

MARKING TIME, OR STALIN AND THE METRONOME

Enzo Traverso, *Left Wing Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 289 p. ISBN 9780231179423.

Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe: A Study in Elective Affinity*, translated by Hope Heaney, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2017), 276 p. ISBN 9781786630858.

Visitors to Prague may be familiar with the metronome that overlooks the city from a plinth in the Letná Gardens. It often does not move at all, but when it does, the metronome ticks out a constant rhythm, measuring out identical intervals of time that stretch into infinity – a future that is at the same time a continuation and reproduction of the present. Although its purpose is unstated, it is often invoked by tour guides and foreign journalists as symbolising the progress and growth of “Czech democracy.” This fits a useful narrative, since on the same spot there once stood a vast statue of Stalin, depicted as gazing out over the city towards a glorious future, flanked on either side by the heroic workers, peasants, and soldiers who were to build and defend it. From the very beginning, though, this statue was always too late. Begun in 1949, it was not finished until 1955. Within a year, such idolatry had become suspect, and the statue survived only until 1963, when it was destroyed. The plinth remained empty until 1991, when the metronome was installed. The space beneath has been home to various initiatives – a radio station, a snack bar and, in 2018, a temporary exhibition about totalitarianism, beginning with the Nazi occupation of 1938 and running up to the revolutions of 1989.

The morality tale told by the exhibition, and perhaps implied by the metronome’s triumph over Stalin, might stand as a good example of the “regime of historicity” that Enzo Traverso seeks to understand and undermine in *Left Wing Melancholia*. Under such a regime, Traverso suggests,

witnesses speak in the name of the victims and the task of collective memory lies in an inexhaustible work of mourning: we have to impede their oblivion and learn the lessons of their suffering for the next generations. Young people are not summoned to change the world, but rather to not repeat the mistakes of those

who, blinded by dangerous utopias, finally contributed to the building of a despotic order. (57)

This is a relationship between history and memory in which “the dialectical tension between past and future is broken in a world withdrawn into the present,” a present of “permanent acceleration within a ‘naturalised’ and eternalised social structure, that is, conceived and considered as immutable, without any possible alternative.” (57) In this regime, the utopian horizon implied by Stalin’s gaze is assumed to be necessarily destructive; the only alternative is the slow methodical development of the present, the metronome ticking evenly and constantly. Marking time without changing it.

Traverso’s book seeks to break through this understanding of the present, while also accepting that there can be no return to the kind of optimism that drove the previous era. It does this through a sustained examination of left-wing attitudes towards history and memory, marked in particular by the failures of the twentieth century. In this respect, it can be seen as a timely renewal of an approach that Michael Löwy’s *Redemption and Utopia* – first written in 1988 but re-issued in 2017 as part of Verso’s *Radical Thinkers* series – labels historical messianism: a distinctive fusion of Jewish messianic thought together with libertarian and utopian socialism, which was visible to some degree in a diverse range of thinkers of the early twentieth century. Löwy’s analysis rests on the identification of several affinities between these two traditions: a combination of a commitment to revolutionary transformation with the idea of a romantic redemption or return to the past; the necessarily public and historical character of that redemption; the idea that the future will be a decisive, qualitative break with a fundamentally corrupted present, rather than being a mere continuation of or development upon it; and the idea that the Messiah’s coming will overturn all human made laws, and perhaps ultimately the idea of law itself. Löwy’s work offers a rich analysis of a range of figures in which these affinities can be traced, ranging from those who leant more towards messianism (Gershom Scholem, Franz Rozenzweig) to those who inclined more towards revolutionary politics (Lukács, Gustav Landauer, Martin Buber). At the centre (conceptually and literally) of the book is Walter Benjamin, who Löwy represents as the authentic fusion of these elements.

