

## HISTORY, REDEMPTION AND MESSIANIC TIME IN WALTER BENJAMIN

### Abstract

Walter Benjamin's concept of history is a construction where the messianic idea, the perfect world, is present in every 'now of knowability' in which the monadological 'dialectical image' presents itself as the actualization of moments of an unredeemed past that is redeemed in knowledge and afterwards in political action. The relation between past and present is given in the dialectical image, in the concept of history, in a messianic interruption of the course of history. This owes to the Jewish doctrine of the Kabbalah, to Kant (and Cohen) and to Marx. The ethical, political and «historical task» pertaining to the collective agent and subject of knowledge is founded on a conception of time that is not empty and mechanical, but that is full, intensive, and redemptive: it is the messianic time.

**Keywords:** Benjamin; History; Kant; Messianic; Redemption

Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history develops continuously across the entire arc of his production, from *The Life of Students* in 1914/15<sup>1</sup> to the late theses in *On the Concept of History*, in 1940. Throughout, the theological conception of the time of history as *Jetztzeit* (now-time)<sup>2</sup> stands opposed to homogeneous and empty mechanical time, the mathematically measurable time of the natural sciences:

Historical time is infinite in every direction and unfulfilled at every moment. This means we cannot conceive of a single empirical event that bears a necessary relation to the time of its occurrence. For empirical events time is nothing but a form, but, what is more important, as a form it is unfulfilled. The event does not fulfill the formal nature of the time in which it takes place. For we should not think of time as merely the measure that records the duration of a mechanical change. Although such time is indeed a relatively empty form, to think of its being filled makes no sense. Historical time, however, differs from mechanical time. [...] Rather, a process that is perfect in historical terms is quite indeterminate empirically; it is in fact an idea. The idea of fulfilled time is the dominant historical idea of the Bible: it is the idea of messianic time<sup>3</sup>.

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- 1 W. BENJAMIN, *Das Leben der Studenten*, in ID., *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by R. Tiedemann und H. Schweppenhäuser, with the contribution of Th.W. Adorno and G. Scholem, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1974-1989, vol. 2, tome 1, pp. 75-87; engl. trans. BENJAMIN, *The Life of Students*, in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings*, vol. 1, ed. by M. Bullock and M.W. Jennings, transl. by R. Livingstone, Harvard University Press, Harvard 2004, pp. 18-36.
- 2 On the genealogy of the term see Fabrizio Desideri, *Ad vocem Jetztzeit*, in F. DESIDERI, *La porta della giustizia*, Pendragon, Bologna 1995, pp. 153-165.
- 3 BENJAMIN, *Trauerspiel und Tragödie* [1916], in ID., *Gesammelte Schriften*, cit., vol. 2, tome 1, p. 134. Translation modified. ID., *Trauerspiel and Tragedy*, in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings*, vol. 1, cit.,

In Walter Benjamin the ethical, political and «historical task» is founded on a conception of time that is not empty and mechanical, but that is full, intensive, and redemptive. This is the time of the Bible and prophecy, where history and the eternity of the idea coincide. This vision considers time not as a process but as an ideal dimension (the historical idea of the Bible) in which a moment exposes a dimension of totality, eternity and completeness. Benjamin's vision positions itself in the realm of Judaic messianism as a restorative dimension of history, a return to a reign of justice<sup>4</sup>.

In the biblical tradition, Justice is the first attribute of God: «Righteous art thou, O Lord; and upright are thy judgments [...] Thy righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, and thy law is the truth»<sup>5</sup>; and an attribute of the Messiah, a distinctive sign of the messianic age: «And righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins»<sup>6</sup>; «the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness»<sup>7</sup>. Messianism is not to be defined as awaiting a personal Messiah, but rather as awaiting a Messianic reign, «an *intra-historical but total, radical and universal fulfillment* [...] linked [...] [to the] contents clearly indicated by the prophets (starting with Isaiah): *peace, justice, happiness*»<sup>8</sup>. The essential character of messianic expectation, as received by Benjamin from Scholem in an intra-historical variation, is immanent and neither eschatological nor univocal, but contains within itself two opposed tendencies. On one hand, the restorative aspect brings equilibrium to a condition of disorder; on the other stands a contrary dimension of rupture and radical novelty that is destructive and apocalyptic<sup>9</sup>. In the *Theses*, a revolutionary leap takes place, in immanence, between world history and redeemed history, through memory and the citation and knowledge of the past; a «tiger's leap into the past»<sup>10</sup>:

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pp. 55-57, here p. 55 f.

