

Matthias Fritsch

# The Promise of Memory

History and Politics in Marx,  
Benjamin, and Derrida

## The Promise of Memory

SUNY SERIES IN CONTEMPORARY CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY

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Dennis J. Schmidt, editor

THE PROMISE  
OF MEMORY

*History and Politics in  
Marx, Benjamin, and Derrida*

MATTHIAS FRITSCH

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# Abbreviations

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References to the frequently used French texts cite the page number of the English translation first, followed by the original. Occasionally, translations have been modified. All translations from Benjamin's works are my own, though I may have consulted English translations when they exist.

- I–VII Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*. References give the volume number followed by the page number.
- CV Walter Benjamin, "On the Critique of Violence" In *One-Way Street and Other Writings*. Translated by E. Jephcott, Kingsley Shorter. London: Verso, 1979.
- "Thesis" Walter Benjamin, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte," I 691–I 704. English translation: "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in: *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*. Translated by H. Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1968.
- AF Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression*. Translated by E. Prenowitz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. (*Mal d'Archive*. Paris: Galilée, 1995.)
- FL Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'mystical foundation of authority,'" *Cardozo Law Review* 11:5–6 (1990). The French original is on the facing pages.
- Points Jacques Derrida, *Points . . . Interviews, 1974–94*, ed. E. Weber. Translated by P. Kamuf et al. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995. (*Points de suspension. Entretiens*. Paris: Galilée, 1992.)
- OG Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. Translated by G. Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976. (*De la grammatologie*. Paris: Minuit, 1967.)

- SM Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*. Translated by P. Kamuf. New York: Routledge, 1994. (*Spectres de Marx*. Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1993.)
- WD Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*. Translated by A. Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978. (*L'écriture et la différence*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967.)
- Capital* Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume One*. Translated by Ben Fowkes. New York: Vintage Books, 1977.

# Exordium

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Among the many prosopopeitic voices, the voices of stones and of the dead, the poetry of Paul Celan has bequeathed two words to us. There is the word that might reach us through the scars of time, by way of groping fingers and through haunting darkness. Then there is the word of the shepherd, a former Spanish revolutionary. The first is a word of suffering, put to sleep by time, unrecognized by those who do not see, a word that tries to awake, a word that wishes to shine, against the odds:

## *Engführung*

[. . .]

Der Ort, wo sie lagen, er hat  
einen Namen—er hat  
keinen. Sie lagen nicht dort. Etwas  
lag zwischen ihnen. Sie sahn nicht hindurch.  
Sahn nicht, nein, redeten von Worten. Keines  
erwachte, der  
Schlaf kam über sie.

\*

[. . .]

Jahre.  
Jahre, Jahre, ein Finger  
tastet hinab und hinan, tastet  
umher:  
Nahtstellen, fühlbar, hier  
klafft es weit auseinander, hier  
wuchs es wieder zusammen—wer  
deckte es zu?

\*

Deckte es

zu—wer?

Kam, kam.

Kam ein Wort, kam,

## *The Straitening*

[. . .]

The place where they lay, it has  
a name—it has  
none. They did not lie there. Something  
lay between them. They did not see  
through it. Did not see, no, spoke of  
words. None awoke,  
sleep came over them.

\*

[. . .]

Years.  
Years, years, a finger  
feels down and up, feels  
around:  
seams, palpable, here  
it is split wide open, here  
it grew together again—who  
covered it up?

\*

Covered it

up—who?

Came, came.

Came a word, came,

kam durch die Nacht,  
wollt leuchten, wollt leuchten.

Asche.  
Asche, Asche.

[. . .]

came through the night,  
wanted to shine, wanted to shine.

Ash.  
Ash, ash.

