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## Temporalities of Revolution: On the Representation of History and Collective Action

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## Abstract

This thesis opens with a discussion of Rosa Luxemburg's notion of "spontaneity," which departs from a consideration of Luxemburg's scientific socialism, the inevitability of capitalist collapse, and her assertion of socialism as the objective response to the contradictions of capitalism. For Luxemburg, then, spontaneity refers to the way in which proletarian consciousness forms in response to these conditions. The second chapter argues that Luxemburg's notion of spontaneity represents what Walter Benjamin would call an historical articulation of the past, which is an articulation of the present and its struggles in terms of their historicity. I develop this argument through a close reading of Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," with particular attention paid to Benjamin's notion of "weak messianism," the historical burden of past generations' failed revolutionary hopes that the present carries. The third chapter considers the second volume of Alfred Döblin's *November 1918* and the question of history's commensurability.

## Keywords

Collective Action, Benjamin, Derrida, Döblin, Germany, Historical Materialism, Luxemburg, Marx, Messianism, Revolution, Spontaneity, Temporality.

## Summary for Lay Audience

This thesis examines three different representations of collective action, which is action undertaken by a group of people with the intention of achieving a common objective. The first chapter discusses Rosa Luxemburg. Luxemburg was a scientific socialist, someone who believed that capitalism is an inherently contradictory economic system. We experience capitalism's contradictions as economic meltdowns or crises such as the Great Recession of 2008. Scientific socialists believe these contradictions doom capitalism to collapse, but that socialism is the scientific response to this inevitability. The chapter turns to Karl Marx's discussion of scientific socialism in order to understand how Luxemburg conceived of the link between the contradictions of capitalism and collective action which arose in response. Luxemburg calls this link "spontaneity," which is associated with collective action that seems to erupt spontaneously. For Luxemburg, such activity demonstrates how consciousness, how we perceive the world, forms in relation to the contradictions of capitalism and inspires collective action. The second chapter argues that Luxemburg's notion of spontaneity represents what Walter Benjamin calls the historical articulation of the past; for Benjamin, we do this when we discuss something in terms of its historical development. Luxemburg did exactly this when she discussed seemingly spontaneous action in terms of its historical development. Such "articulations" shine a new light on events, for instance, which then changes how we understand and respond to those events. For Luxemburg and Benjamin, understanding collective action as an expression of capitalist oppression is what made social revolution possible. The final chapter analyzes the second volume of Alfred Döblin's four-part novel, *November 1918*. The novel seems to ask whether it is actually possible for a revolution to take place which would permanently end oppression, as it looks into history and sees many efforts to achieve freedom all leading back to oppression.

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## Introduction

The focus in each chapter of this thesis is the logic of collective action and the temporality of social and political revolution, or the way in which each theorist or writer interprets the content or experience of the present as a particular demand for action that will transcend that present. My analysis focuses on three efforts to represent historical figurations of collective action in the early twentieth century. The first chapter discusses Rosa Luxemburg and her notion of spontaneity. For Luxemburg, the question of social revolution was an interrogation of the present, in which the rudiments of an alternative social order always already reside. Social revolution was then a matter of organizing and developing consciousness in such a way that the masses recognized not only the manifold contingencies of the inherited capitalist present, but also its unrealized, socialist potential. Spontaneity represents a mass consciousness so developed that it has recognized these factors—a mass consciousness for which the reality of its present condition has come into view to reveal a socialist present which demands the proletariat reach out and grab it.

The second chapter examines the correspondences between Luxemburg and Walter Benjamin in order to argue that spontaneity represents a form of historiography which Benjamin refers to as the historical articulation of the past—a historiography which represents the present in terms of its historicity. Thus, for Benjamin, to understand collective action is to understand the way in which the past inhabits the present as a demand for the fulfilment of “a secret agreement between past generations and the present one” (Benjamin 254). For if “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (Marx, *Karl Marx* 246), then what links the present to the past is the experience of each and every present as class struggle—an experience of the present as history’s impulse toward that which it has been promised. This is the impulse that Benjamin, in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” famously calls “a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim” (Benjamin 254). What Benjamin proposes here is a reformulation of Karl Marx’s own reformulation of Hegel in “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte.” For history’s repetition is not a misrecognition of men’s farcical conjuring up of the past; it is the past, which remains within each and every subsequent present as an indelible mark that signifies the demand its claim be settled. Thus, for Benjamin, collective action must disregard its “superstitious regard for the past,” not to turn its back on the past altogether, but

to articulate its continued presence in terms of its historical significance to the present as that which joins the various experiences of class struggle. Thus, the content of the past would transcend the mediocrity (or ignorance) of its bourgeois phrasing to realize a present which comes not from the future, but from the realization of that agreement which always already resides within the present.

The final chapter considers the second volume of Alfred Döblin's *November 1918* and the possibility of history's commensurability: not as a matter of finding the correct articulation of the present's demand to inspire collective action, but of coming to terms with man's inherent inadequacy, his inability to respond to the demand of history. The novel conceives of the terms of fulfillment along lines not unlike the absolute justice or "justice as relation to the other" that Jacques Derrida discusses in *Specters of Marx*: a justice given as one does a gift, without expectation or condition, and with the messianic subtext of that which has been long expected. This vision of justice does share in Benjamin's messianic conception of collective action, but Döblin's novel considers this task to be an historical articulation of a promise which is messianic in proportion—a task that requires an all-encompassing view of creation. And men, the makers of history, are always at the tail-end of their creation. It is somewhat fitting that Derrida ascribes absolute justice to a future, so long as we consider the future the temporality of that which can never be experienced, of that which is *always* "to come." The realization of justice will bring an end to the experience of the present, of history's demand; its arrival is neither first nor last, but always after. In the meantime, all one can do is find peace in the comfort of faith—the faith which brings the souls of the faithful masses into accord with justice.

I chose the texts I focus on primarily in each chapter for the way in which they articulate each figure's conception of collective action. Thus, the first chapter opens with an examination of Luxemburg's "Reform or Revolution" and "What Is Economics," which contextualize her insistence on the inevitability of capitalism's collapse. This insistence informs much of Luxemburg's theory, including the notion of spontaneity that she explores in "The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions," the text which occupies most of the first chapter's discussion. The second chapter focuses primarily on Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," as this text offers a condensed explication of Benjamin's conception of history and its weak messianic impulse. I augment my discussion of the "Theses" with passages from the "Theologico-Political Fragment," "Doctrine of the

Similar,” and *The Arcades Project*; while Benjamin composes these texts over two decades, they evince an evolution in Benjamin’s thought that helps us to better understand his notion of weak messianism and its correspondences to Luxemburg’s notion of spontaneity. As for the final chapter, its discussion is limited to the second volume of Döblin’s *November 1918* tetralogy, which is separated into two parts: *A People Betrayed* and *The Troops Return*. In addition to being the most widely read, this volume represents its theory of history and collective action as a choice between the divine and the historical—between the interior peace of faith and the unending pursuit of peace in the historical through collective action. In this way, this volume’s formulation of its problematic is highly compatible with the previous chapter’s discussion of weak messianism, and I present these theories as a negation of the emancipatory promise of such conceptions of history.

History is littered with revolutions of varying and debatable success, and theorists of the left have long been concerned with the figuration of collective action in history. A significant contribution to this tradition is Marx’s “Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” a text which stands in the background of each chapter in this thesis. Marx famously begins “The Eighteenth Brumaire” with the observation, “Hegel remarks somewhere that all the great events and characters of world history occur, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce” (Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire” 146). What follows this corrective is an assertion of the broader conditions of historical action: “Men make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted” (Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire” 146). As Marx puts it, “just when [men] appear to be engaged in the revolutionary transformation of themselves and their material surroundings, in the creation of something which does not yet exist, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they timidly conjure up the spirits of the past to help them” (Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire” 146). This, for Marx, represents the temporality of the bourgeois revolution, which needed to conjure up images of a glorious past to inspire “[the] heroism, self-sacrifice, terror, civil war, and battles in which whole nations were engaged, to bring it into the world” and accomplish its world historical task (Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire” 148). The bourgeois revolutions cloaked themselves in imagery of Rome to proclaim that these revolutions were dedicated to universal emancipation, which disguised their class character even from the bourgeoisie itself. The only language available to such revolutions is that of

the past, of what has been, and it carries with it an historical weight that limits its emancipatory sweep, or as Marx puts it, “The tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living” (Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire” 146). The proletarian social revolution, by contrast, must create a new language, one that is free from the dead weight of tradition and able to articulate that which is ineffable in the present. Only a language such as this could inspire the collective action necessary to bring the “poetry from the future” into the present.

## Chapter 1

### 1 Rosa Luxemburg and the Spontaneity of the Masses

Rosa Luxemburg is famously associated with the notion of spontaneity in collective action, but her view on the role of spontaneity must be understood in the context of her wider insistence on the necessity of scientific socialism and the inevitability of the collapse of capitalism. In her 1900 essay, “Reform or Revolution,” Luxemburg observes that “theories are only images of the phenomena of the exterior world in the human consciousness” (Luxemburg 60). Some theories, she argues, present inverted images, but not scientific socialism. For Luxemburg, the accuracy of socialist theory rests on a “fundamental idea,” that capitalism produces the conditions of its own impossibility. From that idea, she argues, three principal considerations follow: that capitalism will become increasingly chaotic and will inevitably bring about its own ruin; that capitalism itself produces through the socialization necessary to enlarge capitalist enterprises the rudiments of the social order that would predominate under socialism; and that the experience of struggle under capitalism only encourages the development of proletarian organization and consciousness.<sup>1</sup> It is important to keep in mind that Luxemburg’s “Reform or Revolution” is a polemic text, a critique of the reformist theories of Eduard Bernstein, a Marxist theorist and member of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). Bernstein was a revisionist, who believed himself to be “correcting” what he considered to be Marx’s “errors.” In Bernstein’s account, capitalism is anything but doomed to collapse; rather, he argues, capitalism deploys certain measures, “means of adaptation” to assuage social relations and to prevent crises, and through those measures demonstrates an almost infinite capacity to adapt. Bernstein also sees in the socialization of capitalist production the possibility of bringing capitalism’s social tendencies increasingly to bear on the management of production and consumption, eventually rendering it wholly social, and thus moving by reformist means

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<sup>1</sup> See Luxemburg 62.

entirely into a new socialist order. Though history did not and has not confirmed the view of Bernstein and the Second International that capitalism will be inevitably transformed into socialism by reformist means, it is nonetheless true that capitalism has proven to be adaptable. As Fredric Jameson observes of the contemporary historical moment, so infinite is capitalism's adaptability and entrenchment in human society that it is easier to imagine a future in which automation allows it to persist on an earth rendered uninhabitable to humans, or as he puts it, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism" (Jameson 76).

However, to see the persistence of capitalism as a refutation of Luxemburg's thesis is to fail to understand her articulation of the theory as a choice between socialism and barbarism, as Luxemburg famously phrases it in the "Junius Pamphlet." Luxemburg wrote the pamphlet in response to the infamous events of August 14, 1914, when the entire caucus of the SPD voted in favour of funding the war which would become World War I. In the pamphlet, Luxemburg revisits Friedrich Engels's articulation of this choice: "Capitalist society faces a dilemma, either an advance to socialism or a reversion to barbarism" (qtd. in Luxemburg 388). She asks "What does a 'reversion to barbarism' mean at the present stage of European civilization? . . . *This world war* means a reversion to barbarism. The triumph of imperialism leads to the destruction of culture, sporadically during a modern war, and forever, if the period of world wars that has just begun is allowed to take its damnable course to the last ultimate consequence" (Luxemburg 388). In many respects, the "Junius Pamphlet" is a restatement of the position Luxemburg sets out in "Reform or Revolution," affirming in particular the destruction of capitalism's imperialist tendency. This war, which Luxemburg ominously predicts will inaugurate "the period of world wars," puts not only capitalism's destructive tendency on full display, but also its insatiable hunger for growth at any cost.

## 1.1 Rosa Luxemburg and the Theory of Collapse

Luxemburg's understanding of the relationship between the capitalist imperative to grow or expand and the inevitability of its collapse is perhaps most fully set out in her essay, "What is Economics," the first chapter of a projected book on economics that was to be based on the lectures she gave at the SPD party school from 1907 until WWI.

Luxemburg's essay begins with an interrogation of its titular question: "Sometimes economics is simply defined as . . . the 'science of the economic relations among human beings'" (Luxemburg 324). But this definition does little more than raise a further question: "is it necessary, and if so why, to have a special science about the economic relations of 'human beings,' i.e., *all* human beings, at all times and under all conditions?" (Luxemburg 324). For Luxemburg, economics studies the organization of production and consumption, but that organization or mode of production is a human creation. Consequently, economics is foremost a science of human relations and their (re)production—but also their historical contingency. As Luxemburg insists, this science should produce a clear understanding of the periodic crises produced from the dynamic of those human relations. As she puts it,

What is noteworthy in all this is the fact that the crisis is looked upon and treated by all concerned, by all of society, as something beyond the sphere of human volition and beyond human control, as a heavy blow struck by an invisible and greater power, an ordeal sent down from the heavens, similar to a heavy thunderstorm, an earthquake, or a flood . . . as if [the crisis] were the result of the workings of a natural law . . .

A thunderstorm is an event caused by the elements of physical nature, and no one, at least not with the present development of the natural sciences and of technology, is able to bring about or to prevent a thunderstorm. But what is a modern crisis? It consists of the fact that too many commodities have been produced. They find no purchasers, and therefore commerce and then industry stop! (Luxemburg 334–35)

In contrast to the efforts of bourgeois economics to cast crises as the products of abstract natural laws, Luxemburg insists that they are the product of specific, historical human relations and that their causes are material. Bourgeois economics takes capitalism's historical relations as fixed and immutable and subject to abstract and immaterial laws or principles. Luxemburg's point is that economic crisis is as material as a thunderstorm—except that the economic crisis arises from an historical social relation, the relations of production: "No one wants a crisis and yet it happens. Man creates it with his own hands, even though he does not want it for anything in the world. Here, in fact, we have before

us a question of economic life which none of the participants can explain” (Luxemburg 335). Crises occur nonetheless, and they represent neither errors nor breakdowns but the truth of the capitalist mode of production. They arise from a social relation, and it is the perfect functioning of that relation which inevitably produces each crisis.

Luxemburg’s understanding of capitalist social relations and crisis is grounded in part in Marx’s discussion of capitalism and cooperation. As Marx explains, “When numerous workers work together side by side in accordance with a plan, whether in the same process, or in a different but connected process, this form of labour is called cooperation” (Marx, *Capital: Vol. I* 443), and cooperation on a large scale distinguishes capitalism from all preceding economic systems, particularly early capitalism, which was “merely an enlargement of the workshop of the master craftsman of the guilds” (Marx, *Capital: Vol. I* 439). This large-scale cooperation in turn succeeds only because capitalism preys upon pre-existing human sociality, as Marx argues: “man, if not as Aristotle thought a political animal, is at all events a social animal” (Marx, *Capital: Vol. I* 444). Capitalism, in other words, does not socialize man, but avails of man’s sociality to express it capitalistically—the exact terms of which I return to below. Cooperation produces what Marx describes as “the new power that arises from the fusion of many powers,” but cooperation under capitalism also intensifies human sociality: “mere social contact begets in most industries a rivalry and a stimulation of the ‘animal spirits,’ which heightens the efficiency of each individual worker” (Marx, *Capital: Vol. I* 443).

However, capitalist production socializes production neither for the sake of increased production itself, nor to give man a means to express himself socially: “The driving motive and determining purpose of capitalist production is the self-valorization of capital to the greatest extent, i.e., the greatest possible production of surplus-value, hence the greatest possible exploitation of labour-power by the capitalist” (Marx, *Capital: Vol. I* 449). Valorization motivates the “twofold content” of capitalist production: “on the one hand a social labour process for the creation of a product, and on the other hand capital’s process of valorization—in form it is purely despotic” (Marx, *Capital: Vol. I* 450). In other words, capitalism’s social relations, its organization of man’s sociality, only function to the extent that they produce surplus value. But when there is a glut of commodities, surplus value falls, and we have a familiar crisis—and not necessarily

because production exceeded the needs of consumption. There could be millions homeless while a glut of homes sits empty because a “housing bubble” popped. This scarcity despite abundance is, in many cases, a feature of capitalist crises: a need which, materially and practically, *could* be satisfied, but which capitalism’s insatiable need for surplus value blocks any socially valid practice from satisfying.<sup>2</sup> Capitalism demands the maximization of commodity production in order to maximize the potential for extracting surplus value; meanwhile, it also restricts the conditions under which those commodities can be consumed in order to, again, maximize surplus value. Capitalism demands scarcity alongside abundance and, in this way, distorts the social relations of cooperation which underlie it: “the interconnection between [workers’] various labours confronts them, in the realm of ideas, as a plan drawn up by the capitalist, and, in practice, as his authority, as the powerful will of a being outside them, who subjects their activity to his purpose” (Marx, *Capital: Vol. 1* 450). Surplus value is that authority, and this is also the despotism of capital: the absolute authority that surplus value holds over social relations, making them increasingly about its production, while also distorting the cooperation which in fact drives capital’s productivity. Insofar as barbarism is an absence of culture and civilization, of social relations, the image of capitalism that Marx presents is characterized by the barbaric disfiguring of sociality.