- 4 See P. FENVES, *The Messianic Reduction. Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2011, pp. 187-226, chapter 7: «The Political Counterpart to pure Practical Reason: From Kant's *Doctrine of Right* to Benjamin's Category of Justice».
- 5 Psalm 119; 137 and 142 (King James Version).
- 6 Isaiah 11; 5 (King James Version).
- 7 Isaiah 26; 9 (King James Version).
- 8 See G. CUNICO, *Ripensare il messianismo. Introduzione*, in «Humanitas», 60, 1-2, 2005, pp. 5-27, p. 14. Cunico refers here to J. KLAUSNER, *The Messianic Idea in Israel from Its Beginning to the Completion of the Mishnah*, Engl. trans. by W.F. Stinespring, Allen & Unwin, London 1956.
- 9 See G. SCHOLEM, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, Schocken Books, New York 1971, 19952. The culminating point of Scholem's project on messianism is the work that appeared in 1957 in Hebrew and in 1973 in English: Id., *Sabbatay Sevi, the Mystical Messiah*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1973. On the theological and political doctrine of Scholem and Benjamin see E. JACOBSON, *Metaphysics of the Profane. The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*, Columbia University Press, New York 2003; see also D. WEIDNER, *Gershom Scholem. Politisches, esoterisches und historiographisches Schreiben*, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, München 2003. On Benjamin's messianism see S. KHATIB, *Teleologie ohne Endzweck. Walter Benjamin Ent-stellung des Messianischen*, Tectum, Marburg 2013; DESIDERI, *Il Messia di Benjamin*, in «Humanitas», 1-2, 2005, 278-302.
- 10 BENJAMIN, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, cit., 70; engl. trans. BENJAMIN, *On the Concept of History*, in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings 1938-1940*, cit., pp. 389-400, 395.

History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time fulfilled by now-time [*Jetztzeit*]. Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with now-time, a past which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate. It cited ancient Rome exactly the way fashion cites a by-gone mode of dress. Fashion has a nose for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is the tiger's leap into the past. The leap, however, takes place in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands. The same leap in the open air of history is the dialectical leap Marx understood as revolution. (Thesis XIV)<sup>11</sup>.

In Benjamin, the materialist conception of history (before the 'Marxist turn' of 1926 we might speak rather of an anarchist, nihilist vision)<sup>12</sup> is closely connected to the theological idea of time as *Jetztzeit*. Through the redemption of the past, by its actualization in the present and the critique of the concept of progress, the historian practices a «*weak messianic power*»<sup>13</sup> and provides a direction for political action. This action is revolutionary and aims at founding a classless society as a secularized Reign, a realm of justice.

A thesis (n. XVIIa) found among the preparatory materials for *On the Concept of History* illustrates these concepts: progress is an infinite, linear process, like the Neo-Kantian 'infinite task' and democratic socialism, that transforms the representation of the messianic idea as an abrupt realization of the reign of justice in an 'ideal'<sup>14</sup>, which is to

11 *Ibidem*.

12 On Benjamin's 'romantic' and messianic anarchism, cfr. M. LÖWY, *L'anarchisme messianique de Walter Benjamin*, in «Les Temps Modernes», 40, 1983, pp. 772-794 e ID., *Rédemption et utopie. Le judaïsme libertaire en Europe centrale. Une étude d'affinité élective*, PUF, Paris 1988. On the *Theses* see D. GENTILI, *Il tempo della storia. Le tesi "sul concetto di storia di Walter Benjamin"*, Guida, Napoli 2002. See also LÖWY, *Walter Benjamin. Avertissement d'incendie. Une lecture des thèses "Sur le concept d'histoire"*, PUF, Paris 2001.

