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DIALECTIC OF THE PAST / DISJUNCTURE OF THE FUTURE:
DERRIDA AND BENJAMIN ON
THE CONCEPT OF MESSIANISM

The very relationship with the other is the relationship with the future.
Levinas —Alterity & Transcendence.

THERE ARE MANY REASONS why critics may be tempted to conflate Walter Benjamin's and Jacques Derrida's ideas on messianism. Their association is conspicuous from the start: Benjamin's essay on the "Theses on the Philosophy of History" and Derrida's book *Specters of Marx* both interlace the languages of Marxism and messianism. That fact alone is enough for some critics — John Caputo for example — to claim Benjamin's model of "weak messianism" and Derrida's notion of a "messianic without messianism" are two expressions of the same idea. Caputo even offers the formula "'messianic' without (= weak) messianism."¹ This confusion stems partly from Benjamin's essay, which is by no means explicit in its meaning, and Derrida himself for giving little reference to Benjamin's ideas. A very important, though overlooked, section in *Specters of Marx* is a lengthy footnote devoted to Benjamin's "Theses":

The following paragraph names messianism or, more precisely, messianic without messianism, a 'weak messianic power' ... Let us quote this passage for what is consonant there, despite many differences and keeping relative proportions in mind, with what we are trying to say here about a certain messianic destitution, in a spectral logic of inheritance and generations, *but a logic turned toward the future no less than the past, in a heterogeneous and disjointed time.*²

¹ John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 352.

² Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 181.

This passage is illuminating as it contains a sketch for both the problem and answer to Derrida's indebtedness to Benjamin. In the opening sentence, Derrida defines *weak* messianism as messianic *without* messianism. Perhaps critics take this statement as Derrida's confessed appropriation of Benjamin's ideas, a confession, no less, that forecloses any real difference between their two projects.³ The latter part of this quotation, on the other hand, highlights a crucial break between Benjamin's past-gazing messianism and Derrida's disjointed messianism, a messianic affirming both the past *and* the future. It may be the case that Derrida's work on mourning and the debt of history corresponds to Benjamin's discussion of redeeming the oppressed past; but it is interesting that in the "Theses" Benjamin says little of the future whereas Derrida's concept of messianicity is based entirely on affirming the future-to-come.⁴ Though I will consider in this paper Benjamin's reasons for abandoning the notion of the future, I want to stress from the outset that the absence of futurity in Benjamin's "Theses," and the whole-hearted affirmation of the future-to-come in Derrida's work, marks an important difference that critics have often glossed over. I will show that this difference has a specific relation to their contrasting views on the nature of time. Derrida distinguishes between messianism (as a specific determination of the emancipatory event within the overarching telos of history), and messianicity (as the basic "experience" of an emancipatory promise that always stands in relation to the unrealizable future-to-come). I hold that Benjamin's model of weak messianism is incapable of approaching the messianic promise to-come because such a promise always lacks self-presence and will therefore never fit within a dialectical constellation of time. In order to account for the heterogeneity of the messianic, Derrida recasts time as out-of-joint, thereby viewing the future not as a future-present, but as a heterogeneous *other*. The possible influence this new conception of time has on our understanding of the subject, however, remains an open question. As a provocative conclusion to this paper, I will explore the ways in which messianicity is subjective, and the ways in which subjectivity is, at bottom, messianic.

In an endnote to his essay "Marx & Sons," Derrida refers to an endnote in *Specters of Marx*, reminding us that his invocation of Benjamin is "cautious from first to last, pending a forthcoming rereading" of Benjamin's ideas on

³ Though Derrida, in a more recent essay "Marx & Sons," clarifies the indecisiveness of this statement and argues for an "infinite leap" between "weak" and "without" messianism (250-251). For a more detailed discussion of the theological heritage of the term, 'without', in specific relation to Blanchot and St. Augustine, see Kevin Hart's forthcoming book *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred*.

⁴ Throughout this article, I will follow Peggy Kamuf's translation of *l'a-venir* as future-to-come (coming, arrival), as opposed to the more ordinary sense of *venir* (future).

messianism.⁵ Derrida is thereby making an evocation, a call, to stir awareness of Benjamin's "Theses," which he describes as "dense, enigmatic, [and] burning."⁶ What makes Benjamin especially difficult is that he departs from the historicism of his age and from the Jewish messianic tradition in which he writes and to which he responds. It is therefore impossible to map his ideas onto any specific philosophical or theological genre. A final caveat: Benjamin himself feared that the publication of the "Theses" would create a general state of "enthusiastic misunderstanding."⁷ There is perhaps no insurance against this misunderstanding even today.