Another aspect of the logic of capital which confirms both its inherent barbarism and the inevitability of its collapse is the imperative that capital expand. For Luxemburg this imperative is typically realized through capital’s penetration of non-capitalist zones, but in a finite world, capitalism will eventually exhaust those zones. Expansion will drive capitalism to its limit, as opportunities for surplus value will dry up:

When capitalist development has reached a certain level, the interests of the bourgeoisie, as a class, and the needs of economic progress begin to clash even in the capitalist sense. We believe that this phase has already begun. It shows itself

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<sup>2</sup> See Smith 243-53 for a discussion of Marx’s theory of value as it relates to surplus value as the basis for the validation of social practices.

in two extremely important phenomena of contemporary social life: on the one hand, the policy of tariff barriers, and on the other, militarism. (Luxemburg 82)

This “capitalist sense” is what Marx’s calls the “capitalist direction” of the economic system’s “twofold content,” its production of both a product and surplus value. Tariffs and militarism represent practices which states use to protect their capitalist interests from competing interests abroad. While Luxemburg famously discusses capitalism’s need for expansion in terms of imperialism, her argument points essentially to the historical limit of capital—the point at which the threat of capitalism’s inevitable collapse outweighs the utility of its socializing production to increase productivity. Tariffs and militarism are, for Luxemburg, two striking signs that the current system is approaching that limit. Whereas tariffs were originally intended to help fledgling sections, they now serve the capitalist class at the national level, stoking rivalries with capitalists of other nations and limiting consumption at the local level.<sup>3</sup> And whereas militarism originally facilitated capitalism’s imperialistic spread into formerly non-capitalist areas, it is now also aimed internally to ensure the domination of the capitalist classes.<sup>4</sup>

That capitalism persists under conditions of endemic crisis is, for Luxemburg, only a sure sign of its inevitable collapse, but that inevitability makes the struggle for what will follow capitalism all the more urgent. As she puts it, “either the triumph of imperialism and the destruction of all culture, and, as in ancient Rome, depopulation, desolation, degeneration, a vast cemetery; or the victory of socialism, that is, the conscious struggle of the international proletariat against imperialism, against its methods, against war. This is the dilemma of world history, its inevitable choice” (Luxemburg 388–89). For Luxemburg, the barbarism of capitalism confirms that it has reached its historical limit and must give way to another social form.

Luxemburg’s vision of this future social form is based on notions of free cooperation. The sociality that enables this cooperation is not removed in her thought from the notion of spontaneity. Once again, Marx can serve as a useful guide to the

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<sup>3</sup> See Luxemburg 83.

<sup>4</sup> See Luxemburg 83-84.

relation between these notions. In the section of his *Grundrisse* often referred to as “The Fragment on Machines,” Marx explains how an embryonic communism already exists within capitalism, which Marx discusses in terms of the mechanization of production. of fixed capital, the machines “fixed” to the factory floor. Mechanization is a practice like any other under capitalism, subject to the production of surplus value, but the effort to maximize surplus value through mechanization also leads inevitably to the reduction of “necessary labour.” As Marx explains, “[capital] is thus, despite itself, instrumental in creating the means of social disposable time, in order to reduce labour time for the whole society to a diminishing minimum, and thus to free everyone’s time for their own development. But its tendency always, on the one side, *to create disposable time, on the other, to convert it into surplus labour*” (Marx, *Grundrisse* 708). Mechanization can reduce labor time and then can increase surplus value, but to the extent it reduces necessary labour time, it also leads to surplus production and reduced opportunities for surplus-value production—in a word, crisis. But the essential point remains: capitalist mechanization and cooperation produces the means by which socially disposable time, time for personal development, might be created for all.

Another way in which capitalism shows the way to its own surpassing is through mechanization’s advancement of what Marx refers to in passing as “the general intellect” (Marx, *Grundrisse* 706). Paolo Virno defines the general intellect as “abstract knowledge (primarily but not only scientific knowledge)” (Virno 3). More specifically, Marx uses the term to represent the way in which man’s sociality works—how innovation is in fact a social product that relies directly and indirectly on the various products of others’ labour.<sup>5</sup> The general intellect, or scientific knowledge as Virno defines it, is not a necessarily capitalist phenomenon, but a feature of man’s sociality, as Marx explains: “Nature builds no machines, no locomotives, railways, electric telegraphs, self-acting mules etc. These are products of human industry; natural material transformed into organs of the human will over nature, or of human participation in nature” (Marx, *Grundrisse* 706). Under capitalist relations, however, scientists or innovators are

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<sup>5</sup> See Marx 706 in the *Grundrisse*.

compensated within capitalist wage relations, even though their labour “is oriented towards the production of fixed capital” and produces no commodities—only the “means” to produce them. This organization even extends to the general intellect itself, for which the productivity of those workers engaged in commodity production provides the social validation for its development. Firms might acquire surplus value from the sale of that knowledge which amounts to productivity advancements, but that transaction only occurs under capitalism if commodity production produces surplus value to such an extent that some can be diverted from circulation and the production of further surplus value to invest in the production of the mode of production. The general intellect depends as much on the knowledge of the scientist as the productivity of the workers.<sup>6</sup> Its development, somewhat outside capitalist relations, reveals the rudiments of an alternative social order: productivity advances are not themselves capitalistic, but their organization according to the production of surplus value is. This assertion recalls the earlier discussion of Luxemburg’s “What Is Economics.” Economics studies the organization of production and consumption, but the organization or mode of production is a human creation in the sense that the labour of human relations produces it. Thus, labour itself is not capitalistic—certainly, it is organized capitalistically, but labour and its product, which includes productivity advancements, remain expressions of man’s sociality. In this light, advances in productivity and in knowledge have consequences for all human labour insofar as necessary labour is *all* labour necessary to reproduce social relations. That these advancements can also support the production of surplus value in their current articulation is not a feature of productivity advancement but of capitalism.

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<sup>6</sup> That the general intellect includes as much the “innovators” as those workers not directly involved in the production of the mode of production is perhaps not immediately obvious because of capitalist abstraction: both sets of people labour for the development of the general intellect and the reproduction of social relations, but the demands of surplus value abstract social relations and artificially separate the two practices.

## 1.2 Spontaneity and “The Mass Strike”

Written in August of 1906 to interpret the significance of the various strikes in Russia between 1905-06, Luxemburg’s “The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions” is significant for the development of her thought and as a chronicle of the mass strike as a form of action:

The present official period, so to speak, of the Russian Revolution is justly dated from the rising of the proletariat on January 22, 1905, when the demonstration of 200,000 workers ended in a frightful bloodbath before the czar’s palace. The bloody massacre in St. Petersburg was, as is well known, the signal for the outbreak of the first gigantic series of mass strikes which spread over the whole of Russia within a few days and which carried the call to action of the revolution from St. Petersburg to every corner of the empire amongst the widest section of the proletariat. (Luxemburg 237)

These events are among those which Luxemburg chronicles in her pamphlet’s third section, the “Development of the Mass Strike Movement in Russia.” However, the text opens with a reconsideration of “the general strike,” which Luxemburg presents as an embryonic form of the mass strike: “For the first time in the history of class struggle [the Russian Revolution] has achieved a grandiose realization of the idea of the mass strike and—as we shall discuss later—has even matured the general strike and thereby opened a new epoch in the development of the labor movement” (Luxemburg 227). Thus, “The Mass Strike” is Luxemburg’s rehabilitation of the general strike from its contemporaneous position within international socialism—perhaps best expressed in Engels’s position on “the revolutionary blundering of the Bakuninists in Spain” (Luxemburg 225). For Luxemburg, that position is not critical of the general strike itself, but of “the anarchist theory of the general strike—that is, the theory of the general strike as a means of inaugurating the social revolution, in contradistinction to the daily political struggle of the working class” (Luxemburg 226).<sup>7</sup> This position is, in other words, critical

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<sup>7</sup> Luxemburg quotes Engels, who writes that “‘The general strike, in the Bakuninists’ program, is the lever which will be used for introducing the social revolution. One fine morning all the workers in every industry

of the anarchists' ahistorical conception of the general strike, divorced from any consideration of the relevance of particular forms of political action to class struggle.

Luxemburg holds that the various forms of strike action that predate the Russian Revolution of 1905 are part and parcel of that revolution, constituting what Luxemburg terms a revolutionary period. In her view, the mass strike was “the indication, the rallying idea, of a whole period of class struggle lasting for years, perhaps for decades” (Luxemburg 263). This assertion provides the basis for the first of Luxemburg’s four “general aspects” of the mass strike, expressed in the notion that the mass strike is not the one and only indication or rallying idea of class struggle, but that it was for *that period*. The mass strike was spontaneous, and its spontaneity was for Luxemburg an expression of the particular way in which consciousness developed in this period. The spontaneity that Luxemburg observes in the mass strikes is an indication of the proletariat’s class consciousness and, thus, its preparedness for its historical task. If “The history of all hitherto existing society is,” as Marx suggests in “The Communist Manifesto,” “the history of class struggles” (Marx, *Karl Marx* 246), then, for Luxemburg, its spontaneity is its phenomenal expression. Broadly stated, for Luxemburg, the significance of any one mass strike is not its singular existence, as a political action which occurred over a certain span of time, but as an expression of consciousness that forms in reaction to the social relations of a particular period of class struggle; while the mass strike, or any form of political action, may seem spontaneous in a given moment, that spontaneity is in fact the yearning of proletarian consciousness to throw off the yoke of capitalism and be truly free.

### 1.2.1 Thesis 1: Luxemburg, the Historical Materialist

In the fourth section of “The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions,” entitled, “The Interaction of the Political and the Economic Struggle,” Luxemburg formulates a series of theses on the correct understanding of the mass strike.

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in a country, or perhaps in every country, will cease work, and thereby compel the ruling classes to submit in about four weeks, or to launch an attack on the workers so that the latter will have the right to defend themselves, and may use the opportunity to overthrow the old society.” (qtd. in Luxemburg 225)

The first of these theses contends that the mass strike should not be considered an isolated action, but rather as part of a much larger process within a particular period of class struggle, lasting sometimes for decades. This thesis serves as a reminder of the materialist conception of history which underlies scientific socialism: while the contradictions of capitalism necessarily inspire struggles for the realization of that alternative social order which already exists within capitalism, the immediate outcomes of those struggles are not a foregone conclusion. For this reason, Luxemburg's discussion of her first thesis opens on the distinction between "demonstration" and "fighting" strikes, the former organized and designed to show a disciplined opposition and the latter spontaneous and thus more concerned with the actual struggle.<sup>8</sup> Luxemburg does not disparage the more organized demonstration strike; rather, she insists on interpreting them as signs of the development of class consciousness. She implies, to this end, that the latter are more indicative of the relation between the development of consciousness and political action; thus, strikes were a constituent of class struggle, and the form it took in relation to class consciousness. Fighting strikes are, in other words, a sign that the proletariat is becoming conscious of its role, and the spontaneity of these actions a sign of that consciousness.

It follows, Luxemburg asserts, that the mass strike must be understood not as a mechanism or strategic tool, but as an event embedded in the materialist logic of class struggle. Hence, she argues that "it is not by *subjective criticism* of the mass strike from the standpoint of what is desirable, but only by *objective investigation* of the sources of the mass strike from the standpoint of what is historically inevitable, that the problem can be grasped or even discussed" (Luxemburg 233). Subjective criticism, then, refers to "abstract speculations on the possibility or impossibility, the utility or injuriousness of the mass strike" (Luxemburg 233). It is this perspective that Luxemburg observes in German Social Democracy's account of the mass strike as an "isolated phenomenon" that is at all times political, wholly without any economic motivations, "and undertaken on the basis of an opportune and mutual understanding on the part of the controlling authorities of the

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<sup>8</sup> See Luxemburg 263-64.

party and of the trade unions, and carried through in the spirit of party discipline and in perfect order . . . the whole material balance of the mass strike . . . is exactly determined in advance” (Luxemburg 235–36). However, this position merely represents a “subjective” view of the mass strike, in terms of its perceived utility. Objective investigation of the mass strike interprets these moments not as they appear, but in terms of their historical situatedness, that is, as the phenomenal expression of class struggle. Massimiliano Tomba makes a relevant observation to this end, in his reading of Marx’s “Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte”:

Marx shows that this model of linear causality is inadequate for the understanding of revolutionary situations. The event belongs to the order of ruptures, “it cleaves linear homogeneity, and fills the spatial void, it negates the abstraction of modern temporality.” It is not history that is without events, rather it is a certain kind of historiographical lens which does not allow one to see events. What is needed instead is a historiography that is up to this task. The materialist historiographer attempts to do this, intervening not only in the history of the present but in that of the past as well. (Tomba 37–38)

This is exactly the sort of “objective investigation” Luxemburg undertakes in her description of the mass strike as the indication of a whole period of class struggle lasting sometimes for decades. To the extent that the strike constitutes a rupture, it is also a moment in the ongoing course of class struggle, and the spontaneity that may attend it is a measure of the proletariat’s development of class consciousness.

### 1.2.2 Thesis 2: The Economic and the Political, or the Lenin and Luxemburg Debate

For Luxemburg, mass strikes are not singular; they are not isolated actions, with a clear beginning and ending. In the historical example she discusses, they are an indication of that phase of class struggle that culminated in the Russian Revolution of 1905 but, in fact, began “five or six years” earlier with “the great general strike of the textile workers in St. Petersburg in 1896 and 1897” (Luxemburg 237). Luxemburg herself admits that the demands of this strike were “economic”: “first, payment of wages for the coronation holidays; second, a working day of ten hours; third, increased rates for piecework . . . the

mass strike was outwardly a mere economic struggle for wages, but the attitude of the government and the agitation of the social democracy made it a political phenomenon of the first rank” (Luxemburg 238). This mass action was followed by “The outbreak of the Caucasian strike in March 1902,” which was “as much due to purely economic partial causes (although produced by quite other factors) as that of 1896” (Luxemburg 239). Luxemburg continues to recount various strike actions throughout the section, all of which contain similar revolts against the further denigration of already poor working conditions. In each instance, workers first demanded improved wages and working conditions, but the demands of thoroughly proletarianized masses always exceeded their initial, economic articulation and became political: “even here there was no predetermined plan, no organized action, because the appeals of the parties could scarcely keep pace with the spontaneous risings of the masses . . . the economic factor and the scattered condition of trade unionism were the starting point; all-embracing class action and political direction the result” (Luxemburg 246). Here, again, the “spontaneity” of the masses acts as the sign of the masses’ development.

Luxemburg insists, moreover, that this record of strikes and demonstrations reveals the absolute reciprocity between the political and economic aspects of class struggle.<sup>9</sup> Spontaneity provides a means to gauge the revolutionary potency of a particular phase of class struggle, of the workers’ awareness of the actual political condition that underlies their economic woes. With a revolutionary fervour sweeping through much of the industrialized world, the nature of the relationship between the economic and the political was a highly contentious matter for Social Democrats. This relationship—not spontaneity—is among one of the several debates between V.I. Lenin and Luxemburg. Both Luxemburg and Lenin are concerned with development of proletarian consciousness, but Lenin is particularly concerned with the successful development of revolutionary or social-democratic consciousness in the proletariat, and the obstacles posed by the limit of spontaneous trade-unionism. His view on

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<sup>9</sup> “With the spreading, clarifying and involution of the political struggle, the economic struggle not only does not recede, but extends, organizes and becomes involved in equal measure. Between the two there is the most complete reciprocal action” (Luxemburg 267).

“spontaneity” is part of a polemic within the Russian situation, one that has often been overlooked, but which has recently been explored by Lars T. Lih’s historical contextualization of *WITBD*, *Lenin Rediscovered*.

As Lih reminds us, an integral point to remember is that Lenin’s *WITBD* is a polemic text, much like Luxemburg’s “Reform or Revolution.” Both are affirmations of scientific socialism, intended to put theoretical debates to rest:

[Lenin] is affirming something rather banal and non-controversial for Social Democrats. He is affirming the mission of Social Democracy to bring the socialist message to the workers as vigorously as possible. He is affirming that *tred-iunionizm* [trade-unionism]—an ideology that explicitly denies the need for Social Democracy—is a bad thing and needs to be combatted. He affirms these precisely because he assumes, correctly, that his intended readers and even his opponents regard them as axioms. (Lih 615)

This affirmation of Social Democracy is more specifically an affirmation of its insistence upon class struggle, as opposed to the “economism” of trade unionism: “‘-ism’ means an *ideology*, which [for economism] is: ‘a *restriction* to economic struggle defended as a matter either of principle or of long-term tactics’” (Lih 220). As Lih explains it, trade unionism overestimates the significance of the economic struggle in class struggle insofar as it restricts struggle to wage strikes and other forms of struggle typically undertaken by unions. Social Democracy, by contrast, holds the political struggle for an alternative social order to be the highest form of class struggle.

The “spontaneity” which Lenin criticizes is that which is typically associated with the economism of trade unionism. While it is in many ways similar to the spontaneity Luxemburg discusses in “The Mass Strike,” Lenin’s discussion is, again, limited to a very particular and largely forgotten context, which, as Lih carefully demonstrates, has also suffered from translation issues. As Lih notes, “the natural translation for *stikhiinyi* is elemental,” but its derivatives make for an awkward translation in English (Lih 618).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> “First, English happens to lack a familiar word for the abstract noun form of ‘elemental.’ One can find in dictionaries words such as ‘elementalness’ and ‘elementality,’ but they grate on the ear . . . Second, the phrase ‘the *stikhiinyi* element,’ used originally by Krichevskii, plays a large role in *WITBD* polemics” (Lih 618).