13 BENJAMIN, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, cit., p. 694; Engl. trans. ID., *On the Concept of History*, cit., pp. 389-400, 390.

14 On the neo-Kantian theme of the 'infinite task', interpreted by Benjamin in ethical-religious terms, see T. TAGLIACCOZZO, *Esperienza e compito infinito nella filosofia del primo Benjamin*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2013 (first ed. 2003): this text seeks to demonstrate the hypothesis of the influence on Benjamin of the messianism and philosophy of Hermann Cohen. See also TAGLIACCOZZO, *Experience and infinite Task. Knowledge, Language and Messianism in the Philosophy of Walter Benjamin*, Rowman & Littlefield International, London-New York 2018; ID., *Etica e messianismo: un confronto tra Walter Benjamin e Hermann Cohen*, in «Archivio di filosofia», 88, 1, 2020, pp. 109-122; DESIDERI, *Messianica ratio. Affinities and Differences in Cohen's and Benjamin's Messianic Rationalism*, in «Aisthesis», 8/2, 2015, pp. 133-145. On the 'ideal' see H. COHEN, *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums* (1919), Fourier, Wiesbaden 19883 (r. a. ed. Kaufmann, Frankfurt a.M. 1929) pp. 291-292; engl. trans., *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, translated with an Introduction by S. Kaplan, Introductory essays by Leo Strauss, Introductory essays for the second edition by S.S. Schwarzchild and K. Seeskin, Oxford University Press, Oxford 19952 (translation mine): «29. The messianic future is the first conscious expression of opposition to the conception of the empirical sense of moral values. This may be simply designated as the *ideal*, in opposition to effectual reality [...] the new of a future. [...]. Thus arises the notion of *history* for humanity and its people. [...] Humanity [...] [is] an idea». Benjamin was reading Cohen's *Religion* in 1920 (see Benjamin's letter to G. Scholem, 1-XII-1920, in BENJAMIN, *Gesammelte Briefe*, 6 voll., vol. 2, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1996, p. 107). For a comparison between Cohen's and Benjamin's messianism, see also H. GÜNTHER, *Der Messianismus von Hermann Cohen und Walter Benjamin*, in «Emuna. Horizonte zur Diskussion über Israel und das Judentum», 5/6, 1974, pp. 352-35. See P. FIORATO, *Notes on*

say an unachievable goal. For the Neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen the Messiah is significant as a metaphysical and moral idea originating in Judaic prophecy, an ideal projected into the dimension of the future of history (and not toward a life beyond the earthly one) where the individual history of humans will disappear.

Benjamin individuates two concepts of the infinite task, one negative (attributed to epistemology and Neo-Kantian ethics, especially that of Cohen), and the other positive (and Benjamin's own), that utilizes the Neo-Kantian structure of the relation between a regulating idea and a series of concepts, to construct a concept of metaphysical experience, not empty, but full (*erfüllt*) of spiritual and theological-linguistic content. The time of the infinite task of Neo-Kantianism is conceived, on the contrary, as homogeneous – the time of the physical and mathematical sciences – and empty; that is, not full (*erfüllt*) and achieved by God and through the power of divine violence/authority (*Gewalt*)<sup>15</sup>:

In the idea of the classless society, Marx secularized the idea of messianic time. And that was a good thing. It was only when the Social Democrats elevated this idea to an “ideal” that the trouble began. The ideal was defined in Neo-Kantian doctrine as an “infinite [*unendlich*] task”. And this doctrine was the school philosophy of the Social Democratic party – from Schmidt and Stadler through Natorp and Vorländer. Once the classless society had been defined as an infinite task, the empty and homogeneous time was transformed into an anteroom, so to speak, in which one could wait for the emergence of the revolutionary situation with more or less equanimity. In reality, there is not a moment that would not carry with it *its* revolutionary chance – provided only that it is defined in a specific way, namely as the chance for a completely new problem [*Aufgabe*]. For the revolutionary thinker, the peculiar revolutionary chance offered by every historical moment gets its warrant from the political situation. But it is equally grounded, for *tis* thinker, in the right of entry which the historical moment enjoys vis-à-vis a quite distinct chamber of the past, one which up to that point has been closed and locked. The entrance into this chamber coincides in a strict sense with political action, and it is by means of such entry that political action, however destructive, reveals itself as messianic. (Classless society is not the final goal of historical progress but its frequently miscarried, ultimately [*endlich*] achieved interruption.) (Thesis XVIIa)<sup>16</sup>.

