

How to stop a dialectic:  
 Furio Jesi, Walter Benjamin  
 and the revolt against time  
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The concept of a dialectic is at once nearly invisible and all pervasive<sup>1</sup>. While it is ordinarily considered as coming from the left, being associated with Marxist theory, it equally can be said to come from the right as well. Dialectical theory is above all a way of inhabiting time, a kind of built in structure for the progress of events and phenomena within time that, while not always leading to teleological conclusions (depending on how it is conceptualized), does allow a certain degree of presupposition to influence what comes next. It is, in a sense, a way of projecting the present, or at least part of the present, into the future (or sometimes the past too), a way of explaining the future/past by terms that are presently available and to build in, above all, a strong relationship between cause and effect that in some sense guarantees that at least some aspects of the present will be preserved

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<sup>1</sup> In this work we will use the term “dialectics” in the widest possible sense, taking together both its ancient meaning as dialogical interaction between two different positions in the search for a truth – deriving from the verb *dialèghestai*, to discuss, to reason together – and the Hegelian-inspired notion of opposing polarities through determined negations that, in this way, set in motion and in movement the dialectical process itself. Aristotle observed how Zeno of Elea – the founder of dialectic theory – used his opponent’s thesis to demonstrate its absurdity and the consequent legitimacy of his own thesis (wherein the former is structurally linked to the one to be opposed). Similarly, in modern dialectic since Kant but especially since Hegel, each variable is seen as being constituted by the variable that opposes it. In all cases, each thing is defined by not being the other even as, at the same time, it is what it is only in relation to the other. What we will be interested in as a polemical objective will in fact be precisely the logic of opposition of two polarities towards their overcoming or their composition. The direction towards which we will tend in the article will be that of following the polarities in order to make them act one against the other as a poison/antidote between them, towards their deactivation and threshold of indistinction.

in and through the destructive processes that dialectic thinking tends to conceptualize and produce.

There are many reasons to appreciate dialectic thinking for the way that it serves as a richer and deeper narrative of time than an emptier liberal progressivism that simply asserts that the passage of time itself is all that is needed for history to proceed. Dialectical theory recognizes the antagonistic nature of historical time. It is also attuned to the way that materiality (at least in certain, particularly Marxist version) plays a role in this antagonism, adding an element that is not entirely up to the human actors who are caught up in its rhythms.

And yet, for all of this, dialectical theory can also serve as a kind of metalevel straightjacket, foreclosing so many possibilities and serving, above all, as a kind of self-fulfilling form of prophecy that ensures that whatever happens over the passage of time, it will be something that thinkers of dialectical theory can recognize, even if it looks largely different from what exists in the present. By projecting elements from the present into the future (or once again the past), dialectic theory is a way to determine time. In this way, whether one agrees with those elements or not, it is determination itself that is paramount.

In this paper, we will argue that, looking at the work of Walter Benjamin and Furio Jesi, we see a full-fledged alternative to dialectical theory. More accurately, we see a take on dialectical theory, what Benjamin calls «dialectics at a standstill», which may assume the form of a dialectic at times but which takes things in an entirely different – and non, or other temporal – direction<sup>2</sup>. We are reading these two authors in constellation with one another because we believe that taking either of them separately does not give a full enough view of the depth and alterity of this other way of thinking about and occupying time. While Benjamin is the better known of the two figures, we will argue that Furio Jesi supplies a critical set of illuminations that gives us, not just the outlines of this alternative, but also a keen sense of how it functions, how it uses the form of dialectical presupposition to deliver us from its otherwise inevitable outcomes.

<sup>2</sup> W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1999, p. 463 (N3,1). For more on Benjamin, temporality and entanglement, see K. Barad, *What Flashes Up: Theological-Political-Entanglement Fragments*, in C. Keller, M. J. Rubenstein (eds.), *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science and New Materialism*, Oxford University Press, New York 2017.

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Benjamin tells us that the future is nothing but «homogeneous, empty time» which is to say that it does not exist at all<sup>3</sup>. In his *On the Concept of History*, Benjamin writes that projection into the future delivers only what he calls «soothsaying», a form of forward projection that seeks to dominate the future and which purposively turns its back on the past, a time that not only has existed but continues to exist in the sense that «*even the dead* will not be safe if the enemy is victorious»<sup>4</sup>. Benjamin counterposes this false, forward-looking view with a description of the angel of history who faces backwards. He writes:

[The angel's] face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which piles wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at 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 and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which its back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm<sup>5</sup>.