[. . .]<sup>1</sup>

One might suggest here that the word that wishes to shine names the word of suffering opening up another history, speaking, with Levinas, against the history of the appropriation of the works of the dead and for the dead themselves, trying to recall those forgotten by time, calling us to responsibly inherit by responding to the dead.<sup>2</sup> One might also argue, with Derrida, that the ashes reveal that “no one bears witness for the witness,” as Celan’s “*Aschenglorie*” has it, revealing an affinity between a date, a proper name, and ashes. As repetition and as memory, time relentlessly reduces the name of the dead to ashes, exposing every date to the wound inscribed within it, adding a second holocaust, at every hour, to the Holocaust that is “the hell of our memory.”<sup>3</sup> And yet the question resonates: “Who covered it up?” Who—not what—covered up the scars that memory tries to retrace, like a finger groping along the seams of time through which the word must pass? Remaining ambiguous, hovering between time itself and the irresponsible inheritor, between ineluctable finitude and redressable occlusion, the cover-up indicates the night through which the word must shine while it burns to ashes.

The other word grows out of the constellation of dates in order to invent a new calendar, against the forgetful calendar that, in suggesting the identity of all time with the objective time of nature, with what Benjamin calls homogenous and empty time, suppresses the singularity of what is dated in it.<sup>4</sup> This constellation configures ‘in one’ what is otherwise separated, thus “blasting out of the continuum of history” a past “filled with the presence of ‘now,’” actualizing that which concerns the present most of all, but lies buried under the canons of cultural history.<sup>5</sup>

#### *In Eins*

Dreizehnter Feber. Im Herzmund  
erwachtes Shibboleth. Mit dir,  
Peuple  
de Paris. *No pasaràn*.

Schäfchen zur Linken: er, Abadias,  
der Greis aus Huesca, kam mit den Hunden  
über das Feld, im Exil,  
stand weiß wie eine Wolke  
menschlichen Adels, er sprach  
uns das Wort in die Hand, das wir brauchten, es war  
Hirten-Spanisch, darin,

#### *In One*

Thirteenth of February. Shibboleth  
roused in the heart’s mouth. With you,  
Peuple  
de Paris. *No pasaràn*.

Little sheep to the left: he, Abadias,  
the old man from Huesca, came with  
his dogs over the field, in exile  
white hung a cloud  
of human nobility, into our hands  
he spoke the word that we needed, it  
was shepherd-Spanish, and in it

im Eislicht des Kreuzers 'Aurora':  
 die Bruderhand, winkend mit der  
 von den wortgroßen Augen  
 genommenen Binde—Petropolis, der  
 Unvergessenen Wanderstadt lag  
 auch dir toskanisch zu Herzen.

*Friede den Hütten!*

in icelight of the cruiser 'Aurora':  
 the brotherly hand, waving with  
 the blindfold removed from  
 word-wide eyes—Petropolis, the  
 roving city of those unforgotten,  
 was Tuscanly close to your heart also.

*Peace to the Cottages!*<sup>6</sup>

This word is also one of memory, but this time of a revolutionary memory, recalling resistance to oppression as a promise of peace. It is the word that we need, that concerns us most of all, for, by it, the past intends and addresses the present. Its regional dialect does not prevent it from indicating universal human nobility. It speaks in many tongues, and the old age of the revolutionary does not detract from its power. Rather, its saturation with a political memory of action opens eyes, frees for a memory of the unforgotten, and aims at the elimination of war. It acts as a shibboleth, granting passage to those who reach out with the brotherly hand. In moving from mouth to hand, the promissory word of the past incites to action in the present.

The following work wonders about the relationship between these two words of memory. How does the word of the revolutionary promise, a memory geared toward the future, relate to the word of suffering that resists being covered up, and that wonders who covered up the scars of the past? The argument unfolded in the following pages is that only in conjunction, intermingling the word of a memory of suffering and the word of the promise, can they form what Celan has called a counterword (*Gegenwort*). This counterword is a word of resistance; it speaks of a memory of suffering that is also a memory of the future. It is the "word that does not bow down before the 'do-nothings' and 'show-horses' of history, it is an act of freedom. It is a step."<sup>7</sup>

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# Introduction

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How can one at all remember the final, non-revisable loss of the victims of the historical process to whom one owes oneself, and still be happy, still find one's identity?