Instead, Lih opts to transliterate the word from the original Russian: the abstract noun *stikhiinost* instead of spontaneity, and the adjective *stikhiinyi* instead of spontaneous (Lih 617). The awkwardness of “elemental” does make “spontaneity” a somewhat sympathetic translation, as “both words revolve around *lack of control*” (Lih 620), but their connotations differ critically—especially politically. In English, spontaneity is often associated with freedom: “in Lenin’s era, Woodrow Wilson writes ‘The highest and best form of efficiency is the spontaneous co-operation of a free people’” (Lih 619).<sup>11</sup> But whereas spontaneity is an achievement, something to be desired, *stikhiinost* is a point of departure. As Lih explains, the Russian term’s etymology evolves from an association with “the basic elements of the universe,” and this leads more or less directly to the modern Russian term, *stikhiinost*, “an element of the universe, a force of nature that is powerful and uncontrollable” (Lih 617). Though the notion of spontaneity as a political force might suggest an ability to transcend the world, to make the politically impossible a reality, it can equally suggest a chaotic and destructive scourge:

The basic metaphor of an uncontrollable natural force was a rich one and various aspects of it could be activated at various times to varying effect. For example, if the revolution itself or the growth of awareness among the workers was moving forward like an unstoppable natural force, that was a good and encouraging thing. If, on the other hand, a strike action was called *stikhiinyi* and thus implicitly compared to a hurricane, that was mostly a bad thing: violent, unpredictable, disorganised, short-lived, destructive, exhausting. (Lih 621)

As for Lenin, the object of his criticism is not this *stikhiinyi* action itself, but economic articulations, which idealize the masses left to their own devices, without leadership or guidance from Social Democracy. It is the squandering of *stikhiinost*, as it has one particular significance to the masses: “the *stikhiinost* of the masses demands from us, the Social Democrats, a mass of purposiveness. The greater is the *stikhiinyi* upsurge of the masses and the wider becomes the movement, so much the more does the demand

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<sup>11</sup> Spontaneity has broadly positive associations in English, as Lih notes in a second, “more popular” connotation, “connected to fun: to be spontaneous is to be impulsive in a cheerful way, to be charmingly unexpected” (620)

increase for a mass of purposiveness in the theoretical, the political and the organisational work of Social Democracy” (Lenin, *WITBD* 721). Earlier he writes that “the ‘*stikhiinyi*’ element is, in essence, nothing other than the *embryonic form* of purposiveness” (Lenin, *WITBD* 701). *Stikhiinost* is an indication of the development of “consciousness” in the masses, to which the Social Democrats must respond accordingly.

At this point, Lenin’s account of *stikhiinost* overlaps somewhat with Luxemburg’s of spontaneity: both are interpretations of what each sees as the significance of sudden mass action to Social Democrats. Moreover, Luxemburg also differentiates between the significance of different strike types in “The Mass Strike” and would likely agree with Lenin’s sentiment that “there are different kinds of *stikhiinost*” (Lenin, *WITBD* 701). For Lenin, there is the *stikhiinost* of Russian strikes in the 1860s and 1870s, *stikhiinost* which resulted in the “‘*stikhiinyi*’ destruction of machines and so on,” that is, action which suggests little knowledge of the potential for collective action. But then there is also “the wholesale character” of worker strikes in response to the Petersburg industrial war of 1896: “if we are going to talk about the people’s movement that was newly rising up, and if we are going to talk about the ‘*stikhiinyi* element,’ then, of course, it is precisely this strike movement that one must call ‘*stikhiinyi*’ before anything else” (Lenin, *WITBD* 701). That is action in which the masses appear as a collective, acting in direct response to a particular event—an indication of their growing knowledge and the power of collective action.

However, this is the point at which Lenin’s and Luxemburg’s accounts diverge. Whereas Luxemburg describes the spontaneity of the mass strike in her first thesis as the indication of a *whole period of class struggle*, Lenin limits the *stikhiinost* of the masses to an indication of burgeoning consciousness and preparedness to *begin* class struggle:

If the earlier riots had been the uprising simply of oppressed people, then these systematic strikes already expressed the embryo of a class struggle—but, indeed, no more than the embryo. Taken in isolation, these strikes were simply *tred-iunionist* [trade-unionist] struggle, but not yet a Social-Democratic one: they bore witness to the awakening of the antagonism between workers and owners, but there did not exist among these workers—nor could it have existed at that time—an awareness of the irreconcilable opposition of their interests to the entire

political and social order, in other words, a Social-Democratic awareness. (Lenin, *WITBD* 701–02)

The worker movement gives voice to the antagonisms inherent in productive relations under capitalism, but that does not necessarily lead to the development of a political consciousness. Lenin describes the development of consciousness, from economic to political, in terms of the relationship between “purposiveness” and “awareness.”<sup>12</sup> In Lih’s reading,

The simplest way to put the relationship is that “awareness” is knowledge that guides action while ‘purposiveness’ is action guided by knowledge. “Awareness” is not just neutral knowledge, but the kind of knowledge that impels and compels action—the knowledge, for example, of one’s historical mission. “Purposiveness” is a quality of action. When action is controlled by knowledge—by a firm and clear sense of purpose and by a solid grasp of ends and means—it is purposive. (Lih 338)

While Lenin and Luxemburg both oppose the economism of Bernstein and the Second International, and consider it the path to opportunism,<sup>13</sup> they would appear to hold different views on the relation of the economic to the political in the development of class struggle. For his part, Lenin suggests that we might regard the economic and the political aspects of the struggle as largely, if not wholly, distinct:

Is it true that economic struggle is in general “the most widely applicable means” of drawing the masses into the political struggle? Completely untrue. A no less “widely applicable” means of “drawing in” is *each and every* manifestation of

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<sup>12</sup> Lih explains the translation of “purposiveness” and “awareness” as follows: “Russian Social Democrats talked about the *soznatel’nyi rabochii* as a worker with the right kind of *soznanie*. According to the usual translation, the figure under discussion is the *conscious worker* with the right kind of *consciousness*. According to the translation adopted in this commentary, he or she is the *purposive worker* with the right kind of awareness” (Lih 337). It should be further noted that *soznanie* refers to “different theories of the world: Social-Democratic, *tred-iunionist* [trade-unionist], and so on. *Soznanie* is often used in *WITBD* in the much less political sense of simple awareness of the world and one’s own actions” (338).

<sup>13</sup> Luxemburg premises her comments on the inevitability of capitalist collapse in “Reform or Revolution” on a refutation of Bernstein’s reformist theories. And Lenin, for his part, critiques Bernstein’s “new critical tendency” in similar fashion in *WITBD*: “Anyone who doesn’t deliberately shut his eyes cannot help seeing that the new ‘critical’ tendency in socialism is nothing other than a new variety of *opportunism*” (683).

police oppression and autocratic outrage—and definitely not just manifestations tied to the economic struggle . . . in the general sum of the day-to-day occurrences in which the worker suffers (either in his own person or in the person of those close to him) from lack of rights, abuse of power and violence, there is no doubt that only a small minority consists of police oppression that is specific to the class struggle.” (Lenin, *WITBD* 728–29)

In this passage, Lenin insists that the motivation for and development of political consciousness is to be found in the response to oppression in whatever form, whether it is the economic oppression of the factory floor or the political oppression of the state.<sup>14</sup> Lenin does not critique Luxemburg directly in this section or in any part of *WITBD*, but he does criticize this aspect of her thought elsewhere, calling it “the whole notorious organisation-as-process theory” (Lenin, *Fine Words Butter No Parsnips*).

For Luxemburg, however, there is finally no separation between the political and the economic aspects of class struggle. This relationship is the topic of her second thesis on the mass strike: “it is impossible to separate the economic factors from one another. Here also the reality deviates from the theoretical scheme, and the pedantic representation in which the pure political mass strike is logically derived from the trade-union general strike as the ripest and highest stage, but at the same time kept distinct from it, is shown to be absolutely false” (Luxemburg 266). On this point, Luxemburg distinguishes herself from Lenin, for whom the pure political mass strike, in which the political has ostensibly overtaken the economic and the trade unions have likewise faded into the background of the revolution, would constitute the highest form of strike, as well as the indication of the proletariat’s discipline and preparedness for revolution.

It is not that Luxemburg rejects the organization that this level of preparedness entails, a criticism typical of misinterpretations of her work. Rather, she sees class struggle, organization, and thus revolution as, indeed, a process—not because revolution is an inevitability, but because history is class struggle *and* contingent. Thus, Luxemburg

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<sup>14</sup> Lih explain Lenin’s differentiation as follows: “Political agitation is *unlike* economic agitation first because it deals with the state as opposed to factory life, but also (Lenin is very concerned to make this point) because it deals with abuses and outrages directed at *all* classes, not just workers” (Lih 579).

rejects “the pedantic representation” of the mass strike, that which dissects it into its ostensible parts. Class struggle is the subject of history and it takes various forms and follows complex trajectories:

[T]he economic struggle is the transmitter from one political center to another; the political struggle is the periodic fertilization of the soil for the economic struggle. Cause and effect here continually change places; and thus the economic and the political factor in the period of the mass strike, now widely removed, completely separated or even mutually exclusive, as the theoretical plan would have them, merely form the two interlacing sides of the proletarian struggle in Russia. And *their unity* is precisely the mass strike. (Luxemburg 268)

Luxemburg’s discussion recalls Marx’s argument in the “Fragment”: that the contradictions of surplus value both conceal an embryonic communism and inspire struggles which are in fact for that alternative social order. When workers strike for an eight-hour workday, for instance, they fight to increase the time for social reproduction, which comes at the cost of surplus-labour time. They fight to loosen the strangle hold that the demand for surplus value places on social relations and ultimately for a future in which surplus value no longer organizes social relations. In other words, they fight for communism.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the economic and the political are always already united, even if they may occasionally appear otherwise. This is the view that informs the eighth section of “The Mass Strike,” “Need for United Action of Trade Unions and Social Democracy,” in which Luxemburg asserts, “the separation of the political and the economic struggle and the independence of each is nothing but an artificial product of the parliamentary period, even if historically determined” (Luxemburg 299). For Luxemburg, the unity of the political and the economic does not depend on appearance, but upon the objective logic of class struggle. It is not a not a question of whether the economic and the political are united, but rather one of recognizing that they are always already united. Their apparent separation can only be, in this context, merely a ruse imposed by the dominant

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<sup>15</sup> See Luxemburg 82-87.

class, or a contingent deformation representative of the current historical moment in the class struggle.

### 1.2.3 Theses 3 and 4: Mass Strike as Revolution

If economic struggles are fights for communism, as Luxemburg sees it, the mass strike comes from the revolution. In her introduction to “The Mass Strike,” Mary-Alice Waters suggests that “[Luxemburg] tends to go too far in the direction of equating the mass strike with the revolution itself” (Luxemburg 222).<sup>16</sup> Luxemburg’s third thesis on the mass strike, that “the mass strike is inseparable from the revolution” (Luxemburg 268), might appear to confirm that view, as would her latter assertion that “in reality the mass strike does not produce the revolution, but the revolution produces the mass strike” (Luxemburg 270). But the mass strike and revolution are far from identical in Luxemburg’s account. They are, rather, simply linked as moments in class struggle through what Luxemburg labels alternately as spontaneity or consciousness, the underlying force that is present in every moment of class struggle, including both the mass strike and the revolution. As she describes it, “the mass strike is . . . *the method of motion of the proletarian mass*, the phenomenal form of the proletarian struggle in the revolution” (Luxemburg 263). Whether we discuss the mass strike or the revolution, the topic at hand is always the development of mass consciousness within the conditions of class struggle. Thus, the mass strike is also the “method” or expression of this mass consciousness in its “movement” toward revolution. And any differentiation between the mass strike and the revolution is counterproductive—a subjective critique that overvalues the immediate appearance of this “phenomenal form” and thus attributes to it something desirable, some practical end.

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<sup>16</sup> Geras addresses this order of arguments against Luxemburg: “Amongst the misconceptions by which Rosa Luxemburg’s thought has been deformed, the most widespread and tenacious is, without doubt, that which attributes to her a thesis going variously under the names of determinism, fatalism and spontaneism” (13). While Waters does not explicitly qualify her criticism in these terms, it is based in a failure to understand that Luxemburg’s criticisms of the various ways in which class struggle is dissected conceals its actual unity as the history of class struggle.

Luxemburg's fourth thesis is concerned with the consequences of this overvaluation, in regards to which she makes the following famous argument: "in the mass strikes in Russia the element of spontaneity plays such a predominant part, not because the Russian Proletarian are 'uneducated,' but because revolutions do not allow anyone to play the schoolmaster with them" (Luxemburg 272). Class struggle may be a relatively simple concept in the abstract; however, the reality of class struggle, its experience, is highly complex, with a multitude of variables that are always evolving:

The element of spontaneity, as we have seen, plays a great part in all Russian mass strikes without exception, be it as a driving force or as a restraining influence. This does not occur in Russia, however, because social democracy is still young or weak, but because in every individual act of the struggle so very many important economic, political and social, general and local, material and psychical, factors react upon one another in such a way that no single act can be arranged and resolved as if it were a mathematical problem. (Luxemburg 272)

Spontaneity, which for Luxemburg expresses political consciousness, appears most dramatically in particular and extraordinary moments of class struggle. But those moments are themselves wildly overdetermined, moments in which there are so many factors whirling around—the economic, political, social, and so on—that they cannot be arranged or ordered into a formal, mathematical account of the sequence of action, cause, effect. Thus, practical ends place artificial boundaries around spontaneous action and overdetermine it. This situation also resembles the false disunity of the economic and the political; this is because both operate according to the logic of capitalism and virtually guarantee the persistence of capitalism. Social democracy's continued separation from trade unions does not resist the very notion of government operating only to further the interests of a particular class—it is the very sign of not only that situation's persistence, but also the continuation of governments throwing the masses a few scraps, only to yank them away with a change in government or an economic crisis. A wage strike that ends once better wages are secured does not resist wage slavery and alienated labour—it guarantees further strikes, many of which workers are bound to lose. To succeed, the logic of class struggle would be necessarily incompatible with capitalist logic; as Luxemburg puts it, "the revolution [is] above all a thoroughgoing internal reversal of

social class relations” (Luxemburg 268). Marx’s theorization of the emergence of communism from capitalism is instructive in this regard, for it suggests that communism also resides within capitalism—that the very undoing of capitalist logic resides within it. In this way, communism inhabits every moment in history, waiting to burst forth, and spontaneity is an expression of that—a brief moment of recognition that must be allowed to play out and bring communism with it.

## Chapter 2

### 2 Walter Benjamin and the Historical Articulation of the Past

Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" is, in one sense, a meditation on class struggle. For Benjamin, the dynamic of history and historical struggle is framed by the distinction he draws between two modes of historical understanding, historicism and historical materialism. Historicism, Benjamin argues, represents an historiographic method which claims "to recognize [the past] 'the way it really was'" (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 255), in which historical events appear as little more than an accumulation of dead facts: "one asks with whom the adherents of historicism actually empathize. The answer is inevitable: with the victor" (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 256). This view of the past presents history as a succession of rational and even necessary regimes of domination, whereas materialist historiography takes the exact opposite approach. Its method is what Benjamin calls the "historical articulation of the past," which "means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 255). History, in other words, is to be read not through accumulation and continuity, but through discontinuities and ruptures. This chapter focuses on how these opposing conceptions of history explain the significance of the past to the present. Whereas historicism limits the meaning of past atrocities, materialist historiography sees history in terms of the continuity of class struggle. To deny the past's continuing significance is to deny meaning to present oppression. That is to say, class struggle is meaningful, but where does this meaning come from? Benjamin's answer in the "Theses" is the past, those events which determined the victors and present-day rulers. Thus, historiography is an overwhelmingly political practice. The failure to report on that historical line which appears between past and present oppression turns a blind eye to its full meaning and so affirms that oppression as right and good by virtue of its happening. For this reason, the historical materialist is interested in the possibility of revolutionary ruptures and the possibility of finally overturning the endless succession of domination and misery.

Benjamin alludes indirectly to Luxemburg in his twelfth thesis, in which he mentions the Spartacist Group: “Not man or men but the struggling, oppressed class itself is the depository of historical knowledge. In Marx it appears as the last enslaved class, as the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of the downtrodden. This conviction . . . had a brief resurgence in the Spartacist group” (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 260). The “Spartacist Manifesto” would certainly seem to confirm Benjamin’s view:

Proletarians of all countries! This must be the last war! We owe that to the twelve million murdered victims; we owe that to our children; we owe that to humanity. Europe has been ruined through the infamous international murder. Twelve million bodies cover the gruesome scenes of the imperialistic crime. The flower of youth and the best men of the nations have been mowed down. Uncounted productive forces have been annihilated. Humanity is almost ready to bleed to death from the bloodletting. Victors and vanquished stand at the edge of the abyss. Humanity is threatened with the most dreadful famine, a halting of the entire mechanism of production, plagues, and degeneration. (Kaes et al. 37)

Benjamin’s twelfth thesis makes it clear that the proletariat are at a loss, not for social democratic parties which claim to protect their interests, but for those which see those interests as a concern of a present which is the product of the history of class struggle, the history of all hitherto existing society: “Social Democracy thought fit to assign to the working class the role of the redeemer of future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its strength. This training made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren” (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 260). The “Spartacist Manifesto” presents the war in terms of this image: not as a sacrifice for some future hope, but one demanded by imperialistic forces which will make no personal sacrifice, but which stand to gain everything. Through a reading of the work of Walter Benjamin, this chapter argues by extension that Luxemburg’s notion of spontaneity represents an historical articulation of the past—that Luxemburg recognizes the entire history of capitalist oppression, abridged in that eruptive moment of struggle.

