

# Let the dead bury their dead

## Marxism and the politics of redemption

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Early in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* Marx makes the following comment:

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 about the past. Earlier revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to dull themselves to their own content. In order to arrive at its own content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead.<sup>1</sup>

The last sentence here might appear to be a throwaway line – one more rhetorical gesture in an armoury heavily stocked with rhetorical gestures. Its final phrase, however, is one that Marx used repeatedly. When a decade earlier Ruge had written to Marx despairing of the lack of revolutionary movement in 1843, Marx replied that ‘your letter, my dear friend, is a fine elegy, a funeral song, that takes one’s breath away; but there is absolutely nothing political about it’. He adds:

Nevertheless ... your theme is still not exhausted, I want to add the finale, and when everything is at an end, give me your hand, so that we may begin again from the beginning. Let the dead bury their dead and mourn them.<sup>2</sup>

The point is repeated elliptically in Marx’s attack on Stirner in *The German Ideology*, and elsewhere in the context of the capitalist class’s drive to do anything necessary to sustain its domination: ‘The capitalist gentlemen will never want for fresh exploitable flesh and blood, and will let the dead bury their dead.’<sup>3</sup> Marx was thus clearly fond of the phrase. But what on earth does it mean?<sup>4</sup>

I want to use this question, and Marx’s comment, to build an argument about the place of the dead within Marxism. I first explore the reasons why Marx uses the phrase and how it appears to fit with other

dimensions of communist politics. I then point to some of the political dangers in the idea, by showing that it contradicts other important dimensions of Marx’s work and, moreover, by suggesting that to ‘let the dead bury their dead’ would leave the dead to other forms of politics – in the worst-case scenario it would leave the dead to be appropriated by fascism. I therefore suggest that we have to rethink the idea that we must let the dead bury their dead; that we need to find a way to incorporate a very different argument about the dead into Marx’s view. This will have its roots in the idea of redemption, an idea that I will excavate via the work of Walter Benjamin and that, I suggest, allows Marxism the possibility of protecting the dead from being appropriated by the political right.

### Time and the dead

The phrase ‘let the dead bury their dead’ is taken from the Gospel of Matthew: ‘Jesus said to him, “Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead”’ (8:22). Jesus makes the comment to a disciple who asks for time to be able to bury his father. The suggestion seems to be that the burying of the (physical) dead should be left to those who are spiritually dead. Jesus’s ‘radicalism’ here lies in his break with contemporary mores concerning the dead, seeming to suggest that a failure to make a break with the past (in the form of the physically dead) was tantamount to the spiritual death of the present movement. The movement itself overrode obligations to the past. The point for Marx would seem to lie in the implication that this new *political* movement should not be burdened with the past. Humanity must learn to part with its past, as he puts it in his early critique of Hegel.

Marx’s use of the phrase seems to pick up on his sense of the danger for the communist movement of succumbing to the weight of the present, a danger symbolized by the control the dead seem to have over the living. He comments in the Preface to the first

edition of *Capital* that ‘we suffer not only from the living, but from the dead. *Le mort saisit le vif!*’ (‘The living are in the grip of the dead!’). And, as he puts it elsewhere, ‘the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.’ Engels repeats this as one of Marx’s insights.<sup>5</sup> The present – or, given the shifting temporality of modernity, at least the *nineteenth-century* present – thus *suffers under the weight of the dead*. The extent of this weight or suffering can be seen in the fact that many revolutionary struggles have been understood in terms gleaned from the past: ‘It is generally the fate of completely new historical creations to be mistaken for the counterpart of older and even defunct forms of social life.’ Thus the Paris Commune of 1871 was ‘mistaken for a reproduction of the medieval communes’ or ‘mistaken for an exaggerated form of the ancient struggle against over-centralization’.<sup>6</sup> In many cases this is because the revolutionaries themselves made the mistake, and continue to make the mistake, of turning to the dead, to past generations, in order to find their meaning and legitimacy.



Just when they seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle-cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language.

Thus

Luther donned the mask of the Apostle Paul, the revolution of 1789 to 1814 draped itself alternately as the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire, and the revolution of 1848 knew nothing better to do than to parody, now 1789, now the revolutionary tradition of 1793 to 1795 ... Danton, Robespierre, Saint-Just, Napoleon, the heroes as well as the parties and the masses of the old French Revolution, performed the task of their time in Roman costume and with Roman phrases.<sup>7</sup>

This is what Marx calls ‘world-historical necromancy’, and he has a strong sense that such necromancy could be deeply problematic for the movement of communism. For the communist movement is understood by Marx as a movement for the future, a movement for a world ‘coming into being’.<sup>8</sup> Driven by what Peter Osborne calls a historical futurity<sup>9</sup> the proletariat should not, on this view, be burdened by the past; it therefore must, in its creation of a new future, leave behind previous generations.