—Helmut Peukert, *Science, Action, and Fundamental Theology*, 209 (translation modified)

It has often been remarked that the events of the twentieth century in particular, and, we might add, of Western modernity in general, force its inheritors to reconsider the structure and content of a 'tradition' that they might still feel compelled to recognize as 'theirs,' even if its 'ownership,' and the limits of the community it implies, is part of what is in question. These events—from two world wars to Vietnam, from the Holocaust to the Gulag—ask us to question the basic assumptions guiding our lives that we inherited from a past whose continued relevance and moral worth have become problematic due to the violent victimizations that they brought about. Neoliberal triumphalism responds with the counting and comparing of the victims of fascism and communism, while its own, in the past and in the present, are deemed unworthy by its increasingly centralized media conglomerates that try to write history as it happens.<sup>1</sup> The calculation of victims takes place in an age that is marked by an increasing acceleration of technological 'progress' and change, and thus by a rise of calculative rationality as well as a rapid outmoding and forgetting of times that count as contemporary. Some have characterized these accelerated times as being marked by an increasing repression of death, even an incapacity to mourn for the dead in general, and the victims of political violence in particular.<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, current political and cultural discourses cannot avoid a less calculative response to this situation. While many countries faced with the long aftermath of direct and indirect Western colonialism, from Argentina to



South Africa, set up the now-famous Truth and Reconciliation Commissions,<sup>3</sup> the most economically developed countries, while generally averse to such commissions about their own past, witness a variety of seemingly disparate debates about the significance of assuming a memory of the victims of past historical and political violence. To name but the most contemporary and mediatized debates, we might refer to the now well-known historian's debate of the 1980s in Germany and the discussions about the gigantic Holocaust Memorial in reunified Berlin; the political debates about the legacy of Stalinism that are particularly prevalent in Russia, but also in France and Italy with their strong Communist Parties; the political and legal questions currently resurfacing in the United States and Canada about affirmative action and the justification of privileging in certain contexts the descendants of the victims of past slavery, dispossession, genocide, and sexist exclusion. What these debates have in common is that they revolve around the issues of the manner in which historical atrocities can be remembered, given their due, and what promises they imply for the future.

The discussions in and around TRCs, memorials, and histories' victims, then, attempt to connect the memory of past violence with a promise for a just future. Regarding affirmative action, for instance, it has occasionally been observed that this largely compensatory practice is Janus-faced, that is, forward- and backward-looking at the same time.<sup>4</sup> It is directed toward the 'rectification' of past injustice as well as toward the building of a more tolerant and egalitarian future. Hence, even if we, perhaps naively, believe in an ultimately final compensation or rectification of past loss and suffering, the attempt to account for it in the present takes place in view of a better and less violent future to which we promise our efforts to remember. In this way, as I will try to elaborate, the issue of memory is always linked to the question of a future promise, or perhaps even a utopia, in the broadest sense of this word, despite the fact that our times appear to have liberated themselves from the great historical narratives that project themselves onto a goal in the future.

Without a more sustained reflection on the relation between memory and promise, however, the debates in question remain faced with the danger of favoring one at the expense of the other. If the memory of victimization is brought to the foreground without clear recourse to a promise of change, the insistence on violence and irretrievable loss may slip into a melancholic occlusion of the promise inherent in all useless suffering. Moreover, a peculiarly late-modern culture of victimhood witnesses all parties vying for the desired status of a victim in an endless battle that tends to hamper both the mutual understanding that is necessary for the formation of collective agency and the concentrated political action of agents less willing to rest content with the receiving end of welfare measures. Perhaps even more disastrously, such memory can easily lend itself to the oblivion, or even justification, of violence inflicted on others—in the past as well as in the present

and the future. According to the faulty reasoning that petrifies a victim's identity, victims and their descendents are incapable of themselves becoming perpetrators.