Written in 1940 by a German-Jew, Benjamin's "Theses" contain an explicit criticism of fascism but also of the main opponent of fascism, socialism. The "Theses," however, do not simply amount to a critique of bad politics. Benjamin's focus extends to the philosophical conceptions of time and history underpinning fascism or any other form of political oppression, as he sees the fight against fascism as futile as long as we subscribe to the same set of presuppositions supporting the fascist position. The task of his critique is three-fold: first, in order to advance beyond fascism we need to disassemble the ruling-class's notion of history (i.e., historicism), which upholds an idea of progress. Secondly, in order to disassemble "progress," we need to undermine the very model of objective time supporting such a belief. Lastly, Benjamin offers an alternative temporal model, which he calls messianic time, which will concern itself with oppressed classes, past and present.

In Benjamin's estimation, Social Democratic theory fails to pose a real opposition to fascism because it believes in progress as well, thereby normalizing the entire fascist enterprise by situating it within a teleological perspective of history. "One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm."⁸ Social Democratic theory believed that progress was (1) the "progress of mankind itself"; (2) "something boundless, in keeping with the infinite perfectibility of mankind"; and (3), "irresistible, something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course"⁹ (260). These predicates of progress, though diverse in their epistemological claims, share a common belief in "homogeneous, empty time," or what amounts to an ontology of time. Similarly, historicism views time as a rigid series of events: "history" is the

⁵ Derrida, "Marx & Sons," 248, in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx*, ed. Michael Sprinker (New York: Verso, 1999), 213-269.

⁶ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 181.

⁷ See Lloyd Spencer. "On Certain Difficulties with the Translation of 'The Concept of History.'" PURL: <http://www.tasc.ac.uk/depart/media/staff/ls/WBenjamin/TranslWB.html>

⁸ Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 257, in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 253-264.

⁹ Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 260.

causal linkage between these events, and the “historian” is the one who scrupulously finds and studies these links.

The problem with historicism is that it views time scientifically, that is, as an objective continuum that is “filled up” with events. This supports the idea that we can ignore the totality of history in order to isolate specific events of the past. Historicism fears what Benjamin calls the “true picture of the past,” for that involves taking each event in consideration of the whole of history.¹⁰ Such a consideration reaches an entirely different view of causality: what the ruling class sees as a chain of events justified in the name of “progress,” the historical materialist sees as “a single catastrophe,” which is nothing less than the history of oppressed people.¹¹ The concepts of “progress” and “objective time,” then, are but “tools for the ruling class.”¹² The task of the historical materialist is to “brush history against the grain,” which involves breaking the lens of history polished by the oppressors.¹³ In contrast to objective time, messianic time disrupts the entire model of linearity, developing from the awareness that causality is not something fixed but created retrospectively, a construction existing only in the present and subject to change and alteration itself. For Benjamin, we can no longer view history as a chronological order but as a constellation that, by a messianic static charge, can rearrange itself in a flash. The principle of construction, then, eclipses the notion of causality.

Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its method is additive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time. Materialistic historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad.¹⁴

The term “monad” needs further discussion, as this concept plays an important role in Benjamin’s understanding of messianic time. The essence of a monad is constellatory: as a *part*, it contains a blueprint of the *whole*. Like a hologram, what appears to be a unique individual pattern is actually a reflection of the total pattern of collected monads. Benjamin favors the historical materialist who encounters past events as monads “in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history,” which amounts to framing each historical epoch in relation to the whole of history.¹⁵ Viewed in this way, the historical

¹⁰ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 255.

¹¹ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 255.

¹² Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 255.

¹³ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 257.

¹⁴ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 262-263.