The purpose of the historical materialist, Benjamin tells us, is not to look towards the blank and empty future but rather to redeem the past generations of the oppressed. In this way, dialectic theory is singularly unhelpful insofar as it is a mechanism that seems to move in one direction only, forward. More accurately, as we will argue further, dialectic theory may work (as teleology does too) in two directions, forward and back, but the sense of movement and history that comes with dialectic always insists on moving across history one way or the other (but not both) inexorably and unidirectionally. It might well seem audacious or even obnoxious to claim that Benjamin uses the idea of historical materialism to remove or challenge one of the central tenets of Marxism but we will argue that this is not quite the case<sup>6</sup>. Benjamin's

<sup>3</sup> W. Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, in M. Bullock and M.W. Jennings (eds.), *Selected Works Volume 4*, Harvard University (Belknap) Press, Cambridge (MA) 2003, p. 397.

<sup>4</sup> Ivi, pp. 391 and 397.

<sup>5</sup> Ivi, p. 393.

<sup>6</sup> For more discussion of Benjamin's relationship to dialectics and time, see M. Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's «On the Concept of History»*, Verso Press, New York 2016; K.S. Feldman *Not Dialectical Enough: On Benjamin, Adorno and Autonomous Critique*, in «Philosophy and Rhetoric», Vol. 44, No. 4, 2011; P. Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time*, Stanford University Press, Stanford (CA) 2011; A. Benjamin, *Working with Walter Benjamin: Recovering a Political Philosophy*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2013; M. Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectic: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst (MA) 1993; S. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, MIT Press, Cam-

reappropriation of dialectical theory shows a form of historical materialism that is not dependent upon dialectical theory or perhaps more accurately uses that theory for purposes that work against its usual methods and directionality. We believe that Marxism can be accommodated with this other method, at least in certain modes.

Benjamin's much vaunted concept of dialectics at a standstill is not so much about freezing the dialectic for the sake of frozenness itself but rather the notion that, through that suspension, the mechanisms of dialectic become altered. Here, the binarisms that are the stuff of dialectic, (whose name in Greek suggests a conversation with two interlocutors) are juxtaposed rather than resolved, breaking each of aspect of the binarism which allows the material aspects of its component parts to be enhanced rather than overcome (*aufhebung*).

Furio Jesi contributes his own critical thinking to this project in his concept of "*ci non-è*" (there not-is). This short phrase beautifully describes the process we are trying to elucidate. "*Ci non-è*" at first glance appears to offer us a choice between what is and what is not. We seem to be in familiar territory here with a kind of dialectical resolution in favor, in this case, of the negative. Yet, as with all dialectical resolutions, the other term is not forgotten: it is incorporated into its own negation. It is preserved even as it is annihilated as a form of opposition.

Yet this more conventional dialectical reading does not entirely explain what Jesi means by this term. "*Ci non-è*" does suggest a binarism but one that is complicated by the fact that it has in a sense never actually existed. The binarism is, in a way, deactivated even as it is expressed. In Jesi's hands, the very negation that is suggested in "*ci non-è*" does not exist because there is in fact no true void, no absolute nothingness that produces dialectical movement. There not-is doesn't mean there is nothing. It means there is always something even in nothingness and that something, that resilient bit of material experience is what Jesi and Benjamin alike seek to discover.

What emerges from this process is less a simple contradiction than a kind of *zen koan* where the very question of existence and non-existence – as well as the differences between these terms – is both put into question and actually experienced as if for the first time. In a way, we confront the reality of these terms by their seeming occlusion. Through the resilience of the concepts that go through a dialectical

bridge (MA) 1999; B. Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels*, University of California Press, Berkeley (CA) 1999.

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process even as they remain present, we are left with a sense of the materiality and resilience of the terms we engage with as well as our own inability to determine what these terms mean and how they are related. What emerges then is a kind of a humbling of the sense of human agency which seeks to understand (and thus control) the passage of time. Giving up this power, we find another one, a way to engage with what is (even as it is not: *ci non-è*).

This is different from a certain reading of the dialectic as argued, for example by Andrew Cole in his book *The Birth of Theory*<sup>7</sup>. In that view, the dialectic that we find in Hegel is entirely negative, not the simplistic clash of positive forces but a radical unmaking and undoing (one that presumes that there is a void after all). Cole's work seeks to reconcile Hegelian forms of dialectic with some explicitly anti dialectical thinking including that of Nietzsche and Deleuze. Cole's argument is that Hegel is influenced, not so much by the ancient Greek notion of dialectic but more by late classical thinkers like Plotinus and then medieval neo-Platonists like Pseudo-Dionisyus. The difference is that these thinkers reversed Plato and Aristotle's priority between being and nonbeing, that is to say that for them nonbeing is prior to being and so the coming into being of things is the source of dialectical movement.

Cole writes: «Plotinus in short takes Plato's binary, being/not-being and reverses its terms, not-being/being, thereby placing negativity as the starting point of dialectic itself»<sup>8</sup>. He goes on to say: «without the figure/concept dialectic (that is, a figure that is based on a failed or nonexistent concept) [...] there can be no dialectical *movement*, from moment to moment [...] the figure/concept dialectic keeps the dialectic from *standing still*»<sup>9</sup>.

