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The Messianic Idea, the Time of Capital and the Everyday

Large William

This was the purpose of the experiment.
To throw emissaries into time. To call
past and future to the rescue of the
present.

Chris Marker, *La Jetée*

Is there not something vaguely disingenuous and repulsive about pilfering the treasure chests of religion in order to come up with ideas, when you do not have the slightest faith yourself? You read Levinas, Rosenzweig, Scholem and Cohen, for example, on the idea of the Messianic, but you do not believe in the Messiah at all, and cannot imagine you ever will. At the same time, however, you do not agree with Negri's judgment, when he is entirely dismissive of this idea. Writing on the Messianic in Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in his book *Time for Revolution*, he says 'this conception is ruinous' (Negri, 2003, p. 112). He believes this because he interprets the 'now time' (*Jetzt-Zeit*) of Benjamin's Messianism to be no different from the time of capital. This identification is completely wrong. Both because it identifies the time of capital with Messianic time, but also because it thinks of this time as mystical, as appealing to a 'beyond' which is outside of the ordinary experience of time. What is outside, however, is never the same as a 'beyond', which is why Benjamin is not a mystic, nor the Messianic opposed to the everyday. Perhaps, then, when it comes to the Messianic, and any other religious concepts or ideas, you do not have to believe them, if belief means appealing to a 'beyond'. We might say, rather, 'how does the idea of the Messianic make sense of our ordinary experience of this world?' Because this is the first thing that strikes you about idea of the Messianic (at

least in its Jewish origin and not its Christian reformulation): it concerns this world and not any other.

There are two ways one can understand religious ideas. You can investigate them dispassionately as mummified relics of the past, whose interest to us is only academic, or you can think of them as living ideas because they still speak to us. So quite the opposite to Negri, I shall argue that the idea of Messianic is important because it does allow us to think against the hegemony of capital, and it does so precisely because it offers us a different image of time. Like Negri, I too, first of all, want to go back to Benjamin's description of the Messianic, but unlike him I shall then retrace its source in Judaism. I will end, finally, on the theme of the everyday and moods in Virno and Blanchot, which is why I understand the Messianic (or at least one version of it in Judaism) to be quite the opposite of the mysticism which Negri fears has contaminated some aspects of Marxism.

My argument is that there are three conceptions of the future: one, the fantastical future of capital which is endlessly postponed ('empty time', Benjamin calls it); the real time which this fantasy conceals, the destruction both of individuals and the planet; finally, Messianic time which is the resistance to this fantasy as the recognition of the disaster. By the word 'recognition' here, I do not mean 'acceptance'. It is the recognition of the disaster in one aspect only: the indeterminacy of time which is its possibility, and which is also the source of any emancipatory promise. Only in this sense are the idea of the Messianic and the catastrophe close together. Both have their source in the promise of time, but they stand to that promise in a different way. The difference is that the Messianic demands justice. In essence it is political, and all politics that is open both to justice, and the time out of joint which makes it possible, is Messianic. To believe one needs a catastrophe in order for the Messianic era to arrive (Millenarianism in all its forms) is still to belong to a linear conception of time, and therefore, paradoxically speaking, not to be Messianic at all.

1. *Capitalism and Religion*

Perhaps there is a more intimate relation between capitalism and religion than I have intimated in the opening paragraphs. Is religious belief a false problem, if it is no longer a question of assenting to a belief at all? We are not asked to believe in capitalism, but in important ways it functions as a religion.¹ This is not just because, as Weber famously asserts, Protestantism is a key precursor for its development, but it too is a religion of a particular kind having its own pieties, rituals and gods. It is, as Benjamin describes it, in a small fragment ‘Capitalism and Religion’ (which was never published in his lifetime), a cult (Benjamin, 2004). As a cult, it invades our everyday lives invisibly. Capitalism becomes the mysterious force supposedly sustaining our lives without question, and money the god we must all worship.