Now, this futurity is somewhat dependent on what G.A. Cohen has called the obstetric motif in Marx’s work.<sup>10</sup> Marx several times points out that the present is *pregnant* with possibility; the new society will *emerge from the womb* of the present. If ‘force is the midwife of every old society’, he comments in *Capital*, then every old society must be thought of as ‘pregnant with a new one’.<sup>11</sup> Or ‘In our days, everything seems pregnant with its contrary.’ Because communism ‘will be the product that the present time bears in its womb’, what we are dealing with is a society

not as it has *developed* on its own foundations, but on the contrary, just as it *emerges* from capitalist society, which is thus in every respect, economically, morally and intellectually, still stamped with the birth-marks of the old society from whose womb it emerges.

The role of the communist movement is to ‘shorten and lessen the birth-pangs’ of the new society and ‘set free the elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant’. In contrast to the system of capital in which labour appears ‘as a power springing forth from its own womb’, communism will be a society which realizes ‘the possibilities resting in living labour’s own womb’.<sup>12</sup> To be a communist, then, is to be focused on the birth of the new rather than the death of the old – to act as midwife to the new society.

This historical futurity and the clear desire to identify the present as a society pregnant with the possibility of communism becomes central to the distinction drawn between the communism of the *Manifesto* and other forms of communism or socialism. In the section on ‘Socialist and Communist Literature’ Marx and Engels identify three forms of socialism.<sup>13</sup> First, reactionary socialism, and its three sub-forms: feudal socialism, petty-bourgeois socialism and German, or ‘true’, socialism. Second, conservative, or bourgeois, socialism. And third, critical-utopian socialism and communism. What is partly at stake in the account of these three varieties is the question of what we might now call class alignment: feudal socialism joins forces with classes for which feudalism was most suited, namely the landed aristocracy; German or ‘true’ socialism tends to obliterate the question of class in its concern for ‘Human Nature’ or ‘Man’ and thus serves the class of philistines, the petty bourgeoisie; conservative socialism aims at the maintenance of existing property relations minus its revolutionary element – that is, a bourgeoisie without a proletariat; utopian socialists appeal to society at large, with the consequence that they stand apart from class struggle and see the proletariat as ‘the most suffering class’ rather than the agent of historical transformation. This dimension of the critique of socialist and communist literature in the *Manifesto* is well known, being the basis of all sorts of clashes and denunciations in the First International and after. But what is also at stake in this discussion, and more relevant to the argument here, is a politics of time.

The defining characteristic of reactionary socialism is its desire to restore past social forms. Feudal socialism is ‘half echo of the past’: it holds up past forms of exploitation as somehow better than present. Petty-bourgeois socialism seeks to reinvigorate the corporate guilds as the basis for manufacture and therefore aims at ‘restoring the old means of production and exchange, and with them the old property relations, and the old society’; the concern is with and

for the past. In contrast to these reactionary socialisms, conservative socialism aims more at the maintenance of existing property relations but without the revolutionary potential within them. Rather than propose a radical rejection of modern conditions on the basis of a reactionary return to feudal or semi-feudal social structures, conservative socialism prefers to contemplate the possibility of ‘the existing state of society minus its revolutionary and disintegrating elements’. Conservative socialism thus aims to maintain the bourgeois status quo, albeit with piecemeal reforms; the concern is with and for the present.

So, in contrast to the historical futurity of communism, other forms of socialism or communism are either backward-looking phenomena – ‘for *they try to roll back the wheels of history*’ – or aim at merely preserving the present. Against these, Marx and Engels set communism as the only doctrine with a vision of a *future* transformation of the social conditions of bourgeois society into communist forms of property ownership. And while the critical-utopians also base their socialism and communism on the future, they do so on the basis of ‘fantastic pictures of future society’ combined with a rejection of all political, and especially revolutionary, class action. The point is that communism is a movement driven by the image of the *future* as well as being founded on the *revolutionary movement of the proletariat*.

To reiterate: communism would appear to be a revolutionary movement for the future and should do all it can to avoid being weighed down by the past. In accepting communism as a movement aiming for the *birth* of a new society we seem obliged to accept the thoroughness of history in carrying old forms to the grave: ‘Why this course of history? So that humanity should part with its past *cheerfully*. This *cheerful* historical destiny is what we vindicate.’<sup>14</sup> Reach for the future, and reach for it cheerfully. Let the new society be born. Let the dead bury their dead.

Now, if nothing else this argument has the virtue of consistency. If communism as Marx conceives it is driven by the birth of the future society, then it is perfectly reasonable to suggest that we must let the dead bury their dead. It therefore appears quite conceivable that Marx saw the solidarity of a liberated mankind simply in terms of a principle of harmony among future generations, a view in which exploited predecessors and enslaved contemporaries are reduced to the status of nonentities or dead wood in the evolution of mankind and whose existence had best be forgotten. According to this view, held by many and assumed by many to be held by Marx, the human species actualizes

itself when it overcomes the debilitating ballast of remembrance; that is, when it *forgets* its historical genesis. Marxism thus becomes a politics designed as the emancipation from remembrance, and communism a movement so driven by the prospects of the future that it sees emancipated mankind leaving behind as 'prehistory' all previous struggles and past sufferings. On this view the dead are to be abandoned to the past, and the past is to be abandoned as dead.

