

## ONE

# Benjamin's Reading of Marx

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THE EVENTS MARKED by the year 1989 can largely be seen as severing a certain political messianism from its institutionalization. Thereby, they provide the opportunity to reopen the inheritance of Marx's text with the intention of salvaging and reformulating its promise for a future, a promise that had been overshadowed and appropriated by totalitarian systems. It is not the case, of course, that Marx's promise for a classless society could only be reinterpreted after its institutionalization in the Soviet Union had been overcome. On the contrary, such reinterpretations constitute the multifarious history of Marxisms. However, the breakdown of the Soviet Union, and the waning of institutionalized Marxism elsewhere, provide a perhaps privileged starting point, and even an obligation, to reinterpret the promise. On the other hand, this privilege comes with an additional burden. Especially after 1989—and the opening of Soviet archives, revealing more clearly than before Soviet atrocities, beginning with Lenin—any reinterpretation of the Marxist promise of social justice can no longer afford to ignore the violence committed in the name of its institutional realization. One way of broaching this reinterpretation, then, consists in the attempt to ask about the relation between the promise of a classless society and the memory of such violence in history, with the intention of seeking a closer integration between them.

Among the previous, pre-1989 rewritings of this promise there is arguably none that concerns itself more intensely with the relationship between the promise of a liberated future and the memory of the violence that explains the need for such a promise—a violence that attends both the failure to fulfill the promise and the claim to have instituted it—than Walter Benjamin's. Thus, this chapter will investigate Benjamin's relationship to Marx. My main concern will be the unfolding of Benjamin's argument that this promise for liberation, even for its own sake, has to be related in a non-instrumental manner to a particular attention given to precisely the victims

of political and economic violence in the past. On pain of losing its emancipatory impulse, the promise may not view itself as surpassing or overcoming that history. Benjamin's work on the Paris Arcades (the *Passagenwerk*) in particular asked these questions of the inheritance of Marx, under very different political conditions, to be sure, but in a way that, nonetheless, merits closer analysis today.

Given these reasons for rereading Benjamin on Marx, however, the reader who consults the rapidly expanding secondary literature on the former's oeuvre will be surprised to find that little of substance has been written about his relation to Marx. The student movement of the 1960s, especially in Germany, might be said to have rediscovered Benjamin for political theory and action, reopening the texts that his friend Adorno had made available in the 1950s, after a period of near-total neglect by the broader public. Although the discussions that followed were dominated by the question of the opposition between Marxist materialism and theological messianism, scholarly investigations into Benjamin's complicated relationship to Marx's texts are rare. No doubt the unavailability of the *Passagenwerk*, published only in the 1980s with certain manuscripts still outstanding, contributed to this lack of research, since that left scholars with only the sparse comments on Marx in the "Theses on the Concept of History" and the essays on Baudelaire and Eduard Fuchs. Particularly earlier essays—like the 1921 "On the Critique of Violence," which the third chapter will take to be crucial to an understanding of the "Theses"—were mostly neglected or bypassed as precisely belonging to the early, "theological" Benjamin. It is, however, perhaps this very opposition between Marxism and theology, materialism and messianism, that disallows a proper assessment even of Marx himself: It brushes aside the way in which Marx—despite his claim that the critique of political economy begins after the critique of (Christian) religion—is reworking and renegotiating a tradition of messianic and eschatological thought, as Karl Löwith was perhaps the first to systematically argue—and cast in a negative light.<sup>1</sup> One of the merits of Derrida's *Specters of Marx* is, as we will see, that it excavates and reformulates this messianic thought in the Marxist tradition after 1989. By insisting on the idea of unconditional responsibility that messianic thought harbors, Derrida attempts—against the scientific, structural interpretation of Althusser, for example—to interpret the liberation of the messianic aspects in Marxism from their institutionalization as a chance for political philosophy and political responsibility. Benjamin also recalls Marx to this tradition of messianic thought—for Benjamin, an eclectic and mostly kabalistic tradition, mediated by his friend Gershom Scholem—while still affirming Marx's 'secularization' of the messianic idea, as we will see.

However, insofar as these efforts of Benjamin were recognized in the secondary literature, this affirmation was, and often is, discredited or viewed as attempts at the impossible. This explains the list of commentators who do

not tire to point out how incompatible (and therefore impractical) Benjamin's historical materialism—a word Benjamin makes his own during the 1930s—is with Marx and Marxism, rather than motivating a rereading of the latter.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the year 1989 presents a genuine opportunity that calls for a reassessment, perhaps revealing Benjamin as the *contretemps* he theorized in his historical reflections: as an event waiting for its sudden reappearance and unlocking by another, discontinuously related event.

Although the last twenty years witnessed a shift of accents in Benjamin scholarship, in particular in Germany and the United States, but increasingly also in France and Italy, they did not decisively return Benjamin to Marx. The massive intrusion of 'postmodern' theory in critical theory as a whole led to a renewed interest in Benjamin's literary achievements and his esoteric philosophizing that most often presents itself in the guise of literary readings (the German *Trauerspiel* of the seventeenth century, the interpretations of Goethe, Baudelaire, etc.). Deconstructive readings of Benjamin now abound, especially after de Man and Derrida themselves engaged his writings.<sup>3</sup> From the standpoint of Benjamin scholarship, it must seem ironic that the publication of Benjamin's most political and historical writings in the 1980s is accompanied by an increased awareness of his linguistic sensibilities and figural strategies centering on the theory and technique of presentation (*Darstellung*). Given these sensibilities and these emphases, Benjamin's often indirect, notoriously recondite and allusive styles of writing, but also his theoretical and philosophical attempts to define language and politics, among other things, are meeting with greater attention. While this has led to a general reopening of his texts to the point of infatuated canonization, these tendencies have not only relegated the question of Benjamin and Marx to a secondary position, but seem to have forgotten it altogether. In the sea of secondary literature, only very few refer to this question, as if language and materialism, literature and politics, theology and Marxism, were once again in irreconcilable opposition. It is as if the downfall of communism now allowed us to welcome the literary and theological side of Benjamin, whereas he precisely tried to rework the opposition between political action and literary and theological interpretation.<sup>4</sup> A further tendency of this new wave of secondary literature is to appropriate Benjamin for postmodern theory, attended by the familiar resistance on the part of some Marxists, such that Benjamin—more precisely, interpretations of Benjamin—became one of the key figures in the (now somewhat stale) debate between 'modernity' and 'postmodernity.'<sup>5</sup> I will here try to avoid these oppositional tendencies in order to reopen the question and interweaving of politics, language, memory and historiographical presentation.