If capitalism has replaced religion (not because it is secular but because it is the most powerful of all religions), then it is a religion whose form is specific, Benjamin argues, even if it is no longer felt as such. It makes guilt all pervasive and this is its fundamental religious emotional tonality. ‘Guilt’, in German (*die Schuld*), also means ‘debt’. We did not have to have had experienced the recent collapse of finance capital (though it has made it more vivid for us), to know that capitalism only functions on credit. The other side of credit is debt, and it is always the debt of the poor which pays for the credit of the rich, whether the poor is the ‘third world’ in the centres of capitalism (the ‘ghettos’ within every city) or the periphery of globalisation itself (what is euphemistically called the ‘developing world’). You have to get into debt because you must consume. This is the unspoken religious commandment of capitalism.

The proximate cause of the current financial crisis is the sub prime market in America, but what is concealed in this cause is a general conception of time which is

¹ This has been thesis of Philip Goodchild’s recent work. As he writes in *Capitalism and Religion*, ‘If God is dead, he is replaced by time and money, not man – there are still transcendent sources of meaning and value that exceed thought and experience, even if they can take the most banal forms.’ [emphasis in the original] (Goodchild, 2002, p. 133)

valid for capitalism as whole. If to consume you have to get into debt, then the fantasy which sustains the cycle of consumption is that this debt can be endlessly postponed. Occasionally reality bites back and the relation between credit and debt becomes unbalanced, but even a balanced financial market (an impossible ideal) only the masks the deeper illusion of capitalism that the future will never arrive and this postponement can be postponed permanently. Hidden within this fantasy is the real material destruction which makes possible endless debt in the short period, and impossible over the longer one. It is one of the precise functions of this fantasy to conceal this outcome. The circulation of capital becomes detached from reality such that we believe it has become its own origin and the origin of reality as well (such that we can no longer conceive of what might be its alternative). This is the source of the religious power of capital. ‘Forces and agents,’ as Deleuze and Guattari write in *Anti-Oedipus*, ‘come to represent a miraculous form of its own power: they appear to be “miraculated” (*miraculés*) by it.’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984, p. 10) The only way to dispel this sorcery and bewitchment is by pointing to the reality it conceals: the real future waiting to happen beneath the marketing of the future. ‘Capitalism,’ Benjamin writes, ‘is entirely without precedent, in that it is a religion which is not the reform of existence, but its complete destruction.’ (Benjamin, 2004, p. 289)

2. *Global Destruction*

The real future of capitalism is imminent global catastrophe. ‘*They have ruined the world,*’ Korin says, the main character in Krasznahorkai’s novel *War and War*, and continues, ‘they have ruined everything they’ve managed to get their hands on, and by waging an endless treacherous war of attrition they have managed to get their hands on everything, ruined everything—seized it, ruined it and carried on in this way until they

had achieved complete victory, so that it was one long triumphal march of seizing and ruining.’ [Emphasis in the original] (Krasznahorkai, 2006, p. 260).²

Perhaps this future has already happened and we simply have not caught up with it yet, just as capitalism had done so before anyone ever knew, sweeping through existing feudal societies and destroying everything in its wake. It is a future produced by the ecological contradiction at the heart of capitalism, because the cycle of credit and debt is infinite, but the physical resources it depends upon are finite. Capitalism is the illusion money can be created out of thin air, but in the end there is always something real sustaining it, and the effects of capitalism on this reality are calamitous. We know that global warming is happening because of the burning of fossil fuels and deforestation. This is not an abstraction and it cannot be postponed into an ideal future which will never arrive. The question is not whether but when. The effects of global warming, however, are utterly unpredictable. As the report by the Royal Society ‘Climate Change’ (which is the summation of scientific opinion in the UK) asserts, we cannot know when it will happen. It could happen today or many years from now (Royal Society, 2005). Nor do we know what effects these changes will have on resources and population. The time of capital is fundamentally at odds with the non-linear time of reality, where the property of an effect is non-proportionally related to its cause. It thinks you can always plan yourself out of a crisis, because they never happen as such, since by some miraculous conjunction of time, a technology will reach us at the very moment we need it most.