This is the key point. For Cole, as for pretty much every dialectical thinker, the point of dialectic is *movement*. This movement occurs, once again, either forward or backward (mostly forward), and so, despite the fact that there is an embrace of a radical emptiness or aporia at the heart of the dialectical process, temporal movement nonetheless is the result. Here, we can see that although Plotinus may have reversed Plato's being/nonbeing he doesn't reverse the directionality of the dialectic itself.

<sup>7</sup> A. Cole, *The Birth of Theory*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Ivi, p. 38.

<sup>9</sup> Ivi, p. 158.

For Cole, Benjamin himself is a «traditionalist [i.e. Platonic] historicist» in terms of his dialectical process and hence not of interest to him<sup>10</sup>. This is because he sees both the classical model and Benjamin's own idea of «dialectic at a standstill» as being one and the same. But this apparent similarity is misleading for, to arrest the dialectic as Benjamin suggests means not to forego change and movement but rather to allow change to happen at a different level. Rather than covering reality with a process that goes from nonbeing into being (or vice versa), Benjamin and Jesi allow us to see being as such, that is to connect to the materiality that lies at the heart of the dialectical process and allow that connection to alter the way we experience time and reality itself. From within our world where space and time are themselves constructions, part of what Benjamin (after Marx) calls the phantasmagoria, we can yet see inklings of another time and another space, releasing us, at least potentially from the utter determination that even dialectics itself helps to reproduce.

Yet, for all of this, we are not saying that dialectic is bad or useless. Instead, we are arguing that to merely put the dialectic through its own process is to fail to take advantage of its most radical potential which is not to be fulfilled at all but rather to disrupt the very binaries that it seems to support. More accurately still, through the constellative model that both Benjamin and Jesi engage with, the binaries disrupt one another, changing both, at least according to our perception of them and, in so doing, change the way we relate to the most fundamental structures and orderings of the world we inhabit. This cannot happen when the dialectic is in motion because as movement it merely reiterates the temporality – and the spatial dimensions of that time – that it is contained within.

In the whole work of both Walter Benjamin and Furio Jesi we often find binarisms of thought, dialectical alternatives, aut-auts (either/or) which might be first read as (and Benjamin for one openly pronounces to actually be) dialectical. In this paper, we propose to analyze these binarisms in order to show how Benjamin and Jesi both use them, not so much for anti-dialectical purposes but rather for what might be called (if we can be forgiven for introducing a temporal term in a system that ultimately defies historical time) post-dialectical. Both Benjamin and Jesi seem, in fact, to want to clearly demonstrate

<sup>10</sup> Ivi, p. 161.

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how the two possible and antithetical moments of a dialectic, even if contrasting and opposed to each other, are subject to the same logic, to the same overarching basic grammar. The very act of positing two polarities as dialectically opposed and antagonistic does indeed create a movement that is based on friction and clash, but, at the same time, it ensnares us in that same movement and process, creating a very powerful logic and ontology that prevents us from seeing an outside (here again, we are forced to use spatial or temporal language when space and time themselves are what are in question) that is separate from that same movement and process.

What both Benjamin and Jesi do is to look for a way out of presupposition, an interruption or a fracture in this dialectical process. For them, without a radical rethinking, an interruption and a fracture of the powerful dialectical device that has influenced the fate of Western thought, ethics, and politics, the way to any real novelty is precluded, and a new historical era will never emerge. Dialectic at a standstill, if we can use Benjamin's term to cover both himself and Jesi, doesn't turn its back on history (or, as we will argue further, revolution). Rather, it seeks to revisit it from the perspective of what history covers over and seeks to determine.

The dialectical alternatives that will be outlined in this paper are first of all that between law making and law preserving violence (*Gewalt*) in Walter Benjamin's *Critique of Violence* – which is connected to the cyclical relationship between constituent power and constituted power. Then we will look at the dialectical alternative between revolt and revolution that is found both in the essay on Surrealism by Benjamin and in Jesi's book *Spartakus*, and finally Jesi's dialectic between myth and history. In short, we will outline the dichotomies, the dialectical alternatives that they work with, and then analyze how Benjamin and Jesi will try to find a way out, or better, a deactivation, of these binarisms. Precisely for this reason, Benjamin will theorize the dialectic via a state of arrest, and Jesi will turn to the mechanism of "*ci non-è*" (there not-is).

Radicalizing to the extreme the consequences of the dialectical discourse within the tradition of Western thought, we will come to see how the same cause-effect nexus and the same potentiality-actuality dispositive are the basis of a teleological procedure, one that is contested by the dialectic but which is truly broken by the suspension of that process. In other words, the dialectic is a necessary but not suffi-

cient condition for breaking out of the temporal restrictions of both conventional Western thought and even (because it remains to some extent bound with that thought), dialectical theory itself. The dialectic is needed for this process because something is required to be broken or suspended, but what emerges from that suspension has little or nothing to do with the dialectic itself.