The beauty of this interpretation, what instinctively makes it appear to work, is that it appears to have a wonderful symmetry vis-à-vis other political positions. One might think of political positions in terms of how they think about the dead.<sup>15</sup> The most basic political assumption concerning the dead is to view them as part of the past and thus incorporate them into 'tradition', especially a national tradition. Such a view leads easily into the political doctrine most closely associated with tradition, namely conservatism. For one of conservatism's key assumptions is that, as Burke puts it, if society is a contract then it is a contract between the living, those yet to be born, and the dead. Because conservatism has been so closely associated with this view, remembrance has often been conflated with a conservative traditionalism oriented around the nation. One aim of this essay is to wrestle the dead out of the arms of conservatism. But this poses an immediate problem. Relieved from being 'merely' tradition, the dead are in danger of becoming adopted by the other main political ideology which likes to harp on about the past in general and the national past in particular: fascism. As part of this, fascism aims to incorporate the dead into a more general political eschatology in which the immortal nation is thought to be founded on the *resurrected* dead. Fascists therefore situate their struggle partly on the terrain of the dead.<sup>16</sup> Thus, against a conservative politics which appears to *sanctify* the dead under the banner of tradition and a fascist politics which wishes to *resurrect* the dead, Marx appears to wish to *abandon* dead generations under the banner of a revolution oriented towards the future. This appears to have a wonderful political symmetry, so perhaps we should leave it at that.

Yet there is something that is not quite right about this reading of Marx; something not quite right, that is, about the idea that we must let the dead bury their dead. For, despite a certain obviousness in the argument – at the most basic of levels communism must be about the future, in a way that conservatism must be about the past and tradition – there is an important sense in which the argument simply omits much that is important to Marxism. Identifying what the argument

omits will help shape a rather different approach to the dead, one that opens up the possibility of saving the dead from fascism.

### **Anamnestic solidarity**

Marx reiterates time and again that human beings make their own history, but they do not do so under circumstances of their own choosing. They build it out of the world from which they have emerged. In other words, human beings *inherit from the dead* the circumstances in which they find themselves, an inheritance formed not least out of the struggles of dead generations. Thus as much as one might wish that we can leave the dead to bury their dead, the tradition of dead generations nonetheless still weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. The struggle for the future is therefore 'not a question of drawing a great mental dividing line between past and present'. There is no absolute distinction between today and yesterday. Rather, it is a question of '*realising* the thoughts of the past'. In other words, in the project of communism mankind 'is not beginning a *new work*' in the way that the obstetric motif would seem to suggest, 'but is consciously *carrying into effect its old work*'.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, Marx's powerful arguments concerning the development of feudalism into capitalism convey the sense of injustice he obviously perceives in this historic transformation: the bloody processes and laws through which agricultural peoples were forced from their homes, turned into vagabonds and then whipped, branded and tortured into the discipline necessary for the wage system; the horrors, extirpation and enslavement experienced in the colonies through which whole continents were turned into warrens for the commercial hunting of black skins; and the constant sucking of the blood of the Western working class by the bourgeois class, a process in which the workers are often worked literally to death.<sup>18</sup> Marx clearly believes that communism is nothing if it fails to build on the sense of injustice experienced by those alive at the fate of their dead. From the famines to the political murders; from remembrance of those who died struggling against capital to the struggle for justice for those killed in the corporate slaughterhouse ('industrial accidents', in bourgeois ideology); from those killed in the fight against fascism to the struggle for retribution against deaths 'in police custody'; from the campaign against 'dead peasants insurance' in the US to the struggle for a workers memorial day in the UK – the list is endless. They are all part of the blood-drenched history that animates contemporary struggles of the living, struggles that either implicitly



or explicitly echo Adorno's suggestion that 'one of the basic human rights possessed by those who pick up the tab for the progress of civilization is the right to be remembered'.<sup>19</sup> It is a sense of the struggles of the past that often drives a movement to struggle for a certain future; the struggle for the future would thus surely be seriously lost if it gave up the struggle for justice for the dead.