For these reasons, I will begin with an analysis of Benjamin's critique of Marx and the role that the concept of the messianic plays in it. Perhaps it is not surprising that a confrontation over this concept is triggered by the issue

of violence in history, for the messianic has lent expression to a more than understandable dissatisfaction in the face of the irretrievability of loss, an irretrievability that appears to affect the self-righteousness of concepts of justice. It is often overlooked that Marx, especially in *Capital*, devoted considerable resources to recount victimization in the past, and to point out the importance of its memory in political and economic contexts. In the first section, I analyze the way in which Marx construes the relationship between a memory of the victims of capitalism's beginnings and the promise for liberation from it, a relationship most often governed by the idea of immanent laws of progress. In section two, I argue that Benjamin revises the question of history in order to direct it away from the alleged laws of historical development, focusing instead on the ever new 'construction' of the past in the present. (This construction, or Benjamin's theory of the 'constellation' of the past and the present, will receive fuller treatment in chapter four.) Benjamin's resistance to the idea of progress and the notion of linear time will then allow us to inquire into his claims for a non-instrumental, nonprogressivistic relationship to the future, a future to which Benjamin wishes to restore what he calls a messianic face. I will argue here that Benjamin attempts to retain the 'secularized' theologico-political imperative he sees embodied in 'communist' political action (which Benjamin seeks to divorce from 'communist goals'), but that this imperative, if given its full weight, requires the abandoning of a Marxist sacralization of history by way of the theory of progress. (The conception of this non-instrumental political action, and its problematic ambiguities, will be more fully elaborated in chapter three by way of a reading of the early essay "On the Critique of Violence" and its Derridian interpretation in "The Force of Law.") Benjamin's reformulation of Marx's promise for the future will then be seen to uncover heretofore buried aspects and 'energies' of the past, but also to place the present under the claim of the victims of history.

A word of caution about the interpretation of Marx in this and the next two chapters is in order. The reading of Marx advanced here is a reading that is willing to emphasize teleological tendencies and economic determinism but does, on the whole, not seek out other tendencies—with the exception of uncovering the extent to which Marx was concerned with a memory of injustice. This reading does not claim to be the only possible one. Different texts as well as different layers of Marx's writings might, with good justification, be mobilized. Nonetheless, the reading presented is a legitimate one, especially if one keeps in mind its purpose in the present context. First, what is needed is the relevant background to Benjamin's (and, later, Derrida's) critique of the contemporary Marxism of the Second International, and also of Marx himself. Second, and more important, for the sake of grasping the significance of Benjamin's and Derrida's objections, it is necessary to understand how the institutionalization of Marx's promise could lead to the totalitarian

violence now associated with it, despite the difficulty of tracing a continuous line from Marx to Stalin. As noted, any attempt to inherit Marx's promise today must take account of this violence. I believe it is worthwhile to read Marx differently, for example, as undermining a Leninist or Kautskian appropriation, but such a reading, especially if it wishes to join a memory of injustice to a promise of justice, may not be oblivious to those layers of Marx that permitted such an appropriation.

#### REMEMBERING THE INSTITUTING VIOLENCE OF CAPITALISM

Let us proceed to the argument that Marx already connected a sense of loss and anger at past victimization to his promise for the future, but that, in the end, a certain teleo-logic of history comes to dominate the thinking of the relation of the past to the future in his writing. While analyzing the suffering of the oppressed in the past as well as in the present, Marx views the final materialization of his promise for the classless society as following the very same logic that brought about the suffering, such that the promise would in some sense justify the suffering and surpass a mournful memory of those victims. This account provides the background against which we should read Benjamin's explicit and largely overlooked critique of Marx. This critique hints at a way to inherit the promise that neither opposes it to memory nor justifies past suffering. Indeed, Benjamin will be seen to argue that a focused assumption of loss and suffering in the past is necessary to the inheritance of past promises, but also necessary to guard against the belief in a simple fulfillment of the promise. For Benjamin, this inheritance requires a radical rejection of a politics of 'endism,' one that directs itself to the goals or the ends of history or of politics. Rather, Benjamin tries to conceptualize a theory of political action that derives its efficacy and motivation not from its political goals, but from a political imperative, which, while interrupting the linear time of progressive history, at the same time finds its sustenance in a memory of violence and suffering. For Benjamin, as I will elaborate in greater detail in chapter three, a concept of emancipatory action that is motivated by the promise of the past but does not neglect this memory, indeed requires a refusal of every instrumental or utilitarian logic that uses its goal to justify the means, and which relies on the future in order to sacrifice or surpass the past. While Benjamin's critique of Marx's progressive logic of history denies the conception of a future as a utopian goal, this critique reveals, in various ways, the crucial impact on emancipatory struggles of a memory of promises that is also a memory of loss. (In the third chapter, I will ask about the possibility and desirability of denying political goals altogether.)