1. *Gewalt that poses and Gewalt that preserves law.  
Lawmaking vs. Law preserving violence*

In the *Critique of Violence* of 1921, the young Walter Benjamin is already looking for the interruption of a specific kind of dialectic, the one between the violence that poses new law and the violence that preserves law itself<sup>11</sup>. To consider this distinction further, we must remember that the German term *Gewalt* means not only violence as a kind of physical act, but also a sense of power and authority: that is, what Benjamin is looking for in this youthful text is a way out of the infinite cycle of violence, power and authority, which he sees, precisely because it is totalizing and cyclical, as the closed universe of destiny and myth (and, we might add, an uninterrupted dialectical process as well). In order to do this, Benjamin's essay shows first of all how both natural law and positive law are subject to the same basic logic, and also form a very powerful dialectical mechanism. Normally, a dialectical model would seem to suggest a radical rejection of liberal enlightenment norms but for Benjamin they perpetuate it in the guise of exposing and reducing it, akin to what the Maoists used to call «waving the red flag to oppose the red flag»<sup>12</sup>.

As it is well known, Benjamin shows us how both natural law – for which violence would be a natural fact and for which the juridical end would justify the means to that end – and positive law – for

<sup>11</sup> For more on the *Critique of Violence*, see B. Hanssen, *Critique of Violence: Between Poststructuralism and Critical Theory*, Routledge, New York 2000; W. Hamacher, *Affirmative Strike: Benjamin's Critique of Violence*, in A. Benjamin, P. Osborne (eds.), *Benjamin's Philosophy*, Taylor and Francis, New York 1993. See also the new translation P. Fenves and J. Ng (eds.), *Walter Benjamin: Toward the Critique of Violence*, Stanford University Press, Stanford (CA) 2021.

<sup>12</sup> For more on Benjamin and his relation to dialectical theory more generally (and, in particular to the Frankfurt School and especially the work of Theodor Adorno), see S. Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectic: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute*, The Free Press, New York, 1977.

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which violence, in order to be legitimate, must come into being within historical time and its presuppositions in order to be sanctioned, making itself the «legitimate» means to guarantee the correctness of the ends – meet in a common fundamental and self-referential form of dogma: just ends can be reached with legitimate means, legitimate means can be used for just ends. Natural law tends to «justify» the means by the justice of the ends, positive law to «guarantee» the justice of the ends by the legitimacy of the means.

What is Benjamin emphasizing here? First and foremost, and over and above the differences between natural law and legal positivism, he points to their common underlying logic, namely that of the necessary reference between means and ends. Benjamin looks to the interruption of this functional cross-reference: he tells us that, without the interruption of the cross-reference between means and ends, we will remain forever trapped in this infinite dialectic, destinal and mythical as it is, of violence and power. Maybe more accurately, the dialectic *is* for him an improvement from liberal forms of temporality but only insofar as it makes itself available to be interrupted. He seeks, as it were, to interrupt the interruption (if we were left with only liberal temporality there would be nothing to interrupt, only a seamless and ever progressing form of time). Benjamin seeks out pure means, that is, means that are freed from teleology, from ends, a series of gestures that may look like they come out of dialectic but are in fact unto themselves.

To understand this better we must first ask, what is the violence (*Gewalt*) that sets up law (or its close cousin, right) in the first place? Benjamin offers the violence of war as one example: this is a violence with natural (not juridical) ends – conquering a new territory with violence committed against another nation – which inevitably leads to the establishment of a new law, as happens for example in peace treaties. Every war is initially a violence outside of law, but it returns to the legal purposes it initially seems to defy, creating new law in the process.

What, on the other hand, is the violence that preserves law? It is simply any violence that serves as a means to legal ends. Benjamin gives us the example of the police as a means to the ends of the state. Every coercion imposed by the rule of law represents violence for legal purposes.

We can see here how a circularity is created: violence as a means to natural ends posits new law, and this new law will use violence as a

means to legal ends to preserve itself as power. Here, Benjamin cites the very category of dialectic, telling us that here we are in the presence of a real

*dialectical rising and falling* in the lawmaking and law-preserving forms of violence. The law governing their oscillation rests on the circumstance that all law-preserving violence, in its duration, indirectly weakens the lawmaking violence it represents, by suppressing hostile counterviolence [...] This lasts until either new forces or those earlier suppressed triumph over the hitherto lawmaking violence and thus found a new law, destined in its turn to decay. On the breaking of this cycle maintained by mythic forms of law [...] a new historical epoch is founded [...]. If the existence of violence outside the law, as pure immediate violence, is assured, this furnishes proof that revolutionary violence, the highest manifestation of unalloyed violence by man is possible, and shows by what means<sup>13</sup>.