The myth of capitalism is that progress is infinite and any unforeseen danger can be alleviated, but the threshold between stability and instability, in this case, is wholly unpredictable. Nothing might happen for years and we might be able to find the

²This monologue is one long lament without paragraphs (always a good sign in a novel), and there really is no way to quote it fully. These are the opening words of the monologue, and my cut is arbitrary. You must read it for your self. Krasznahorkai, and his friend the film maker Béla Tarr, are the true artists of the apocalypse of capitalism.

alternative technology to replace fossil fuels, or the catastrophe might be right around the corner. What is certain is that no civilisation can survive without climatic equilibrium, but when we look at the ice core records from Greenland, then uncertainty is more certain than certainty. What is unique to our era (the last 8000 years) is that the climate has been peculiarly consistent, but there is no reason for this to continue (Cox, 2005). Added to this uncertainty is the effect of an increase in global temperature (the average surface temperature of the Earth has risen 2 to 3 °C this century) on the climatic system as a whole. The smallest change might have the most catastrophic effect over a relatively small time period. None the less, we carry on as though time were linear, as though the future could be postponed in a present extending forever, and we can plan for whatever outcome. Such complacency has its source in the time of capital itself, where the future is only ever a continuation of the present through the calculation of risk and the only apparent worthwhile question is whether the reward in the present for us is worth what others will pay in the future.³

3. Benjamin's Angel

So we might as well say the disaster has already happened and we are only waiting for the effects to catch up with us. The real future has already intervened to rupture the bubble of the fantasy of the cyclical time of credit. But is time just a conveyor belt of instants in which we are just thrown into the ruins of a dead civilisation and dying planet? Is all this unstoppable and inevitable? Despite Negri's scepticism, such an interrupted time is precisely what is present in Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in what he calls 'a weak messianic power' (*eine schwache messianische Kraft*)

³The paradox is that the more we risk the less we are in control. Added to the possible changes to the climate because of global warming, is the effect of reaching peak production in oil, which is the major cause of climatic change in the first place (Roberts, 2004). As people struggle for less and less resources, then conflicts across the world can only increase and political instability will be the norm. It has already been calculated that we have exceeded the capacity of the planet to support us (Wackernagel & et al., 2002).

(Benjamin, 1999, pp. 244–55). In these fragments, Benjamin argues against a conception of time as continuous and homogeneous, which he associates with all those who believe in the objectivity of history and progress, where the present infinitely extends out of the past into an empty future. The task of the historian is merely to record the facts and events which stand on this featureless plane. Such a time is not scientific or objective, but capitalist. It is the time of the production line which has been placed at the level of knowledge. True historical time is not continuous and homogeneous, but discontinuous and heterogeneous. This time is both political and Messianic. The historian does not stand to time indifferently, as one event happening after another, but seizes from time the possibility of a different future other than the one supposed to be inevitable. The true significance of the past is only what leaps out of time and such moments can redeem the present for us as the repetition of past in the future. Time is not an infinite series of ‘now points’ in which our experience is suspended, but a virtual past in which the sparks of different futures are visible to the one who can see them. The past is not just what has happened but exists in the present as its future. It affects the present as the permanent possibility of the state of things being entirely different from what they are. In this way, events can be snatched out of the continuum of time. We can change time. We can demand that time, this time, be on the side of the vanquished and not the victors. Any politics which seeks justice in this world, which does not see time as the inevitable progress of an indifferent force, must be Messianic, no matter how weak this power is.

Famously in ‘The Theses on the Philosophy of History’, Benjamin describes a picture (which he owned) of an angel by the painter Klee called the *Angelus Novus* to illuminate this other meaning of history. He imagines the angel blown by a storm out of Paradise. This storm is what we call progress. It sees it as one single catastrophe piling up beneath its feet as it is flung backwards into empty time. It is not this angel of history which is the Messiah, nor even the foretelling of the Messiah. For its face is only turned towards the past. What the angel sees is what is hidden by the ideology of progress. It is

the truth of *our* history, but not the truth *of* history. The empty time of the future is merely the cradle of the disaster. What would it mean to see time differently? The future is not empty and the present is not the addition of one event on top of another. Rather, the present is always full of other possibilities which are not part of the present state of things. This other present, all these other possibilities which have been nullified by the actual (but in which the actual itself has to have its origin), exists virtually in the Messianic future. It is to see in every instant a different possibility. 'For every second of time,' as Benjamin writes of the Jews, 'was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.' (Benjamin, 1999, p. 255)

4. The Messianic Idea

The future is not an empty void, nor the endless repetition of what has already happened, but the creation of the new at the edge of time. It is a present political actuality. The idea of the Messianic is essential temporal. It is to conceive of the future as an interruption rather than as progress. Capitalism robs us of the time in the present for the sake of a future which will never arrive but does so by hiding the real future of a catastrophe. Capitalism is the latest version of cyclical time, where the past and the future are held together in the endless cycle of the same. It is a new version of paganism.