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*Future and History in Hermann Cohen's Anti-Eschatological Messianism*, in R. MUNK (ed.), *Hermann Cohen's Critical Idealism*, Springer, Dordrecht 2005, pp. 133-160. A possible source of Cohen's messianism for Benjamin may have been the essay *Das Gottesreich*, in which Cohen identified the Reign of God and the Reign of the Messiah, published by Cohen in 1913, in COHEN, *Soziale Ethik im Judentum*, ed. by Verband der Deutschen Juden, J. Kauffmann, Frankfurt a.M. 1913, pp. 120-127 (now in COHEN, *Kleine Schriften V 1913-1915*, in ID., *Werke*, ed. by H. Holzhey, Georg Olms Verlag, Zurich-New York 1977, vol. 16, pp. 41-50).

- 15 On the divine *Gewalt* see BENJAMIN, *Zur Kritik der Gewalt*, in ID., *Gesammelte Schriften*, cit., pp. 179-203; engl. trans. *Critique of Violence*, in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings*, vol. 1, cit., pp. 55-57. See on the theme of violence and divine violence in Benjamin in relation to the political philosophy of Kant, M. TOMBA, «*La vera politica*». *Kant e Benjamin: la possibilità della giustizia*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2006. See also ID., *Another Kind of Gewalt: Beyond Law. Re-Reading Walter Benjamin*, in «*Historical Materialism*», 17, 1, 2009, pp. 126-144. See also ID., *Justice: Walter Benjamin and the Time of Anticipation*, <https://benjaminonjustice.wordpress.com>, paper presented at Goldsmith College, London, April 28, 2016.
- 16 BENJAMIN, *Anmerkungen a Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, in ID., *Gesammelte Schriften*, cit., vol. 1,

In the fleeting ‘slipping away’ of a dialectical image, the historian recuperates and recognizes a moment of the past of the oppressed classes, which enters into a constellation with immediate political conditions and makes it explode, providing a direction for praxis. Revolutionary action takes shape through a dialectical leap into the past that takes place in the messianic *now* – in the ‘now of knowability’ (*Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit*) that pertains to the ‘concept of history’: «The dialectical image is an image that emerges suddenly, in a flash. What has been (*das Gewesene*) is to be held fast – as an image flashing up in the now of its knowability. The rescue (*Rettung*) carried out by these means – and only by these – can operate solely for the sake of what in the next moment is already irretrievably lost»<sup>17</sup>.

The epistemological structure of the ‘concept of history’, which presents itself in a monadic dialectical image, is characterized by a non-linear, non-progressive but intensive and ideal temporal dimension, in which the cognitive concept and the idea (of the good, of justice, of liberty) characterized by totality and eternity coincide. Here emerges the link between the theological realm – transcendental and ideal but secretly active in the immanence of redemption – and the immanent setting of the political. In fact, in a fleeting moment, the redeemed past renders the fulfillment of messianic time, the Reign of God, and provides the occasion and direction for praxis, for a revolutionary action that is messianic and theologically motivated, striving toward the construction of a classless society.

Political action is rendered possible specifically by its link to the past, by the cognitive capacity of the historical materialist to recuperate forgotten moments and make them explode, and to fuel the destructive, liberatory power of the oppressed class (the subject, like the historian, of historical knowledge) through images of enslaved ancestors, without projecting the liberation into an infinite future, as does democratic socialism:

The subject of historical knowledge is the struggling, oppressed class in itself. Marx presents it as the last enslaved class—the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of the downtrodden. This conviction, which had a brief resurgence in the Spartacus League, has always been objectionable to Social Democrats. Within three generations they managed to erase the name of Blanqui almost entirely, though at the sound of that name the preceding century had quaked. The Social Democrats preferred to cast the working class in the role of a redeemer of *future* generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This indoctrination made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than by the ideal of liberated grandchildren. (Thesis XII)<sup>18</sup>.