Here, we can see that every power, every form of violence, contains within itself the creative violence that led it to be a constituted power. Over the course of time, this violence is weakened by the violence that preserves this very same power, until a new violence arrives that takes over from the violence that had previously brought law into being. And so on and so forth ad infinitum. There is indeed “movement” here, (shades of what Cole appreciates in dialectical theory more generally) but a movement that is contained within history (in a sense even “transcending” history only leads to more of the same).

In looking for pure means, that is, violence that is not a means to an end, much less a legal end, Benjamin can thus interrupt precisely the infinite dialectic between violence that poses and violence that preserves law, the infinite cross-reference between means and ends. This pure violence for Benjamin is what he calls divine violence: such a violence suspends and interrupts both law and even revolutionary violence which can also be thought of as a possibility beyond the cyclic, closed and destined world of law.

## 2. *Revolt-Revolution*

Of all of the binarisms – and dialectical polarities – that we see in Benjamin and Jesi’s consideration, the one between revolt and revolu-

<sup>13</sup> W. Benjamin, *Critique of Violence*, in M. Bullock, MW. Jennings (eds.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Vol. 1, 1913-1926*, Harvard University Press, (Belknap), Cambridge (MA) 1996, pp. 251-52.

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tion is probably the most important. This distinction may be the place where we see the difference between a Benjaminian (or Jesian) understanding of dialectic and a more conventional one most clearly. The distinction between revolt and revolution appears on the surface to merely be the difference between a suspension of history and time (revolt in Jesi's terms) and a bogus form of rupture that only reinforces the dynamics and tyrannies of historical time. As we will show, this is not wrong but it is not the whole story.

Let us begin with Jesi's treatment. It is he that uses the distinction or binary between revolt and revolution most clearly. In *Spartakus*, which describes the moment of the German revolution in 1919, Jesi writes, «every *revolt* can instead be described as a suspension of historical time. The greater part of those who take part in a revolt choose to commit their individuality to an action whose consequences they can neither know nor predict»<sup>14</sup>. In this way, to be in revolt is to be removed from historical time, from an iron clad relationship between cause and effect (Jesi also calls this «shelter from historical time in which the collective finds safety»)<sup>15</sup>. Jesi says this is a suspension, not a radical break, indicating perhaps that historical time is not to be entirely abandoned (nor the dialectical processes that occur within it) but is revisited from a position that has already been suspended. The importance of these sentences lies in the fact that for Jesi, in a state of revolt, the relationship between actions and the consequences cannot be predicted. The revolt – because of the fact that is not within the historical time, but suspended from it – undermines the possibility of a temporal dialectic. What interests us here is precisely the fact that Jesi considers the revolt as an interruption of the links between cause and effect as an interruption of teleology and of the means/ends dialectic.

In this moment of revolt (which insofar as the word «moment» is a temporal term is not a moment at all, but only an experience), Jesi goes on to say that one's engagement with the material world around you as well as with those others in your community are radically altered. Jesi writes: «You can love a city, you can recognize its houses and its streets [...] but only in the hour of revolt is the city really felt as your *own* city [...] your own because it is a battlefield you have chosen and the collectivity too has chosen»<sup>16</sup>. When your city is in

<sup>14</sup> F. Jesi, *Spartakus. The Symbolology of Revolt*, Seagull Books, New York 2014, p. 52.

<sup>15</sup> Ivi, p. 53.

<sup>16</sup> Ivi, p. 54.

historical time, everything is already given and known so it is not in fact your city. Only when the predictability and inevitability of historical time is suspended can you experience the city as your own, can you inhabit it without the presuppositions that override your experience of it when living in “normal” time.

Revolution, on the other hand, for Jesi, «designates the entire complex of short- and long- term actions that are carried out by those who are conscious of wanting to alter *in historical time* a political, social, economic situation, and who develop their own tactical and strategic plan by constantly considering the relations between cause and effect in historical time, within the most far-seeing perspective possible»<sup>17</sup>.

Jesi keeps stressing the fact that the phenomenon of revolution lies completely within historical time, namely a temporality grounded in the infinite process of the dialectic between cause and effect. Everything in the revolution has to be prepared, to be an end for determinate means, and to serve the task of something else. Until there is a suspension of a means/ends temporality, a cause/effect logic, we will stay – in Jesian terms – ensnared in historical time.