On the other hand, promises of justice without reflective links to memory may also lead to the justification of violent means claimed to be necessary on the way to an end that alone is seen as just. The problem here is particularly pernicious if it is bolstered by two views intimately connected to the self-understanding of Western modernity: the idea of the progressive unfolding of history toward a just end, especially if the claimed progress assigns tasks to agents who thus know themselves to be in agreement with the meaning of history, and the equally illusory dream of wiping the slate clean, cutting one's losses, and beginning all over again.<sup>5</sup> While the idea of progress, in its self-righteousness similar to the cultivation of supposed victimhood, neglects real regress, the *tabula-rasa* approach not only abandons the hopes of the past and victimizes the dead a second time, but forgets its own historicity and, with it, perhaps its finitude. Reflection on politically viable interpenetrations of memories and promises is thus very much in demand.

If the legacy of Marxism appears a particularly promising starting point for this reflection—thus justifying the fact that I will single it out as a springboard for developing the promise of memory—it is not only because Marxism is implicated in the unleashing of the totalitarian violence the last century had to witness. Less controversially than, say, Western capitalism, institutions that professed to adhere to a kind of Marxism allowed that unleashing to happen precisely in the name of a promise for emancipation and liberation. Efforts to uncover this violence culminated in the publication of the *Livre Noir du Communisme* in which, among others, former partisans settle devastating accounts with the history of communism, figuring the number of its victims around eighty million.<sup>6</sup> If one does not wish to prematurely sign the death certificate issued for Marx's promise, the need to reformulate it in light of a memory of violence recommends itself: to maintain it, the promise must be articulated with a memory of especially the victims of its own attempt to institutionalize itself. Such articulation may begin with an inquiry into the possibility of the promise to lead to totalitarian violence. Speaking summarily, the emancipatory promise needs to be divested of its tie to a logic of history that guarantees its victorious fulfillment by which, as the verdict of History, it can justify suffering in the past and in the present. Correspondingly, the understanding of memory is to be definalized, such that the suffering of the past cannot be thought to be overcome or redeemed once and for all.

On the other hand, the Marxist promise is, of course, itself heir to the Enlightenment to which Western capitalist democracy owes its roots as well. This might suffice to dispel the simple acknowledgment of the Marxist failure in favor of a neoliberal alternative by default. At the same time, and despite appearances, a look at Marx with questions of memory in mind

reveals that he already attempted to link memories of historical atrocities with the idea of the classless society. Thus, uncovering and criticizing the sort of link between memory and promise that Marx proposes, and doing so to prevent atrocious outcomes in the name of justice, expands the focus on the victims of institutionalized Marxism to include the victims of what we might term the instituting violence of capitalism. The memory of this violence is, today more than ever, equally necessary to maintain the Enlightenment promise of justice in general and Marx's version in particular. For one of the greatest challenges for the promise of democratic equality is the very real lack of motivation on the part of the less well-off, especially in the most developed countries. In an age increasingly characterized by the prevalence of instrumental over moral and political rationality, this lack must to a large extent be explained by the partial overlap of strategic interests between owners or managers of productive assets and those they hire to amortize the value of these assets—an overlap that results in part from an absence of radically different political economies, which in turn is connected to the weakness of motivated action aiming at such different arrangements. As is well known, under the partly ideological and normative banner of globalization, the latter today threatens democratic nations and citizens with capital flight, thus exploiting what Adam Przeworski, following Gramsci, calls the “material basis of consent.”<sup>7</sup> In this context, it is crucial to recall the violence in history that brought about the ‘consent,’ and that what Marx called the “silent compulsion of economic relations” (*Capital* 899)—the highly ambiguous ‘freedom’ to sell one's labor power in the absence of other modes of access to productive assets—could only be able to secure consent once more directly physical and state-organized forms of violence had done their job. Here, an often overlooked form of motivation directly connected to historical memory can complement, in crucial ways, normative or strategic motives for political action, and help build communities of resistance.<sup>8</sup>

As these reflections indicate, the political inheritance of Marx and Marxism today requires a reelaboration not only of the understanding of the promise for emancipation, but also of the political import of memory. For this reason, the present work will investigate in what way the promise and memory can be conjoined in a single constellation. In this constellation, the promise must include a memory of loss and suffering, while such memory will be seen to be invested with a promise that renders it both interminable and allows it to further contribute to political changes in the present: *a memory of the promise as well as a promise of memory*. The resulting reformulated promise thus cannot be seen to surpass or overcome its own troubled history, but needs to revise the temporality that merely opposes the future to the past, that plays off a utopia, or any future ideal, to the remembrance of the past.