Benjamin encountered Marx's writing at a time when its reception was still dominated by the Second International (1889–1914), a loose federation

of parties and trade unions whose doctrine and influence was largely embodied and dominated by German Social Democracy, the most important party during the Weimar Republic. Benjamin is especially critical of the Social Democratic neo-Kantian, Bernsteinian interpretation of Marxism. As we will see, Benjamin argues that on this goal-fixated and ultimately quietist view, the promised classless society becomes a regulative ideal and the struggle for it an “infinite task” without urgency (I 1232). By contrast to the dismissive treatment of Social Democracy, he usually approaches Marx’s texts more carefully and affirmatively. In the *Passagenwerk*, his unfinished account of the history of the nineteenth century as crucial to an understanding of modernity, Benjamin is mostly interested in Marx, and in particular in the “Eighteenth Brumaire” (the text that we will see Derrida privilege for an access to Marx’s account of ‘active forgetting’), insofar as it itself belongs to the object of the study, that is, as a privileged source for his historical ‘commentary.’ Consequently, one hopes in vain to find there a detailed philosophical, sociopolitical, and methodological confrontation with Marx. Nonetheless, as I will show, in particular in his notes to the “Theses on the Concept of History,” Benjamin is quite explicit about his critique of Marx’s concept of history as preparing the way for the later errors of quietism—in contrast to the “Theses” themselves, which largely and boldly attribute to Marx a more unorthodox view of history (cf. I 701). This practice of commentary, of allusive, unorthodox reading, and out-of-context citation, resulting in an apparent ambivalence of Benjamin’s relation to Marx, may easily lead to confusion among commentators.<sup>6</sup>

As noted, the interpretive inheritance of Marx’s promise today requires, at the very least, that we remember the violence that its institutionalization inflicted upon it. Therefore, before tackling Benjamin’s reading of Marx more directly, we need to take note of that dimension of Marx’s text that, already for Benjamin in the 1930s, allowed the self-proclaimed successors of Marx to implicate his name in a totalitarian interpretation whose “technocratic features”—as displayed, for instance, in the Social Democratic concept of labor—Benjamin views as akin to fascism (Thesis XI). Marx’s philosophy of history is by no means devoid of performative elements—and Derrida, as we will see, underlines this performativity as much as possible. Many of its constative assurances regarding the law-governed unfolding of history can also be viewed as a performative call to action and a scientific support to its promises. Nonetheless, the view that Marx claimed to have discovered the laws of history’s dialectical movement is not without support in his texts. The motor of history would be the dialectic of the forces and relations of production and the concomitant class wars. Once capitalism has attained its more or less ‘natural’ limit in the utter impoverishment of the majority, this dialectic can (or even will) lead to a democratic revolution ending the period of class wars, what Marx famously calls the “prehistory of humanity.”<sup>7</sup> Since the class strug-

gle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is governed by the (largely unconsciously operating) laws of historical necessity, politics plays a role in the struggle only insofar as economic interests are represented in it.

The task of the proletariat is to recognize these laws as the 'content' of the historical process, that is, to consciously appropriate the historical opportunity provided by the economic movement of history. Marx, following but also revising the tradition of the *Aufklärung* with its emphasis on the 'availability' of history to human action, recognizes history as the history of the one who (for the first time) 'makes' it, albeit in the context of inherited circumstances.<sup>8</sup> Marx can, in a gesture characteristically wavering between the constative and performative mode, designate a historical subject that can and should consciously appropriate the historical process. The proletariat has arrived (or ought to arrive) at itself as the 'content' of that process and thus is no longer in need of world-historical reminiscences for the motivation of revolutionary struggles. According to Marx, such memories occurred to bourgeois revolutionaries in the moment of action to deceive themselves and the oppressed people about the limited nature of the revolutions that merely aimed at substituting one form of domination for another. In the 1848 Paris revolution, for example—a revolution that, as we will see, sent Marx into mourning for the loss of a promised but missed opportunity—the past appears as merely the tradition of dead generations, a tradition that is cited precisely when the task would have been to cut through this tradition in order to “create something that does not yet exist.”<sup>9</sup> Marx's response to his mourning is revealing: instead of placing his hope in memory, he opposes memory to the future and famously argues that

the social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped off all superstition in regard to the past. Earlier revolutions required world-historical recollections in order to drug themselves concerning their content. In order to arrive at its content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead.<sup>10</sup>

Marx thus distinguishes between bourgeois revolutions, which did not accomplish the historical self-creation of humanity, and the proletarian revolution that can accomplish this task only by parting with the past 'cheerfully' in order to fulfill its project. In the famous 1843 letter to Ruge, Marx had claimed that through a 'reform of consciousness' “[i]t will transpire that it is not a matter of drawing a great dividing line between past and future, but of carrying out the thoughts of the past. And finally, it will transpire that mankind begins no *new work*, but consciously accomplishes its old work.”<sup>11</sup> According to this historical dialectic, therefore, Marx does not argue for a new beginning of history by wiping clean the slate of “the tradition of the dead generations [that] weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living.”<sup>12</sup>

Instead, he divides the problematic collective singular of 'the past' up into the nightmarish dream and its latent meaning striving for its release: Fulfilling the past's project, what Marx calls a 'world-historical task,' precisely requires abandoning the dream- and ghostlike form which that which 'is' no longer tends to assume. It is this abandonment that is supposed to make possible what Jacques Rancière, in his recent analysis of this logic of fulfillment, has called "the collective identity of the dreaming cogito," attained at the cost of the "delegitimation of speech positions" and at the expense of the "multiplicity of little narratives."<sup>13</sup>

Thus, at different stages of his career, Marx argues for a 'cheerful' separation from a past seen as superstitiously hampering historical development. Of course, this active forgetting in favor of the self-presence of the subject of history is, for Marx, only possible insofar as this subject knows itself to be in harmony with the structural processes underlying history, its laws being rendered accessible by Marx's scientific analyses of historical modes of production. Before turning to Benjamin's critique of this unifying teleology, I want to turn to two texts by Marx in which the issue of the relationship between politico-historical violence and an adequate response to it in the present is at least operative, if not explicitly governing the discourse. For it would be a mistake—one that would be at a loss to explain Benjamin's affirmative gestures to Marx in this regard—to think that an insight into the importance of the memory of historical violence and oppression is absent from Marx's discourse altogether, as Derrida's focus, in *Specters of Marx*, on the "Eighteenth Brumaire" might lead one to believe. In a brief discussion of, mostly, a part of *Capital*, serving as an indispensable backdrop to Benjamin's critique of Marx, my argument will be that Marx's promise is already suffused with a memory of those who were oppressed and brushed aside by the historical genesis and forward march of capitalism. Nonetheless, the promise for the classless society, demanding the 'expropriation of the expropriators,' follows the logic of a history of violence, thus overcoming or redeeming the mournful memory for which it nonetheless calls. Today, after the outbreak of totalitarian violence in the twentieth century, including the atrocities committed in the name of Marx, we largely tend to see this heeding of the call for memory as indispensable. Benjamin was perhaps the first to point out this necessity, especially for Marxist emancipatory struggles. He therefore criticizes precisely a unifying teleology in Marx.

