardon*”, thoroughly discussed in Jelin Elizabrth, “The Politics of Memory”, *Latin American Perspective: A Journal of Capitalism and Socialism*, Vol.21, No. 2, 1994, pp.38-58.

289Christopher H. Schwarz, “Collective Memory and intergenerational transmission in social movement: The “grandparents” movement” *iaiflautas*, the indignados protests, and the Spanish transition”, *Memory Studies*, No.1, p.1-18.

appropriation of the messianic discourse may as well disentangle it from its ties to futurity; and argued that, for this reason, it is questionable whether we can classify his discourse as “Political Theology”, since theocracy is not to be perceived as relevant to a discussion on politics. I proposed the term “Theopolitics” as an alternative that highlights an opposition to the metaphysics of the state. Moreover, I promoted those scholarly views that investigate the profane signification of the term *redemption* and explored its transgression from its philosophical roots (i.e. Plato). Finally, I attempted to capture how Benjamin’s early writings may point towards a materialist understanding of history.

In chapter B, I sought to present how his eclectic (or fairly fragmentary) reception of marxism amalgamates with his aesthetico-experiential concerns. I argued against an overemphasis on a Freudian understanding that psychologizes his discourse. By discussing his understanding of living conditions, I argued for the social and collective dimension he ascribes to experience, dreaming and awakening. I attempted to challenge those final judgements that see his atrophy of experience as a basis for an argument in favour of an absolute deactivation of political agency in capitalism and, inversely, accentuated the destructive potential he sees in surrealism as an example of perception that can change reality. Following this, I discussed the basic difference between Benjamin and Marx with respect to the role of remembrance of past struggles in building a present subversive momentum. In this discussion, I highlighted that Benjamin’s historical context amidst the rise of the Nazi regime in Europe is pivotal in his criticism against political quietism, which he sees as a derivative of Marx’s own reassuring *promise* for victory; ones described as *laws* of history.

In Chapter C, I attempted to present how Benjamin’s discourse on memory and history could provide a layer of theoretical insights to the field of collective memory studies. Many scholars have noticed this potential and embedded some key notions in their theoretical armature to back their analyses. This relatively new development helps us re-evaluate Benjamin’s work as relevant to social movement theory, especially when we identify how his “*redemption of history*” may indeed be of relevance to a discussion on “*framing*”. The interplay between collective remembrance and collective political action finds in Benjamin a valuable source of theoretical insights as it sets out to reveal

that historical memory is a battlefield for politics and a decisive factor in the development of political agency.

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