In attempting this constellation of a promise and its inheritance, I will draw on a number of texts by Jacques Derrida, including *Specters of Marx*

(1993), which stands out as an engaged philosophical response to the inheritance of Marxism after 1989. But I will also enlist Walter Benjamin's significant but recondite rewriting of Marx's promise in the 1920s and 1930s, in the wake of the Russian Revolution and the rise of fascism in Western Europe, and in the context of his broader philosophical and historiographical investigations into the political legacy of the nineteenth century. The interweaving of the texts and proposals of these authors will occur gradually in the course of the entire work. In the remainder of this introduction, I will present a brief synopsis of the main argument.

In the interest of holding on to a political promise of a just future while articulating it with a memory of injustice and historical violence, the first chapter investigates Benjamin's reading of Marx. I begin with Marx's account of the relation between the memory of violence and the promise of liberation. Contrary to superficial readings and some later Marxists, I show that Marx is very well aware of the political significance of such memory, especially in regard to the non-economic violence that was required to set modern capitalism on its path. The reading of Marx advanced here vindicates Benjamin's positive yet selective appropriation of Marx in this regard against those who accuse him of serious misunderstandings. However, Benjamin criticizes the way in which Marx connects the memory of violence with the promise for a classless society. If the connection is made by way of a teleo-logic of history that accounts for both the violence of the past and the necessity of liberation, the promised future is viewed as, in some sense, redeeming and possibly justifying the violence that is to be remembered. It is in this context that Benjamin rejects 'communist goals' and demonstrates the ultimately quietist consequences of reading history in terms of allegedly scientific laws and a final, redemptive goal. Benjamin accuses orthodox Marxism, beginning with certain texts by Marx himself, of conceiving the victims of yesterday as the rightful victors of tomorrow. A logic of certain victory has overtaken and absorbed the indignation at suffering and oppression, a logic that is willing to trade off a memory of the oppressed in favor of the speculative appropriation of the victims' alienated works in and for the future, in the form of technological advances and the creation of a universalized humanity. Rather than the promise of certain victory, it is the memory of past victimization, and the uncovering of the 'barbarism' at the heart of the material and cultural richness of a tradition, that are essential to motivate resistance in the present. This resistance seizes the political chances of the day, rather than postponing them to an indefinite future. Accordingly, as I show toward the end of chapter one, Benjamin outlines two tasks required for the reception of what he calls the messianic claim of the oppressed of history. The first concerns a materialist method of reading history that I will deal with in chapter four, and the second, addressed in chapter three, concerns a concept of political action that resists established power in the present. Resistance and materialist historiography

must go hand in hand for Benjamin, as the latter helps motivate the former, which in turn resists, along with oppressive relations in the present, dominant discourses of history that occlude a memory of victimization.