## 2.1 Temporality of Redemption: Walter Benjamin's Materialist View of History

Benjamin and Luxemburg share both a materialist view of history and an understanding that the capitalist present poses a choice between socialism and barbarism. Whereas Luxemburg positions herself explicitly in those terms in the “Junius Pamphlet,” Benjamin alludes to them in his seventh thesis of and then the full name of the text. However, he sets the ground for these terms in the first thesis, in which he discusses the “automaton” and “puppet called ‘historical materialism’” (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 253). According to Michael Löwy, understanding the significance of this puppet hinges on the quotation marks which enclose historical materialism:

The use of quotation marks and the way this is phrased suggest that this automaton is not ‘true’ historical materialism, but something that is *given* that name. By whom, we ask. And the answer must be the chief spokesmen of Marxism in his period, that is to say the ideologues of the Second and Third Internationals. In Benjamin’s view, historical materialism actually becomes in their hands a method that perceives history as akin to a machine leading ‘automatically’ to the triumph of socialism. (Löwy 25)

The Second and Third Internationals perceive the arrival of socialism as automatic, the logical and inevitable conclusion of “the development of the productive forces, economic progress, the ‘laws of history’” (Löwy 25). This is what Benjamin refers to elsewhere in the “Theses” as progress. For Benjamin, this false “historical materialism” is particularly significant in terms of theory and practice because it encourages the view that the succession of suffering and oppression in history is borne by little more than pawns, expendable to the greater end of socialism—because, ultimately, historical materialism will capture capitalism’s king. Through the euphemism “automatic,” this perspective actually encourages passivity or inaction. In Benjamin’s “Theses,” the historical materialism of the Internationals is ultimately theological in that it simply embraces the mystified view that socialism is inevitable. This assertion might seem odd, considering the theological underpinnings of Benjamin’s “Theses.” But whereas Benjamin only attributes a “*weak* Messianic power” to the present, we could extrapolate from

Benjamin's "Theologico-Political Fragment" that the Internationals would need an actual Messiah to inaugurate socialism: "Only the Messiah himself consummates all history, in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates its relation to the Messianic. For this reason nothing historical can relate itself on its own account to anything Messianic. Therefore the Kingdom of God is not the *telos* of the historical dynamic" (Benjamin, *One-Way* 155). Historical materialism is for Benjamin something *like* theology. It understands the "history of all hitherto existing society" as "the history of class struggles" (Marx, *Karl Marx* 246), and it hopes without guarantee for a resolution not unlike the Messiah's consummation of history. The historical materialism of the Second and Third Internationals, however, is exactly the opposite of a real historical materialist view, which is scientific and active. As Richard Wolin points out, Benjamin's notion of the theological demands action in the present: "It remains temporal man's *ethical* responsibility to take a stand, despite the often contradictory and confused manner in which the choices present themselves in the prosaic context of empirical life" (Wolin 118).

In contrast to the passivity of the automaton, Benjamin focusses on the urgency of the capitalist present: "the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule" (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 257). The state of emergency serves as an alternative formulation of the choice between socialism and barbarism: the present is always under threat (by capitalist barbarism), and the only answer is to bring this (the capitalist) phase of history to a close (with a social revolution). This formulation, however, characterizes the choice as a demand for action peculiar to the present, experienced as what Benjamin calls "the now" in a subsequent thesis: "History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now" (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 261). Using the same oppositional logic that he employs in his discussion of materialist historiography and historicism, Benjamin opposes the temporality of the now to that of progress, referred to here as homogenous, empty time. This logic produces two opposing constellations that Benjamin uses to affirm the objectivity of materialist historiography. In one constellation, historicism coincides with progress; its homogenous, empty time continues historicism's limiting historical truth to the past. In the second constellation, materialist historiography coincides with the present expressed through the

temporality of “the now.” As Marx argues in the “Eighteenth Brumaire,” history is of man’s making, but under the manifold contingencies of its inherited condition. The now’s articulation of the present is premised on this inherited condition, which it represents as the “fullness” of the present—the past’s significance to the present.

In Benjamin’s view, the experience of the present is comprised of fragments from the past. For experience to be objective it must be premised on an understanding of the past’s significance to the present: to know the present is to recognize the past’s claim on the present, its demand for redemption. As a mode of representation, the historical articulation of the past is based in epistemology and experience, and I begin first with its epistemology. As Alison Ross notes of Benjamin, “his conception of the ‘historical object,’ which epitomises his theory of historical knowledge, stands and falls with the theological view of history” (Ross 99). This reliance on theology may seem contradictory at first. For the divine realm of the theological is antithetical to the profane realm of the historical: where the divine is complete and permanent, the political is fragmented and contingent, indeed, historical. However, it is the divine’s permanence that, for Benjamin, makes meaning reliable and thus possible: “Whatever the changes in Benjamin’s understanding of theology in the course of his career may have been, he retained the view that without theology the interpretation of reality (i.e., the ascription of meaning to circumstances and events) would inescapably lead to confusion (the ‘chaos of symbols’) and hence anxiety, and even to mythic empowerment of ‘daemonic’ forces” (Ross 99).

Two essays connect Benjamin’s early theological epistemology to his later theory of historical knowledge: “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” written 1920-21, and “Doctrine of the Similar,” written 1933. In the first essay, he discusses the divine foundation of meaning:

The translation of the language of things into that of man is not only a translation of the mute into the sonic; it is also the translation of the nameless into name. It is therefore the translation of an imperfect language into a more perfect one, and cannot but add something to it, namely knowledge. The objectivity of this translation is, however, guaranteed by God. For God created things; the creative word in them is the germ of the cognizing name, just as God, too, finally named each thing after it was created. But obviously this naming is only an expression of

the identity of the creative word and the cognizing name in God, not the prior solution of the task that God expressly assigns to man himself: that of naming things. (Benjamin, *One-Way* 117–18)

The significance of this excerpt lies in its differentiation between the “language of things” and the language of man.” Naming “translates” God’s language of thing into man’s: “The proper name is the communion of man with the *creative* word of God” (Benjamin, *One-Way* 116). God thus vouchsafes the reliable meaning and the communication of the thing’s essence in naming:

“The task of naming given to Adam by God . . . underlines the creative vocation of humans. The ‘creative word’ of God is the ground of the human being’s possibility of ‘communication’ with things . . . The translation (and perfection) of the language of things into human language is Benjamin’s conception of (genuine) knowledge, and remains so throughout his writing . . . In the naming language, human being’s ‘meaning something’ is immediately fulfilled, thanks to the linguistic essence of things, and *hence* the world is transparently meaningful.” (Ross 82–83)

Benjamin then address man’s access to meaning in the “Doctrine of the Similar,” in which man is said to still be able to communicate things, their essence, but only by the less direct recognition of non-sensuous similitude:<sup>17</sup> “The perception of similarity is in every case bound to an instantaneous flash. It slips past, can possibly be regained, but really cannot be held fast, unlike other perceptions” (Benjamin, “Doctrine” 66). Astrology provides example of such a similarity which, for Benjamin, “nature produces.” That is to say, God’s creation produces these similarities as “a fundamental importance for the illumination of large areas of occult knowledge” (Benjamin, “Doctrine” 65), recognition of the similar momentarily recalls that mythic condition of language that man

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<sup>17</sup> See Ross on the connection between “On Language” and “Doctrine of the Similar”: “In the naming language, human being’s ‘meaning something’ is immediately fulfilled, thanks to the linguistic essence of things, and *hence* the word is transparently meaningful. In the post-lapsarian condition, the communication of things’ takes place only in intermittent ‘flashes’ of the recognition of ‘nonsensuous similarity.’” (Ross 83)

once enjoyed in his communion with God.<sup>18</sup> Man then imitates these forms, as in horoscopes.<sup>19</sup> However, the example of astrology also points to deterioration in modern man's capacity to recognize similarities: no longer do we see ourselves reflected back in the stars. Rather, this faculty now appears to be reproduced in language and writing:

Recent graphology has taught us to recognize images, or more precisely picture puzzles, in handwriting, pictures which conceal the writer's unconscious. It can be assumed that the mimetic faculty expressing itself in the activity of the writer was of great importance for writing in the ancient times of its origin. Along with language, writing has thus become an archive of non-sensuous similarities or non-sensuous correspondences. (Benjamin, "Doctrine" 68)

With naming as the original foundation of meaning, we have in nature a connection to the meaning which makes true knowledge possible. Whereas man, after the Fall, initially relies on intermittent "flashes" of recognition and mimesis of the similarities that nature produces, Benjamin suggests that he has since interpolated that mimetic quality into language—writing especially. Benjamin's notion of linguistic meaning, recognized in flashes which are then reproduced, as it were, mimetically in historiography. I return to this below.

Regardless of the concealment of this inherited fullness by historicism and progress, the past remains effectively available to the present. To know the present in its inherited fullness is to see it as the angel of history does. As Benjamin asserts in his ninth thesis:

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in

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<sup>18</sup> "The linguistic nature of access to the 'communication of matter' is the pivot of Benjamin's 'doctrine' of similitude. In a sense, the perception of nonsensuous similarity recalls, or even sporadically captures, but without being able to restore, the paradisiacal semantic plenitude of language" (Ross 82)

<sup>19</sup> Benjamin writes that "the horoscope must be understood as an original totality which astrological interpretation merely analyzed" (Benjamin, "Doctrine" 66)

his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

(Benjamin, *Illuminations* 257–58)

In this sense, the angel of history represents the objective practice of historiography—not because historiography is divine, but because of the limited ways in which man has access to knowledge of the present. Those who practice historiography must do so in recognition of how meaning is constituted in order to ensure that they accurately name the object, that is, recognize it in terms of its similarity and thus significance to the present. In this way, the angel affirms the true historical object as that which Benjamin describes in *The Arcades Project*: “An object of history is that through which knowledge is constituted as the object’s rescue” (Benjamin, *Arcades* 476 [N11,4]). To recognize the historical object is to represent it in language, whether in writing or orally, and thus to have knowledge of its connection to the present, which is its redemption. Or, as Ross explains, “Recognition and redemption of the historical object coincide” (Ross 113n5). However, this particular excerpt also states that “The materialist presentation of history carries along with it an immanent critique of the concept of progress” (Benjamin, *Arcades* 476 [N11,4]). That is to say, recognition involves critique, an historical-materialist articulation, at which point the object is redeemed. Recognition intimately connects mimesis, in the case of similitude, to the representation of historiography: “This, if you will, magical side of both language and writing . . . is an intention with an established basis which can only appear at all in connection with something alien, the semiotic or communicative element of language” (Benjamin, “Doctrine” 68). In this sense, historiographic representation can almost bring the historical object back to life insofar as its articulation reveals the historicity of the present.

Theology uncovers the meaninglessness of the future, that is, as anything other than a concept of that which can never be experienced. Benjamin alludes to this quality in his twelfth thesis: “Social Democracy thought fit to assign to the working class the role of the redeemer of future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This training made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated

grandchildren” (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 260). Experience and thus action are limited to the temporal and spatial coordinates of the present, whereas the material world and its meaning are permanent. Thus, any meaningful emancipatory hope is passed down to the present from the past. This conception also holds true for progress, which is experienced in the present as a misrecognition of the historical object. Any revolutionary meaning attributed to the future is an act of naming experienced in the present: an act which does not name any “thing,” any part of God’s creation, and thus no “thing” that will ever exist. In this way, Benjamin’s notion of historical knowledge resonates with Luxemburg’s critique of the anarchist conception of the mass strike. Both place their revolutionary hopes in a future that will never come. For associating the meaning of revolutionary hopes with some future condition begins as a failure to properly name the experience of class struggle and could never produce the sort of action necessary.

Thus, class struggle is emphatically an experience of the present, but in terms of its historicity, of what makes it meaningful. Benjamin’s differentiation between the past and history is instructive to this end:

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure . . . grasps the constellation which his own era 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. (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 263)

The past is, quite literally, past or previous presents, that is, the events which constitute present experience. One event may indeed have a causal connection to a subsequent one, but to consider this connection historical would be a mistake. The past becomes historical only once its articulation integrates it into the historical narrative of the history of class struggle. This is the narrative to which the proletariat seeks a resolution, the truth of history: “Genuine historical knowledge has the character of an emphatic experience, a flash of recognition, by which the knower enters into a ‘communion’ with the object of knowledge, the dreaming past. In a sense, this understanding of truth is almost

necessitated by Benjamin's topic in all his works: experience" (Ross 50). To experience the present in terms of historical truth carries consequences for one's (re)actions:

The new, dialectical method of doing history presents itself as the art of experiencing the present as waking world, a world to which that dream we name the past refers in truth. To pass through and carry out *what has been* in remembering the dream!—Therefore: remembering and awakening are most intimately related. Awakening is namely the dialectical, Copernican turn of remembrance. (Benjamin, *Arcades* 389 [K1,3])

Benjamin likens materialist historiography to the moment of awakening from dream-filled sleep, during which the line between reality and dream is blurred. Even if the signs of exploitation, oppression, and even emancipation are everywhere, they are not immediately perceived as such. To awaken is to experience "what has been," that is, the present in terms of its relationship to the past, its historicity. This is the practice of historiography: to pass through it and carry it out means to bring the practices of the present into the light of their historicity. Ross explains that this articulation is Benjamin's attempt to collectivize the experience of historical knowledge: "this recognition of past dreams is in fact an *experience* in the emphatic sense of this term, a 'passing through and carrying out what has been in remembering the dream.' . . . the subject of such an historical recognition is a 'collective'" (Ross 49). Indeed, waking from the dream refers to the various ways in which the past can be articulated to make the present meaningful. Regardless, what one awakens to is inevitably the collective history of oppression and exploitation.

Ross makes two criticisms of Benjamin's theory of revolution which come down to one misreading that can be used to further address the significance of the historical articulation of the past to class struggle. She suggests that Benjamin's collectivization of historical knowledge through the dream metaphor "is not 'transferable' to the 'collective' as a subject of historical knowledge" (Ross 49). In regard to his insistence that class struggle be articulated in terms of its historical significance, she objects that "There can hardly be a more potent motivational basis for revolutionary struggle than the daily experience of exploitation and oppression" (Ross 54). Considering the state of global capitalism, obviously it is not. The problem here, however, is the notion of objectivity

that underlies the second criticism in particular. To experience class struggle does not guarantee an objective understanding of it. Regardless of the historiographic method employed, the articulation of the past occurs “posthumously,” in a subsequent present. To claim to articulate the past “the way it really was,” as historicism does, is not unlike claims to objectivity in general, that is, the claim to be free from any ideology which might cloud a “true,” “real,” or “accurate” representation. Yet, the claim to operate outside ideology is about the most ideological claim one can make. Benjamin discusses the ideology of this claim in the seventh thesis:

To historians who wish to relive an era, Fustel de Coulanges recommends that they blot out everything they know about the later course of history. There is no better way of characterizing the method with which historical materialism has broken. It is a process of empathy whose origin is the indolence of the heart, *acedia*, which despairs of grasping and holding the genuine historical image as it flares up briefly. Among medieval theologians it was regarded as the root cause of sadness . . . The nature of this sadness stands out more clearly if one asks with whom the adherents of historicism actually empathize. The answer is inevitable: with the victor. And all rulers are the heirs of those who conquered them.

(Benjamin, *Illuminations* 256)

This *acedia* is an ideological apathy toward and thus complicity with the present. For historicism’s professed ignorance of the present is essentially an affirmation of that present: “reliving” an era is an impossibility, but blotting out everything that follows a moment in the past, its connection to the present of its articulation, implies that this moment and its consequences are right and correct—an historical truth, merely by virtue of their having happened. However, this is the nightmare in which class struggle, motivated by the daily experience of exploitation and oppression, currently occurs. Materialist historiography provides the indexes to wake up from this nightmare, which is in many regards an individual experience—but it is the collective history of exploitation and oppression that the individual awakens to. The experience of class struggle alone does not provide the objective understanding that historical knowledge does. Only this experience can provide the historical knowledge needed to inform effective political action.

In this way, historicism carries very real consequences for the present, perhaps best exemplified by the ways in which the logic of historicism embraces the notion of progress. The logical conclusion of historicism's limiting historical truth to the past is that all subsequent time is ontologically homogenous and empty:

Progress as pictured in the minds of Social Democrats was, first of all, the progress of mankind itself (and not just advances in men's ability and knowledge). Secondly, it was something boundless, in keeping with the infinite perfectibility of mankind. Thirdly, progress was regarded as irresistible, something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course. Each of these predicates is controversial and open to criticism. However, when the chips are down, criticism must penetrate beyond these predicates and focus on something that they have in common. The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogenous, empty time. (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 261)

The experience of the present specific to the temporality of progress has only two features. The first is its homogeneity, a consequence of experience being articulated solely in terms of the perfectibility of mankind. Insofar as this perfectibility provides the only means or "indexes" by which to articulate or "refer" experience, time becomes otherwise homogenous as everything else fades into the background of progress and perfectibility. The second feature is time's emptiness, a consequence of its homogeneity, as the very continuance of time represents mankind's successful completion of any past tasks. Only progress or mankind's perfectibility follows him into any subsequent present; all else fades into this homogeneity.

Despite its ostensible disinterest in the past, progress entails a particular view of history. In fact, this disinterest is tantamount to an ignorance that demands an alternative view of history, one which recognizes the present's consequential "state of emergency" and produces the action necessary to contend with it: "We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm" (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 257). Benjamin

associates the rise of fascism with progress and its inadequate account of fascism as an “historical norm.” For, as the continuation of historicism, progress assumes that any experience of the present is wholly unencumbered by the past. The present moment’s very existence is confirmation of mankind’s past triumph and continuation along the path of perfectibility. This is the inadequacy of the progressivist view of history: it treats historical phenomena as “norms,” tasks incumbent to mankind’s perfectibility. Past atrocities belong to that past—their historical lesson has been learned.

For the historicist operating under the sign of progress, the presence of Fascism is bewildering, but, as Benjamin argues, the confusion is really the historicist’s own: “The current amazement that the things we are experience are ‘still’ possible in the twentieth century. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable” (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 257). If fascism arises in the present, it is not simply “still” possible—it is exactly what the present makes possible. Much like Luxemburg’s expositions of militarism and imperialism, Benjamin’s various accounts of fascism tend to see it as a feature of capitalist barbarism, although Benjamin considers fascism to be peculiar to the twentieth century’s fetishization of technology: “It recognizes only the progress in the mastery of nature, not the retrogression of society; it already displays the technocratic features later encountered in Fascism” (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 259).<sup>20</sup> Benjamin perceives a continuum between progress, the fetishization of technology, and fascism. The capitalist development of technology only seeks to foist some of the workers’ exploitation onto machines, not revolutionize the mode of production itself. In this respect, fascism is merely a feature or symptom of the current historical task, and the experience of the present as the now reveals this fact. For to experience the present in terms of the now’s

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<sup>20</sup> Benjamin makes a similar observation elsewhere: “Without approaching the surface of the significance of the economic causes of war, one may say that the harshest, most disastrous aspects of imperialist war are in part the result of the gaping discrepancy between the gigantic power of technology and the miniscule moral illumination it affords. Indeed, according to its economic nature, bourgeois society cannot help but insulate everything technological as much as possible from the so-called spiritual, and it cannot help but resolutely exclude technology’s right of co-determination in the social order. Any future war will also be a slave revolt of technology” (Benjamin, “Theories of German Fascism” 120).