Taken together these ideas point towards the fact that the revolutionary tendency of the proletariat does not come from nowhere, but emerges from historical conditions that have themselves been shaped by struggle. It is this that drove Marx to spend more time thinking and writing about the past than the future. After all, is not Marx constantly reproached with having written ten to twenty volumes about the past and present while producing barely ten pages on the future?<sup>20</sup>

When Marx talks about the past in these ways he seems to be making a point very different to the idea that we must abandon the dead to their fate. Rather, he seems to be suggesting that there exists a *unity of the oppressed*, a unity rooted in the emergence and continued existence of class society and which suggests a certain solidarity, albeit undefined, between the living and the dead. This unity is, I believe, behind Derrida's stress on the political importance of mourning. But rather than follow Derrida into the realm of mourning and spectres I will instead take up the idea that this sense of unity with dead generations should be thought of as an *anamnesic solidarity*, a form of solidarity expressed through the process of remembrance and which finds no better expression than in Marx's suggestion that the victorious proletarian contemporaries would be *de facto* heirs of legions of exploited slaves and workers of the past.<sup>21</sup> Historical materialism would appear to be politically weakened if it involved forgetting that communism will be built on the bodies and memory of those who have struggled and died in the past: 'only the conscious horror of destruction creates the correct relationship with the dead: unity with them because we, like them, are the victims of the same condition and the same disappointed hope.'<sup>22</sup>

So we cannot simply let the dead bury their dead; we have to find a way of incorporating the dead into Marxist politics. Without this we would, in effect, be abandoning the dead to conservatism (at best) and fascism (at worst). In other words, we need to protect the dead from both conservatism and fascism, or, what amounts to the same thing, protect the dead from fascism in a non-conservative fashion. I suggest that such an anamnesic solidarity – which would be some-

thing like a Marxist politics of remembrance – can be developed through the category of redemption. In making this suggestion I aim to contribute to the growing body of work on redemption as a historical materialist category, and do so by contrasting redemption with two alternative and fundamentally opposed categories: reconciliation, as found in conservatism, and resurrection, as found in fascism.

Marx played with the idea of redemption in his early work, where he suggests that the proletariat 'can redeem itself only through the *total redemption of humanity*'.<sup>23</sup> He did not, however, develop this at any length. To do so, I shall turn to the Marxist who was most sensitive to the idea of redemption: Walter Benjamin. In his theses 'On the Concept of History' Benjamin suggests that 'the idea of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the idea of redemption'. The same applies to the idea of the past, and thus history. 'The past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption .... There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one.'<sup>24</sup> To grasp this secret means neither trying to recognize it 'the way it really was' nor to attempt any kind of 'total recall', both of which feature as the myth of historicism (or at least Benjamin's understanding of historicism, which in conflating both objectivism and progressivism in history has a peculiarity of its own). For Benjamin, the historicist attempt to narrate things 'as they really were' is in fact a form of forgetting: that what are now called 'cultural treasures' have an origin which cannot truly be contemplated without horror; that the documents of civilization are at the same time documents of the barbarism which has produced them.<sup>25</sup>

In contrast to historicism, history for Benjamin 'is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time [*Jetztzeit*]'. Not only is the 'now' thus a *historical present* but, conversely, the historical is filled by the presence of the now. This gives rise to a reading of the French Revolutionary use of ancient motifs very different to that suggested by Marx in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* or the *Manifesto*. In contrast to Marx's suggestion that in performing the Revolution in Roman costume and with Roman phrases the French were engaged in world-historical necromancy, Benjamin suggests that

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 bygone mode of dress.<sup>26</sup>

For Benjamin, the French Revolutionaries were doing something more profound than Marx was willing to make allowances for: they were working with an image of the past which captured their own concerns in the now; they at least recognized that historical tradition might be part of the terrain of the class struggle.

Benjamin thus rejects any concept of history as an uninterrupted series past–present–future in favour of a concept of history in which past and present are intermingled.<sup>27</sup> This concept of history is thought by Benjamin to be in keeping with the ‘tradition of the oppressed’, a tradition under threat from the commitment to ‘progress’ on the part of both historicism and social democracy.

The subject of historical knowledge is the struggling, oppressed class 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 ... has always been objectionable to Social Democrats .... 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.<sup>28</sup>

The greatest strength of the movement thus lies in the repository of historical knowledge held by the oppressed class. Our concept of history both requires and leads us to make a choice. The same threat hangs over both the content of the tradition and those who seek to maintain it: the danger of becoming a tool of the ruling class. The nature of this threat stands out most clearly if one asks with whom one empathizes: for the adherents of historicism it is the victors; for the historical materialist it is the enslaved ancestors.

Underlying Benjamin’s opposition to historicism and his insistence that historical materialism needs to make history explode with the images of enslaved ancestors is his belief that if historical materialism fails to supply such an experience of the past, the dead will not be safe. ‘The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious.’ This is the ‘unique experience with the past’ supplied by historical materialism. But the problem is that the enemy – fascism – has not ceased to be victorious. Benjamin is concerned here not only that Marxism has failed to be sufficiently nourished or mobilized by the image of enslaved ancestors, but that should this failing continue then the same enslaved ancestors will themselves not be

safe from the enemy. Historical materialism thus needs to engage in ‘a revolutionary chance in the fight *for* the oppressed past’.<sup>29</sup> Our task is nothing less than to protect the dead. To ‘let the dead bury their dead’ would therefore not only fail to fan the spark of hope embodied in the images of enslaved ancestors, it would be politically disastrous. The dead will not be safe, and neither will we.