We contrast this time with the time of the infinite. Infinite time is not the same as the eternal present of time. The infinity of the future, the creativity of time, is not the same as the eternal empty time of the present. The first time is turned to the closure of the past, as though the present was simply the past frozen into a homogeneous unity (the past is the merely the remorseless unchanging passing of one event after the other). The second time is opened towards the future, which is infinitely productive and constantly renewed. This is why the Jewish idea of the Messianic is not eschatological, as it is in Christianity. The latter image of time is still linear. The Messiah returns at the end of time in a future which has already happened placed outside of time: a future

which is strictly speaking timeless, like the circulation of capital. Such a future is quite different from a future as the pregnant possibilities of the present, which do not belong to the *status quo*, but is a new time within present time.⁴

The future is not other than the present, not an empty time in which the present continually falls, so as to become frozen in a past without change or difference, but the present redeemed in this and every moment. This is why in some forms of Hasidism it is said that the age of the Messiah has already arrived and our duty is to not to wait for the end of time, but to bring time to an end. The myth of a Golden Age at the end of time is exactly the opposite of Messianic time, since it secretly harbours the belief that the present cannot be redeemed, so it projects the redeemed present into a mythical future that will not happen, and which is beyond this world.⁵ Rather than a 'beyond', the Messianic is always an actuality. Rather than the past being frozen in eternity, it is the memory of those moments which were already opened to another future yet to come and still to come in the present. This is an alternative history and a history of alternatives which cannot be conceived if history is only the catalogue of what has happened rather than what is still to happen.

The future emerges from the void of being (the difference between the virtual and actual) through action. It is not the projection of time onto a past or a future beyond it. Eschatology, on the contrary, is the accomplishment of time in an eternity transcending it. The *eschaton* today is capitalism: the future that will not happen

⁴ Levinas imagines this future as fecundity. Messianic time is the time of the child whose future is both mine and not mine. 'The relation with the child - that is, the relation with the other, not power but fecundity - establishes relationship with the absolute future, or infinite time. [...] Fecundity continues history without producing old age. Infinite time does not bring an eternal life to an aging subject; it is *better* across the discontinuity of generations, punctuated by the inexhaustible youths of the child.' [Emphasis in the original. Translation modified] (Levinas, 1969, p. 268)

⁵ 'This is the great cultural and historical riddle which Messianism poses. All peoples transfer the Golden Age into the past, into the primeval time; only the Jewish people hopes to see in the future the development of mankind. Messianism alone maintains the development of the human race, while the Golden Age represents the idea of a decline. [...] In Messianism past and present disappear in the face of the future, which exclusively makes up the consciousness of time.' (Cohen, 1995, pp. 289–90)

(eternal circulation of capital) in the time of the catastrophe (global destruction and permanent war). It is the eternal present without a future since it destroys the future in two ways: first, by projecting the future into a beyond (this is the religion of capitalism, infinite debt endlessly postponed); second, the real future it is actuality producing, the state of things in the present, which is concealed by the illusory future, is the total destruction of everything.

5. *The Everyday*

Scholem tells us that the content of the Messianic idea is very precise. It contains two elements: the restorative and the utopian (Scholem, 1995, p. 3). Restorative time is the projection of an ideal past into the future, and utopian, the arrival of the future to come, which comes not so much from the past, but from the future of the future itself. These are two tendencies within the Messianic. They are not opposed to one another, but always present to some extent or other in any kind of Messianism. Benjamin's weak Messianic power, for example, is more restorative than utopian, but nonetheless it is still utopian to some degree, since it looks to the future in then past. Against a pure utopianism, he speaks at the end of the fragments of a prohibition in Judaism against prophecy of the future. 'We know,' he writes, 'that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future.' (Benjamin, 1999, p. 255). Be that as it may, whether in strong or weak Messianism, the future always breaks into the present rather than fulfilling it. There is no historical progression towards Messianic time. It is not a fulfilment of history, but its fracturing. Messianic time is not teleological but transcendent. It is, as Scholem writes, 'transcendence breaking into history, an intrusion in which history itself perishes, transformed in its ruin because it is struck by a beam of light shining into it from an outside source.' (Scholem, 1995, p. 10)