“presence” or “fullness” is to recognize it as always already in a state of emergency. This articulation of experience inspires the action necessary to achieve “our task.”

Progress operates according to a temporal index by which it is referred not to redemption but to mankind’s infinite perfectibility. Although fascism appears as an aberration, it appears nonetheless and must be accounted for. The only critical (or philosophical) knowledge that the amazement of this aberration can lead to is the untenability of the progressivist view of history, its inadequacy. This is exactly where Benjamin’s treatment of historicism and progress lead, a recognition of the inadequacy of the progressivist view of history and of the necessity of materialist historiography’s articulation of the present as “the now.” The temporal index of progress is mankind’s infinite perfectibility, that is, the only mode of articulation for the events which comprise present experience. Everything fades into the homogeneity of that index. That something exists at all in the present means that it represents an aspect of man’s perfectibility, and man (re)acts to the present accordingly. Thus, with the limited linguistic arsenal of progress, fascism appears as an aberration, leading to the uncritical reaction, “how is this ‘still’ possible?” Fascism is thus accounted for as an historical norm, mistaken for the task itself, when it is actually a symptom or feature of the task.

Written from 1920-21, the “Theologico-Political Fragment” is among one of Benjamin’s earlier attempts to reconcile his burgeoning political interests with the theological underpinnings of his thought. Although the “Theses” represents a further developed conception of materialist historiography’s theological aspects, the correspondences between his thinking in the “Theologico-Political Fragment” and the “Theses” are nonetheless useful for unpacking the terms in which Benjamin conceives of political action. We find in the “Theologico-Political Fragment,” for example, an early articulation of the link between political action and happiness: “The order of the profane should be erected on the idea of happiness” (Benjamin, *One-Way* 155). Benjamin’s use of happiness (in the second of his “Theses” and N13a,1 of the *Arcades*) is by no means an arbitrary choice—not, for instance, a stylistic choice made for the way in which happiness gestures to, as of yet, unimaginable conditions. Rather, happiness is, for Benjamin, that which should motivate all political action, that is, all action in the profane-historical realm, and this view is consistent from the “Theologico-Political Fragment” to

his “Theses.” As he puts it in the earlier text, “The relation of this order to the Messianic is one of the essential teachings of the philosophy of history. It is the precondition of a mystical conception of history, containing a problem that can be represented figuratively” (Benjamin, *One-Way* 155). That is to say, political action conceived of in terms of “this order,” the idea of happiness, entails a view of history as unfolding to a particular end that is neither the divine in and of itself nor wholly unlike the divine. Political action motivated by this order conceives of the profane-historical realm in terms of a problem, represented figuratively in the idea of happiness. No longer is political action stratified, undertaken toward an endless multiplicity of goals, as theology reveals an endpoint that the masses can pursue:

If one arrow points to the goal toward which the profane dynamic acts, and another marks the direction of Messianic intensity, then certainly the quest of free humanity for happiness runs counter to the Messianic direction; but just as a force can, through acting, increase another that is acting in the opposite direction, so the order of the profane assists, through being profane, the coming of the Messianic Kingdom. The profane, therefore, although not itself a category of this Kingdom, is a decisive category of its quietist approach. For in happiness all that is earthly seeks its downfall, and only in good fortune is its downfall destined to find it. Whereas, admittedly, the immediate Messianic intensity of the heart, of the inner man in isolation, passes through misfortune, as suffering. To the spiritual *restitutio in integrum*, which introduces immortality, corresponds a worldly restitution that leads to the eternity of downfall, and the rhythm of this eternally transient worldly existence, transient in its totality, in its spatial but also in its temporal totality, the rhythm of Messianic nature, is happiness. For nature is Messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away.

To strive after such passing, even for those stages of man that are nature, is the task of world politics, whose method must be called nihilism. (Benjamin, *One-Way* 155–56)

Benjamin concludes the “Theologico-Political Fragment” with an allusion to the resurrection-deity motif in myth, in which a messianic figure passes and rises again from the dead, often as a symbolic representation of seasonal passing from the death of winter

to the new life of spring. Despite their necessarily nihilistic quality,<sup>21</sup> world politics operate according to a seasonal logic of nature's passing from the death of oppression and barbarism to the spring of new freedom.

The past is an utmost concern for Benjamin in the "Theses," but that concern is tempered by its significance for the present. Indeed, the only meaning Benjamin considers to be available to the past is that which can be attributed to it in the present. Benjamin refers to happiness in the present to illustrate this point: "our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption. The same applies to our view of the past, which is the concern of history. The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption" (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 254). As I suggest above, happiness is, for Benjamin, the profane equivalent of messianic redemption. As an expression of man's desire for happiness, mechanization represents for Benjamin an historical tendency not unlike that which Marx recognizes in his "Fragment." What limits the attainment of this wish, the full expression of machines' potential, is its capitalistic articulation. Happiness is also a theological corollary for man's innate desire to be free:

[T]he realm of freedom actually begins only where labor which is in fact determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases . . . [Man must wrestle with nature] in all social formations and under all possible modes of production. With his development this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants; but, at the same time the forces of production which satisfy these wants also increase. (Marx, *Capital: Vol. 3* 807)

For Benjamin, the nineteenth century's explosion of innovation most strongly expresses the collective desire for happiness, which occupies much of Benjamin's attention in the *Arcades*: "the industrial and technological innovations of the nineteenth century make it

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<sup>21</sup> Benjamin opens the "Theologico-Political Fragment" with a rejection of theocracy: "the order of the profane cannot be built up on the idea of the Divine Kingdom, and therefore theocracy has no political but only religious meaning. To have repudiated with utmost vehemence the political significance of theocracy is the cardinal merit of Bloch's *Spirit of Utopia*" (Benjamin, *One-Way* 155). Any attempt to bring the divine into the profane, to install a theocracy within the profane, is meaningless: "Only the Messiah himself consummates all history, in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates its relation to the Messianic" (Benjamin, *One-Way* 155). At no point, in either the "Theologico-Political Fragment" or the "Theses," does Benjamin afford messianic power to any profane figure—only a weak messianic power, at best.

possible to articulate the human wish for happiness in concrete terms that gives this century its exceptional significance . . . the nineteenth century makes human happiness a meaningful concept for historical agents because it makes the constituent elements of such a ‘wish’ describable” (Ross 81). In this sense, the advent of mechanization represents, for Benjamin, the same historical tendency toward communism as it does for Marx in the “Fragment.” The *Arcades* contains a counterpart or, perhaps, earlier draft of the second thesis:

Happiness for us is unthinkable only in the air that we have breathed, among the people who have lived with us. In other words, there vibrates in the idea of happiness (this is what that noteworthy circumstance teaches us) the idea of salvation. This happiness is founded on the very despair and desolation which were ours. Our life, it can be said, is a muscle strong enough to contract the whole of historical time. Or, to put it differently, the genuine conception of historical time rests entirely upon the image of redemption. (Benjamin, *Arcades* 479 [N13a,1])

Notably, the object of “the idea of salvation” and “the image of redemption” is *Erlösung* or “redemption” in the original German (Benjamin, *GS* 600 [N13a,1]). Ross translates both instances as “redemption” and writes the following: “Our sense of fulfilment depends on the remembrance and ‘redemption’ [*Erlösung*] of past disappointments, which is also a ‘release’ [*Erlösung*] from the past. This remains a possibility for the personal past of the living; and it *must* remain a possibility for the dead, the redemption of whose ‘disconsolateness and desertedness’ fulfils the ‘historical time’” (Ross 100).

Benjamin’s seventh and eighth theses can be read together in order to further explicate the qualities of the alternative temporality of the present he constructs in opposition to the constellation of historicism: “Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate” (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 256). These, the prostrate defeated of the seventh thesis, animate the “tradition of the oppressed” in the eighth. The method of materialist historiography thus stands in opposition to historicism’s method of complicity:

[E]mpathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers. Historical materialists know what that means. Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document of barbarism is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush against the grain of history. (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 256–57).

The historical materialist's "cautious detachment" suggests an objective attitude toward historical phenomena. For Benjamin, the temporal logic of materialist historiography is not merely preferable—it is premised on what he takes to be the objective standard for analysing historical phenomena, responding directly to progressivism's inadequate account of present phenomena such as fascism. Benjamin discusses a strikingly similar methodology in Convoluted N of his *Arcades Project*: "Modest methodological proposal for the cultural-historical dialectic. It is very easy to establish oppositions, according to determinate points of view, within the various 'fields' of any epoch, such that on one side lies the 'productive,' 'forward-looking,' 'lively,' 'positive' part of the epoch, and on the other side the abortive, retrograde, and obsolescent" (Benjamin, *Arcades* 459 [N1a,3]). The seventh thesis deploys a method not unlike this cultural-historical dialectic that reveals historicism's pursuit of the easy methodological route, establishing oppositions between the historical truth which presents itself as "lively," that which is "productive" insofar as it produces that truth, and relegates the rest to the detritus of the past. In this way, however, historicism betrays its methodological inadequacy: "The very contours of the positive element will appear distinctly only insofar as this element is set off against

the negative” (Benjamin, *Arcades* 459 [N1a,3]). That is to say, the “negated” oppressed imbue the “positive” victory of the rulers with meaning—the rulers owe their position to their triumph over and oppression of the defeated. What this betrays is the continued relevance of the past to the present, as it remains effectively available in this present, that is, materially as the “cultural treasures,” although their negative aspect only has meaning insofar as it affirms or “sets off” the positive, to the benefit of present rulers. The inadequacy of historicism and, by extension, progress is not the phenomena they articulate; rather, it is their methodology, which constitutes a sort of lie by omission. Materialist historiography corrects this, and it does so by its objective treatment of the negative:

It is therefore of decisive importance that a new partition be applied to this initially excluded, negative component so that, by a displacement of the angle of vision (but of the criteria!), a positive element emerges anew in it too—something different from that previously signified. And so on, ad infinitum, until the entire past is brought into the present in a historical apocatastasis.<sup>22</sup> (Benjamin, *Arcades* 459 [N1a,3])

Much as, for Marx, capitalism’s contradictions, grounded in its pursuit of surplus value, point to a future alternative social order, the documents of civilization’s barbaric subtext provide the historical materialist with the criteria for action in the present. This method brushes against the grain of history, bringing long lost meanings springing to the surface, not unlike how a change in perspective shines light on what once was hidden.

## 2.2 Redemption and Revolution: Rosa Luxemburg and the Historical Articulation of the Past

This section argues that Luxemburg’s notion of spontaneity represents what Benjamin would consider the historical articulation of the past—that her discussion of,

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<sup>22</sup> Rolf Tiedemann defines apocatastasis as the “‘Restoration of all things.’ Derived from Jewish apocalyptic, Stoic, and Neoplatonic-Gnostic traditions, the concept originally referred to the recurrence of a specific planetary constellation” (Tiedemann 989n3).

for example, the mass strike “seize[s] hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 255). This memory is that of class struggle, for which the mass strike is “the indication . . . of a whole period of class struggle lasting for years, perhaps for decades” (Luxemburg 263). That is to say, Luxemburg recognizes in the mass strike an abbreviation of the history of class struggle: “The present, which, as a model of Messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in an enormous abridgement, coincides exactly with the stature which the history of mankind has in the universe” (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 263).

There is a broad correspondence between Benjamin’s treatment of the relationship between the profane political and the divine and Luxemburg’s notion of the absolute reciprocity between the political and the economic. Whereas happiness is, for Benjamin, the note by which the profane can harmonize itself with the divine, freedom would constitute the ultimate goal for Luxemburg. In this case, Luxemburg’s “divine” would be the lived experience of socialism realized fully in history. Put simply, for Luxemburg, the political and economic ultimately belong entirely to the political, within the constellation of what Benjamin terms the profane (the earthly-historical-political). In her view, the economic organization of human relations structures the political (human relations): a mode of production determines social relations.<sup>23</sup> In this context, class struggle under capitalism is the long process through which the dominated battle to transform those social relations; the forms of this battle include the possibility of revolutionary rupture and the destruction of the state and political forms of domination. This conception of class struggle and political action corresponds to Benjamin’s understanding of the relationship between political action in the profane and messianic redemption. This relationship refers to the way in which happiness, as a political goal, can bring the profane into a sort of accord with the divine: the profane would not become divine,

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<sup>23</sup> Tony Smith identifies this process in Marx’s *Grundrisse* as “form determination,” or “the manner in which the options, subjective preferences, and external behaviour of human agents are shaped by [relations among] things as a result of the social form they possess in generalised commodity production. Due to these social forms, money and capital are not so much *instruments* of social life as *embodiments* of sociality standing over and against individual human subjects” (Smith 246).

something only the messiah can accomplish.<sup>24</sup> It could, however, exist at spatial and temporal coordinates which are simultaneous to the divine.<sup>25</sup> As I suggest above, Benjamin's discussion of man's pursuit of happiness correlates to the notion of freedom that Marx and Luxemburg see as innate to mankind. The link with Luxemburg would then be found in the way that class struggle, under the guidance of scientific socialism, should lead to a realm of complete emancipation and cooperation, a realm of happiness.

In order to further understand how spontaneity constitutes an historical articulation of the past, I want to turn briefly to the correspondences between Jacques Derrida's *Specters* and Benjamin's "Theses," which Derrida himself notes, particularly with respect to his notion of injunction and Benjamin's notion of the past's claim to the present.<sup>26</sup> Derrida describes this "injunction" as follows: "To feel ourselves seen by a look which it will always be impossible to cross, that is the *visor effect* on the basis of which we inherit the law. Since we do not see the one who sees us, and who makes the law, who delivers the injunction . . . , since we do not see the one who orders 'swear,' we cannot identify it in all certainty, we must fall back on its voice" (Derrida 7). Thus, history has a similar status for Derrida as Benjamin: one cannot reach out and touch history, which *happens* in contingent events but *appears* in mediated textualized forms. These forms extend to the whole of social relations: "one cannot speak of generations of skulls or spirits . . . except on the condition of language—and the voice, in any case of that which *marks* the name or takes its place. ('Hamlet: That Scull had a tongue in it, and could sing once')" (Derrida 9). Benjamin's expression, the "documents of barbarism," represents a similar idea insofar as their status as "cultural treasures" is a tacit acceptance of the exploitation and oppression they represent. These are the various histories which

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<sup>24</sup> "Only the Messiah himself consummates all history, in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates its relation to the Messianic" (Benjamin, *One-Way* 155).

<sup>25</sup> "For in happiness all that is earthly seeks its downfall . . . To the spiritual *restitutio in integrum* . . . corresponds a worldly restitution that leads to the eternity of downfall, and the rhythm of this eternally transient worldly existence, transient in its totality, in its spatial but also in its temporal totality, the rhythm of Messianic nature is nature, is happiness" (Benjamin, *One-Way* 155–56).

<sup>26</sup> See Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 228–29n2.

constitute the present, and which may very well lie dormant. Their condition is that of language: “The Skull [which] could sing once” gestures to the contingency of any historical articulation—the chance that any historical object may one day be a “cultural treasure,” its very meaning thus sterilized.

Derrida refers to history, in this regard, as “this *thing* that is called spirit” (Derrida 4) or “this Thing that is not a thing” (Derrida 6). These quotes refer to history’s phenomenological and linguistic status in a sense that two lines from Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*, which are integral to *Specters*, can help us to further explicate: “A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of Communism” (Marx, *Karl Marx* 245); and “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (Marx, *Karl Marx* 246). If the spirit of history, that which joins its seemingly disparate events but disjoins its experience, is class struggle, then its specter, its manifestations in “flesh and phenomenality,” is in the desire for an alternative social order, for communism:

As soon as one no longer distinguishes spirit from specter, the former assumes a body, it incarnates itself, as spirit, in the specter. Or rather, as Marx himself spells out, . . . the specter is a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. It becomes, rather, some “thing” that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other. For it is flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition, but which disappear right away in its apparition, in the very coming of the *revenant* or the return of the specter. (Derrida 4–5)

History is at all times mediated by interpretation and articulation, but that is not to say that the mere articulation of the past constitutes history. Those articulations of the past which are in fact historical reveal three things, the constituents of history, one of which is the “skulls and spirits” discussed above. Another characterizes the practice of historiography as a form of mourning: “It consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by *identifying* the bodily remains and by *localizing* the dead” (Derrida 9). In this sense, according to Derrida, Marx mourns communism (identifies and locates its remains) in the “Fragment” by identifying it within the productive capacity of mechanization and localizing the dead in capitalism’s contradictory organization of social relations around the extraction of surplus value: “The

more this contradiction develops, the more does it become evident that the growth of the forces of production can no longer be bound up with the appropriation of alien labour, but that the mass of workers must themselves appropriate their own surplus labour” (Marx, *Grundrisse* 708). Furthermore, mourning expresses the same quality that Benjamin attributes to language and writing: that is, to make the present historically meaningful. In one sense, mourning reveals the fullness of the present, what Benjamin calls “the now,” and resonates with his theology of the divine and profane. For the fragmented, historical profane is the antipode of the complete, permanent divine. Although the profane will always be historical, it can bring itself into line with the divine by way of happiness, repairing to some extent its fragmentary state. The present, in other words, contains within in it the remnants of an alternative social order, which the nineteenth century’s expression of man’s wish for happiness seems to confirm.