¹⁵ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 263.

materialist “recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.”¹⁶ In other words, by viewing history as a constellation we can redeem the part of the past the ruling class passed over in their progressive recording of history. We can also view the past as equally a part of the present (and as past oppression as equally important to our present state-of-affairs). Such an understanding of the present differs radically from conventional views. Every *Jetztzeit*, or ‘now-time’, contains a messianic concern with tradition, for relieving the past from the ignorance of the ruling class:

A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the ‘time of the now’ which is shot through with chips of Messianic time.¹⁷

The important claim here is that messianic time breaks from any faith in the imminence of future salvation, and directs all its energy to redeeming the past that lives immanently in the now-time. Each second of time, Benjamin writes, is the “straight gate through which the Messiah might enter.”¹⁸ Benjamin’s usage of the expression the Messiah, however, differs from its conventional usage. The “messianic cessation” involves revolutionizing the *past*, not the future. For Benjamin, “the past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption”¹⁹ We are not “enslaved ancestors” but “liberated grandchildren.”²⁰ This is the nature of Benjamin’s “weak messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim.”²¹ Messianic anticipation, or hope for salvation, negotiates between the “secret agreement” that bonds the present generations to history.²² More than an index, the past is what mediates, for Benjamin, the messianic promise itself.

Benjamin is trying to blind the eye of teleology (or what he calls “progress”) lodged in the center of the dialectic of history. Critics have often confused this with trying to blind the dialectic itself. The notion of a dialectic without teleology lends all the more support to Benjamin’s concept of a weak messianism, a messianism which never produces images of future salvation, but rather images of the past that demand to be saved. For Benjamin, there is still movement,

¹⁶ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 263.

¹⁷ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 263.

¹⁸ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 264.

¹⁹ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 254.

²⁰ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 260.

²¹ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 254.

²² Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 254.

resolution, and synthesis, not of the past ages into the present, but of the present age into the entire temporal matrix of history. This “dialectic” no longer moves magnetically towards a transcendent future, but rather concerns itself with tradition, with the memory of a genuine past that flares up momentarily in times of danger. It is therefore appropriate to approach Benjamin’s understanding of messianic time as inverted Messianism. It remains, nevertheless, dialectical (although not strictly Hegelian). The historical materialist, Benjamin writes, approaches history by

blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this method the lifework is preserved in this work and at the same time canceled²³; in the lifework, the era; and in the era, the entire course of history. *The nourishing fruit of the historically understood contains time as a precious but tasteless seed.*²⁴

The seed of time is precious because it is the very movement of history; it is tasteless because, within the grasp of a weak messianism, it no longer tastes like progress. We can read “time” here as synonymous with linearity. Benjamin also states that Messianic time “comprises the entire history of mankind in an enormous abridgement, [and] coincides exactly with the stature which the history of mankind has in the universe.”²⁵ By dialectically canceling-out the specificity of a historical era, we elevate and preserve its specificity in relation to the entire structure of messianic time. Herein rests what some critics view as the crucial ambivalence of Benjamin’s thought. What is the exact relationship between the present and the past? “Are we looking to the past for an account of the essential nature of the present, as a revelation [...] of our proper fate? Or are we looking to the past as a catalogue ... of our present sickness?”²⁶ The former question implies that we remain stuck, so to speak, in the present; the latter suggests that movement toward the future is inevitable and perhaps necessary. Julian Roberts sees Benjamin’s view of history as “suspended” between these two questions.²⁷ I believe this tension exists not so much in the “Theses” as it does spread out over the entire course of Benjamin’s writings.²⁸ In the “Theses,” Benjamin is relatively clear that historical “movement” is inevitable; we can just never have certainty of the course of this movement, and least of all are we in

²³ “The Hegelian term *aufheben* in its threefold meaning: to preserve, to elevate, to cancel.” — This is Benjamin’s footnote.

²⁴ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 263—The emphasis here is mine.

²⁵ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 263.

²⁶ Julian Roberts, *Walter Benjamin* (London: MacMillan Press, 1982), 202-203.

²⁷ Roberts, *Walter Benjamin*, 203.

²⁸ For an example of Benjamin’s earlier, more traditional, views of messianism, see his “Theological-Political Fragment”, newly translated by Eric Jacobson in *Metaphysics of the Profane: The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 20-21.

any position to call this movement “progress.”