The argument that revolutionary politics has its origins in religious messianism is, of course, not a novel one – rather it is a staple of certain brands of anti-communist literature. But for Löwy these affinities were a source of strength rather than weakness, precisely because they allowed figures like Benjamin to articulate a version of Marxist thought that was distinct from the mechanistic confidence displayed by Stalinism and social democracy alike:

Historical messianism, or the romantic/millenarian conception of history, constitutes a break with the philosophy of progress and with the positivist worship of scientific and technological development. It brings a qualitative, non-evolutionary

perception of historical time, in which the detour through the past becomes the necessary part of departure for the leap towards the future, as opposed to the linear, unidimensional and purely quantitative vision of temporality as cumulative progress. (204)

Traverso's debt to this tradition is clear: his book is in fact dedicated to Löwy, and Benjamin occupies a similarly central place. Traverso, however, approaches this detour through the past via the category of melancholy – an attachment to a lost object that cannot (and perhaps even should not) be mourned. Faced with the failures of the left in the twentieth century, Traverso calls for a Marxist politics of memory that is capable of confronting and recognising that we have been defeated, and in the process we have lost something. This loss is symbolised for him by the year 1989, the moment in which the “the changes accumulated over the previous decades suddenly condensed, leading to collapse.” (57) Prior to this collapse, the left remained capable of approaching its defeats with a hopeful attitude. Central events in the communist tradition such as “1848, the Paris Commune, the Spartacist Revolution, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, and the Bolivarian guerrilla struggle of Che Guevara – possessed a great and glorious taste. They certainly deserved retrospective criticism but did not spread despair; they compelled admiration, inspired courage, and reinforced loyalty.” (50) This was enabled by both a confidence in historical progress and the actual progress of the movement, a “metabolism of defeat” whose secret lay “precisely in the fusion between the suffering of a catastrophic experience (defeat, depression, humiliation, persecution, exile) and the persistence of a utopia lived as a horizon of expectation and a historical perspective.” (51)

It is precisely this horizon of expectation that Traverso sees as denied to us now. We are no longer able to see our defeats as glorious staging posts in a passage towards an emancipated horizon. We can no longer “metabolise” or “sublate” our defeats; we must instead hold fast to them. In this sense the old slogan, “don't mourn, organise” acquires a very different significance: “Because of the end of utopias, a successful mourning could also mean identification with the enemy: lost socialism replaced with accepted capitalism [...] In this case, melancholy would be the obstinate refusal of any compromise with domination.” (45) Thus, melancholy is in a sense an “impossible mourning,” or even a resistance to mourning itself, a refusal to accept that the object is lost, since to do so would be to surrender completely to reality. A contemporary Marxism cannot help but adopt this melancholic posture:

Amputated from its principle of hope – at least in the concrete form it took in the twentieth century, when the utopia of a liberated society was embodied by communism – it internalises a historic downfall. Its strategic dimension does not consist in organising the suppression of capitalism, but rather in overcoming the trauma of a suffered collapse. Its art lies in organising pessimism: to draw lessons

from the past; to recognise a defeat without capitulating in front of the enemy, with the awareness that a new start will inescapably take new forms, unknown paths. (834)

Much of Traverso's book is concerned with discussing these moments of "organising pessimism." One chapter is dedicated to the concept of Bohemia. This is not the geographical Bohemia to which Löwy frequently returns, but the world formed by "the synthesis between an anticapitalist and romantic ethos and an anticonformist and transgressive lifestyle, [between] the accursed artist and the political plotter." (124) This is Bohemia as both an emergent creativity in moments of rebellion, and a place where people go to nurse their wounds, "a realm where, behind the façade of the restored order, the vanquished retire and meditate on their defeat." (150) The remaining chapters concern a number of encounters, real or imagined, between thinkers who attempted to rethink Marxism in the twentieth century: the melancholic lack of an encounter between the Frankfurt School and the Black Marxism embodied in CLR James - a missed encounter that ultimately led to both Western Marxism and Post-Colonial Studies merging "under the sign of defeat." (177) The letters between Benjamin and Adorno in the 1930s that reveal their divergent attitudes towards political action and its emancipatory possibilities. Finally, the reading of Benjamin undertaken by the French Marxist Daniel Bensaïd in the years following 1989.