Before Marx's disillusionment, in 1852, with an impending proletarian revolution, he had concerned himself in a newspaper article with the memory of the 'victims' (*Opfer*)—a word he, but not Benjamin, is willing to use, at least in minor texts<sup>14</sup>—of the 1848 June insurrection in Paris. Marx makes a distinction here between the proletarian victims and the bourgeois victims of the battles in the streets of Paris, thus perhaps anticipating Benjamin's famous distinction between a history of victors and of the oppressed.<sup>15</sup> "One



will ask us whether we have no tears, no sigh, no word for the victims who died before the anger of the people," Marx writes.<sup>16</sup> The French state will, he says, honor the victims of the bourgeoisie and take care of the relatives of the deceased, but the task of the remembrance of the proletarian victims, almost as martyrs, Marx assigns to the democratic press:

But the plebeians, torn by hunger, reviled [*geschmäht*] by the press, abandoned by the doctors, cursed by the respectable thieves [*Honetten*] as firebrands and galley slaves, their women and children plunged into even more boundless misery, their best survivors deported overseas—to wind the laurel around their threatening gloomy heads, that is the *privilege*, that is the right of the *democratic press*.<sup>17</sup>

To bind the laurel wreath, sign of victory, around the dead victims of emancipatory struggles: This is how Marx envisions the work of mourning of those who continue the struggle. Taking over the struggle from those who can continue it no longer is perhaps the best way to both remember them and to assume their promise for emancipation. It is, however, the transformation of this memory of the dead into the promise of victory that, as we will see, seems problematic from Benjamin's perspective.

This transformation is confirmed by Part Eight of *Capital I*, entitled "So-called Primitive Accumulation," in which Marx presents the historico-political violence and the "bloody legislation against the expropriated since the end of the 15th century" on which capitalism, viewed as a historical period, is based. Marx argues there that the "process that creates the capital-relation [. . .] cannot be something other than the process of division between the worker and the condition of labor" (*Capital* 874). The origin of capital—understood as a *social* relation rather than reified as mere assets that, without living labor, would lack their conditions of realization and amortization—thus lies in the twofold creation of these conditions by turning the social means of subsistence and production into capital, and by turning the immediate producers into wage-laborers without ownership of capital. Taking 'capital' to mean any asset that can generate an income for its owner, as bourgeois political economy does, forgets, according to Marx, that inanimate objects do not generate wealth and interest by themselves but require labor power as a social relation. This is, at bottom, what Marx means by 'capital fetishism.' It marks an attitude to capital that blocks any memory of the violent process that created capital in the first place. In a certain sense, then, the critique of fetishism—which Derrida, as we will see, rejects as an exorcist ghost hunt—precisely tries to free us for this memory, for the specters of the victims that Marx sees crushed by bourgeois ideology. (We will return to the relationship between fetishism and memory in chapter four.)

The process that creates capital as a social relation thus requires the separation of laborers from the means of production and subsistence. Europe's

serf population had to be removed from the land, common land had to be enclosed, and, in the United States (where originally there were neither serfs nor immigrants without land), Native American and, later, African slaves had to fulfill the need of labor power.<sup>18</sup> Thus, focusing mostly on England, Marx presents the process of the violent creation of a 'free market' as having slavery as its precondition, and as expropriating the agricultural population from common land, thereby robbing them of their means of subsistence and forcing them to work in the cities without adequate wages, many of them left to starve as the victims of the birth of capitalism. The tone of Marx's writing of history here is well captured by the conclusion to his account of capital accumulation in the United States: "A great deal of capital, which appears today in the United States without any birth-certificate, was yesterday, in England, the capitalized blood of children."<sup>19</sup> Marx mourns the 'victims' of history not only by writing about them in a 'scientific' work, thus countering an at times deliberate forgetting of which Marx accuses the bourgeois theoreticians of political economy (who resort to Christian theology for this active forgetting; cf. *Capital* 873). But furthermore, throughout *Capital* and in this chapter in particular, Marx's tone also reveals moral indignation in showing that today's riches are built on the back of past suffering, especially that of serfs, slaves, and wage-laborers. Marx prefaces his account by pointing out that the violent victimization that was necessary for the creation of capitalism remains a stain of violence inherent in capitalism: "And this history, the history of their expropriation, is inscribed in the annals of mankind in inextinguishable letters of blood and fire" (*Capital* 875).<sup>20</sup> At one point Marx's outrage overwhelms his historical account to such an extent that he is willing to let go, for a moment, of the writing of history in terms of its economic laws of development: "We leave on one side here the purely economic driving forces behind the agricultural revolution. We deal only with the violent means employed" (*Capital* 883). With a view to these passages, it perhaps becomes more apparent why Ernst Bloch called Marx's theory a "political economy (*Nationalökonomie*) from propheticism in despair."<sup>21</sup>

It is, however, again instructive to observe Marx's response to this indignation at the violent victimization of farmers and would-be proletarians, as the prophetic side takes over from the despair. After the brief suspension of the laws of history in the previous passage—a suspension, as I will argue, that alone allows a memory of loss—Marx returns to write history in the teleological framework enabling him to discover a latent meaning in the suffering he recounts. Marx finds comfort in the belief in the process's necessity to overcome the "universal mediocrity" of feudal society in favor of the "further socialization of labor" (*Capital* 928). After having exposed the violent means by which feudalism was destroyed—an exposition that forces Marx to admit, in a variation on the famous formula from the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, that it is not only new forces of production, but also "new

passions" that drive history forward<sup>22</sup>—Marx now argues that this violence was necessary for history to progress. It is a violence that will now allow a proletarian revolution. The same necessity that gave rise to capitalism will lead to the proletarian revolution, which thus sublimates the (in its extremity, unnecessary) violence of the past Marx so meticulously recounts: one expropriation following another, that is, following the "immanent laws of capitalist production itself" that, "with the inexorability of a natural process, [begets] its own negation" (*Capital* 929). These laws allow Marx to call for their practical execution, wavering between the constative and the performative mode: "What is now to be expropriated is not the self-employed worker, but the capitalist who exploits a large number of workers" (*Capital* 928).<sup>23</sup>