So far, this seems to suggest that for Jesi, revolt is good and revolution is bad. Yet, if this were the case, we might have the kind of ordinary dialectical binarism that is itself the stuff of historical (i.e. dialectical, taken in its more orthodox sense) time. Another way to say that is if you read a binarism that way you are already in historical time because the meanings of these terms are already set and predictable. Accordingly, to assume one knows the stakes of this binarism creates an internal contradiction in the binarism (i.e., the distinction between the «good» and the «bad» term actually favors the bad term insofar as it partakes in the very (bad) temporality, one based on cause and effect, that the latter term purports to supplant). In fact, Jesi’s analysis is much more complicated than this as we can see with an application of Jesi’s analysis in his book *Spartakus* to his analysis of the German revolution.

It is tempting to call this the «failed» German revolution since it did indeed end in disaster for German communism, costing the life of many of its leaders, most notably Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht and effectively ending the chances of the German commu-

<sup>17</sup> Ivi, p. 52.

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nist party to come to power. Jesi himself uses this term as when he says simply, «The Spartacist revolt failed»<sup>18</sup>. Worse than that, he says that «the Spartacist revolt was useful to the very power against which it flung itself»<sup>19</sup>. It was useful, he tells us further, because in its defeat, the Spartacist revolt restored what he calls «normal (that is to say, historical) time», something that had already been suspended by the extraordinary developments of World War I. The return to normal time was a requirement for bourgeois power and authority to reinstate itself.

Yet, for all of this, Jesi offers something critical that is accomplished by the Spartacist revolt. To begin with, by calling it a revolt and not a revolution, he is admitting its power to suspend historical time once again. Why does this matter when the end result (i.e., the failure of the revolt and the restoration of historical time) is a *fait accompli*? It matters because the suspension of historical time means that whatever happens in that experience cannot be affected by historical time itself; it is of another register and another temporality altogether. The “failure” of the Spartacist revolt then is only a failure when measured from the perspective of historical time itself (the time that we happen to live in). But that failure does not alter or affect the time of revolt because cause and effect, that master trope of bourgeois temporality, is itself suspended and cannot be applied.

Furthermore, and most critically, the fact that revolt cuts into historical time actually does not leave historical time itself unaffected. For example, Jesi tells us that «the new-born German Communist Party was not – or should we say was not yet – a party. Its instrumentalization by its enemy, which drafted it into the revolt, met few obstacles, precisely because it was not yet a party but, formal appearance aside, a grouping of people all endowed to a greater or lesser degree with class consciousness and the willingness to fight»<sup>20</sup>. Had the revolt not happened, it seems, the German Communist Party could have had time to develop itself and do what such parties do, promote and then plan a revolution. From Jesi’s perspective, the fact that the revolt was so premature (Rosa Luxemburg’s judgment from the beginning) or, more accurately the fact that the move to revolt prevented a more measured and steady drive towards revolution is only (for him) to the good. A revolution cannot step outside of time and so it

<sup>18</sup> Ivi, p. 60.

<sup>19</sup> Ivi, p. 61.

<sup>20</sup> Ivi, p. 56.

can only continue the ordinary workings of historical dialectics. If the revolution had been allowed to go in its own (historical) time, it would have been just one more reproduction of cause and effect, a failure in a much more profound way than the failure of the Spartacist revolt itself.

Instead, given the prematurity of the revolution (but being the right time for revolt; being out of time means that it is always the right time for revolt), the Spartacist revolt meant that the party «did not find a way to be (and therefore was not) a party but only a grouping of a class in revolt»<sup>21</sup>. As such, the party did not have the opportunity to supersede the masses with its will, its own objective reality was therefore not superimposed over the objective reality of the workers as such.

All of this makes it seem as if revolution has no role to play at all in this question but we do not think that is quite right either. The concept of revolution is critical because, despite its own embeddedness in history, it is nonetheless what leads to the possibility of getting out of historical time in the first place. In other words, it is only as a failed (or premature) revolution that the Spartacists managed to create their revolt. The Spartacist revolt needed the lure of a promise within historical time, in this case of revolution, to escape historical time; having sought out revolution they got revolt instead. Here, cause and effect are in a way hijacked, used, not for more of the same but to suspend and leave the endlessness that is the hallmark of historical time. This is where we get a clearer sense of how dialectics are, once again, not irrelevant or rather their irrelevance only comes when considered on their own terms but they become very relevant indeed as mediums that allow for other political forms and experiences to occur through its failure or suspension.

Jesi's explanation of the Spartacist revolt then helps us to better understand both the role of the dialectic as well as the way that this model needs to be interrupted. The dialectical tension between revolt and revolution is only «resolved» (here too using a historical, and indeed dialectical, term to speak about something entirely different) when historical time (the time of dialectic itself) is suspended. Outside of that time, a different relationship can be seen between these two terms that is not entirely antagonistic. Whereas dialectic theory tends to get us to look for winners and losers, we see that mutuality can

<sup>21</sup> Ivi, p. 57.

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take very different forms when the entire model is taken out of its context. As we can see, the dialectic process, in this case the idea of revolution, does interrupt the ordinary proceedings of historical time but this interruption is not enough. Once again the interruption itself needs to be interrupted.