It is in this final chapter that Traverso most explicitly returns to Löwy's themes of messianism and redemption. Bensaïd's decision to turn to Benjamin was not merely an academic whim, nor a vague affinity, but a decision necessitated by the similarities between Benjamin's last years and the early 1990s. Even a Trotskyist like Bensaïd was capable of recognising that 1989 had represented more than simply the end of a particular regime (or set of regimes): "The history of communism and the Marxist tradition as a whole were put into question. The task of thinking a revolutionary project, its social forces, its organizational instruments, its alliances, and its strategy became unavoidable." (220) In this context, Benjamin represented a kind of "ark" for those who wished to resist the conservative wave unleashed by 1989, and his critique of historicism became a way of both re-reading Marxism and breaking through the triumphalism of the end of history. Benjamin's distinction between viewing history as homogeneous, empty time and viewing it as a qualitative, open and unfinished process became central to the project of rescuing the possibility of emancipation from the crushing dominance of the present. Though now robbed of an emancipatory horizon, Benjamin encourages us instead to look backwards, to a past that demands redemption and transformation. As Traverso stresses, the task becomes to change the past, or more accurately to re-activate it in the present: "To remember means to salvage, but rescuing the past does not mean trying to reappropriate or repeat what has occurred and vanished; rather it means to *change the present*. The transformation of the present carries a possible 'redemption'

of what has passed.” (222) Throughout the book, Traverso repeats the importance of both keeping in view and adopting the perspective of the defeated, in order to sustain and enrich our denunciation of the present. In a project of left-wing melancholy, “the sight of the vanquished is critical.” (84)

While Traverso is aware that this messianic language opens revolutionary politics to charges of obscurantism and blind faith, he joins Löwy in insisting that this theological dimension is essential and unavoidable, resisting Bensaïd’s attempts at a purely secular reading. There is, then, in both thinkers, an almost audacious attempt to reclaim the classical criticism of Marxism as an eschatology from the mouths of its twentieth century critics, to plead guilty, to assert that messianic hope *is indeed* a necessary component of the tradition, and that it will continue to be so long as we are to believe that a revolution might deliver something genuinely different from what came before. Marxism may no longer be a determinism or a teleology, but it remains an eschatology and a messianism, bound to the theological categories it claimed to transcend. Yet contra the critics, the messianic element of Marxism is precisely to introduce uncertainty, not certainty, not communism as a future towards which we inexorably move, but as a rupture that will break all previous logics and turn the world upside down.

These theological elements act both to sustain the left through conditions of despair and maintain a horizon of possibility, and Traverso notes that in Benjamin they became “all the more pronounced and profound as the European left appeared defeated, abandoned by its leaders, and crushed by the inexorable rise of Nazism.” Yet Traverso and his subjects are also preoccupied with the challenge of uniting these commitments with a rational appreciation of historical possibilities. Traverso joins Bensaïd in invoking Lucien Goldmann’s repurposing of Pascal’s wager for the twentieth century left, in which “thinking emancipation became a *wager*, an act of faith.” (219) Nonetheless, the shift from faith to wager raises important questions. Pascal’s wager is rational because we have nothing to lose. While from a certain perspective Marxism’s wager also has nothing to lose (but our chains), we also know, as indeed Traverso’s central motif reminds us, that we can lose and have lost. Sustaining resistance and struggle may always be worthwhile, but once we begin to decide where to focus our energies we open ourselves to the possibility of failure. Placing our bets in this way is not merely an act of faith, but rather opens up a space between certainty and faith: neither a shot in the dark, nor a confident step forward, but acting according to a balance of probabilities. This is, as Traverso notes, what Bensaïd was seeking to achieve in his reading – an alliance between a hard-headed strategic appreciation of what is possible and an openness to rapid and qualitative transformation. Traverso suggests that this combination of “strategic hypothesis” and “regulating horizon” might be best understood in Bloch’s terms as a “concrete (and possible) utopia.” (231) The “prognostic” dimension of Marxism is thus restored in a far less certain and more tentative register, as something that is necessary for the formulation of strategic interventions and the grasping of opportunities, rather than as prophetic reassurance.