Thus, toward the end of Part Eight, Marx transforms the commemorative outrage directing his pen into the apparent certainty of the proletariat's victory, thus performatively calling on workers to derive a sense of the 'world-historical task' from this history of victimization. Insofar as its victory would follow the logic of history striving for fulfillment in the 'social revolution of the nineteenth century,' Marx surreptitiously attaches a latent meaning to past victimhood: "It is the bad side that produces the movement which makes history," as he wrote elsewhere.<sup>24</sup> In the most general terms, it is thus Marx's faith in progress, and his elevation of the memory of victims to a place in this line of socioeconomic development, that can be seen to evade the fuller implications of such memory for the promise of emancipation, even when it takes note of the importance of memory. While he attempts to connect a sense of loss to the promise of the past for a better future, that promise, in giving meaning to the loss by connecting it to a logic of victory, ultimately dissipates it. As we will see, Benjamin tries to disentangle the promise of a classless society from the historical dialectic, to let us as its heirs experience its call. Benjamin inherits from Marx the outrage about the 'inextinguishable' horrors that are associated with the origins and development of capitalism, but he disavows the promise of progress into which Marx transformed this outrage. Both Marx and Benjamin attempt to conceive a memory of past injustice that acts as a motivation for emancipatory struggles, but in Marx, this memory is joined to the promise of progress and victory.

#### THE PRIMACY OF POLITICS OVER HISTORY

Before we turn to Benjamin's critique of Marx, let us be clear about the historical and political consequences in the history of Marxism of Marx's emphasis (whether performative or constative) on historical necessity and what came to be known as economic determinism. For Benjamin's relation to Marx is situated within these consequences and unintelligible without reference to them. I have already remarked that Benjamin encountered Marxism mostly in the form of the German Social Democrats, and he often—in

unorthodox formulations that in turn cannot be equated or reconciled with the 'classical' Marxist theory—defended Marx against this party's interpretations, premised on the growing disjuncture between classical Marxism and the political practice of Social Democracy. But Benjamin also traveled to Moscow in the late 1920s and returned to Berlin disappointed at the "class" and "caste state" (IV 334) of Marxism–Leninism. What then is the connection between Marx's theory and the failure of its promise, a failure much more obvious to us after 1989 than perhaps in the 1920s and 1930s? Why is Benjamin reacting against, as we will elaborate in a moment, the Marxist emphasis on the underlying laws of history and the notion of progress, and what is the connection of the latter theme with his insistence on a memory of history's oppressed?

There can be no doubt that both in Lenin and in the primary theorists of Social Democracy—Kautsky and Bernstein—the role of economic determinism had the gravest consequences for the conception of working-class politics. In fact, Benjamin's famous "Theses on the Concept of History" may, to some extent, be seen as a response to the Nazi–Soviet Non-Aggression pact of 1939, in that Benjamin blames the politics of Social Democracy for allowing the German fascists to rise to power (Theses VIII, X, XI, XII, XIII).<sup>25</sup> This background give the "Theses" their dramatic and urgent appeal, and it allows one to surmise that the primary target of the critique of progress is not (or not only) bourgeois historiography, but indeed the Marxism of Social Democracy. Allow me to briefly indicate the historically fateful connection between writing history in terms of its underlying (economic) laws, laws that carry the promise of emancipation, and the totalitarian (rather than liberating) results of Marxist politics. For Benjamin, the promise must be freed from this tie to the progress of productive forces in order to be 'messianized,' as we will see.

If history must be written in terms of the prevalence of the mode of production, which falls into the developing dialectic of the forces and relations of production, then the working class as the primary agent of social change finds its unity and identity, including its political identity of interests, outside of the sphere of politics, in the relations of production alone. The laws of economic development assign a more or less preestablished identity to the proletariat, prior to the moment of politics. In this way, its historical chance to become a politically democratic movement (by articulating the demands of the working classes with other political actors) is preempted. Due to its privileged place in the mode of production, Marx raised the working class to the status of the 'universal class,' representing the interests of the masses as a whole, of all actors, and ultimately of history itself. Both Lenin and Kautsky had to respond to the crises of Marxism that resulted from the lack of the increasing immiseration of most sectors of society, which would have given some plausibility to the idea of the universal class, representing the future

“dissolution of all classes,” as Marx put it in the *German Ideology*.<sup>26</sup> But rather than revising the thesis of the ontological centrality of the working class—for example, by theorizing the social relations of the working classes with the peasants, the petty bourgeoisie, the *Lumpenproletariat*, the intellectuals—Lenin transferred this centrality to the political leadership of the working class—the vanguard—which is further endowed with an epistemic privilege: It knows the underlying movement of history.<sup>27</sup> The Communist Party represents the economic interests of the proletariat, and thus of the mode of production as a whole, in a unilateral and transparent fashion. This is the turn to an authoritarian politics that surrendered Marx’s commitment to a democratic revolution. In this turn of events, history (i.e., the concept of history founded on the economy) takes precedence over politics, as the ‘base’ takes precedence over the ‘superstructure.’ In Kautsky, the reaction to the crisis of Marxism took the less authoritarian form of a strategy of hibernation: Given the empirical fragmentation of the working class, the Party has to recognize and represent, by way of science (as opposed to politics), the future unity of the working class guaranteed by the movement of the economic base. This seemingly radical and orthodox strategy prepares the way for the political quietism of Social Democracy, insofar as the lawful movement of history does not require any political intervention.<sup>28</sup> It is this quietism, this conception of automatic progress, that Benjamin believes has been most harmful to the politics of the working class, and he models his new understanding of history in opposition to it. Accusing the “politicians in whom the opponents of fascism had placed their hopes” of a betrayal of the working classes, Benjamin writes:

Our consideration proceeds from the insight that the politicians’ stubborn faith in progress, their confidence in their ‘mass basis,’ and, finally, their servile integration in an uncontrollable apparatus have been three aspects of the same thing. It seeks to convey an idea of the high price our accustomed thinking will have to pay for a conception of history that avoids any complicity with the thinking to which these politicians continue to adhere (Thesis X).