This argument is bound up with Benjamin’s concept of redemption: ‘Only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past.’<sup>30</sup> A combination of a secret agreement between generations and the image of enslaved ancestors on the one hand, and a sustained class hatred on the other (a hatred fuelled by the depth of historical knowledge), is the basis of redemption, in which liberation is completed in the name of oppressed ancestors. This idea crystallizes Benjamin’s image of the angel of history in the ninth thesis.

There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed.

Many commentators have interpreted this image as yet another sign of the messianic dimension of Benjamin’s work, but there is nothing messianic about the ninth thesis – historical wakening is, for Benjamin, one of the foundation stones of dialectical thinking.<sup>31</sup> The angel stands for the ‘true’ historian – that is, the historical materialist – who sees those lying prostrate, the horror which has produced the cultural treasures, the sky-high wreckage and pile of debris, and senses that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy. Far from being a Messiah come to save us, the angel in question would like to stay and do nothing less than *awaken the dead*. Now, for obvious reasons it could only be a *wish* that one could wake the dead (and as we shall see, this sounds dangerously like the fascist concept of resurrection). But the motivation for Benjamin’s suggestion is precisely the idea that without the preservation of this wish as a wish they would die a second time – at the hands of the enemy.<sup>32</sup> And this task of protecting the dead is not assigned to a redeemer who intervenes from outside history; rather, it is *our task*.

For Benjamin, then, ‘historical materialism sees the work of the past as still uncompleted’.<sup>33</sup> The exchange of letters between Benjamin and Horkheimer is inter-

esting in this regard. Benjamin had sent the essay (on Edmund Fuchs) in which he makes this comment to Horkheimer for publication in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. In a letter to Benjamin from March 1937 Horkheimer offers a very different conception of the image of enslaved ancestors. He comments that ‘past injustice has occurred and is completed. The slain are really slain .... Perhaps, with regard to incompleteness, there is a difference between the positive and the negative, so that only the injustice, the horror, the sufferings of the past are irreparable.’<sup>34</sup> This is an integral part of the pessimism that Horkheimer readily (and proudly?) concedes is at the heart of critical theory, as he makes clear in published essays: ‘perfect justice’ can never become a reality, because ‘even if a better society develops and eliminates the present disorder, there will be no compensation for the wretchedness of past ages and no end to the distress in nature’. Similarly, ‘past injustice will never be made up; the suffering of past generations receives no compensation’.<sup>35</sup> While articulating a position that may appear closer to that initially identified with Marx’s above, Horkheimer here misses the intention and distinctiveness of Benjamin’s argument. After all, Benjamin was hardly averse to a little pessimism himself – ‘pessimism all along the line. Absolutely.’<sup>36</sup>

In reporting on this exchange with Horkheimer in one of the notebooks for the ‘Arcades Project’, Benjamin comments that historical materialism is here concerned less with the ‘determined facts’ and more with the politics of remembrance. Remembrance can help make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete.<sup>37</sup> Benjamin thus senses that remembrance and redemption could be the cornerstones of a historical materialist approach. He is ‘pointing to a politics of memory for which the character of the present, and hence the future, is determined by its relations to a series of specific pasts (“enslaved ancestors”, for example, as opposed to triumphs of nation)’.<sup>38</sup> One of the underlying principles of his work was thus to develop a materialist concept of history founded on ‘images in the collective consciousness in which the new is permeated with the old’, in which ‘the entire past is brought into the present’, and in which the present recognizes itself as intimated in the image of the past, a cultural-historical dialectic politically driven by the secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Such an agreement appears as a political right that past generations have vis-à-vis the power of redemption possessed by the living. Memory thus becomes the secret of redemption.

## Redemption, reconciliation, resurrection

Yet wait a minute: isn’t all this stuff about the past, memory, remembrance, beginning to sound a little, well, conservative? In his critical profile of Benjamin, Jürgen Habermas suggests that Benjamin’s theses on the concept of history are essentially conservative (or conservative-revolutionary), since they imply a concept of critique which lies in the redemption of the past. Following Adorno, it might be said that Benjamin’s argument runs the serious risk of falling into an undialectical archaism and thus a political conservatism. And since, as Axel Honneth puts it in developing these suggestions, it is unclear to what extent it is meaningful to speak of a communicative relationship to people or groups of people who belong to the realm of the dead, beyond a methodological quasi-magical notion of ‘experience’, the risk of falling into a concept of the past and the dead which has little to distinguish it from a conservative politics seems to be quite high indeed.<sup>39</sup> These points are crucial, and raise a more general concern. For if the argument is that we move from positing historical materialism as a historical forgetting (‘let the dead bury their dead’) to suggesting that historical materialism might actually constitute a form of remembering, and if this move centres on a debate about our relation to the dead, then an obvious question arises: are there any grounds to distinguish between historical materialism and conservatism on the question of remembrance? In other words, are we in danger of allowing Benjamin’s arguments to take Marxism down an inherently conservative road, and thus out of Marxism altogether? For if, as Benjamin suggests, our task is redemption and if, as Benjamin also suggests, the memory of our ancestors will be irretrievably lost if we miss the opportunity to engage in such redemption, then what is there to distinguish this from, say, Burke’s claims about the dead within his conservative vision of tradition? Moreover, and even more dangerously, is this idea of redemption just a little too close to the fascist idea of resurrection? After all, haven’t rather a lot of people described fascism itself as a form of redemptive politics?