As for the nature of the “effect” that revolt has on revolution – here again we are reduced to using the language of historical time to describe something that is beyond its boundaries – that effect remains entirely on the level of possibility, of *potentia* rather than of *potestas*. That is, there is no immediate or traceable effect that something that is done in the time of revolt emerging into historical time and hence the time of revolution. Rather, an event in the time of revolt means that historical time loses its monopoly over cause and effect and the relationship becomes anarchized and multiple rather than archized and singular<sup>22</sup>. The effect could be anywhere and anything; no predetermination stems from its connection to its “cause” in the time of revolt.

Moving on now to Benjamin’s version of this story, he does not use the terms “revolt” and “revolution” in the same way that Jesi does. Yet a similar dynamic can be seen perhaps in particular in his 1929 essay on surrealism. In that essay, Benjamin, like Jesi, articulates a kind of antagonism between what could be called historical and non-historical time, or more accurately, in his case, between revolution and intoxication. In this case, Benjamin’s central argument is that, whereas surrealism is said to be something that is “over” reality, in fact it is required to access reality in a way that is very similar to the way that Jesi describes revolt. Because for Benjamin, as for Jesi, reality and time are overwritten with false, capitalist forms of phantasm, the only way to really experience the world around us is via expressions which appear (in our false phantasmic mode) to be ridiculous or unreal.

Benjamin’s essay on surrealism is filled with references to dialectics at work and it is here that we can see how unorthodox his treatment of this concept really is. An inattentive reader of the essay could be forgiven for not noticing Benjamin’s break with dialectical orthodoxy on this matter. He speaks, for example, of the «dialectical kernel that later grew into Surrealism», suggesting very much an orderly, cause and effect rendition of historical time. Furthermore, much of the es-

<sup>22</sup> See again Barad, *What Flashes Up* cit.

say looks in the expected direction, the future (there is much talk of prophecy, clairvoyance and fortune telling). And furthermore, as already noted, the term dialectic itself is frequently used.

But let us see just how Benjamin actually employs this term. We see a bit of the complex relationship between modes of time and reality when Benjamin writes (speaking of Breton's novel *Nadja*), «to live in a glass house is a revolutionary virtue par excellence. It is also an intoxication, a moral exhibitionism that we badly need»<sup>23</sup>. Combining revolutionary virtue – which seems to be the pinnacle of historical time once again – with intoxication, is a move that Benjamin makes often. In the *Arcades Project*, his larger study of 19th century Paris (of which the Surrealism essay seems an early precursor), he writes of the atmosphere in the various *marchands de vin* (wine shops) in pre-revolutionary Paris. Here too we see a combination of revolutionary discipline and intoxication and disorder. Benjamin quotes Marx himself as writing that the:

conspirator, highly sanguine in character anyway like all Parisian proletarians, soon develops into an absolute *bambocheur* [boozer] in this continual tavern atmosphere. The sinister conspirator, who in secret session exhibits a Spartan self-discipline, suddenly thaws and is transformed into a tavern regular whom everybody knows and who really understands how to enjoy his wine and women<sup>24</sup>.

While Marx himself seems to very critical of these drunken pseudo revolutionaries (Benjamin calls his comments «deprecatory»), Benjamin himself sees this drunkenness as being a virtue in that it stops the careful ongoing flow of historical time and revolutionary planning<sup>25</sup>. Recall in his comments on living in a glass house how Benjamin says it «is a revolutionary virtue par excellence. It is also an intoxication», we see that there need not be an either/or in this case. Drunkenness, or Surrealism, or any other way to interrupt and stop where revolution thinks it is heading (i.e., the culmination of the dialectical process) serves, not so much to sidetrack revolution (although it does that too) but rather to fulfill its promise in a different, unexpected, even unknowable way.

<sup>23</sup> W. Benjamin, *Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia*, in M.W. Jennings, H. Eisland and G. Smith (eds.), *Walter Benjamin Selected Works Vol 2. 1927-1934*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1999, p. 209.

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* cit., pp. 605-6 (V2, V2a). Benjamin also says that «only revolt completely exposes [Paris'] Surrealist face», in Benjamin, *Surrealism* cit., p. 211.

<sup>25</sup> W. Benjamin, *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*, in W. Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, Belknap Press, Cambridge (MA) 1999, p. 52.

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Speaking generally about the role of Surrealism and what it accomplishes, Benjamin states:

There is always [...] a moment when the original tensions of the secret society must either explode in a matter-of-fact profane struggle for power and domination, or decay as a public demonstration and be transformed. At present, Surrealism is in this phase of transformation. But at the time when it broke over its founders as an inspiring dream wave, it seemed the most integral, conclusive, absolute of movements. Everything with which it came into contact was integrated. Life seemed worth living only where the threshold between waking and sleeping was worn away in everyone as by the steps of multitudinous images flooding back and forth; language seemed itself only where sound and image, image and sound, interpenetrated with automatic precision and such felicity that no chink was left in the penny-in-the-slot called «meaning»<sup>26</sup>.