Luxemburg recognizes this quality of the present in her insistence on the absolute reciprocity between the economic and the political. She articulates this reciprocity in terms of the merger debate, in the eighth and final section of “The Mass Strike,” “Need for United Action of Trade Unions and Social Democracy”: “the German trade unions are a direct product of social democracy” (Luxemburg 304). That is to say, the merger debate must be premised on the understanding that social democracy’s expression of the political struggle and the trade unions’ expression of the economic struggle are always already merged insofar as they are both contingent on history, which is at all times the history of class struggle: “the separation of the political and the economic struggle and the independence of each is nothing but an artificial product of the parliamentary period, even if historically determined” (Luxemburg 299). So long as one accepts the precepts of historical materialism, then one must understand that history, its spirit, is the long process of class struggle. As the expression of the economic and thus base of social relations, and the place where workers ostensibly experience class struggle, the trade-union struggle might be thought of as the absolute foundation and thus primary form of class struggle. However, just as we cannot touch history, trade unions cannot be incarnations of history. Rather, the nature of these remains must be understood within the historical context of class struggle, for which trade unions are a spectral expression, the “flesh and

phenomenality” of communism, the fragments of which Marx and Benjamin locate in mechanization.

Luxemburg’s notion of spontaneity recognizes in such forms of political action an abbreviation of history that speaks to the way in which world politics pursues an end which is not unlike while also absolutely not divine. For the profane redemption of revolution seeks to realize the meaning its fragments have been imbued with by God. As expressed through redemption and mourning, historiography proves productive: “the thing *works*, whether it transforms or transforms itself, poses or decomposes itself: the spirit, the ‘spirit of the spirit’ is *work*. But what is work? What is its concept if it supposes the spirit of the spirit? Valéry underscores it: ‘By ‘Spirit’ here I mean a certain *power of transformation the spirit works*’” (Derrida 9). Luxemburg recognizes this transformational power in the spontaneity of the masses:

[T]his first general direct action reacted inwardly all the more powerfully as it for the first time awoke class feeling and class consciousness in millions upon millions as if by an electric shock. And this awakening of class feeling expressed itself forthwith in the circumstances that the proletarian mass, counted by millions, quite suddenly and sharply came to realize how intolerable was that social and economic existence which they had patiently endured for decades in the chains of capitalism. Thereupon there began a spontaneous general shaking of and tugging at these chains. All the innumerable sufferings of the modern proletariat reminded them of the old bleeding wounds. Here was the eight-hour day fought for, there piecework was resisted, here were brutal foremen ‘driven off. (Luxemburg 248)

Luxemburg’s reference to the realization of class consciousness, as if by an electric shock, is highly reminiscent of Benjamin’s language, which Alex Levant notes: “These experiences of a sudden flash of memory are, according to Benjamin, unconscious memory traces that have been triggered by something in the present” (Levant 381). This something is the fragments of an alternative social order, which already exists within the present—not production itself, but its capitalistic expression. Historiography is thus productive insofar as it effects a change in perspective, so that capitalist social relations, and not their features, are seen as “intolerable”: “by a displacement of the angle of vision

(but not of the criteria!), a positive element emerges anew in it too—something different from the previously signified. And so on, ad infinitum, until the entire past is brought into the present in a historical apocatastasis” (Benjamin, *Arcades* 459 [N1a,3]). Luxemburg’s final lines in “The Mass Strike” indicate that it is in this sense of bringing the past fully into the present that she envisions socialism’s realization: “The trade-union movement is . . . that which lives in the consciousness of the mass of proletarians who have been won for the class struggle. In this consciousness the trade-union movement is a part of social democracy. ‘And what it is, that should it dare to appear’” (Luxemburg 315).

## Chapter 3

### 3 The Incommensurability of History in Alfred Döblin's *November 1918*

This chapter considers the narrative figuration of collective action as a search for justice in the second volume of Alfred Döblin's *November 1918* tetralogy.<sup>27</sup> This volume consists of two parts,<sup>28</sup> *A People Betrayed* and *The Troops Return*, and represents the period from November 22, 1918, shortly after the beginning of the November Revolution's second stage in Germany, to December 14, 1918—although the final book reaches into the 1920s and depicts events which are largely international. These narratives represent a period which informs much of Walter Benjamin's early work and which ends only weeks before the assassination of Rosa Luxemburg, who appears throughout the second volume and again as the protagonist of the third. But whereas Luxemburg's and Benjamin's theories identify a weak messianic impulse throughout history that expresses man's desire for emancipation and seems to inspire organization and collective action, Döblin's novel sees only centuries of irredeemable conflict. Perhaps due in part to Döblin's conversion to Catholicism during World War II, his novel raises the question of history's commensurability: even if the history of all hitherto existing society were the history of class struggle, do men, the makers of history, have the capacity to grasp and act on that history's full magnitude on a global scale in order to realize a justice that would not simply collapse as so many regimes before it?

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<sup>27</sup> *November 1918* is in fact a tetralogy organized into three volumes, with the second volume consisting of two parts. This situation is due largely to the novel's unusual publication history, ending with the authoritative German edition's division of the work into three parts (Kiesel 215-16, 231n1). The English translation follows this convention: the first volume, *Bürger und Soldaten* has never been translated into English; the second volume consists of two parts, *Verratenes Volk* and *Heimkehr der Fronttruppen*, published in English as *A People Betrayed* and *The Troops Return*, respectively; and the third, *Karl und Rosa*, was published in English as *Karl and Rosa*.

<sup>28</sup> I use the following terminology to describe the second volume's organization: the volume itself is split into two parts, *A People Betrayed* and *The Troops Return*, which are made up of several books, all but the last of which are titled by the date depicted; these books are then divided into chapters, which are divided into sections.

Dates are central to the organization of *A People Betrayed* and *The Troops Return*, and this emphasis on dates would seem simply to illustrate Döblin's thoughts on honest historiography: "If we look at the writing of history, we see that *only chronology is honest*. Once dates are ordered the manoeuvre begins. To put it bluntly: *one makes use of history*" (Döblin qtd. in Lukács 274).<sup>29</sup> This constitutes, for Döblin, the dilemma of the historical novel: if anything beyond chronology is interpretation, or the use of history to advance a particular argument or vision of history, how does one accurately represent history? The dilemma also complicates whether *November 1918*, a novel which chronicles as much as comments on history, is in fact an historical novel. The tetralogy's title—the month and name of the socialist revolution that created the Weimar republic and preceded the failed Spartacist revolution of January 1918—signals the work's historical intent, particularly in the second volume: the narrator as chronicler registers persons and events in books titled according to the dates they depict, evidence of the novel's effort at historical accuracy. Significantly, however, this practice ends with the second volume's final book, "Last Echoes, the Sequel" (and does not resume in the third volume, *Karl and Rosa*). Thus, *The Troops Return* seems to diverge from the honesty of chronology, from what Döblin considers the conventions of the historical novel, and venture into the interpretation of history. As Klaus Hofmann observes,

The narrator poses as the indifferent and disinterested onlooker, registering what happens—or, rather, pointing at representations of what happened— . . . notably so in the chapter and section headings and in the summaries given at the head of the chapters in Book II. The pose is part of the alienation strategy which subverts the novel's realism into irony and occasionally ventures into surrealist episodes, which the narrator reports as matter-of-factly as anything else. (Hofmann, "Transcending the Historical Novel" 319)

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<sup>29</sup> See Bance 298n2 and Hofmann, "Revolution and Redemption" 472, who both attribute this argument to Döblin's essay "*Der historische Roman und wir*" ("The Historical Novel and Us"), which does not seem to be available in English.

Both chronicler and adjudicator of history,<sup>30</sup> the narrator complicates the novel's form. Hofmann asks "whether this novel can be contained within or in fact transgresses the confines of [the historical novel]" (Hofmann, "Transcending the Historical Novel" 309). However, he seems to answer this question in an earlier article, in which he claims that the narrator's methods "are stylistic moves which do not deny the narrator's obligation to a presumed reality" (Hofmann, "Revolution and Redemption" 472). That presumed reality is the contingency of history, and *November 1918* is by no means ignorant of history—it is, if anything, painfully aware of history and its practical failure to deliver a successful, thoroughgoing social revolution.

In *November 1918*, the dilemma of the historical novel becomes the dilemma of history itself, or, more precisely, the dilemma of history as repetition or as a continuum in which a litany of revolutions inevitably leads back to the oppression and exploitation that inspired them. The question of history's accurate representation turns to whether it is reasonable to expect history to resolve itself. Karl Marx articulates the problem in "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" as follows: "The tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living. And, just when they appear to be engaged in the revolutionary transformation of themselves and their material surroundings, in the creation of something which does not yet exist, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they timidly conjure up spirits of the past to help them" (Marx, "Eighteenth Brumaire" 146). But where Marx sees an historical logic, for the narrator of *November 1918*, history is chaos:

[H]e refrains from endowing history with logical coherence. Standing Aristotle's ruling on its head, the narrator of *November 1918* claims to be more faithful to a given reality than historians, who, along with some narrators, construct a world of logical consistency, while he takes nature to be much more wanton . . . working through lack of reason as well as through over-determination. (Hofmann, "Revolution and Redemption" 472)

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<sup>30</sup> See Hofmann, "Revolution and Redemption" 472.

The honesty of chronology demonstrates the disorder of history, ironically: if history has a logic, it is imperceptible to those who must make it from deep within its confused and rapid unfolding. Whatever correlations or connections men claim to find can be attributed to man's faculty for finding patterns—where none necessarily exist. This faculty might help survival of the day-to-day, but its capacities are exceeded when applied to anything beyond an individual's lifespan.

Thus, *A People Betrayed* and *The Troops Return* are a disavowal of history, its capacity to resolve itself, its having any discernable, practical logic, and the narrator articulates this disavowal in temporal terms not unlike Jacques Derrida's notion of temporal disjunction: "Time vomited what was in its belly. It remained to be seen whether that would make it well again" (Döblin 77). This remark must be understood on a literal and figurative level. As it opens the chapter section "The Retreat of the Defeated Army," time's ejection is the literal return of the German army—the troops' return from the warfront, defeated:

While Wermuth, the mayor of Berlin, was calling on the city to receive its troops with ceremony—"shadows lie over the German nation, but above them all shines its eternal glory. Lift up your hearts to greet Germany's sons, bind for them wreaths of honor to deck the railroads, houses and streets, quarter them in your homes"—the British cavalry was marching into Namur and Liège.

Belgian troops moved toward Cologne, French divisions toward Mainz. The vanguard of the English troops was led by General Harbringer. When he entered Charleroi, driving German regiments before him, they had just left the city, blowing up fifty munition cars before their departure. Civilians were killed. As they marched out, the Germans were attacked by hostile citizenry. Belgian police had to intervene. (Döblin 77)

Figuratively, time vomits that which remains unresolved from World War I as it passes into the November Revolution: The Council of the People's Deputies, an interim government, has replaced the monarchy, signalling an end, but to what—to the entire November Revolution or only its first phase? Rather than any actual historical figure, General Harbringer seems to be literally a harbinger, signalling the approach of the answer to that question. For, despite the novel's fragmented narrative, the troops' return

looms large throughout, signifying the crushing reality of sacrifices made for those who sacrifice nothing and the aftermath of Germany's loss, the brunt of which would be borne by the already starving masses. Class struggle, in other words, continues, but to what end?

To understand this question, we must acknowledge the complexity of what remains unresolved: the troops' return does not simply signify an experience of oppression and exploitation over which the masses of all countries could easily unite. It also carries nationalist undertones: mourning Germany's defeat, while celebrating the return of "Germany's sons." The narrator alludes to the contradictory symbolism of the troops' return when the event finally occurs in the second part of volume two:

The tension grew. People thought they heard a distant beat of drums. A wave of shouts rolled along the streets. The guards formed a chain to hold back the masses. And now trumpets were indeed approaching.

And then began the spectacle that caused many in the crowd to weep. Men as well as women, moved by the emotion of man's common fate, remembering the long war and all the dead.

Did these people see the troops? They were looking at the long war, at victories and defeats. Passing before them was a piece of their own life, with wagons and horses, machine guns and cannons.

An unending hurrah burst about the parade. The children waved their flags. People waved from windows and balconies with handkerchiefs. The officer and the rank and file had attached their lilies of the valley to their chests, many wore the Iron Cross, all had on black, white and red rosettes and ribbons. (Döblin 409-10)

Mentions of black, white, and red, the colours of imperialist Germany, allude to the competing history of the country's national colours. These colours' association with imperialist Germany renders them a symbol of the country's internal unrest—the historical burden of imperialist Germany which still weighed "like a nightmare" on the new German republic, and which would not suddenly disappear with the advent of the

republic.<sup>31</sup> When the narrator asks whether “these people see the troops,” he asks how they conceive of that defeat, how they interpret history: as the transnational experience of all men, forced to fight in long wars, which could be experienced just as easily at the level of the bereaved individual, suddenly faced with the reminder of a lost loved one; or, as a nationalist experience, bitter over Germany’s defeat, which the Kaiser’s forced abdication makes doubly painful? The narrator would respond that the interpretation differs from one person to the next and occurs on a spectrum.

This indeterminacy suggests that *A People Betrayed* and *The Troops Return* constitute a liminal novel, both historical and, as Hofmann suggests of the entire tetralogy, polemical: “in accordance with Döblin’s dictum: ‘*Mit Geschichte will man etwas*’ [with history you want something]” (Hofmann, “Revolution and Redemption” 473). The narrator’s indiscriminate criticisms evince the position and logic of this polemic: that history is incommensurable not because there is no standard for the judgement of history, but because man is unable to effectively perceive and practice the standard by which history is to be judged, if that judgement were to be just. The position appears throughout the novel as the search for a “justice” that will guarantee “a lasting peace.” Georges Clemenceau, the prime minister of France during WWI, offers an instructive account of justice in this regard:

“Justice is an organization of historical forces, which time to time call for strengthening.” And there you have it. That is Europe: historical forces that from time to time grow weaker and then have to be strengthened. Everything fine and dandy—except that true justice is missing. Everything at the moment depends on the victor’s showing that he knows what justice is, what absolute justice is, and acknowledging it. He must begin with trust. Victory has placed that duty upon him. He can only expect bitterness, hate and a thirst for revenge from the defeated. (Döblin 613)

This justice, historical justice, is fragmentary and incommensurable, in the sense suggested in the previous chapter’s discussion of “the generations of skulls or spirits”

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<sup>31</sup> See, for instance, Döblin 78, 79, and 149.

(Derrida 9). As this thing that is not a thing, history can only be perceived and conceived of “on the condition of language” (Derrida 9), in the mediated textualized forms which articulate historical events. Thus, the standards of historical justice are formulated in direct response to the way in which these forms chronicle fragments of history—not history in and of itself. Thus, justice for history would apply to the whole of history and need to be “absolute” or “true.” Anything less would be historical and yet another deferral of justice, as the victor lies in wait of the reprisal that satisfies the other’s bitterness, hate, and thirst, however temporarily.

The question remains, however: what is this “absolute” or “true” justice? Derrida discusses such a concept in terms which are highly compatible with *November 1918*. This is the concept of justice he develops in his analysis of Heidegger’s criticism of the translation of the ancient Greek term *Dikē* as justice (as well as right or penalty): “Heidegger . . . interprets *Dikē* as joining, adjoining, adjustment, articulation of accord or harmony on the basis of presence . . . *Dikē* harmoniously conjoins, in some way, the joining and the accord. *Adikia* to the contrary: it is at once what is disjointed, undone, twisted and out of line, in the wrong of the unjust, or even in the error of stupidity” (Derrida 27). Heidegger takes issue with the modern “juridical-moral” connotations of this translation, which fail to capture the particular historicity of the term. As Derrida explains, Heidegger instead proposes an understanding of *Dikē* based on being as presence, which Derrida’s discussion of *Hamlet* can help us to understand: “Hamlet is ‘out of joint’ because he curses his own mission, the punishment that consists in having to punish, avenge, exercise justice and right in the form of reprisals; and what he curses in his mission is this expiation of expiation itself” (Derrida 23). That is to say, Hamlet does not curse the expiation of his father’s death but his experience of the present, the “presence” of which is a temporal disjointedness experienced as the present’s demand for that expiation: it is the first and last standard by which the entirety of his experience of the present is judged. Thus, for Hamlet, to balance this particular present, to make this and only this present just, is to satisfy the demand of his father’s specter—to avenge his death by killing Claudius. In a passage which could serve equally well as a definition of historical justice, Derrida argues that this justice would be “the jointure of the accord: the proper jointure to the other given by one who does not have it. Injustice would be the

disjointure or disjoining” (Derrida 31–32). It is no justice at all (and exactly the sort of justice *November 1918* is critical of): one that is so contingent, it ceases to be just the moment its standards are satisfied, effectively disjoining any subsequent present, as when Gertrude, Laertes, and Hamlet all must die in order that Claudius might be killed and the king’s death avenged—fully, four deaths to avenge one. This is the justice which *November 1918* observes throughout history, justice as history’s repeated demands for expiation, which suggests the incommensurability of history.

The alternative justice Derrida proposes is “justice as relation to the other,” and its response to the presence of disjunction is to risk “the evil, expropriation, injustice (*Adikia*) against which there is no calculable insurance” (Derrida 32). This is justice given as a gift, freely and without expectation, whether that be of reciprocation of future payment. Much as the gift given with expectation is no gift at all, justice given on those terms entails the disjunction of the present, over which the expectation hangs; it is justice not as the gift exchanged *with* the other, but given *to* the other, in relation *to* the other, “to what must . . . be rendered to the singularity of the other, to his or her absolute *precedence* or to his or her absolute *previousness*, to the heterogeneity of a *pre-*, which, to be sure, means what comes before me, before any present, thus before any past present, but also what, for that very reason comes from the future or as future: as the coming of the event” (Derrida 33). Not unlike Walter Benjamin’s notion of “the now,”<sup>32</sup> justice as relation to the other is given in light of the present and everything in “precedence” to it, everything which “preceded” it in order to make it, and thus everything which would preclude historical justice. And if it is given *with* anything, it is with intention, which seems to convey its futurity: this present may be disjointed, but the gift of justice is given in response to that “presence” and with the intention of harmonizing it, an event realized in the subsequent present, future to that of the gifting, and, in this way, the coming of that long-deferred, “absolute” or “true” justice.