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tome 3, p. 1231, Ms 1098v. engl. trans., *Paralipomena to “On the Concept of History”*, thesis XVIIa, in Walter Benjamin. *Selected Writings 1938-1940*, vol. 4, trans. by E. Jephcott, Ed. by H. Eiland and M.W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2003, pp. 401-411, 401-402.

17 BENJAMIN, *Das Passagen-Werk*, in ID., *Gesammelte Schriften*, cit., vol. 5, tome 1, pp. 591-592, N 9, 7; engl. trans. ID., *The Arcades Project*, transl. by H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin, Harvard University Press, Harvard 2002, p. 473.

18 BENJAMIN, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, in ID., *Gesammelte Schriften*, cit., vol. 1, tome 2, p. 700; engl. trans. ID., *On the Concept of History*, in Walter Benjamin. *Selected Writings 1938-1940*, vol. 4,

Benjamin's position on the oppressed class as subject of historical cognition can be read, as Sami Khatib writes, against the backdrop of Kant and Marx:

Although Benjamin clearly distinguishes the subject of historical cognition from Kant's non-historical transcendental subject, [...] the epistemo-political scope of Benjamin's historical materialist concept of history becomes legible only against the dual backdrop of Marx *and* Kant. If the struggling, oppressed class takes the position of the Kantian transcendental subject, the political-economic standpoint and historicity of this collective subjectivity coalesces with its cognizing vantage point in a transcendental sense<sup>19</sup>.

The oppressed class takes the place of the Kantian transcendental subject and, through the dialectical image (which contains a historical index, a potential encounter between fore- and after-history, that renders the image legible and usable for political action), overcomes the Kantian vision of knowledge as the relation of a knowing subject to a known object<sup>20</sup>:

Benjamin maintains the basic structure of Kant's transcendental argument, yet expands and radicalizes it by grounding transcendental in a constellation of historical time punctuated by class struggle. In this way, historical cognition is not structured by ahistorical transcendental forms but always already imprinted by a 'historical index' (*AP*, N 3,1), which is bound to the experience of a political subject at a particular time<sup>21</sup>.

What is transcendental here is less the subject than the medium of knowledge, a linguistic medium, given that, «the place where one encounters [the images] is language»<sup>22</sup>. Language is a medium in that it is not a means of communication but a location of com-

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cit., p. 394, thesis XII.

- 19 KHATIB, *Walter Benjamin and Subject of Historical Cognition*, in *Walter Benjamin Unbound*, Special Issue of *Annals of Scholarship*, vol. 21, 1/2, 2014, pp. 23-42, 23. See *ibid.*: «In the preparatory notes on the Theses, [Benjamin] [...] adds a further clarification: "This subject is certainly not a transcendental subject, but the struggling, oppressed class in its most exposed situation. There is historical cognition for them (this class) only and for them only in a historical instant" [GS, I, 1243]» [translation mine].
- 20 BENJAMIN, *Erkenntnistheorie* [1920-21] in *Id.*, *Gesammelte Schriften*, cit., vol. 6, p. 46; engl. trans. *Id.*, *Theory of Knowledge*, in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings*, vol. 1, cit., p. 276: «Two things must be overcome: 1. The false disjunction: knowledge is either in the consciousness of a knowing subject or else in the object (alternatively, identical with it). 2) The appearance of the knowing man (for example, Leibniz, Kant)».
- 21 KHATIB, *Walter Benjamin and Subject of Historical Cognition*, in *Walter Benjamin Unbound*, cit., p. 23.
- 22 BENJAMIN, *Das Passagen-Werk*, in *Id.*, *Gesammelte Schriften*, cit., vol. 5, tome 1, p. 577, N 2a, 3; *Id.*, *The Arcades Project*, cit., p. 462: «For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what has been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language». For Benjamin's critique of temporal *continuo*, see J. NG, *Acts of Time: Cohen and Benjamin on Mathematics and History*, in «Paradigmi», 25, 1, 2017, pp. 41-60. See DESIDERI, *Intermittency: the differential of time and the integral of space. The intensive spatiality of the Monad, the Apokatastasis and the Messianic World in Benjamin's latest thinking*, in «Aisthesis», 1, 2016, pp. 177-184.

municability<sup>23</sup> in which a cognitive relation is constructed between subject and object, which encounter one another in the now of knowability. When a linguistic, ideal, and messianic image (for example, that of republican Rome for Robespierre, or the French Revolution, or the messianic realm) becomes legible in the now of knowability, time is contained within it as an intensive, messianic and infinitely abbreviated «time differential»<sup>24</sup>, which is curved rather than linear.