The common ground for Benjamin and Derrida is a refusal to give content to the messianic promise, or to determine the shape of the messianic event. Benjamin, however, compensates for this lack of content in the messianic future by resorting to the messianic past as our responsibility to liberate history. Along with considering our debt to the past, Derrida emphasizes the radical futurity of messianic anticipation to the point that it loses all content (justice, democracy, or equality), and becomes the undetermined structure of messianicity itself (the emancipatory promise). I will develop this point later on — for now, it suffices to say that Derrida’s idea of the messianic ultimately affirms the future-to-come and the impossibility that engenders the future with messianicity. Rather than reappropriating the messianicity of the present age back into history, Derrida highlights the *disjuncture* of time. He in turn revitalizes the concept of the future (the future-to-come), thereby making his approach to messianicity entirely different from that of Benjamin’s. To his own detriment, Benjamin is incapable of conceiving of any futurity outside the notion of progress, and for this reason alone, he is incapable of approaching any concept of the future-to-come. Ironically, the messianic chips in the ‘time of the now’ are not fragments of futurity, of an impossibility we can only await without expectation, but are rather flashes of the past that we must liberate from the lifeless continuum of objective time. That is why Benjamin refers to the constellation of the present age as a formation welded to “a definite earlier one.”²⁹ Moments of danger (pre-revolutionary or post-revolutionary) awaken our dialectical memory of the past and make us question the hypnotic lull of history.

Benjamin and Derrida share the goal of disrupting the linear model of time, but their response to this disruption is what really sets them apart from each other. By failing to note this, critics such as Fredric Jameson often conflate Derrida’s and Benjamin’s views of messianism: “Benjamin ... was accustomed to think this impossibility, namely that very conception of the messianic to which Derrida appeals at the climax of his book on Marx.”³⁰ Jameson falters in two ways, generally by reading Benjamin *through* Derrida. Jameson quotes Benjamin’s last cryptic statement in the “Theses”: “For the Jews ... every second of time was the straight gate through which the Messiah might enter.”³¹ He goes on to affirm that “this is the notion of the non-announced, the turning of a corner in which an altogether different present happens, which was not foreseen ... It is this temporality which is the messianic kind, and about which the very peculiarity of

²⁹ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 263.

³⁰ Fredric Jameson, “Marx’s Purloined Letter,” in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s Specters of Marx*, ed. Michael Sprinker (New York: Verso, 1999), 26-67.

³¹ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 264.

the messianic idea testifies, which can thus not be ‘hoped’ for in an ordinary way.”³² This is a flawless explanation of Derrida’s obscure notion of “awaiting without horizon of expectation,” which I will soon discuss. But it says nothing of Benjamin’s strain of inverted Messianism. Secondly, Jameson makes the mistake of reading the tropes “Messiah” and “Messianic” according to their traditional usage. Ordinarily these terms signify the coming of a *future* age of salvation. Benjamin’s concept of Messianic time, however, issues a reverse: it is “a power to which the past has a claim”³³ — it lacks future orientation. Derrida, on the contrary, celebrates the coming of the messianic event, insofar as this event remains, in his estimation, an undetermined promise. In light of this, we must address the following questions: Why must the messianic promise remain undetermined? How are we to live in accordance with the future-to-come? And how does Derrida’s idea of the future-to-come relate to justice?

The undetermined *event* is unthinkable from the position of conjoined time (that is to say, linear, homogeneous, teleological time), for this model of time rests on the notion of presence (past-present, present-present, and future-present), which in effect imbues each event with determinate content. Disjointed time, by disrupting linearity and our notion of chronological order, opens up the possibility of conceiving of an a-temporal event, an event that remains always-already outside the flow of history:

To affirm the coming of the event, its future-to-come ... all of this can be thought ... only in a dislocated time of the present, at the joining of the radically disjointed time, without certain conjunction. Not a time whose joinings are negated, broken, mistreated, dysfunctional, disadjusted, according to a *dys*—of negative opposition and dialectical disjunction, but a time without *certain* joining or determinable conjunction³⁴ There would be neither injunction nor promise without this disjunction.³⁵

Like Benjamin in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Derrida raises a directly ethical question in *Specters of Marx*: What is the nature of justice? And Derrida’s approach to this question, like Benjamin’s, involves reconceiving the very notion of time. But whereas Benjamin views time in a quasi-dialectical fashion as the bursting and crystallizing of monads, Derrida places an emphasis on the negative dialectic of time. In other words, Derrida is concerned with a time “out-of-joint” (or “out-of-constellation”) that questions the very opposition of “real time” and “deferred time” and never resolves into a third term: “one must perhaps ask oneself whether the *spectrality effect* does not consist in

³² Jameson, “Marx’s Purloined Letter,” 63.

³³ Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 254.

³⁴ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 17-18.