We have already seen that Benjamin, in opposition to the idea that conceptions of the future must animate a politics of resistance, goes back to Marx in order to recover a sense of indignation, and thus a motivation for such struggles, from violence in the past. For Benjamin, Eduard Bernstein’s neo-Kantian interpretation of Marxism—which emphasizes the autonomy of politics more than Kautsky does—betrays the same spirit of sacrificing present politics for the ultimate progress toward an infinite “ideal” of the classless society (I 1231). When Benjamin thus radically disallows conceptions of the future for emancipatory struggles, citing the Jewish prohibition to investigate the future as support (I 704), we should keep in mind that the future Benjamin rejects is one that, as a form of quietism, makes present action seem less

urgent, and justifies suffering in the present and the past by reference to a future ideal connected to a conception of progress.

Before we now turn to a more direct treatment of Benjamin's critique, let me note briefly that Benjamin rejects almost all the features that unite the various responses to the crises of Marxism at the end of the last century and the beginning of the next. As we just saw, he rejects the naive belief that politicians of the working-class parties have the support of, and thus unilaterally represent, the 'masses.' Benjamin thereby opens up the possibility of a gap between the working class and the masses, a gap that questions the conception of the vanguard and allows for the possibility that the Marxist primacy of working-class struggles over the struggles of all other political groups is misdirected (although Benjamin largely holds on to this primacy). Benjamin further rejects the hierarchy of the economic infrastructure over the superstructure and over politics, arguing instead that modern techniques of reproduction and tele-technology (and thus of mass manipulation) allow politics a much more independent and central role than orthodox Marxists are willing to admit (see I 434ff.).<sup>29</sup> As I will elaborate, this also means for Benjamin a conception of the "primacy of politics over history" (V 1057, cf. V 491). In effect, we will see that Benjamin wishes to reconsider the relationship between history and politics altogether.

As this discussion of a few texts has shown, Marx fashions a subject of history that, while turning all its attention to the future, to the 'creation of what does not yet exist,' either abandons a memory of the past in order to know itself to be in agreement with the law or the 'content' of history—as in "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte"—or it is called on by Marx to derive a sense of the enormity of its task from loss and victimization in the past—as in Part Eight of *Capital, Volume One*. In the latter case, Marx tries to connect a memory of loss to the promise for a liberated future by relying on the logic of history: the very same laws of development that expropriated peasants, serfs, and slaves should and will lead to the 'expropriation of the expropriated.' The future is thus projected and predetermined as that which, putting an end to all class conflict and exploitation, 'redeems' the violent past by fulfilling its latent promise. The interpretation of history in terms of a lawful development of the productive forces retroactively justifies past violence as necessary for the possibility of fulfilling the promise. In Benjamin's critique of Marx it will be a matter of retaining Marx's promise, but in such a way that the future is not conceived as the aim of history, as an end that fulfills the promise. Therefore, Benjamin opposes to the idea of a memoryless subject incarnating the future—that is, to the very opposition between the past and the future—a suspension of the past in order to save its promises and its possibilities. What has to be elaborated in greater detail is the intrinsic connection between these two gestures, the one that refuses futural goals as *teloi* of history, and the one that

'rescues' memory and inherited promises. Contrary to Marx, Benjamin suggests that the link between loss and the promise cannot be established by the 'laws' of history, and that the meaning Marx attached to the victims of the past on the basis of these laws misses those dimensions of history that let the 'voice' of the oppressed be heard in a register different from what he famously calls the "history of the victors" (Thesis VII).

To be sure, in coining this phrase Benjamin most explicitly turns against an objectivist historicism and a bourgeois "cultural history" that he characterizes as the "booty" [*Beute*] carried along in the "triumphal procession" of the victors (*ibid.*). Nonetheless, as I will try to show, the elaboration of the suspension of the past—which requires a brief look at Benjamin's critique of historicism, and which leads him to a revision of the question of history—also applies to Marx's view of history's underlying processes. It is this revision that prepared Benjamin for a rejection of the teleological dimensions of Marx's text, dimensions that Benjamin thought had disastrous consequences for revolutionary politics—in particular with regard to the question of memory, a question that Benjamin from the beginning associates with the conception of the future implied in this politics. Thus, I find myself in agreement with those interpreters of Benjamin who view as the primary object of attack, especially of the "Theses," the Enlightenment philosophy of history rather than bourgeois historicism, although Benjamin often strikes at both in a single gesture.<sup>30</sup>

#### REVISING THE QUESTION OF HISTORY

In what way, then, does Benjamin argue for a revision of the question of history? Benjamin is not primarily interested in what we might call the knowledge of history (and its laws), but in the writing of history.<sup>31</sup> When Benjamin first systematically presented his historical methodology as a critique of epistemology, in the 'epistemo-critical prologue' to his study of the seventeenth-century German *Trauerspiel*, he turned against 'scientific verificationism' and a science that disregards its own language. Benjamin sees language as constitutive of any presentation (*Darstellung*) of phenomena, especially historical and aesthetic ones (I 222, I 207). Against the objectivist method of the German Historical School of the nineteenth century (e.g., Ranke, Treitschke, Meinecke)<sup>32</sup>—which will again constitute one of the central targets of the "Theses"—Benjamin argues for a "revision of the question" concerning history. The revision "can be formulated in the consideration of how the question: How was it actually? can not so much be scientifically answered, but rather can be posed" (I 222). In a Nietzschean vein, Benjamin thus asks from what perspective the historicist-scientific question concerning the reconstruction of the past is legitimate, and what presuppositions must be in place for it to be posed.<sup>33</sup> The revision presupposes that history, or rather histories,