Perhaps it would not be possible for Benjamin to speak of such a transcendence in a direct way. Even Scholem at the end of his essay seems to think that such an extraordinary or meta-historical meaning of Messianism is no longer possible since

Israel has entered the history of nations.⁶ Is there a way of thinking this transcendence in a differently not as exterior but interior, as a kind of broken immanence? My answer to this question is through the everyday. The Messianic inhabits our everyday lives, but it does so not from a ‘beyond’ but as an outside. What is ‘outside’ is not exterior if we think of the exterior as coming from a different place. On the contrary, what is outside is the most interior, more interior than any place. It is what disrupts every place. In the relation between capital and life, life is the outside, but this outside inhabits capital from the very inside. Capitalism presents itself as the very origin of life, but the truth is the reverse, life is the very condition of capitalism. There is no external opposition between them. Post-Fordist capitalism has to directly appropriate the capacities and abilities of individuals in order to produce surplus value, but in order to do so, it has to exist at the very heart of the everyday. This would mean that any resistance to capitalism, any internal difference to its power and influence, must itself happen within the everyday, and must do so all the time, because it is life which is the surplus and not capitalism. There is no transcendent politics which is not a nostalgic romantic anti-capitalism (localism or a desire to return to nature, to pre-capitalism). Any worthwhile political critique of capitalism must be immanent. It must show how capitalism distorts everyday life reducing it to less than it could be by decreasing the very potential of both human beings and the planet on which they exist.

In the notes at the end of ‘Capitalism and Religion’, Benjamin writes about the mood of capitalism as being one of ‘worry’ (*Sorge*) (Benjamin, 2004, p. 290). Such worry is the opposite of hope. Its origin is a communal despair brought about through debt. Benjamin was not the only one who was writing about moods in the 1920s. Heidegger too spoke of worry and anxiety. In *Being and Time*, anxiety is the fundamental mood because it reveals the nothingness at the heart of human existence, such that none of us truly belong to this world, and we are all, ontologically speaking,

⁶ ‘Born out of the horror and destruction that was Jewish history in our generation, it is bound to history itself and not meta-history; it has not given itself up totally to Messianism.’ (Scholem, 1995, p. 36)

permanently homeless (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 228–35). In lectures just after *Being and Time* called *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude and Solitude*, we are no longer anxious but bored and the mood of our of age, boredom, is not individual but communal. We have, as Heidegger says, become a slave of our everyday occupations (Heidegger, 1995, p. 129). It is not something particular which is boring, nor even ourselves, rather everything has become boring. Yet this ‘everything’ is indeterminate and impersonal, just as the German phrase, Heidegger reminds us, *es ist einem langweilig* (‘it’s boring’, or ‘it is boring for one’), is (Heidegger, 1995, pp. 134–5).

What characterises moods is that they pervade the whole of existence giving it its particular tone and quality. What is or are the mood or moods of today? Is it still boredom, as Heidegger asserts? We do not have to agree with Heidegger completely, and there is still a latent romanticism here, since for him it is about snatching the authentic moment out of the general banality of life. Paolo Virno describes the moods of late capitalism as opportunism and cynicism, which we might say are particular kinds of boredom, when boredom defines everything that decreases the power to exist (Virno, 2004, pp. 84–8). He adds, and this is the decisive point, it is not just these moods themselves which are significant, but the ‘neutral core’ from which they spring. This is why we should not immediately think of these moods in a negative way, as though asserting their opposites were possible, and it were simply a matter of becoming patient, loyal and steadfast in order to resist nihilism. Any alternatives can only be uncovered in the common source from which they spring, which is the everyday. We have to find in opportunism and cynicism different possibilities and not merely their opposite.