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<sup>32</sup> See Benjamin, *Illuminations* 261.

This language of a justice “to come” alludes to its messianic undertones,<sup>33</sup> which Derrida describes as “the coming of the other, the absolute and unpredictable singularity of the *arrivant as justice*” (Derrida 33). The historical messiah arrives as the other whose enactment of justice constitutes the singularity of the *arrivant as justice*, the realization of that event which is first and last. For *A People Betrayed* and *The Troops Return*, the logic of a justice to come is appropriate for the divine messiah, who comes as singularity: the divine messiah’s very coming is the fulfillment of his promise, just as Christ comes as the Son who is the singularity of God in the Trinity.<sup>34</sup> The historical messiah, by contrast, is always preceded by a plurality that depends on reciprocation to constitute the singularity of the messianic event. This is the truth of history, to which the novel returns: the fragmentation and thus incommensurability of history. Friedrich Becker notes the following immediately before the denouement of his search for justice, which suggests that its realization amounts to a truth:

“The secret of heaven—is it not our duty to become as gods. Can we stop even there? The world exists not only in the images with which we do battle daily. There are other images besides, I can sense them, I feel the ecstasy even now just thinking about them. It all blossoms as if from a tree . . . Why not heavenly images, in fullest majesty?” . . .

“The world has a place in the order of justice, but it is also bound up with that majesty . . . is it wrong for me to feel—that we and this world must die in order to live in God?” (Döblin 597).

Whatever justice there is available within the historical is to be accessed through divine images that transcend the fragmentation of the historical, and that the believer “senses” or “feels” these images as a matter of faith. Thus, what the believer experiences in faith is absolute justice but, much as happiness is for Benjamin the profane equivalent of a divine

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<sup>33</sup> This language also alludes to the connection between Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, which Derrida himself notes, and the “weak Messianic power” that Benjamin mentions in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” See, for example, Derrida 227-28n2 and Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 253-54.

<sup>34</sup> “The Christian doctrine of the triune God . . . The one God is made known as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; each is God, but each is a distinct ‘Person’” (“Trinity”).

experience, not in its fullness: absolute meaning is only available through the divine, to which the believer has fragmented access in faith and full access after death. By extension, the only truth available to the historical is its divine negation: that history is fragmented by virtue of its being the antipode to the divine's permanence. That is to say, for *A People Betrayed* and *The Troops Return*, historical truth is not necessarily fragmented, but it is ascertained much as a bat uses echolocation to navigate by where it is not.

If the divine messiah comes as a pre-existing singularity, the historical messiah's coming is fragmented into two events: his coming with the intention to create a singularity that renders his arrival the first and the last, "the *arrivant as justice*," and his coming to render that gift of justice without expectation. The event which comes as the historical messiah to fulfill the temporal disjunction of *A People Betrayed* is the actual event of the troops' return, and its success depends on whether man can render the events time vomited digestible. The narrator offers the following commentary on the event in the chapter's epigraph: "*December 10<sup>th</sup>. When the troops march through the Brandenburg Gate, they seem to be both the present and the future. The farther they move into the city the older they grow, and finally they become completely unreal*" (Döblin 409). The soldiers occupy a liminal temporality: returning to the present as the defeated past whose presence is history's demand for justice. And if, as Derrida suggests, absolute justice "comes from the future or as future" (Derrida 33), the troops' return comes *as future*, as the possibility of the only temporality in which the soldiers' demand could be resolved: they do not come as a singular temporality, but as the past whose presence gestures to the future. Thus, the soldiers' futurity is fitting from a theological standpoint. As I suggested in the previous chapter, the future is a meaningless temporality, that is, as anything other than a concept of that which can never be experienced: any meaning attributed to the future is an act of naming experienced in the present, an act which does not name any "thing," any part of God's creation, and thus no "thing" that will ever exist.<sup>35</sup> In *A People*

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<sup>35</sup> Naming was, for Benjamin, the linguistic practice in which God vouchsafed "the language of man," which translates God's "language of things." See Benjamin, *One-Way Street* 117-18 and Ross 82-83.

*Betrayed* and *The Troops Return*, however, the future is meaningless because it refers to a time without “presence,” to a present which could never be insofar as the fragmentation of history is experienced in the present as the presence of a *Dikē* which ought to be. Thus, the incommensurable fragmentation of history precludes the expiation of the soldiers’ presence, which is essentially a demand to join past, present, and future to create the singularity of justice from the current disjunction of the soldiers’ liminal temporality. The spectators’ various perceptions of the soldiers’ presence conflict with others’ and not so much defers the future as confirms its impossibility: the soldiers age before their eyes until they become unreal, dissipating into time and ensuring the transmission of their exploitation into a future when, once again, time will vomit what is in its belly. As with every preceding historical messiah, these Germans were unable to perceive these events in terms of their full historicity: not as the immediate appearance of transgressed morals and denied rights that demanded expiation, but as an echo of others’ past transgressions and denials. But this inability is the historical messiah’s promise: to fail his task and to return to a subsequent present.

In *A People Betrayed* and *The Troops Return*, the present is the experience of the *Dikē* that ought to be—this is, perhaps, the one commonality throughout every plot line, that everyone searches for something to join their disjoined present. For the novel, this search is for the interior peace of faith, which brings the soul, the only remnant of the divine to be found within the historical, into accord with the divine order of justice. According to the narrative voice and Becker, however, the condition of the historical entails that the search will be as fragmented and contingent as the historical itself. Only some will find a path to the divine, of which there are many. Others experience the promise of the historical messiah, calling into the abyss with the intention to bring the future into the present and create the singularity of justice, only to inevitably fail and guarantee a subsequent present appears to echo the past’s call for justice. Consequently, the narrator typically describes such searches as being for an affirmative conclusion from a negative premise, absolute justice from historical fragmentation. This chapter focuses on the representation of this search in Johannes Maus and Becker. Both are soldiers returned from the war and temporally liminal; thus, they represent the presence of the defeated past’s demand for expiation.

### 3.1 The Historical Search for Justice

*A People Betrayed* engenders temporal disjointedness in first epigraph to the first chapter: “A young man returns from war, finds nothing appealing about living in Berlin and meets others who feel the same. Some overwrought people attack police headquarters and find they can sleep better afterward. It is November 22, 1918” (Döblin 5). The previous chapter suggested that Benjamin likens the effect of materialist historiography to the moment of awakening from dream-filled sleep, during which the line between the reality of class struggle and the dream of an alternative social order is blurred. But this experience would be limited to those for whom the historical articulation of the past reveals the historicity of the present and its injustices. For these “overwrought people,” however, their experience is a demand for expiation, which action relieves temporarily and allows them to sleep, perhaps even dream. Immediately following this epilogue, the narrator represents their experience as that of history:

Berlin was a proliferation of buildings sprawling low and somber across the sand of Mark Brandenburg. A shabby excuse for a stream, the Spree, flowed between them. The little river took on an iridescent black from the sewage emptied into it, buildings turned their backs on it, sheds and coalyards lined its banks. In the Hansa district near the zoo the world surrounding its murky, proletarian waters opened up somewhat, and it caught a glimpse of trees and boats and was glad to leave behind the heaps of stone that were the source of the refuse. But for some distance out onto the plain the poor river was hemmed in again by industry, by complexes as big as cities, where still more men and women toiled inside. (Döblin 5)

The river Spree enacts the flow of history as it is experienced by the overwrought: through the detritus of the past, which has flowed from one present to the next, with some enjoying fleeting moments of reprieve that are inevitably cut short by other historical actors interrupting the river’s course. This is one of the few moments in which the narrator describes the setting at any length; he typically limits himself to naming streets

or landmarks and focusing on characters' thoughts.<sup>36</sup> Here the imagery is pervasively passive, which overpowers the people depicted in it, reducing them to masses of men and women, with little individuality, subject to the whims of history. The experience of history is happenstance: the river washes away meaning as soon as it comes into view, and individuals respond to conditions whose significance is fleeting. An opportunity presents itself in those conditions—some overwrought people attack police headquarters. Their relief lasts only as long as it takes the river to wash it away.

The young man to whom the narrator refers in the epigraph to the first chapter is Maus, a soldier returned from the war and thus a temporally liminal figure whose presence is the past's demand for expiation. The narrator introduces Maus next to the overwrought Berliners and returns to his narrative immediately following the river scene; proximity is a technique that the narrator uses throughout *A People Betrayed* and *The Troops Return* to signal characters' relation to their immediate context.<sup>37</sup> Maus's immediate context is the experience of the present as the demand for expiation, which he echoes. Thus, the narrator's description of Maus's body grounds him in the historical (and raises the theme of corporeality, which appears throughout the novel as an indication of a character's connection to the historical):

On this Friday, November 22<sup>nd</sup>, a former lieutenant, Maus by name, wanders listlessly about the streets of Berlin . . .

With his youthful, rosy-cheeked face, Maus is an unprepossessing, amiable fellow who hasn't accomplished much in life as yet. He has powerful limbs ready to spring into action, his gray-blue eyes have a look of candor.

(Döblin 6)

Maus is, on one hand, the prototypical proletarian and the representation of his corporeality the embodiment of the proletarian body: his experience reflects "the

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<sup>36</sup> See Jennings 142 for his discussion of a similar effect in what he argues is *November 1918*'s "aesthetically conservative though politically stable form of montage."

<sup>37</sup> See Jennings 142 for his discussion of a similar effect in *November 1918*'s use of: "When objects, excerpts from texts, or other concrete manifestations do enter the novel, they consistently display their relation to their immediate context" (Jennings 142).

struggling, oppressed class itself’ and is thus the embodiment of that class as “the depository of historical knowledge” (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 260). This is knowledge strengthened by its historical oppression, “the sinews of its greatest strength,” knowledge for which class struggle forms the foundation of meaning, but which the river might wash away at any moment.

The meaning of Maus’s search for expiation is not founded on firm ground. His past as a soldier drives his search, but it hinges on the two ways in which he articulates that experience, both of which culminate in his feeling discarded: as part of an army of soldiers drawn from the working class to which they return immediately following the war, but also as part of an army of soldiers who return from the war as symbols of the nation’s defeat. These are the terms on which Maus experiences the present as one which demands expiation. Hofmann suggests that “The characters of Friedrich Becker and Rosa Luxemburg are devised to carry [the novel’s search for a true and lasting peace]” and points to Becker’s “prayerlike invocation” for peace in the first volume, *Bürger und Soldaten* (Hofmann, “Revolution and Redemption” 477). However, Maus does echo this invocation several times, albeit in somewhat different terms. Peace for Maus would be feeling useful *to this world* and justice the achievement of that experience which is usefulness: “He no longer has his hopes set on a career, he only wants to know whether he is of any use to this world” (Döblin 6). The terms of Maus’s search are also a reminder of man’s inherent limits, his inability to perceive and respond to the entirety of history—to even the entirety of the present’s immediate appearance. Although Maus is attuned to history’s demand for expiation, his response to the present is necessarily limited to his own experience.

Tellingly, Maus’s echoes of Becker’s invocation coincide with others’ mentions of the war, which connects his sense of expiation to his experience in the war—to the past to which the novel’s present is subsequent. That is to say, he experiences the present as a demand to expiate for the war. Maus first echoes Becker’s invocation in response to Grete Gries musing on German intellectuals’ failure to resist, shortly after she recounts the sacrifices made for nothing during the war:

“Something wrenched inside Maus . . . She’s supposed to be telling me where we go from here. The woman’s chatter kindled a sullen anger in him, one that

swallowed up his memory of Becker sobbing there inside the train car as they rolled along. Peace sweet peace. He looked over at Big Ding. “So what are you doing about [the political situation]?”

He wrinkled his brow and raised both fists. “I’m on the side of the revolution.” (Döblin 11)

Maus interprets Gries’s criticism of the war as criticism of himself and the other soldiers, of their failure to win the war for Germany. Thus, her musings constitute a sort of twofold inactivity: Maus suddenly feels confronted by the prospect that he and the other soldiers are to blame for Germany’s disjunction, but no practical suggestion for expiation follows the accusation, only intellectual nonsense. The weight of the present’s demand for expiation weighs so heavily on Maus that he, who initially claimed “I don’t give a damn about the revolution” (Döblin 9), suddenly feels compelled to ask about this, the last form of practical action mentioned that responds to the present’s disjunction. The second echo coincides with the mention of Liebknecht:

[Ding:] “The Hohenzollerns had hoped to march victoriously through the Brandenburg Gate at war’s end; instead, it is the proletariat that is marching. All the thrones of Germany have toppled. The princes, the generals, the petty junkers, the mass murderers have all crept back into their rat holes.”

The girl: “Liebknecht said that.”

Once more Becker’s words sounded in Maus’s ears: “Night. The night. Peace is coming now. I’m glad we’ve lived to see this.”

Maus’s sullen anger. He whispered, “Those of us at the front did what we could. We’re not to blame if other people acted like that back home.”

And his shoulder hurt him. He thought of Richard, the pilot who lay dying in the hospital room next to his, and of Hilda, so distant now. Suddenly he had tears in his eyes, for the whole wretched mess, and because everyone in the whole world deserted you.

The young teacher watched his face grow pale, his lips quiver. She came over to him and took his hand. There. She stroked his hand as he let his head sink down onto his chest.

A canary was singing in the next room. That made the pain all the worse for poor Maus. He pulled his hand away.

And then suddenly everything reversed itself inside him. A decision crashed through Maus like lightning: I'm through with this whole rotten business.

And without paying attention to his two guests he rushed over to the bureau behind the armchairs, with the same rapid movements he always made when fetching his belt and holster from their drawer. The mirror cast his image back at him, the grim face, and he said in a hoarse voice as he threw the hair out of his face with a toss of his head. "All right, let's go. What's it to be? I'm at your service. It won't be because I didn't do my part" (Döblin 11-12).

Maus interprets Liebknecht's calls for expiation for the war as another admonishment of himself and the other soldiers. The thought triggers the injury he sustained during the war and resentment over being a symbol of Germany's defeat; the memory of Richard's death immediately follows, raising the possibility of his and the other working-class soldiers' exploitation by the Hohenzollerns; and the memory of his unrequited love is another factor contributing to Maus's feeling of disjunction, which he might have avoided had he not gone to war. The language the narrator uses to describe Maus's response to his disjunction, "like lightning," resembles that which Luxemburg uses to describe the Russian proletariat's sudden development of class consciousness, "as if by an electric shock" (Luxemburg 248). However, Maus's "spontaneity," his suddenly siding with proletarian action, is mere chance: the revolution is simply the first potential for practical action to appear that responds to Maus's experience of disjunction.

Maus is an extreme example of those who give themselves over to the historical and become consumed by the need for action—much as Becker's religious ecstasies are an extreme example of Christianization. The extremity of their representation is a reflection of their temporal liminality, the way in which they are conduits for the present's temporal disjunction. A telling moment immediately precedes Maus's sudden decision to join the revolution: when he, whose experience echoes the river of history, with a "coalyard" on its bank, hears the canary's song and echoes its mourning, but what does it mourn? Rather than a justice deferred to the future, the canary's call mourns Maus's forthcoming decision, one that will only prolong his sense of disjunction and

guarantee a subsequent present in which he will need to repeat his search for expiative action. Maus's experience limits the extent to which he consciously understands the song's significance, but the mournful call he hears is the same echo for justice from preceding presents. Much as the troops' temporally liminal return is a fulfillment of the temporal disjunction signalled by time's ejection, an affirmation of the historical messiah's promise, Maus's eventual and sudden decision to join a right-wing militia is a fulfillment of the canary's call:

And by chance Maus happened to see at a street corner that same poster Becker had observed at the Königstor. "What is socialism? The highest goal of socialism is the total liberation of the German people and of the whole of mankind . . ."

No, thought Maus. You won't pull it off. I know you. No, I've had enough. I'm not going to be a part of it any longer. It makes me sick.

And with a jerk, Maus was free of his doubts. The way lay open, the direction was clear. He knew where he wanted to go. A few days before a comrade had told him about something going on in Westphalia. They were forming a corps of volunteers who loved discipline and the fatherland. You could find out about it at an office on Fasanenstrasse.

That's what I'll do, Maus decided.

. . . Maus marched. He was sure, wild and vengeful. (Döblin 598)

The socialism poster anchors this episode's fulfillment. Shortly after having first seen the poster, Becker evokes it during his confrontation with Maus: "Becker did not notice the gaze with which Maus was examining him. Becker thought: look how the world follows you about. There he stands, my bailiff. He's come to collect debts" (Döblin 579).

Although Becker observes Maus's presence, the way in which he echoes history's demand for expiation, the confrontation which follows affirms history's fragmentation. Both are temporally liminal soldiers, highly attuned to the present's disjunction—should not one's expiation resonate with the other? Instead, Becker confronts Maus with the truth of history's incommensurable fragmentation: "'The institutions of the state, and of the economy too, have most certainly been very rotten, extraordinarily rotten. But when are they ever very good? Yes, when are they good? They've never been good'" (Döblin 586). There is no explicit point during the confrontation at which Maus abandons the

revolution, but it would seem to coincide with the moment he believes the confrontation is actually about Hilda: “Shall we not for once really be you and me, have a really personal conversation now, just this once. You’re talking about Hilda, aren’t you? At the root of it you think you have to preach these sermons to me on account of her”” (Döblin 594). The actual “root of it” is the abyss which supports Maus’s concerns and allows him to transition from one to the other with relative ease—to whichever will provide a moment of relief. Thus, the socialism poster anchors this episode as an expression of history’s truth, the various ways in which an historical intention to create the singularity of justice actually contributes to the fragmentation of history, experienced here as the present’s disjunction: the push the poster gives Maus to join the right-wing militia is inspired “by chance,” swept onto his path by the flow of history, the magnitude of socialism’s messianic promise. The narrator’s anchoring of this episode around the socialism poster is clearly intended to suggest that a present in which the search for justice could lead to two, such contradictory actions could not be anything but fragmented.