This logical time stands against chronological time and the time of Newtonian physics and mathematics, although some interpreters argue that it takes inspiration from the new mathematical theories of the early twentieth century<sup>25</sup>. This time is a time of crisis and political decision, a time for revolutionary action, which may entail an interruption and reversal of the course of history, such that the oppressed classes may be both subject of knowledge and political subject. The oppressed classes arrive at a polarized historical moment, represented (*dargestellt*) in the dialectical image, an instant in present time (*Aktualität*), and makes it explode into praxis and struggle<sup>26</sup>. Subject (the oppressed classes) and object (the image) of historical knowledge unite in the now of knowability, in the constellation of historical concepts that constitute the dialectical image. Both subject and object are not static, but active and involved in the historical events that they undergo and provoke.

As we have seen, what permits the dialectical image to become an instrument of knowledge is its ‘construction’ as a concept; that is, as a historical concept. Theory and praxis are deeply interwoven: praxis, provoked by the conditions of the oppressed classes, directs knowledge toward the construction of concepts and the representation of utopian ideals; theory provides direction for praxis, and thus for political action.

The concept of messianic time, opposed to the homogenous and empty physical and mathematical time of modern science which is typical of Neo-Kantianism and democratic socialism – with its vision of the progressive, ‘infinite’ task moving toward the ideal of a classless society – is anticipated here with extraordinary import in the 1914/15 period in the *incipit* of the essay paper *The Life of Students*:

There is a view of history that puts its faith in the infinite extent of time and thus concerns itself only with the speed, or lack of it, with which people and epochs advance along the

23 See S. WEBER, *Benjamin's abilities*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2008, p. 13.

24 BENJAMIN, *Das Passagen-Werk*, in ID., *Gesammelte Schriften*, cit., vol. 5, tome 2, p. 1038, Qo 21 (*Erste Entwürfe*); Engl. transl., *The Arcades Project*, cit., p. 867 (‘First Sketches’).

25 See FENVES, *The Messianic Reduction. Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time*, cit., p. 106-113 and 242. See J. NG, *Acts of Time: Cohen and Benjamin on Mathematics and History*, cit. See KHATIB, *Walter Benjamin and Subject of Historical Cognition*, in *Walter Benjamin Unbound*, cit., p. 39, fn. 18: «Peter Fenves has suggested that this unimaginable shape of time can be conceived mathematically with reference to the so-called ‘Weierstraß function’ and the ‘Koch curve’, which Benjamin was acquainted with».

26 See BENJAMIN *Das Passagen-Werk*, in ID., *Gesammelte Schriften*, cit., vol. 5, 1, pp. 587-588, N 7a, I; W. BENJAMIN, *The Arcades Project*, 470: «every dialectically presented historical circumstance polarizes itself and becomes a force field in which the confrontation between its fore-history and after-history is played out. It becomes such a field insofar as the present instant (*Aktualität*) interpenetrates it».

path of progress. This corresponds to a certain absence of coherence and rigor in the demands it makes on the present. The following remarks, in contrast, delineate a particular condition in which history appears to be concentrated in a single focal point, like those that have traditionally been found in the utopian images of philosophers. The elements of the ultimate condition do not manifest themselves as formless progressive tendencies, but are deeply rooted in every present in the form of the most endangered, excoriated, and ridiculed ideas and products of the creative mind. The historical task is to disclose this immanent state of perfection and make it absolute, to make it visible and dominant in the present. This condition cannot be captured in terms of the pragmatic description of details (the history of institutions, customs, and so on); in fact, it eludes them. Rather, the task is to grasp its metaphysical structure, as with the messianic domain or the idea of the French Revolution<sup>27</sup>.