while dialectically conditioning the present, constitute themselves in the present of their writing, a presentation that thus cannot be abstracted from the present. The resulting emphasis on the logic of the ‘after-the-fact’ (*Nachträglichkeit*), on a “construction” of history out of the present (I 702), its dependence on the “focal point (*Fluchtpunkt*) of our own historical experience” (I 1104), can be traced through all of Benjamin’s writings.<sup>34</sup> This linguistic-historical approach is not only contrasted with the historicist attempt to reconstruct the past, in Ranke’s well-known phrase, ‘the way it really was,’ but it also places Benjamin in advance, so to speak, in a critical position vis-à-vis a view that fundamentally asks about the underlying processes of history. As we will see, Benjamin in particular rejects the guiding idea of linear time, and the notion of a final exhaustibility of historical objects. Both of these presuppositions, in Benjamin’s view, preclude the inheritance of promises from the past, promises that bind the past and the present to the future. As we will also see, however, a closer look at Benjamin’s “Theses” reveals that the present in question is in turn deprived of its seemingly superior position over the past by a certain relation to the future, a relation that places the present under the claim of the past. Furthermore, it should be emphasized that Benjamin, from his first encounter with the Historical School, rejects their objectivism—which in Ranke is justified by the claim that all generations are equal “before God”<sup>35</sup>—in the name of a premodern, less unitary, and finalized understanding of our relationship to history, without recommending a return to premodern forms of historiography. The medieval chronicle, which Benjamin defends in Thesis III, stands in his usage not for the mere listing of events without interpretation, but for a multiplicity of layers in relation to the past (VI 97). Already in 1921, Benjamin noted what recent scholarship has taken efforts to demonstrate: that modernity invents the collective singular of history, assured by the historicist, scientific method.<sup>36</sup> In a note entitled “On the Philosophy of History of Late Romanticism and of the Historical School,” Benjamin writes:

The lack of fertility, which attaches itself to this philosophy of history despite its significant thoughts, stems from its characteristically modern features. For it shares with many scientific theories of modernity [*Neuzeit*] the absolutism of method. Since the Middle Ages, the insight into the richness of layers [*Reichtum von Schichten*], in which the world and its best meanings [*Gehalte*] construct themselves, has been lost (VI 95).

Revising the question of history must thus also uncover a multiplicity of histories not to be written in a singular, law-governed totality. This shift of perspective from the laws of history to its writing in the present further allows Benjamin not only to ask about the interests in a perspective that claims to know the *telos* of the historical process to which these laws are oriented, but it also allows him to look for what is worthy of rescue (*Rettung*) in history—



not in that which contributes to its alleged, visible teleology, but in what Benjamin calls the “cracks and jags” (*Schroffen und Zacken*) of a tradition (V 592). In subsequent chapters, I will ask about these interruptions of linear time and narrative history, and their significance for both the writing of history and political resistance. For the moment, let us note that Benjamin's revision concerning the question of history and temporality allows him to ask about the interests, prejudices, and conceptual presuppositions that the present brings to its reading of the past. The revision implies that the present and the past stand in a dialectical relationship to each other in which the one influences and conditions the other. In his own way, then, Benjamin arrives at an insight that has become commonplace since Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* and Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* in particular: the insight into the dialectical interpenetration, the hermeneutic circle, of the past and the present. Especially Gadamer has shown that—contrary to the older hermeneutic tradition (Schleiermacher and Dilthey in particular), which emphasizes understanding the meaning of texts and historical events in the way the authors and actors understood them—our very historicity results in the impossibility of returning to the perspective of past authors and actors. This impossibility, however, is the very condition of historical understanding, for it consists in relating one's own preconceptions and prejudices to the past in a ‘fusion of horizons’ (*Horizontverschmelzung*) of past and present.<sup>37</sup>

How does Benjamin arrive at this hermeneutic insight? In his *Passagenwerk*, Benjamin argues that the task of the (Hegelian or Marxist) dialectical method—“to do justice to the concrete historical situation”—is insufficient: “For, to the same degree this method is concerned with doing justice to the concrete historical situation of the *interest* for its historical object” (V 494, Benjamin's emphasis). The dialectical method must also take into account the present historical situation that gives rise to its historical interests, what Gadamer called the ‘prejudices’ orienting one's view. Gesturing toward his later account of the way in which past elements suggest their own “recognizability,” “citability,” or “readability” to the present, Benjamin, in a characteristic reversal, describes this interpenetration of the past and the present as the way in which a historical object “preforms” by itself the interest a later time might have in it. This means, according to Benjamin, that the interest, and the historical situation that gives rise to it, “concretizes that [historical] object in itself,” thereby bringing it to a “higher concretion” in the now (V 495). Benjamin characterizes this concretion and formation of the object, in the interplay of past and present, as its latent formation, preparing itself for its being read. He then wonders why this process can be seen as a “higher concretion” of the object, as its attaining a “higher degree of actuality” (*ibid.*). He emphasizes that the rise in concretion cannot be understood under the premises of the “ideology of progress” but must be seen as the inevitable increasing “condensation” (*Verdichtung*) and “integration” of past

reality from the perspective of the present. It is this process of the “dialectical interpenetration and presentation of past contexts” that yields, as we will see later, Benjamin’s much-discussed “dialectical image” (*ibid.*). As an example, taken from his earlier writings on presentation and condensation, we might refer to epistolary correspondence as historical “testimony” (VI 95).

Thus, our interest in the past is not simply external to the object, but the object itself suggests—in a “jolting, intermittent way” (V 495)—its interesting character, its readiness for being read or taken up. Benjamin’s account of the “prefiguration” or “historical index” of the readability of, and interest in, a historical object should be seen as an attempt to overcome the presupposition of the subject-object model in historical understanding. It is an attempt to overcome the idea of the imperial purview of the historian over the past, from above, in control of his or her subject matter and freely choosing the method, perspective, and the object. Instead, we should accept that, in a way to be explored, the past—which is always a particular past, a specifically condensed “image”—*claims* us in asking to be read. Benjamin wishes to emphasize that the “true” and singular image of the past, the one that concerns the singularity of the present most of all (due to its political significance), requires a “presence of mind” (*Geistesgegenwart*) and is always in danger of being missed and lost forever:

The true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. ‘The truth will not run away from us’: in the historical outlook of historicism these words of Gottfried Keller mark the exact point where historical materialism cuts through historicism. For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably (Thesis V).