³⁵ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 33.

undoing this opposition, or even this dialectic, between actual, effective presence and its other."³⁶ For Benjamin, messianic time is a way of viewing the past ethically. Disjointed time, on the other hand, allows Derrida to view the future-to-come as the site of justice. The future-to-come, like the *other*, is heterogeneous: we cannot have a pure understanding of alterity, and, according to Derrida, any attempt to reduce the other to the same amounts to violent appropriation. Though we can never have absolute knowledge of the future-to-come, we can nevertheless affirm its heterogeneity and, in doing so, welcome the other without reserve. For this reason, justice is always disjointed; it is never present within the sphere of conjoined or objective time. And in this sense, Derrida's understanding of spectrality adds a concern for the future simply lacking in Benjamin's notion of a messianism devoted to the past: "Within this *non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present*, without that which secretly unhinges it, without this responsibility and this respect for justice concerning those who *are not there*, of those who are no longer or who are not yet *present and living*, what sense would there be to ask the question ... what will come in the future-to-come?"³⁷ Whenever we determine the content of justice, according to Derrida, we obtain law instead. Law is always algebraic, centered on an economy of rules, restitution, divestiture, appropriation, and all the totalizing norms of representation that rest on self-presence. Law seeks to reify the relation to the other in a fixed determination of codes and protocols that strip the other of its singularity and uniqueness. Justice, on the other hand, is impossible, not in a negative sense, but in the sense that it can never have self-presence. And only if time is heterogeneous can we establish a heterogeneous relation to the other. Still, disjointed time does not necessarily lead to justice; it simply opens up the heterogeneity crucial for any respect and responsibility toward the other. Justice is therefore "undeconstructible" because it disrupts the notion of linear time, not because it has a self-presence immune to the logic of displacement.³⁸

Justice participates in the paradoxical structure of a promise that never reaches completion. We find this undetermined promise, Derrida argues, in every politico-religious ideology: "The effectivity or actuality of the democratic promise, like that of the communist promise, will always keep within it, and it must do so, this absolutely undetermined messianic hope at its heart, this eschatological relation to the to-come of an event, *and* of a singularity, of an alterity that cannot be anticipated."³⁹ Without resorting to a new kind of historicism or post-historicism, Derrida wishes to "open up" rather than suppress an affirmation of the undetermined emancipatory promise *as promise*

³⁶ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 40.

³⁷ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, xiv.

³⁸ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 28.

³⁹ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 35.

and not, Derrida adds, “as onto-theological or teleo-eschatological program or design.”⁴⁰ He further stresses “not only must one not renounce the emancipatory desire, it is necessary to insist on it more than ever, it seems, and insist on it, moreover, as the very indeconstructibility of the ‘it is necessary’. This is the condition of a re-politicization, perhaps of another concept of the political.”⁴¹

This condition of a new concept of the political is possibly concurrent with a new concept of the religious. It is important to understand that Derrida’s thinking of the messianic opens up and revitalizes political and religious questions insofar as these questions never terminate into answers. By remaining questionable, uncertain and undetermined, messianicity unsettles the binary of rational and theological discourse. Derrida’s conception of the messianic, nevertheless, will remain skewed insofar as we interpret his project as an attempt to secularize the eschatological promise of salvation.

In a way, Aijaz Ahmad falls into this very trap. Despite confessing the above quotation leaves him “speechless,” Ahmad goes on to interpret Derrida’s notion of messianicity as an even further diluted version of Benjamin’s weak messianism:

In a sense, what we have at hand is Derrida’s rewriting of Benjamin’s actual location within Jewish mysticism (hence, perhaps, the proviso that he wishes to detach ‘the messianic’ from ‘*messianism*’); all that is left of that side of Benjamin’s torment is the *language*, the rhetorical play of an emancipation at once secular and messianic: the image of the hopes of humankind once invested in religion, then invested in Marxism, now to be reinvested, as Derrida would have it, in deconstructionist ‘radicalization.’⁴²

If Jameson’s mistake lies in reading Benjamin through Derrida, Ahmad’s mistake is just the opposite — he reads Derrida through Benjamin: “It would appear that Derrida is inspired here by Benjamin’s virtually eschatological attempts to reconcile Marxism with Jewish mysticism.”⁴³ There are two primary weaknesses in Ahmad’s interpretation of Derrida. A superficial problem is that Ahmad relies on the standard reading of Benjamin’s project in the “Theses.” What does it mean to reconcile Marxism with Jewish mysticism? In fact, as they stand in their orthodox forms, the two are highly compatible: they both seek the eschatological liberation of humankind. Marxist “prophecy” believes the proletariat will give rise to their own Messiah-type leaders who will engage the ruling class in a battle

⁴⁰ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 75.