Although one might certainly describe as conservative the sort of critique which either attempts to preserve everything as a matter of principle or locates itself within the dominant tradition, none of these characteristics applies to Benjamin’s idea of redemption.<sup>40</sup> Far from seeking to preserve everything, Benjamin wishes to preserve the struggles of the oppressed for the purpose of the contemporary revolutionary (and thus anti-tradition) movement. And, far from being located in the dominant tradition, Benjamin points to



the ways in which the dominant tradition is suspect precisely because of its use by 'the victors' and 'the enemy'. Far from being an end in itself, then, Benjamin seeks to use the tradition of struggles against oppression in order to avenge that very oppression, and he does this because his concept of redemption is forged through the concept of an antagonistic class society rather than an organic order unified under the authority of the state.

Moreover, Benjamin constantly reiterates that the kinds of images he is talking about as the core of a materialist concept of history are simultaneously *wish images*. Anamnestic solidarity figures in Benjamin as redemptive solidarity, centred on the now-time and to be realized in the future. This image of the future is as far from conservative as can be, for it is one in which 'the collective seeks both to overcome and to transfigure the immaturity of the social product and the inadequacies in the social organization of production'. At the same time,

what emerges in these wish images is the resolute effort to distance oneself from all that is antiquated. ... In the dream in which each epoch entertains images of its successor, the latter appears wedded to elements of primal history – that is, to elements of a classless society. And the experiences of such a society – as stored in the unconscious of the collective – engender, through interpenetration with what is new, the utopia that has left its trace in a thousand configurations of life.<sup>41</sup>

Benjamin's concept of remembrance is thus not backward-looking in any conservative sense, but futural. It is an attempt precisely to *avoid* a politics in which 'people pass things down to posterity, by making them untouchable and thus liquidating them'.<sup>42</sup> The angel of history may have his face turned

towards the past, but the storm from paradise irresistibly propels him into the future. And, moreover, this historical futurity envisions the past as gathered up within the present in an *apocalyptic* fashion. In contrast to the historicist and conservative 'eternal' or 'immortal' image of the past, the historical materialist aims to 'blast open the continuum of history' – to 'make the continuum of history explode' rather than peddle a myth of continuity: to 'blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history'.<sup>43</sup>

And the purpose of such blasts and explosions is clearly distinct from any conservative politics, for while the model of 'completion' contained within the idea of redemption may superficially appear conservative, its ultimate aim is not for redemption as a *realizable* practical goal, but as a standpoint around which revolutionary action might be oriented.<sup>44</sup> Revolutionary action, that is, towards the *possibility* of the most non-conservative idea imaginable: a classless society.

Far from entailing a conservative concept of historical unity or an eternal contract between generations, this idea of redemption is also pitched *against* the conservative idea of reconciliation. Reconciliation involves accepting the present in its own right, to find a certain satisfaction in the present – 'to delight in the present ... is the *reconciliation* with actuality', says Hegel.<sup>45</sup> Reconciliation thus tends to postulate a situation supposedly prior to conflict or the outcome of some kind of 'resolution' to the conflict, marked by an ideological 'peace' and 'understanding' between otherwise contradictory forces or tendencies. Reconciliation thus comes to figure as an essentially conservative mode of thought. Marx himself warned of the way in which 'lachrymose words of reconciliation' could function as an anti-revolutionary tool; the way, that is, that the search for a 'sentimental reconciliation' of contradictory class interests functions as an ideological gloss of the highest order.<sup>46</sup> And of the many things Benjamin expressed concern about, 'sentimental reconciliation' is fairly near the top: 'Mistrust in the fate of European literature, mistrust in the fate of freedom, mistrust in the fate of European humanity, but three times mistrust in all reconciliation: between classes, between nations, between individuals.'<sup>47</sup> For there is a fundamental – an irreconcilable – difference between reconciliation and redemption. Where reconciliation



imposes a certain closure, insisting on some sort of conclusion, redemption insists on a certain openness, in the sense that the future is not wholly determined.<sup>48</sup> Redemption and conservatism are thus understood in political opposition: the task to be accomplished is less the reconciliation with the past (or nature, classes, etc.), but rather the redemption of the hopes of the past. Politically, reconciliation and redemption are not compatible; they are as incompatible as conservatism and Marxism.<sup>49</sup>