For Benjamin, as we will see, the image that is most important to (Marxist) emancipatory struggles is the condensed image of the “tradition of the oppressed” (Thesis VIII). It is this image, however, that both a Gadamerian account of historical understanding and a teleological Marxism are bound to miss. I will return to Benjamin’s critique of orthodox Marxism in a moment, after briefly contrasting Benjamin’s view of historical presentation with Gadamer’s.

The ‘epistemological’ idea that ‘images’ of the past, by prefiguring the interest of later times in them, address themselves to us in the present, is charged by Benjamin with the ethical and political significance of uncovering oppressed voices in history, and of assuming their promise of being heard, their ‘claim’ (*Anspruch*) to be represented in contemporary discourses, especially if that requires a change in the power structures of representation. By insisting that the past claims us in the present (cf. Thesis II), Benjamin also turns against the more obvious, Gadamerian emphasis on the way in which

the past, as the classical tradition forming the background horizon of understanding, already predetermines the present. Although both Gadamer's and Benjamin's view of historical understanding insist on the dialectical interpenetration of past and present, a crucial difference emerges between them. For Benjamin, the claim that the present and its interpretive procedures is always already indexed to, and indebted to, its tradition, neglects the fact that effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) excludes the voices of those oppressed ones who nonetheless contributed to its emergence. For Benjamin, as we will see, those who were repressed and forgotten during their lifetime, are crushed a second time by the "triumphal march" of history (Thesis VII). The many lives who are not represented or acknowledged in our heritage lead Benjamin to call for a "memory of the nameless" insofar as the "inventory of culture owes its existence not only to the efforts of the great geniuses who created it, but to the nameless drudgery of their contemporaries" (I 1241; cf. Thesis VII). It is these "nameless" ones who, according to a Benjaminian view, are forgotten by Gadamer's classicism, as also by the "historical objectivism" against which Gadamer writes.<sup>38</sup> If, according to Gadamer, time is no longer understood as the "yawning gap" but, following Heidegger, as the "ground of happening, in which the present is rooted," then the temporal distance separating the ages (*Zeitenabstand*) is "filled with the continuity of the emergence and of tradition."<sup>39</sup> Benjamin opposes to this continuity, which he associates with a conservative "appreciation" or "apologia" of tradition, the "revolutionary moments of the course of history": "The appreciation or apologia only gives weight to those elements of a work that have already generated an after-effect. It misses those points at which the transmission breaks down and thus misses those jags and cracks which call a halt to those who wish to move beyond it" (I 658, cf. V 591f.). Benjamin is thus not only interested in the way in which the past and its cultural heritage provide, in a 'continuous' handing down, the horizon of understanding on the basis of which the present turns to the past, but in what is left out of consideration by this heritage. We will return to the more specific question of why, for Benjamin, the 'rescue' of this so very different claim that a forgotten or 'subaquatic' (*unterseeisch*) past can have on the present, requires a focus on the discontinuities, interruptions, the 'messianic cessation' and the breakdown of transmission.<sup>40</sup>

As this brief excursus makes clear, Benjamin's preoccupation with the historicity of historiography, and the relation to the past in general, is motivated by political concerns that do not harmonize with Gadamer's classicism. This is, if you wish, the epistemological background to Benjamin's political polemic against "historians who wish to relive an era" by "blotting out everything they know about the later course of history" (Thesis VII). For by denying the dialectical interplay of past and present, and by trying to understand historical events from the perspective of the actors, Benjamin argues, these

“objective” historians will inevitably side with, or “empathize” (*empfinden*) with, the victors of history. This is a crucial claim for Benjamin’s project insofar as it allows him to associate political resistance to domination in the present with the ‘liberation’ of the voice and promise of the oppressed in history. This renders it all the more surprising that this claim is largely, and interestingly, uncritically accepted and unexamined in the secondary literature. I will analyze this claim in greater detail in chapters three and four, in the context of a discussion of Benjamin’s notion of a discontinuous presentation of history. At the moment, I wish to highlight the fact that this critique of victor history, in its difference from a hermeneutics of effective history, led Benjamin to be critical not only of bourgeois historians, but also of orthodox Marxism and a Marxist conception of progress.

Benjamin rejects the notion of “empathy” not only on the basis of the Marxist doctrine that, as Marx put it in *The German Ideology*, “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas.”<sup>41</sup> In that case, the claim would be that bourgeois historians read history in terms of the dominant ideologies and power relations of the present, and thus cannot uncover alternative histories, for instance, histories that take into view the “nameless drudgery” of the contemporaries of “great geniuses” and political victors (I 1241). By neglecting, in the attempt to attain an objective, contextless viewpoint on history, the influence of dominant ‘ideologies’ on contemporary historical research, historians are all the more subject to their influence, and therefore cannot read history of, or from the perspective of, the oppressed. This critique of bourgeois historicism is in agreement with the Marxist critique of ideology, in particular the ideology of the autarky of culture and cultural history (cf. V 583, II 465ff.).

Benjamin connects this critique with a more radical claim—one that is, at least in a strong version, more difficult to defend, as we will see in chapter two—according to which there is a continuity of the oppressors in history. “All rulers are the heirs of those who were victorious before them. Thus, empathy with the victors benefits, in every case, the present rulers” (Thesis VII; see also I 1241). Not only does a scientific objectivism about historical knowledge uncritically affirm a history of violence, Benjamin suggests, but it also, at the same time, reifies present structures of oppression and domination. A continuous presentation of history thus (perhaps inadvertently) plays into the hands of the history of victors and the continuity of oppression: “The continuum of history is the continuum of the oppressors,” Benjamin suggests (I 1236). Even if the ruling classes, and the systems of domination and exploitation, change, they continue oppression and form a victor history. One might still take this view as quite compatible with the Marxist conception of history as the history of class struggles. However, the point for Benjamin is not to deny that there is continuity in history—such continuity can always be found and constructed from out of the ‘richness of layers’ that make