⁴¹ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 75.

⁴² Aijaz Ahmad, “Reconciling Derrida: ‘Specters of Marx’ and Deconstructive Politics,” in *Ghostly Demarcations*, 88-109.

⁴³ Ahmad, “Reconciling Derrida,” 103.

that will determine the fate of humanity. After the fall of capitalist oppression, an entirely new form of social governance will arise, a Kingdom of God *without* God. I can illustrate further parallels, but the point should be clear. Jewish Messianism and Marxism are, in their crude versions, translatable discourses because they both carry a strong messianic message. Benjamin's notion of inverted Messianism, and his commitment to the revolutionary pulse of materialist historiography, makes his project more hybridized than any "reconciliation" permits.

In another sense, Ahmad is "speechless" with Derrida's language of messianicity because he is unable to disassociate the concepts of faith and religion from the pitfalls of dogma or onto-theological obsession:

For, if phrases like 'the absolute future of what is coming' invoke so many latent images of the Second Coming, in other phrases like 'desert-like experience' or 'waiting for the other and for the event', and in the invocation of an 'experience' that is at once indeterminate and already 'codified', we hear the powerful language of religious surrender and renunciation that is common to the mystical traditions in all three major monotheistic religions.⁴⁴

Ahmad's onto-theological critique of Derrida's discourse on messianicity reflects an inherent bias of Ahmad's position: anything that resembles religious language is immediately guilty by association. This is a form of dogmatism itself. What is in fact a subtle and complex argument on Derrida's behalf reduces to a simulacrum of religious torment. For Ahmad, such a reduction is very convenient. By considering the infinite incoherence of religious language, he can deduce that Derrida's language is likewise meaningless. His critique of Derrida is thus caught between two contradictory positions: on the one hand, he blames Derrida for secularizing the rhetoric of Jewish mysticism found in Benjamin's work; on the other hand, he rejects this rhetoric on the basis of its association with mystical discourse. Ahmad cannot decide what messianicity is: is it secular or religious? This indecisiveness on Ahmad's part, in fact, displays the impossibility of categorizing messianicity in any traditional secular/religious dichotomy. In his essay "Faith and Knowledge," Derrida writes: "This messianicity, stripped of everything, as it should, this faith without dogma ... cannot be contained in any traditional opposition, for example, that between reason and mysticism."⁴⁵ Derrida's project at once acknowledges the difficulties of separating messianicity from messianism, and engages continuously in the possibility of separating them and understanding the importance of that

⁴⁴ Ahmad, "Reconciling Derrida," 105.

⁴⁵ Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," 17-18, in *Religion*, eds. Gianni Vattimo, & Jacques Derrida (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 1-78.

separation. This fact alone refracts any force Ahmad's argument has. Derrida's notion of messianicity is thus in no way a secularization of Judeo-Christian messianism (Marxism, Hegelianism, or Kantianism, on the other hand, are perfect examples of secular eschatology), because the very nature of the messianic is undetermined — it has no content. The indeterminateness of messianicity likewise prevents it from ever being a "return" to religion, in any orthodox sense. This "indeterminateness," however, depends on the nature of our anticipation. As soon as we place the messianic on a horizon of expectation, it quickly precipitates into traditional messianism, becoming dogmatically religious, in the same way that justice, whenever we try to give it (self) presence, results in the rigidity of law.

Here again we see the difference between Benjamin's 'weak messianism' and Derrida's notion of the 'messianic *without* messianism' — the distance between the two measured by an "infinite leap."⁴⁶ 'Without,' Derrida warns us, "does not necessarily designate negativity; even less does it designate annihilation."⁴⁷ Derrida is skeptical whether a weak messianism can disassociate itself from the traditional forms of Judeo-Christian messianism. Not that Derrida wishes to "do away with the historical figures of messianism" as they are "only possible on the universal and quasi-transcendental ground of the structure constituted by this '*without* messianism'."⁴⁸ The messianic, rather than excluding the avatars of messianism, exists anterior to the historical specification of the apocalyptic event affiliated with universal redemption. By filtering from Judeo-Christian messianism its historical determination (and the Messiah-like figures that punctuate this history), Derrida places messianicity "beyond" deconstruction: "The figures of messianism would have to be ... deconstructed as 'religious', ideological, or fetishistic formations, whereas messianicity without messianism remains, for its part, undeconstructible, like justice. It remains undeconstructible because the movement of any deconstruction presupposes it."⁴⁹ We cannot simply cast off Judeo-Christian messianism as an absurd eschatological fantasy, a by-product of religious dogma. The important issue involves the conditions making the cultural phenomenon of messianism possible, the very structure of experience that, before its deliquescence on the Judeo-Christian horizon, is nevertheless *messianic*. Derrida stresses, repeatedly, "a certain experience of the emancipatory promise" remains "undeconstructible as the possibility itself of deconstruction."⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Derrida, "Marx & Sons," 250-251.