It may also appear that this talk of redemption comes a little too close to fascism and its claims about the dead. The idea of redemption has been used to explain, variously, the eschatological dimension of fascism, fascism as a political religion, the idea of fascism as a palingenetic myth, Nazi anti-Semitism, the centrality of violence, and much else. But redemption is the wrong concept in trying to make sense of fascism. Rather, fascism's central concept when it comes to the dead is resurrection, as I have shown at greater length elsewhere. Now, resurrection and redemption may appear to be close due to their theological connections. Theologically, redemption refers to deliverance from sin. But the theological meaning of redemption is only one of a complex set of meanings. Redemption also refers (and my sense is that Benjamin knew this) to 'the action of freeing a prisoner, captive or slave by payment', 'the action of freeing, delivering, or restoring in some way', and 'the fact of obtaining a privileged status, or admission to a society'. In political terms, then, such an act can take on the sense of 'to make good on the debts of the past', or even 'to rescue the past by means of the future'. But resurrection has a very different set of connotations. Stemming from the rising again of Christ after death, it connotes rebirth in the literal sense but also refers to the rising again of mankind at the Last Day. It is the literal process of individual and collective rebirth as part of a new era. The choice of the concept here is politically telling, and draws our attention to a fundamental aspect of the distinction between Marxism and fascism on this score. Where 'redemption' might be thought of as connoting the *hopes and struggles* of the dead, 'resurrection' points not to the hopes of the dead but to *the dead themselves*.

The fascist stress on resurrection is precisely why Marxism must hold on to some alternative and competing argument concerning the place of the dead. Far from letting the dead bury their dead, Marxism has to recognize the political importance of the dead – the generations of the downtrodden and enslaved ancestors who embody the political struggles of the past. In that

sense, the revolutionary commitment which encourages us to let the dead bury their dead must be articulated from the standpoint of redemption: shot through with the redemptive dynamic that animates a large number of political movements and through which, if nothing else in these days of defeat, the dead are made safe from fascism.

## Notes

Thanks to David Cunningham, Howard Feather and Peter Hallward for comments on the first draft of this article, and to Peter Osborne for picking up on my undialectical use of the question mark.

1. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vols. 1–49, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1975–2001 (hereafter *MECW*), vol. 11, 1979, p. 106.
2. Marx to Ruge, May 1843, in *MECW*, vol. 3, p. 134.
3. Karl Marx, 'Wage Labour and Capital' (1849), in *MECW*, vol. 9, p. 226; Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (1845–6), in *MECW*, vol. 5, p. 137.
4. Derrida asks this same question, but his answer is not at all helpful: Marx 'wanted, first of all, it seems, to recall us to the *make-oneself-fear* of that fear of oneself' (*Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 114). Vincent Geoghegan has situated Marx's comment in the context of his critique of religion. See "'Let the Dead Bury their Dead": Marx, Derrida, Bloch', *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2002, pp. 5–18. As I aim to show, there is much more to be said about Marx's comment.
5. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume 1 (1867), trans. Ben Fowkes, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1976, p. 91; *Eighteenth Brumaire*, p. 103; Engels, 'The Future Italian Revolution and the Socialist Party' (1894), in *MECW*, vol. 27, p. 437.
6. Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France*, (1871), in *The First International and After*, ed. David Fernbach, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1974, p. 211.
7. Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, pp. 103–4.
8. Karl Marx, 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. Introduction', in *MECW*, vol. 3, p. 187.
9. Peter Osborne, 'Remember the Future? The Communist Manifesto as Historical and Cultural Form', in *The Socialist Register 1998*, Merlin, London, 1998, p. 193.
10. G.A. Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2000, pp. 66–78.
11. Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, p. 916. Engels stressed this aspect of Volume 1 of *Capital* in a review of the book he wrote for the *Beobachter* in December 1867: 'he [Marx] endeavours to show that the present-day society, economically considered, is pregnant with another, higher form of society' (*MECW*, vol. 20, pp. 224–5). It seems that Engels got this idea from a letter from Marx just a few days before he wrote the review, in which Marx had toyed with the idea of 'hoodwinking' people by writing a review of *Capital* which would stress the point that 'he [i.e. Marx] demonstrates that present society, economically considered, is pregnant with a new, higher form'