It is in this prognostic mode that the practical import of the messianic approach both emerges and begins to present a dilemma. Löwy sees Benjamin as transposing an anticipatory messianism into an active messianism, in which the Messiah is no longer simply to be waited for, but to be called into being through active intervention in the moment. He notes that “it goes without saying that this standpoint might lead to a passive and resigned expectation of the advent of the Messiah,” but “in Benjamin’s mind it was not a question of waiting, but rather of seizing the revolutionary opportunity that each historic moment offered.” (207) This “active revolutionary messianism” is summarised for Löwy in Benjamin’s quotation of Focillon: “To ‘mark a time’ does not mean intervening passively in chronology, it means hastening the moment.” (208) And yet, this melancholic messianism has to do its fair share of waiting. Even if neither passive nor resigned, there is a sense in which the kind of left-wing melancholy that Traverso describes has no choice but to wait for a messiah, even as it acts to hasten their arrival. In another work, Bensaïd describes this attitude as “akin to the concentration of a hunter on the lookout for the sudden emergence of what is possible.”¹ Given this, we might worry that these activist and anticipatory elements are too easily separated, with activism giving way to a solemn vigilance. On the other hand, perhaps this is precisely where the contemporary left finds itself, both waiting for the kind of events that might transform the possibilities for action, while also sustaining the kind of resistance that keep any possibilities alive.

And perhaps it has ever been thus. Here, Traverso’s focus on 1989 might be seen as bearing too much. The year 1989 is seen as a decisive moment not because it represents the failure of communism per se, but because it crystallises all of the processes of disillusionment into a decisive blow, in which the emancipatory horizon no longer became tenable. Yet, as the example of Benjamin reveals, this process of disillusionment was very long in the making. The historicist vision that sustained the confidence of socialists in the West was – like Stalin’s statue – always already out of date. If this is the case, then, why should we see 1989 as possessed of such import? Traverso insists that “left melancholy does not necessarily mean nostalgia for real socialism and other wrecked forms of Stalinism.” But such nostalgia certainly does exist, and even appears to be undergoing a certain revival. While it would be naïve to suggest we could simply “forget” about 1989 and its historical significance – even those who had no illusions invested in the historical regimes still feel its effects – we might worry that singling it out as a melancholy object is to give it a weight it doesn’t deserve, and even to resuscitate a tradition that deserves to be left behind, successfully mourned, rather than clung to.

Alternatively, we might try to reconfigure Traverso’s focus on 1989 from a different perspective. Traverso writes largely from the perspective of the Western left, for whom 1989 was largely experienced as the collapse of a horizon. However, in the East 1989 is

¹ Daniel Bensaïd, *Marx for Our Times* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 85.

not just a collapse of one horizon, but a revolutionary moment that opened up a range of others. On the one hand, this means that approaching 1989 with a melancholic attitude in the East is thus even more fraught with danger than in the West, doubly prone to both nostalgia and triumphalism. On the other hand, Traverso's call to reactivate the past by changing the present might also be applied to 1989 itself. If, as Traverso puts it, "melancholy means memory and awareness of the potentialities of the past: a fidelity to the emancipatory processes of revolution, not to its consequences," (52) then we should look not just to the triumphant victors of 1989, but to all the emancipatory possibilities it contained. Part of this is recognising how events could have proceeded differently, that the dominance of what Benjamin calls "homogeneous, empty time" was not The Only Alternative. But this reactivation must proceed alongside an attempt to transform the present – to redeem those possibilities and see them as urgently current, not merely missed moments. Returning to Letná, we might recall that, between the historicist confidence of Stalin and the homogenous regularity of the metronome, for much of its history the plinth stood empty. Perhaps, like Benjamin anticipating the Messiah, we should focus our attention on this empty space, and the possibilities that might still emerge from it.

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