⁴⁷ Derrida, "Marx & Sons," 251.

⁴⁸ Derrida, "Marx & Sons," 251.

⁴⁹ Derrida, "Marx & Sons," 253.

⁵⁰ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 59.

Messianicity therefore relates directly to “experience” and to the status of our anticipation. One of the most difficult aspects of Derrida’s understanding of messianicity is his suggestion that it involves a “quasi-transcendental structure” of experience.⁵¹ Before any conventional “religious” experience, Derrida implies that messianicity is the primordial experience of the future-to-come: it remains undetermined itself, perhaps, because such a mode of experience refrains from determining (via expectation) any messianic anticipation of the future. It seems from this description that messianicity is “merely” subjective, as it bears no direct correlation to any conventional religious establishment. One critic even refers to Derrida’s definition of the messianic as establishing “a massively subjective idealist project.”⁵² The problem with formulating messianicity as a transcendental structure is that it leaves Derrida’s project exposed to such interpretations. It is true: the phrase “quasi-transcendental structure” invokes the ghostly heritage of idealist discourse. But the messianic does not assume transcendent status, for it never claims objectivity, in the complete sense that envelops religious discourse with the transparency of truth. The messianic is quasi-transcendental because of the necessary impossibility penetrating its core; it always stands in relation to the transcendent to-come, or what amounts to the unrealizability of a complete society,⁵³ a fulfilled history, or an autonomous subject. We also must not forget that the central force behind Derrida’s discussion of disjointed time, justice, awaiting-without-expectation (and the formulation of the “messianic without messianism”) consists of an “invincible desire” to respect the alterity of the other.⁵⁴ To this effect, Derrida’s ideas on messianicity bear no approximation to the ethical mires of subjective idealism, which runs the continual risk of epistemological solipsism.

To clarify the issue at hand, I recommend we approach *subjectivity as messianic* rather than *messianicity as subjective*. This reversal in emphasis serves a three-fold purpose: it allows us to situate Derrida’s discussion of messianicity on a personal level; it helps convey the sense in which subjectivity is inextricably involved with the other (and with the otherness of the future-to-come); and lastly, it highlights the impact Derrida’s concept of disjointed time has in relation to our concept of the subject.

This last point demands the most attention, as it encompasses the other two. It is difficult, however, to avoid the language of causality, especially when dealing

⁵¹ Derrida, “Marx & Sons,” 254.

⁵² David Bedggood, “Saint Jacques: Derrida and the Ghost of Marxism,” *Cultural Logic* 2. 2 (Spring 1999), 47. PURL: <http://eserver.org/clogic/2-2/bedggood.html>.

⁵³ Here the intersections between Derrida’s project and the work of Laclau and Mouffe are apparent, though a detailed study of such intersections falls outside the scope of this paper. See *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (Great Britain: Verso, 1985), 125.

⁵⁴ Derrida, “Faith & Knowledge,” 18.

with the concepts of time and subjectivity. It is common to say that our notion of time changes, alters, modifies, radicalizes, in a word, *affects*, our understanding of the subject, or vice versa. This motif runs throughout the history of philosophy. In our case, the central problem with the language of causality is that it presumes we have two preconceived notions — “time” and “subjectivity”, for example — and that changing one necessarily involves changing the other. The situation with the messianic subject is much different. Instead of the concept of messianic time affecting the concept of subjectivity, we see them partaking in the reciprocal structure of messianicity itself, which matches the structure of the promise. In one sense, *messianicity is subjective* to the extent that it has no association with politico-religious institutions. In another and perhaps more important sense, *subjectivity is messianic*, for both concepts revolve around the promise of reaching self-presence, a promise which is, in itself, impossible. The messianic subject, insofar as it struggles ceaselessly for this ontological claim, nevertheless remains as an affirmation of that impossibility.

