

## **Marx, Heidegger, Benjamin: Historical Opportunity and Eschatology in Three Late Modern German Thinkers**

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The collapse of Communist regimes in the late 80s and early 90s seemed to have offered a stark choice between two competing philosophies of history. On the one hand, grand narratives of progress and emancipation were claimed to have definitively *founded*, leaving in their wake a plurality of individual viewpoints and social micro-histories (Lyotard). The collapse of Communism was also read in precisely the opposite way, as heralding the *triumph* of a grand narrative of historical progress, specifically that of liberal democracy (Fukuyama).

McLennan, Tkach and Shaw begin from the intuition that each option, starkly posed, misses something vital: a proper assessment of the concept of historical opportunity. Events since the collapse of Communism (the rise of religious fundamentalisms, the current crisis of capitalism) fuel the suspicion that we have neither reached the end of the era of grand narratives, nor properly accounted for the power of competing micro-histories. For theoretical and practical reasons, the present historical conjuncture renders a critical re-visitation of the “happy 90s” of utmost importance.

The contributors approach the current crisis of historiography by way of the debate over historical opportunity and eschatology which took place in Germany in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. They argue that the question of an end of history, as well as a rich debate over how human beings figure with regard to it, was already posed in German debates over Marxism; Heidegger and Benjamin subsequently proceeded from such debates to nuanced yet deeply opposed conceptions of historical opportunity and eschatology. In short, much of the current debate in the philosophy of history was already fought out on German soil. Though the contributors differ with regard to how they think this antecedent debate can guide our current theory and practice, they agree that there is much in the conjuncture “Marx-Heidegger-Benjamin” to be mined which might shed light on how we may apply the concepts of historical opportunity and eschatology in the present.

### “Historical Opportunity and Eschatology in Marx and Marxism”

Matthew R. McLennan

Presenting a grand narrative of historical progress alongside an emphatic insistence on the importance of human agency, the works of Marx contain fascinating material for the philosopher of history. The seeming tension between determinism and freedom at the heart of his work has led to widely divergent interpretations of Marx, from the more or less deterministic, evolutionary historical picture of German Social Democracy and the Second International, to the voluntarism of Lenin, Luxemburg and Guevara. McLennan begins the proposed roundtable by arguing that Marx’s philosophy of history is not only consistent, to the extent that the tension between determinism and freedom is only apparent, but also that it better lends itself to interpretations tending towards voluntarism. More specifically, after showing to what extent Marx was able to square his notion of the end of history with his emphasis on human agency, McLennan offers an argument that the Leninist notion of historical intervention, of “hitting upon the right moment”, was a more faithful application of Marx in its day than was that of the evolutionist faction of German Social Democracy and the Second International; this will set the stage for Shaw and Tkach’s contributions by suggesting that Germany missed its opportunity to grasp the concept of historical opportunity, at least in the way Marx intended. Finally, tentative reflections will be offered with regard to the question of how such an interpretation of Marx might figure in an approach the present historical conjuncture.

### "Historicity, Freedom, and Eschatology in *Being and Time*"

David Tkach

Tkach examines the problem of 'our historical opportunity' in light of the interrelated concepts of history, freedom, and eschatology as they are understood in Heidegger's *Being and Time*. For Heidegger, history is fundamentally neither an object of study nor a series of events in the past; rather, this sort of history arises as a result of the inherent *historicity* of Dasein, the beings which human beings are. Dasein's historicity is related to the possibility of its *freedom*, which, for Heidegger, is the freedom to appropriate one's choices authentically, or to make authentic decisions concerning how to live, in light of one's end in death. Choosing in light of Dasein's *eschatological* endpoint permits Dasein to see its choices as its own, and hence to choose them authentically. For Heidegger, authentic Dasein is free to choose how to live, through inventive repetition of past possibilities handed down to it from out of its own past, in light of its eschatological end, the cessation of Dasein itself. This philosophical structure of human existence makes problematic any conception of political participation in something like a 'global vision' or 'grand narrative,' and instead can be seen as contributing to the political fracture and division characteristic of our age. Hence, the consideration of such a structure, and its concomitant concepts of history, freedom, and eschatology, is necessary for any who wish to consider the political problem of 'our' historical opportunity.

### "The Opportunity of History in Walter Benjamin's Thought"

Devin Zane Shaw

Shaw reconsiders Benjamin's concept of history as a critique of both Soviet Marxism and Heideggerian phenomenology. Benjamin's work stands opposed to both of these currents of historiography because of his insistence on the transmission of history as the 'tradition of the oppressed' that is transformed through political practice. From his perspective, orthodox Marxism fails to recognize this other tradition because it relies on the concept of historical necessity, which claims that due to development of the forces of production that communist revolution is inevitable. Benjamin criticizes orthodox Marxism because this concept of historical necessity is much like the bourgeois idea of Progress, which holds history is leading in one direction toward the betterment of humanity. Benjamin instead portrays history as a long catastrophe for the oppressed, who can only redeem their conditions through political practice and by regaining the meaning of their history. In many ways, Benjamin's well-known work "Theses on the Philosophy of History" sets out the ideas that will find fruition in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in what is called 'history from below.'

This also distinguishes the work of Benjamin from Heideggerian phenomenology. Heidegger too sees that Progress is an untenable historical concept, but for Benjamin, Heidegger's historicism is blind to its political consequences. Heidegger glimpses the tragic character of history, but he did not see *for whom* history was a catastrophe. As Philippe Simay summarizes it, Benjamin rightly sees that the Heideggerian historical hermeneutic, which does not account for social antagonism, is "dependent upon the cultural contents transmitted by the dominant class." Both Heidegger and Benjamin give, in their respective philosophies, an important place to artistic production as a task of thinking, but they differ over the meaning of these documents. Benjamin writes, in Thesis VII, "There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."

So history is not the site of realizing Progress (Soviet Marxism), nor is it the site of a recovery of a past or heritage that has been covered over by an inauthentic understanding of history (Heidegger). History can only be written by blasting the events of the past out of the continuum of linear (or as Benjamin states, 'empty') historical time. Only then is it possible to clearly evaluate the documents of culture as both redemptive and barbaric.

What is remarkable about Benjamin's "Theses on History" is that he brings theological concepts— such as redemption— into a Marxist interpretation of history in order both to empty Marxism of its reliance on the concept of historical necessity and to demystify the concept of future as a locus of reconciliation. The guiding thread of his interpretation of history is that the time of opportunity can only be grasped by the strength of the oppressed as they confront their oppressors. Instead of looking for Progress to structure the transmission of history, one must establish the progress (with a lower-case-p) of the oppressed in

seizing their *praxis* as the successful disruption of the continuity of their domination. The emphasis of historical work is its direct bearing on the present, just as the redemption of the oppressed is not a concern of the future but an opportunity of the present.