In modern capitalism, there is no separation between work and life. Everything that would have been devoted to life now finds its place within work. Our ordinary abilities are precisely what are cultivated in the production process: speaking, gossiping, chatting, imagining, creating, and dreaming. The list is endless. The most

important skill of the worker is flexibility and mobility. Such is the source of opportunism. You must be ready to seize your chance. This talent is not merely restricted to the workplace. It is socially pervasive. This is why it expresses itself as a general mood. You already have to be opportunistic before you enter the workplace and not after, and such opportunism invades every aspect of our lives (even our relations to ourselves). There are no solid foundations, you must keep changing and reinventing yourself. Unlike Heidegger's anxiety, this is not experienced as an uprooting of existence. Opportunism is the banality of the professionalization of life. That you are flexible, uprooted, *heimatlos*, is something you celebrate in your CV, and you do not lose sleep over it. Opportunism is the very opposite of anxiety. It is its familiarisation, as though anxiety had become the everyday rather than its opposite. Cynicism too, Virno, continues, has its origin in the general instability of life in late capitalism. It arises from our proximity to the rules of the game which we know are completely artificial. All there is are games in which we find ourselves immersed and which, if we want to be successful, we must play by the rules, even if we know they are arbitrary. We have not chosen to be in this game, rather this game has already chosen us, and to leave it is just to enter another with equally arbitrary rules.

Neither of these two moods can be surmounted, just as much as we cannot jump out of the everyday. We cannot appeal to life beyond capitalism, because life and the productive process has become completely enmeshed. We do not stop being cynical and opportunistic when we get home, because this is a general mood we carry around with us. Life is not beyond capitalism, but outside of it. It is in their common neutral core that we can see a different possibility and which can switch these two moods in a different direction. Being opportunistic is being open to the possible as far as possible (even though this flexibility is exploited by capitalism), and being cynical is recognising the conventionality of rules such that one can invent one's own (even though this conventionality is converted into conformism by capitalism). In each case,

it is a question of turning around what is already there in a different direction back to their neutrality before they have been appropriated by capitalism.

How can we understand this neutrality? It is the anonymity of the everyday life. Before I speak, it speaks. As Virno remarks, when it comes to Heidegger, this anonymity is something one should resist. You should speak in your own name, and not in that of those nameless others. Thus, idle speech and curiosity are examples of inauthentic existence, but for Virno they are where we might find a common and everyday resistance to capital. 'I am tempted to say that idle talk,' he writes, 'resembles *background noise*', and adds, 'yet it offers a sketch from which significant variances, unusual modulations, sudden articulations can be derived.' (Virno, 2004, p. 90).

As Blanchot writes in 'Everyday Speech', this anonymity is the most difficult phenomenon to capture (Blanchot, 1993, pp. 238–45). As soon as we speak of it, it disappears. This is why the only way we can think of it is through moods, because like them it is so amorphous and indistinct. It is everything we are at any time, whether we are at work or at home, awake or asleep. In this sense, it has nothing at all to do with truth or history, but precisely because of this it can interrupt and disrupt them, yet only from its absolute weakness rather than strength. It escapes the law because the universal cannot reach it in its exhausted and pathetic particularity which does not even reach the level of the individual. The subject of the everyday, as we know from Heidegger, is anyone at all, but no one in particular: indifferently different, but for this very reason always an object of suspicion of any power. The everyday is not just a statistical mass of information about the ordinary activities of society, but the very opposite of society. Only in the ordinary we will find any resistance to society and nowhere else. From the side of power, it is seen as the most banal and sordid, but on from its perspective, it always escapes the structures of political society, and does so precisely because of its insignificance. This is no more so than in the case of communication, where we are bombarded daily with noise and images, but none of this means anything and does not seem to be spoken by anyone. Yet only in this cacophony can what is new emerge,

rather than from the institutions of society. The very indistinctness and impersonality of the ordinary, the very fact that it never reaches the lofty heights of truth and history, is what permits them to be interrupted and forestalled, and something new to enter into time.