### 3.2 The Theological Search for Justice

In a sense, the title of *The Troops Return*’s final book could not be a date, not using the historical logic the novel has employed to this point: the book’s contents span several years, from the contemporaneous negotiations for the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations to the death of Woodrow Wilson. While the novel’s polemic on the significance of history appears throughout the narrative, it culminates in this chapter in the narrator’s assertion of the truth of history’s incommensurable fragmentation. Consequently, the only justice and peace to be had within the historical is to be found in the spiritual or theological—in the interior peace of faith, which brings the soul, the only remnant of the divine to be found within the historical, into accord with the divine order of justice. The final book’s title, “Last Echoes, Sequel,” suggests that this truth is the result of the negotiations it depicts: the vengeful Treaty of Versailles and the short-lived League of Nations effectively silence the echoes of history’s call for justice, but on terms that guarantee a sequel. Wilson leads this present effort for justice within the historical. The narrator also represents him in temporally liminal terms, as he comes from a past

which is future to Europe: “The year 1620 lived in his soul, the year the proud Pilgrim fathers had pushed off from Europe, and three hundred years of unbroken and free growth of American humanity lived there too, as did the principles of Jefferson and Lincoln and his nation’s dead, the men he had had to cast into the maw of the Moloch that was Europe” (Döblin 312). Wilson approaches these negotiations with the spirit of America’s past—the future that Europe never realized, that forced America to disavow the old continent in order to realize itself on the new, and that Wilson hopes can finally be realized in Europe: “There was to be an end to the corruption of the old continent. Europe lay exhausted and mangled. The messenger of conscience, the representative of the country that was ‘not a geographical fact, but a moral one’” (Döblin 312). The narrator offers two accounts of Wilson’s preparedness for this task:

Woodrow Wilson was aware of the magnitude of his task.

He was a lonely, solitary man. He felt God had laid a heavy burden upon him. He was determined to bear it . . .

The left half of his face had developed a nervous tic. His eyes lay haunted and deep behind his glasses.

Wilson did not know what awaited him in Europe. (Döblin 312)

Theologically, Wilson understands the magnitude of his task: the monumental task of bringing a lasting peace that would be the first and last to a continent rife with the historical fragmentation of war. But he does not fully comprehend the practical or historical magnitude of his task, of “what awaited him,” which the narrator suggests immediately after mentioning Wilson’s twitch or corporeality. What awaits is the multiple conflicting calls for justice, many of which come from those who experience the present as the demand for justice Wilson was to bring. Thus, the tic indicates a body not long for this world; indeed, Wilson’s condition worsens as the negotiations begin to fall apart. He approaches negotiations with an assuredness based in a theological conception of politics that is impracticable in the historical. In this way, Wilson is an echo of Becker: whereas Wilson begins with a theological sense of politics that slowly decays, as everything historical does, Becker’s point of departure is the historical knowledge of philology. But their trajectories are inverted: as Wilson eventually acknowledges the incompatibility of theology to politics, and Becker finds the only peace available to the historical, a practical

peace that brings the soul into accord with the divine order of justice through faith and harmonizes the believer's experience of the present.

One indication of this echo is the two mentions of the ancient Greek myth of Antaeus, first in reference to Becker and later in reference to Wilson. Son of the sea god Poseidon and the earth goddess Gaea, Antaeus drew his strength from direct contact to the earth, his mother. He would challenge passersby to wrestling matches and was undefeated until he challenged Hercules.<sup>38</sup> Upon realizing that Antaeus drew his strength from the earth, the divine hero locked Antaeus in a bear hug that rendered him unable to touch the ground. Antaeus is a figure whose strength is derived fully from the (historical) earth. In *November 1918*, the subtext of the Antaeus myth is that only the divine can overcome the historical, which on its own is a continuum of battles, such as those to which Antaeus challenges others. Both allusions are made in reference to the most theologically inclined characters in *A People Betrayed* and *The Troops Return*; thus, they also speak to the nature of the relationship between the divine and the historical. The narrator makes the first mention in *A People Betrayed*: "He no longer dragged himself about like a wretched skeleton with a waxen skull . . . Aided by canes in both hands, he lifted his legs more quickly and vigorously. He could walk for certain stretches without tiring, and every success spurred him on. He credited it all to Berlin—Antaeus on his home soil" (Döblin 90). More than simply recounting that Becker connects the improvement in his condition to his return home, the narrator confirms Becker's historicity, that he is a flesh and blood man. This confirmation is significant because Becker's relationship to reality is a vehicle for the novel's polemic: the strength of his connection to reality is directly connected to his search for justice and his expression of futurity as a soldier. The narrator's second mention of Antaeus occurs in a remark Senator Henry Cabot Lodge makes to himself. Historically, Lodge was instrumental in the failure of the Treaty of Versailles and keeping the United States out of the League of Nations. Upon seeing Wilson after his return from treaty negotiations in Europe, Lodge

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<sup>38</sup> Typically referred to as Heracles in ancient Greek myth, Hercules is the name more common in the Western tradition and the one used in a later reference to the myth of Antaeus in *The Troops Return*.

remarks that “Only once did Professor Wilson wander into the fields of mythology, only to mistake Antaeus for Hercules” (Döblin 628). The implication is that Wilson entered negotiations expecting them to unfold according to divine ideals, which would be meaningful to a divine hero such as Hercules, but found himself pitted against Antaeus, the European political leaders who were more interested in settling historical scores that would establish a justice to their liking. Lodge’s evocation of the myth also undermines the notion of the United States as “the country that was ‘not a geographical fact, but a moral one’” (Döblin 312): even this “moral” country, this ostensible realization of the future, is caught up in history’s fragmentation. Whereas Wilson’s association with Antaeus demonstrates that he was woefully unprepared to respond to the practical conditions of negotiations, that he comprehends the relationship between the divine and the historical, Becker’s association is limited to an historical matter, the healing of the body from injuries sustained during the war and, we might say, “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s.”

Whereas Maus’s corporeality grounds his search for justice, Becker’s search for justice is shaped by his background in philology, which leads him to the foundation of historical meaning. Here, the war has exposed longstanding and substantial faults: “During peacetime you prepared [to be conscripted], in the midst of your Kant and Plato. And you—don’t question. You don’t question, you go, you obey. The agency that issues the orders is more than God. You listen, more than to God” (Döblin 48). Becker’s argument is an interrogation of historical meaning: what does it mean, for instance, that men who are educated in such high ideals can still commit such acts which directly contravene them? How can these mutual incompatibilities coexist? What are the implications for life in the historical? Becker’s colleague responds “But there you’ve just admitted . . . The government is the guilty party and ought to be, has to be, changed” (Döblin 49). Thus, he fails to understand that the ostensibly proper ascription of guilt is meaningless to Becker, as it implies the possibility of justice:

Becker stands up. The bookcase. He reads the titles, the names. Sophocles, Dante, Kant, somber fear stirs in the background.

Where to get help? Where to get help? The books are mute. The great minds point toward the abyss, who will lead me across the chasm? This uneasiness, confusion, physical fear. (Döblin 331)

The historical foundation for meaning, the narrator suggests, is impermanent, hovering over an abyss, essentially meaningless, for nothing vouchsafes any meaning it deploys. Justice is so clearly unavailable when its rendering could entail injustice. Thus, Becker's experience of temporal disjointedness is not unlike Hamlet's, except that he seeks a justice which would *necessarily mean* the experience of time as harmony, the preclusion of disjunction. In this way, Becker's theological epistemology differs from Benjamin's on the matter of man's access to divine meaning. For Becker, man's connection to God's divine meaning is more direct than the recognition of non-sensuous similarities discussed in the previous chapter; the novel might consider non-sensuous similarities more akin to the transliteration of one language to another while maintaining the grammar and syntax of the original, producing nonsense interspersed with fragments of meaning. In other words, the historical translation of the divine would produce the historical. We might attribute this difference to Becker's operating on Christian and not Jewish theological principles. If, as Benjamin suggests, only the messiah consummates history, Christ has only somewhat repaired man's relationship to the divine. Man has not been reinstated to the linguistic condition that Adam enjoyed, but there is a bridge to meaning that is somewhat more direct than Benjamin's non-sensuous similarities—belief in Christ: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*, John 3:16). These are certainly the terms in which Becker eventually expresses his turn to Christianity:

“Do I believe? Is that faith? That there is a heaven and a hell, that there are justice, punishment and grace, that God is not distant. And He is the same God who created the world. Is that faith?”

He went to the window and had to look out. There it is again, Berlin. A great many things are happening here, here and elsewhere in the nation. The war is over. But what I see here is just one small piece. There is also a God and grace and justice. That is what holds the world together, those are its clamps. That is

what makes it endure, what pulses without contradiction through the world from heaven to earth to hell. It is the world's fundamental law, its axis. (Döblin 512)

The extent to which Christ repairs man's connection to God is that he must believe in Christ, bringing his soul into alignment with the divine order of justice, which he experiences as the justice and peace of redemption.

The contents of the last book of *The Troops Return* are what Döblin would call the interpretation or making use of history, an expression of what the novel wants with history. If the historical example of the November Revolution can be read as a specific example of the appearance of history's demand for justice in that moment, Döblin's novel might be said to represent the silencing of that echo with a further deferral to the future, which entails the arrival of another subsequent present experienced as the demand for justice. However, as I suggest above, the novel's denial of absolute justice for history precludes the very possibility of such a future. Rather, the final book gestures repeatedly to the truth of history's incommensurable fragmentation. One such episode is Wilson's contemplation of politics and theology, in which he defines the practice of politics by the divine's negation of history:

My father and grandfather had the task of bringing Holy Scripture to people. That was the way, the office they employed, to educate people. It fell to me to study, to learn—and to get involved in politics. I could not keep my knowledge to myself. I admit that there is always a certain impatience and need to dominate that drive people into politics. Where, however, does the real difference lie between my way of doing things and that of my father and grandfather? They went at things from the inside, from the center. They had a smelter for melting the ancient holy truths by which they could make people fluid and mobile. We politicians don't have it so easy. We work from the outside. We break people more than we form them.” (Döblin 637-38)

Wilson's contemplation comes in light of his failure in Europe, which affirms the qualities inherent to political practice: if the divine's unified permanence is the precondition of its unifying power, the fragmentation and contingency of the historical renders the practice of politics necessarily fragmented and fragmenting.

This affirmation of the fragmentation inherent to the political is itself an echo of earlier events, which hinges on a moment of simultaneity between Wilson and Becker in the “Posters” section: “In the course of the morning Becker went out onto the street. It was the same hour that the train carrying President Woodrow Wilson, the peace-maker, pulled into Paris at the Bois de Boulogne station” (Döblin 575-76). This simultaneity is significant as it is one of the few instances of such an effect, which the first volume frequently establishes using montage. As Helmuth Kiesel notes, “the second part was made more lucid through subsequent rearrangements of parts . . . The feeling of simultaneity and diverse perspectives was lost as was the sense of anonymous revolutionary events resulting from an almost incomprehensible number of variously motivated individual occurrences” (Kiesel 219). In this instance, however, simultaneity contributes to lucidity, as it gestures to the relationship between Becker and Wilson to suggest that understanding them relies to some extent on reading them comparatively. In this instance, Becker refers to Wilson as he polemicizes on justice as a precursor to peace in the immediately preceding section, “Relief”:

There must be punishment [for the atrocities committed in the war]. People must be able to feel that there is justice. If people will not acknowledge God in heaven and pay no heed to the laws of this world, then they have to be dealt with like trained dogs, horses and elephants. If you can't make human beings reasonable and good, you can at least make them bearable. That can be done with individuals, that is what upbringing is about. But what happens when they band together, or when they form power blocs, the state? What can you do with the state? Each one with its pride, its arrogance, each with its border and its greed, what can come of that? Perhaps one ought to take their borders away from them. But how? There is Wilson. But even in antiquity there were the small Greek cities, each of them a state, and they tore one another to pieces—and all the while stood at the height of learning. They founded a league of states. It didn't work. The Macedonians had to come, the barbarians from the north, to subjugate them and take their freedom from them. Then they were unified and there was peace, for a while. (Döblin 574)

What inspires Becker's polemic is an article detailing "the refusal of foreign academics to work together with Germans at congresses in the future" (Döblin 574). In a newspaper left by the Westphalian chaplain, the article alludes to the Peace of Westphalia which has since evolved into the modern international law of Westphalian sovereignty.<sup>39</sup> To one extent, the conflicts of modern nations echo those which the Peace of Westphalia resolved, which echoes the conflicts of ancient Greece; and that conflict, in the putative home of Western thought, is echoed by academics' hostilities toward each other. In this way, the novel's polemic becomes about what chronology reveals: that despite the various forms the political has taken throughout history, it always tends toward fragmentation and conflict, with only rare and temporary moments of that peace which unity produces. Here, unity is a cognate for justice insofar as it refers to that which tempers the disjunctive experience of injustice, however temporarily, and peace is the experience of that just or unified future. This points back to the essential incompatibility between the divine and the historical, as even historical unity is premised upon fragmentation: the Greeks' unity was within the fragmentation of their opposition to the Macedonians. The truth of history guarantees that political unities will always fragment and devolve into chaos, whether that chaos be internal, civil unrest or between other state unities.

Shortly thereafter, Wilson and Henri Poincaré bloviate about peace in the "Posters" section: "Poincaré, the president of the French Republic, will rise . . . and . . . speak of the misery and sorrow of this war that has ended in victory. Peace must bring with it reparations and guarantees against a recurrence of the dangers of the past . . . Mr. Wilson rises, speaks . . . He, too, mentions the new peace that must build the basis for the freedom and happiness of countless people" (Döblin 576). Poincaré invokes a notion of peace in which unity or justice is premised on the other's disjunction, the harmony of disharmony, whereas Wilson posits a peace which produces justice like the autogenesis of virgin birth: not a justice that will produce a lasting peace, but a lasting peace that will

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<sup>39</sup> The Peace of Westphalia was a number of peace treaties which included the creation of international boundaries.

produce justice, the gift of peace given with the expectation of justice. Peace is the experience of *Dikē*, a present without presence. The peace Wilson proposes is antithetical to the fragmentary practice of politics from the outside; it constitutes an affirmative conclusion from a negative premise, that is, absolute justice from historical fragmentation. This moment finds its fulfillment in Wilson's later contemplation on the nature of theology and politics; that is to say, Wilson's failure to forge lasting peace for Europe fulfills the historical messiah's promise to fail his and to return to a subsequent present—the "Sequel" gestured to in the title of the last book.

Although Becker finds justice in the divine, he remains an historical man of flesh and blood: if the divine is the axis of justice, the question is whether the peace of that justice can be experienced in the historical present. The answer is a tentative yes, but that experience is limited to the interior peace of faith, which brings the soul into accord with the divine order of justice. Becker's search for that justice does engender the soldier's fading from reality: his search occurs mostly as encounters with Satan, who appears as the Mysterious Brazilian, a lion, and a rat, encouraging Becker to join the spirit world, that is, to become "unreal" but by the flesh and blood method of suicide. Thus, Becker's attempted suicide can be read as his acceptance that justice is wholly unavailable in the historical: if the truth of history is its fragmentation, how is one to act consistently and without fear of committing evil? His decision to commit suicide forecloses the possibility of any further missteps and adopts the novel's language of temporal disjointedness: "I'm vomiting up my whole self. I refuse to accept this existence. I refuse to accept this gift with its fake ego named Friedrich Becker. The package will be returned to sender" (Döblin 479). The decision to refuse this gift is not a disavowal of history, but a tacit capitulation to the expiation of history as a matter of personal guilt and responsibility: suicide is the only means to expiate the extent to which Becker contributes to the disjunction of the present. In this sense, his ego or conscious thinking self is only meaningless fragment within the historical, consumed by his resulting indecision and inactivity; the only resolution available is to become "unreal."

Becker's survival, however, is, as he suspects, due to God's intervention: "That man' has not succeeded. Then there was someone who was stronger than "that man." Then it was not a defeat after all" (Döblin 486). Indeed, at the literary level, the triumph

is the novel's polemic transcending the form of an historical novel. Johannes Tauler, the fourteenth-century Alsatian Catholic mystic and another spiritual manifestation in *November 1918*,<sup>40</sup> suggests that Becker's search for justice and peace through the expiation of his personal guilt and responsibility will be both his downfall and his saving grace: "You are a man of high, proud temper, you will accept no answer but one that makes you higher, prouder still. You have entered through the Gate of Dread and Despair. Your pride has led you along this path. You will not find the truth in any other way" (Döblin 441). Becker survives his confrontation with Satan because he was on not *the* but *a* path to God, who saw his suffering and saved him: "Then God intervened and saved me, and woke the core of my numbed ego. Ah, it is not an empty shell, this life, there is seriousness about it" (Döblin 510). Thus, *A People Betrayed* and *The Troops Return*'s polemic is the truth of history: its incommensurable fragmentation, within which the believer can still find the interior peace of faith, which brings the soul into accord with the divine order of justice. And the moments preceding Becker's spiritual denouement in *The Troops Return* serve as an affirmation of the novel's polemic: Becker's pronouncement that "The world has a place in the order of justice" acknowledges the possibility of peace, but the acknowledgement that "this world must die in order to live in God" limits that peace. Shortly thereafter, Becker experiences a sudden clarity of mind: "*Adsum*, here I am. I am a part of reality. This is it" (Döblin 597). He finds himself in the present but also "connected to the easy-going, proud Becker, the first-lieutenant from the war, lying among the wounded and helpless in the military hospital" (Döblin 597): he experiences the inner-peace of the faithful, which neutralizes the present's disjunction.

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<sup>40</sup> Hofmann observes that, in the third volume, Tauler "will subsequently be Becker's spiritual mentor" (Hofmann, "Revolution and Redemption" 477). See also Hofmann, "Revolution and Redemption" 477fn14.

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