- (Marx to Engels, 7 December 1867, in *MECW*, vol. 42, p. 494).
12. Karl Marx, 'Speech at the Anniversary of *The People's Paper*', April 1856, in *MECW*, vol. 14, p. 655; Marx to Ruge, May 1843, p. 141; 'Critique of the Gotha Programme' (1875), in *MECW*, vol. 24, pp. 85, 87; *Capital*, Volume 1, p. 92; *Civil War in France*, p. 213; *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume 3, trans. David Fernbach, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1981, p. 966; *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1973, p. 454.
  13. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), in *MECW*, vol. 6, pp. 507–17.
  14. Marx, 'Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. Introduction', p. 179.
  15. Space does not allow for a full development of this side of the argument. The full argument, combined with an analysis of the *undead* as a political category (the category of monstrosity) can be found in my *The Monstrous and the Dead: Burke, Marx, Fascism*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, forthcoming.
  16. See Mark Neocleous, 'Long Live Death! Fascism, Resurrection, Immortality', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, forthcoming.
  17. Marx to Ruge, September 1843, in *MECW*, vol. 3, p. 144, final emphasis added.
  18. See Mark Neocleous, 'The Political Economy of the Dead: Marx's Vampires', *History of Political Thought*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2003, pp. 668–84.
  19. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), trans. C. Lenhardt, Routledge, London, 1984, p. 72.
  20. György Lukács, 'On Futurology' (1970), in *The New Hungarian Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 47, 1972, pp. 100–107, p. 101.
  21. Christian Lenhardt, 'Anamnestic Solidarity: The Proletariat and its *Manes*', *Telos* 25, 1975, pp. 133–54.
  22. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), trans. John Cumming, Verso, London, 1979, p. 215.
  23. Marx, 'Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law', p. 186, translation modified.
  24. Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History' (1940), trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4: 1938–1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Belknap/Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2003, Thesis II, pp. 389–90.
  25. *Ibid.*, Thesis VII, p. 392.
  26. *Ibid.*, Thesis XIV, p. 395.
  27. Peter Osborne, 'Small-scale Victories, Large-scale Defeats: Walter Benjamin's Politics of Time', in Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, eds, *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 86.
  28. Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', Thesis XII, p. 394.
  29. *Ibid.*, Theses VI and XVII, pp. 391, 396, emphasis added.
  30. *Ibid.*, Thesis III, p. 390, translation modified.
  31. Walter Benjamin, 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century' (1935), in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 3: 1935–1938, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland and Others, Belknap/Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2002, p. 43. On the non-messianic nature of this thesis see Rolf Tiedemann, 'Historical Materialism or Political Messianism? An Interpretation of the Theses "On the Concept of History"', in Gary Smith, ed., *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1989.
  32. Tiedemann, 'Historical Materialism or Political Messianism?', p. 187.
  33. Walter Benjamin, 'Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian' (1937), in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 3, p. 267.
  34. Cited by Benjamin, 'N [On the Theory of Knowledge]', *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLoughlin, Belknap/Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1999, p. 471.
  35. Max Horkheimer, 'Thoughts on Religion' and 'Materialism and Metaphysics', both in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell and others, Continuum, New York, 1999, pp. 26, 130.
  36. Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' (1929), trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2: 1927–1934, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, Belknap/Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1999, p. 216.
  37. Benjamin, 'N [On the Theory of Knowledge]', p. 471.
  38. Osborne, 'Small-scale Victories, Large-scale Defeats', p. 89.
  39. Jürgen Habermas, 'Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique' (1972), in Smith, ed., *On Walter Benjamin*, pp. 99, 124; Theodor Adorno, 'Letter to Benjamin, August 1935', in Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1928–1940*, trans. Nicholas Walker, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1999, p. 106; Axel Honneth, 'A Communicative Disclosure of the Past: On the Relation Between Anthropology and Philosophy in Walter Benjamin', *New Formations* 20, 1993, pp. 83–94.
  40. Peter Bürger, *The Decline of Modernism*, trans. Nicholas Walker, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1992, p. 22.
  41. Benjamin, 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century', pp. 33–4.
  42. Walter Benjamin, 'The Destructive Character' (1931), trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, p. 542.
  43. Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', Theses XV, XVI, XVII, pp. 395–6; 'N [On the Theory of Knowledge]', pp. 474–5; 'Edward Fuchs', pp. 262, 268.
  44. Osborne, 'Small-scale Victories, Large-scale Defeats', p. 91; Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde*, Verso, London, 1995, p. 146.
  45. G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1821), trans. H.B. Nisbet, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, Preface.
  46. Marx and Engels, 'The Great Men of the Exile', *MECW*, vol. 11, p. 297; Marx, *The Class Struggles in France, 1848 to 1850*, *MECW*, vol. 10, p. 58.
  47. Benjamin, 'Surrealism', pp. 216–17.
  48. See the comments in this regard by Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Dancing in Chains: Narrative and Memory in Political Theory*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1997, p. 183. See also Michael O. Hardimon, *Hegel's Social Philosophy: The Project of Reconciliation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994; Steven Sampson, 'From Reconciliation to Coexistence', *Public Culture*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2003, pp. 181–6.
  49. This interpretation undermines the idea that reconciliation might contain a utopian dimension recoverable for a Marxist politics. Adorno's later reworking of some of Benjamin's ideas about redemption into the notion of reconciliation is in this sense far less a development of Marxism and far more a slip into conservatism.