As seen here, already in 1915 there is a nexus between the intensive, redemptive time of history, as found in the images of the utopians, and the metaphysical structure as idea, and thus with the epistemological nexus that makes the individuation of the state of perfection and justice (the ‘final state’, the ‘messianic reign’, the ‘French Revolution’) indispensable in the immanence of the present, through the division of phenomena by means of concepts comprehended, in fragments, in the idea<sup>28</sup>.

In the messianic now of knowability, the concept of the historical object exposes the ‘truth’ (which is an «intentionless state of being, made up of ideas»<sup>29</sup>) by presenting an image of the past known and saved in a fleeting flash of representation. The monadic phenomenon is a dialectic image of the messianic reign, the representation and symbolic concept of the state of divine perfection and justice<sup>30</sup>. In the «state of fulfillment of the world»<sup>31</sup>, phenomena will no longer be fragmented the way they are in the now of knowability, of immanence, and in history, the conditions of which necessarily entail knowledge and caducity. Revolutionary action inspired by the ‘hidden’ theological-messianic dimension remains conscious of the fact that it produces a transitory political reality not based on an eternal truth. The truth of the past, and the messianic idea of redemption connected to it, is a ‘fleeting (*vergänglich*) truth’ that appears for a moment and then vanishes, just as the unknown, never-realized past is fleeting:

If [...] [the image of the past] is authentic, it is due to its fleetingness (*Flüchtigkeit*). Precisely because this truth is fleeting (*vergänglich*) and a breath is enough to sweep it away,

27 W. BENJAMIN, *Das Leben der Studenten* [1914/15], in ID., *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, 1, p. 75; eng. trans. ID., *The Life of Students*, in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings*, vol. 1., eds. M. Bullock and M.W. Jennings, trans. by R. Livingstone, Harvard University Press, Harvard 2004, pp. 37-47, 37.

28 See *Erkenntniskritische Vorrede*, in BENJAMIN, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, in ID., *Gesammelte Schriften*, cit., vol. 1, 1, pp. 207-237. BENJAMIN, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, cit., pp. 27-56.

29 See *ivi*, p. 216; Engl. trans. p. 36.

30 See TOMBA, *La «vera politica»*, cit., pp. 206-255, in particular the section *Göttliche Gewalt*, pp. 251-255.

31 BENJAMIN, *Erkenntnistheorie* [1920-21] in ID., *Gesammelte Schriften*, cit., vol. 6, p. 46; eng. trans. ID., *Theory of Knowledge*, in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings*, vol. 1, cit., p. 276.



much depends upon it. Appearance (*Schein*), in fact, which agrees better with eternity, is ready to take its place<sup>32</sup>.

The concept of history is a construction where the messianic idea, the perfect world, is present in every 'now of knowability' in which the monadological 'dialectical image' presents itself as the actualization of moments of an unredeemed past that is redeemed in knowledge and afterwards in political action. The relation between past and present is given in the dialectical image, in the concept of history, in a messianic interruption of the course of history. This owes to the Jewish doctrine of the Kabbalah, to Kant and to Marx. This owes also a great deal to Hermann Cohen's neo-kantian and Judaic-messianic conception of ethics and his concepts of temporality and eternity, his concepts of sanctity, humanity, justice and peace bound to history, and to his ethical anti-ontologism and anti-eschatologism. Benjamin inverts Cohen's idea of ethics bound to the future in the actuality of remembrance and the political interruption of the course of history<sup>33</sup>.

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32 BENJAMIN, *Anmerkungen a Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, cit., vol. 1, tome 3, p. 1247, Ms 440 (translation mine).

33 See DESIDERI, *Messianica ratio. Affinities and Differences in Cohen's and Benjamin's Messianic Rationalism*, in «Aisthesis», 8, 2, 2015, pp. 133-145; TAGLIACCOZZO, *Etica e messianismo: un confronto tra Walter Benjamin e Hermann Cohen*, in «Archivio di filosofia», 38, 1, 2020, pp. 109-122.