However, Benjamin largely lacks the conceptual temporal account he needs to maintain a connection between memory and promise, past and future, while refusing Marx's teleological one. This account is to link futural openness, the general interpretability of the past and the constructedness of stories of continuous progress, and memorial retrieval in and through the discontinuity of time. Apart from some general obscurities, this lack becomes clear in the reemergence of an opposition between images of 'enslaved ancestors' and 'liberated grandchildren,' and is connected to his apparent rejection of Kantian regulative ideas (or 'realistic utopias') in general as quietist, not just those whose goal is promised on the basis of an allegedly scientific teleology. In part to remedy these defects, chapter two turns to Derrida's account of the promise of memory in terms of the quasi-transcendental law of repetition. What I will call the promise of repetition establishes an intimate connection between, on the one hand, a thinking of the promise to an open future—as the promise *that* there is a future rather than of *what* the future will bring—and the not only political, but also (quasi-) transcendental necessity of memory, on the other. For Derrida rethinks the nature of the promise in general as not one speech act among others, but as a promise that opens up the past and the present to an interminable repetition from the future. Insofar as memory is a kind of repetition, it is thereby exposed by the promise to an unforeseeable future, a future whose unpredictably changing contexts turn repetition into a productive 'iteration' in difference. I will unfold the thinking of this ineluctable and quasi-transcendental promise in order to demonstrate its productivity for the conjoining of memory and the promise in general, and the reformulation of the Marxist promise of history in particular. In regard to the latter, we will see that an emancipatory discourse that promises itself to the future cannot conceive of the future and its alterity as a radical liberation from the past or as the fulfillment of the essential mission or telos of history. Rather than projecting the revolution as a radical break with the past, a break that involves a relinquishing of the dead, this discourse needs to restructure its prophetic promise so as to make room for memory.

In the last section of chapter two, I show that Derrida's account of the relation of history to the future is not antiutopian, as it does not reject the projection of political goals altogether. It is better understood as what we might call postutopian, in that it reveals the necessity of projecting horizons of the future which, however, are never final. His is a more complex concept of the future that allows for both projected horizons of writing history or stipulating political goals, and a more radical, empty future 'to come' that constitutes at once the possibility of memory and the impossibility of final accounts of history. The Derridian account of the promise-memory nexus

thus effectively complements Benjamin's mere gesture at a temporality linking an open future and memory without a reemerging opposition between future and past. It also does not disallow utopian projections, but renders them eminently contestable. At the same time, against the quietist conclusions Benjamin feared in the Kantian Marxism of his day, the future to come also signals the ethical and political urgency of interrupting attempted progress toward stipulated goals.

Having discussed Benjamin's political import of memory and Derrida's conceptual link between memory and the future, I then seek to integrate the two in chapter three by revisiting Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" and Derrida's reading thereof. However, before the issues raised in the first two chapters can be interwoven in this way, I attempt to demonstrate the coherence of the early Benjamin's reflections on violence and power with his later texts on history. The connection between early and late Benjamin will help explain what the "Theses" mean by the historical continuity of power relations and the history of victors, as well as its 'messianic standstill' brought about by way of political action as well as in historiography. Concerning the former, Benjamin proposes a decidedly non-instrumental mode of political action, which he describes in terms of Sorel's proletarian strike. It exposes the violence embedded in politico-legal institutions of the 'victors' who tend to write history in terms of progress, teleology, and final goals, thereby muffling the resistance that both reveals the violence subtending history and that is to be conditioned and motivated by it. Only a non-instrumental, and hence nonviolent, resistance to the capitalist state, as a representative of class power, can be both responsive to and liberate a memory of victims. Since this non-instrumental action proceeds from the need of power to continually reinstitute itself according to what Benjamin calls a 'law of oscillation,' receiving and assuming the messianic call of history's 'oppressed' is made possible by the finitude of power itself. Only the transience of all power, its inherent weakness and exposition to change, allows for a concept of action that breaks through inherited power relations and thus frees us for a memory of victims.

Derrida and Benjamin will be seen to agree that the finitude of power contributes what Benjamin calls a 'weak messianic force' to the struggle against oppression in the present and for a memory of victims. However, Derrida's reconsideration of power, law, and justice complicates in significant ways Benjamin's theory of a non-instrumental, nonviolent, and memorial political action. If Derrida's 'law of repetition' is seen to operate as Benjamin's 'law of oscillation' at the heart of all power, there can be no messianic realm free of state power, law, and violence. Since we must resist the temptation to oppose the messianic in a binary fashion to a political power that Benjamin sees as conducting a violent politics, we cannot see law and power as being interrupted or even overturned from without, as Benjamin ambiguously suggests. Consequently, we also cannot single out a subject (such as the proletariat) that

would be uniquely situated to respond to past victimization and to receive the messianic claim of past generations upon the present one. The promise of repetition, opening the past as well as power and law to an indeterminate ('messianic') future, also returns the constitution of such a subject to the ever renewed work of repetition, thus disallowing a clear dividing line between the dominant and the dominated, between violence and nonviolence, and between memory and forgetting. Derrida's concept of the differential promise of repetition points us to the necessity of a democratic negotiation of questions regarding the identification of victors and oppressed.