What we become in the everyday is the anonymous. We are stripped of our personality, anything that would make us stand out from within the crowd. We are just like everyone else, and everyone else is just like us, nobody and everybody. The everyday ruins and dissolves every structure and institution, even though they have their origin there. From the side of the subject, this anonymity is felt as negative, such as in Heidegger's description of boredom, but from the side of the other, it is what strips it of any attribute or predication. It is what permits the other to remain other and to resist its appropriation by capital. The everyday, as Blanchot adds, belongs to the street where what is said is spoken by nobody, or no one owns up to what is spoken. You might think of such a speech as being fundamentally irresponsible, since no one bears witness to what they say, and as such it is the very opposite of sincerity. This is why the initial rumour of the street can easily become public opinion and propaganda manipulated by the politician, and what was formless and unorganised stratify into the most debased values and morality, which in turn legitimate violence against the very anonymity from which they emerged. Yet one can think of the absence of any subject not negatively but positively, or at least as a positivity preceding negation. The absence of the subject is not just the They, as Heidegger believed, but is this experience of the other: the other which has no name and is without identity. Neither the self, nor the other, if one thinks of the other as merely an other individual, but utterly anonymous and belonging to the streets, an indefinite presence of indeterminate possibilities. From the side of the individual such an experience might be terrifying, but one should not underestimate the corrosive force of this uncertainty, which is far more powerful than any heroic act. It is these streets Blanchot will find again in May 68. 'It was not even a question of overthrowing an old world,' he wrote later; 'what mattered was to let a possibility

manifest itself, the possibility – beyond any utilitarian gain – of a *being-together* that gave back to all the right to equality in fraternity through *the freedom of speech* that elated everyone.’ [Emphasis in the original. Translation modified] (Blanchot, 1988, p. 30)

6. *The Hidden Messiah*

There is a story about the Messiah that it is in these streets where He will be found, outside of the city, and with the anonymous rag-tag of society. There are two accounts of the arrival of the Messiah in Judaism. One is that it can be calculated and the other that it cannot. For the latter account, it is said that the Messiah could arrive at any instant. It is such a tale, as we have seen, to which Benjamin alludes to in the ‘Theses’. If the Messiah can arrive at any moment, then there can be no preparation. Waiting for the Messiah, then, would not be expectation, a prolongation or expansion of the present into the future, but its disruption. The Messianic moment is not a moment within time, it does not follow the normal course of events, but is outside of time. ‘He comes suddenly,’ Scholem writes, ‘unannounced, and precisely when he is least expected or when hope has long been abandoned.’ (Scholem, 1995, p. 11) This impossibility of putting a precise date on the arrival of the Messiah led to the stories in the Aggadah of the occultation of the Messiah. The Messiah had already arrived and could be anyone and perhaps even unknown to himself. The most extreme form of this story is the idea of the Messiah living with the lepers and beggars in front of the gates of Rome (Sanhedrin 98). When the Rabbi Joshua b. Levi asks this Messiah when He will come, He replies ‘today’.

The Messianic is found where you might least expect it. Outside the walls of the city with the destitute and homeless, those who are most exiled from the centre of power. It belongs not to the ‘most high’, but to the ordinary and everyday. It is not above or beyond time, but alongside it accompanying it in every instant. Alongside, however, does not mean contemporaneous. It is not one more instant added onto all the

others. This is how I understand the occultation of the arrival of the Messiah. It cannot be foretold because it does not belong to the flow of time. It is not because this event is so surprising or mysterious or even unexpected, in the ordinary sense of this term, that I cannot know when the Messiah arrives, but because it does not belong to order or sequence of events at all. It has always already happened or not happened. 'Today,' the Messiah replies to Rabbi Joshua b. Levi, but he does not believe Him and complains to Elijah that He has lied to him. Elijah responds 'Today, if you will hear his voice'.⁷ In the word 'today', I hear the ordinary, the most ordinary of the ordinary, and perhaps, in that sense, not ordinary at all. What is actual today is the subsumption of capital. Yet there are always other possibilities which do not belong to this actuality, and these possibilities are always the most ordinary, more ordinary than everything else: 'beneath the pavement, the beach', as one of the slogans of May '68 says.⁸ Such moments, I would say, are Messianic. They reveal, if only for an instant, that the smooth flow of time is a lie, and underneath the monotony of the actual present, lies the future which is neither mine nor yours, but anyone's. What is certain is if there is no such future, if there is no interrogation and resistance to cult of capital, then all that awaits us is an oncoming disaster, whose time of arrival we cannot know.

⁷ There is even the story that the Messiah has come but we have not noticed because the redeemed world is so little different from this one, but none the less it is still redeemed if only one could see.

⁸ Written anonymously by the Comité d' Action Etudiants-Ecrivains, of which Blanchot and Duras, amongst many others, were participants.

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