The structure of the affirmative promise, as we have seen with the example of justice, is paradoxical: it is the promise of the future-to-come, of the undetermined messianic event that avoids presentation. A promise always stands in relation to a future event. Ordinarily, we seek to transcend the form of the promise (the uncertain future) in order to grasp or predict the content of the future. We do this by placing the promise on a horizon of expectation, and by doing so we treat the future-to-come as a future-present. The very essence of a promise, however, is its futurity, what is to-come. Affirming the promise — instead of the promised event — amounts to affirming the future-to-come indirectly, which prevents us from ever determining the future with content. In this sense, we need “to think the possibility of such an event but not the event itself.”⁵⁵ Affirming the future *as future* is parallel to affirming the other *as other*: in each case, by affirming the given heterogeneity, we refrain from reducing the other to the same, or the future to the present. The promise of the autonomous self — the self-certain cogito — is structurally equivalent to the promise of universal salvation, political utopia, or moral enlightenment, for such a promise entails a messianic cessation that will unite the *goal* and the *end* of the subject. By affirming the impossibility of a teleo-eschatological self, the messianic subject, by contrast, affirms the promise of the unforeseeable future-to-come: “The self, the *autos* of legitimating and legitimated self-foundation, *is still to come*, not as a future reality but as that which will always retain the essential structure of a promise and as that which can only arrive as such, as *to come*.”⁵⁶ The messianic future-to-come, therefore, gives ceaseless movement to the subject (continual

⁵⁵ Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Willis (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), 49.

⁵⁶ Derrida, *Who's Afraid of Philosophy? Right to Philosophy I*, trans. Jan Plug (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 22.

deferral), prohibiting the subject from ever arresting the movement of its delimitation. Determining the future with eschatological content amounts to specifying the universal closure of history. It is the very attempt to arrest the subject's movement, to impose self-presence upon the messianic promise.

Messianic subjectivity involves a unique way of affirming the impossibility of justice and using that affirmation as a catalyst for ethical action. By encompassing "teleology" and "eschatology" without reducing one to the other, the messianic subject simultaneously preserves the notion of "progress" and deconstructs any attempt to frame progress on a political horizon of expectation. Progress — like justice and hospitality without reserve, like salvation and the messianic event — is impossible; it is thus out of joint, out of being, and out of time. We can safely say progress does not "exist." But by that, we mean progress lacks self-presence. Derrida never denies the telos of history; like Benjamin, he denies any politico-epistemological agenda that claims to understand the course of temporality. Such an "understanding," by negating the heterogeneity of the future-to-come, most often proposes an image of utopia, secular or religious, which marks the end of history.

The vital differences between Derrida and Benjamin should be clear by now. It is interesting that Derrida's *Specters of Marx* is an entire essay on the importance of disjointed time, heterogeneity, singularity, and respect for the other, yet critics repeatedly try to conjoin Benjamin and Derrida, as if the former holds the key to understanding the latter and by conjuring Benjamin's spirit, we may dispel the complexity of Derrida's work, or vice versa. Despite their differences, Benjamin and Derrida share a concern for justice and history, and they both understand the importance our notion of time has in relation to ethics. The great reversal accomplished with Benjamin's weak messianism is not the Marxist appropriation of a theological term, but the inversion of a messianic gaze, traditionally directed to the future, but now to the past instead. Like Derrida, Benjamin refrains from speaking of a future-present for two related reasons: it commits us to a false notion of progress — that the present is moving toward a determined future — which in turn commits us to the model of objective, linear time. Since Benjamin's main critique in his "Theses" of the idea of "progress," we can understand why he distances himself from any notion of the future, directing his dialectical concern to the past instead. Derrida, likewise, is concerned with the past and with our present debt to the past. Like Benjamin, he deconstructs the notion of a future-present, for as the oxymoronic name suggests, this notion is an attempt to give self-presence to the unanticipated future-to-come. But instead of turning away from the future all together, Derrida wishes to affirm the very heterogeneity of the future-to-come, and he does so through the concept of the promise. The very structure of a promise *is* futurity (i.e., it is impossible to

promise anything that does not relate to the future); so, by affirming the promise itself, we indirectly affirm the future, thereby approaching (without appropriating) the future as *other*.

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