In fact, we will see Derrida argue that the messianic promise not only opens up the past for its inheritance and remembrance, but that it also institutes an 'originary violence' at the heart of all action and an originary forgetting at the heart of all memory. This is what Derrida names the double bind of all inheritance: Memory also effaces that which preserves itself only by way of memory. In the fourth and last chapter, I discuss the implications of this double bind and this originary violence for Benjamin's messianic claim of the dead. Contrasting Benjamin and Derrida on the question of the relationship between memory and responsibility, we will see that the latter resituates the messianic call as arising not with the dead or even with identifiable victims (of capitalist modernity, say), but with this originary violence itself. Accordingly, I first show that Benjamin's proposals for reading dominant history against the grain and for constructing a counterhistorical montage of history's trash demonstrate that Benjamin seeks the claim of the dead, as a call to responsibility, in inherited cultures and traditions, rather than, like Levinas, beyond visible history altogether. I then ask how the attempt to render legible the double violence of history—at the level of *res gestae* and the occlusions at the level of *rerum gestarum memoria*—may be reconciled with an emphasis on the inevitable violence of all memory as well as of all calls to responsibility.

Derrida thinks an anterior otherness that is installed in responsible subjects as the (continually withdrawing) origin of ethical and political responsibility insofar as it opens up the subject of responsibility in the first place. He claims that a 'nonpositive' affirmation of human finitude as anterior alterity, as the pre-cedence of language and inheritance, is the condition of all responsible politics, and can be said to elaborate Benjamin's thought of the messianic claim of the dead on the living. However, Derrida's notion of responsibility names only the originary opening up of every subject to otherness, and thus indicates the condition of possibility of moral and political concepts of responsibility. Hence, I will argue that Derrida's suggestion—according to which his account of our responsibility in the face of a history of violence is close to Benjamin's messianic claim of past generations—overlooks that, for Benjamin, this claim is first and foremost linked to the oppressed of a particular history and a particular cultural transmission of that history, such that

the claim is muffled or drowned out by it, rather than originating with the dead in general, and being muffled, merely or primarily, by finitude and its originary violence as such. Accordingly, Derrida's notion of responsibility cannot do without Benjamin's more concrete account of a politically responsible relation to the violence of capitalist modernity, as exposed in chapter one. For Derrida's argument, I will show, entails that there is no otherness 'as such'; rather, spectral anteriority can only be thought within a particular context and a specific history of violence. If Derrida's affirmation of an originary injunction is to be more than a traditionalist affirmation of the inherited canons and dominant hegemonic discourses of the past, it must affirm what is excluded and forgotten by the canons that tend to hide the voice of suffering. Thus, the affirmation of an originary otherness must be transformed, with Benjamin, into the exposure of the specific and unnecessary 'barbarism' that allows those canons to legitimate themselves in the first place.

I will argue, then, for a productive oscillation between Derrida's insistence on the 'unreadability of violence' and Benjamin's demand that violence be made legible. For capitalist modernity and its social relations of production, this must mean, above all, a memory of the expropriation and displacement that made capital formation possible: While there can be no democracy without the future to come that keeps its projections contestable, there can also be no genuine democracy without the attempt to address the severe constraints the history of capital-formation continues to place on the equal right to free participation. Given that the memory of capitalist democracy is suffused with a promise, the political community it might establish is one that fosters a sense of identity through the permanent deferral of the completion of that identity, through a mode of action and praxis that keeps it up for discussion. Interpreting the world will thus be seen, perhaps more against Engels than against Marx,<sup>9</sup> as an integral part of changing it.



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## 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