In this passage, we see a lot of what Benjamin means by “dialectic at a standstill”. On the one hand, he appears to be giving us a mere snapshot of a frozen process. He talks about the revolutionary value (low) of Surrealism and seems to suggest that when Surrealism started it was simply a dream. But this is narrated from the perspective of historical time itself. From its own suspended perspective, Benjamin sees how, very much like Jesi’s depiction of a city that you only know when you are in a state of revolt, life is only real when Surrealism “broke over its founders”. In a sense the very excess of realism that surrealism represents is required to get any inkling of reality at all when we live in a world that is distinctly unreal and phantasmagorical. Benjamin does not force us to choose between the two states he depicts. They can both be true at once because they occupy different realities and temporalities.

Yet, it seems fair to ask, what is the value of the lessons we learn from intoxication or from surrealism; even if “real”, (or realer anyway), they seem to be inevitably brought back into historical time and retroactively (that is to say dialectically since, dialectic does, as we said earlier, move in two directions even if not at the same time) rendered into something politically meaningless – in this case an “art movement” with weird books and paintings. We could ask the same question of Jesi insofar as what really changed, that is to say in historical time, the time that we actually (mostly) live in? What was gained by the sacrifice of the German Communists, of Rosa Luxemburg herself?

<sup>26</sup> Benjamin, *Surrealism* cit., p. 208.

Benjamin puts a bit more teeth into his idea of the political value of Surrealism when he tells us that, «the trick by which this world of things is mastered – it is more proper to speak of a trick than a method – consists in the substitution of a political for a historical view of the past»<sup>27</sup>. By substituting politics for history, we may be able to recall those moments of what Jesi (and sometimes Benjamin too) calls revolt, those breaks with history and the marks they leave behind.

To illustrate this point, Benjamin quotes from Apollinaire (at least by attribution) saying, «Open, graves! You, the dead of the picture galleries, corpses behind screens, castles and monasteries! Here stands the fabulous keeper of keys holding a bunch of the keys to all times, who knows where the press the most artful locks and invites you to step into the midst of the world today»<sup>28</sup>.

This passage is very reminiscent of a passage from his 1940 (and final) essay *On the Concept of History* where Benjamin writes: «even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious»<sup>29</sup>. In both cases, it seems that the past can be “brought back to life” as it were. More accurately, it seems as if the past was never dead. It remains available to be changed and altered, taken out of historical time and read politically instead. This means two critical things. First, that all of the “failed” (from the perspective of historical time) revolts are not unavailable to we who remain in historical time. They continue to be available and can continue to interfere in and with historical time, perhaps leading to a new kind of revolt that is also a revolution (as already stated, the two don’t have to be contradictory or mutually exclusive). Secondly, this shows why dialectic itself is not merely a tool of revolt, a thing to be tricked, like other things that are fodder for revolt and material reality. Dialectic is what allows us to access the past thanks to its movement. If everything were always and only purely determined, we’d never be able to retrieve these past events or experiences. Dialectic creates movement in historical time which then allows that movement to be suspended. Dialectic theory is a mystification of history that has an unwanted or unintended function, namely that in setting the aspects of history into motion it allows for its own interruption. Here, it acts as a bit of a pharmakon, a poison that works against its own

<sup>27</sup> Ivi, p. 210.

<sup>28</sup> Ivi, p. 211.

<sup>29</sup> Benjamin, *On the Concept of History* cit., p. 391.

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poisoning, something that we could call, reversing the Maoist slogan “waving the white [i.e., reactionary] flag to oppose the white flag”.

What we are left with then is a kind of conundrum; dialectics seems to be both that which is required (making the tension between revolt and revolution dialectical after all) even as it must be suspended and halted. But this conundrum, indeed this appearance of dialectic, only comes when we insist on reading this through the lens of the inevitability of historical time (in one direction or the other). The either/or motif that Jesi demonstrates and Benjamin employs is itself a different way to read this relationship, one that does not force us to resolve this within historical time but to employ both in their various modalities and powers to cancel each other out, as it were, leaving us undetermined and, in that undetermination, making even something historical like revolution have new possibilities and forms.

### 3. *Myth vs History*

The third and final binarism we are going to discuss may be the most fundamental of all. The distinction of myth and history seems at first glance to be the least relevant for questions of dialectic insofar as dialectical theory in both its idealist and materialist modes claims that it has to do with reality and tends to dismiss myth out of hand. Yet, as our discussion of Benjamin’s treatment of Surrealism suggests, myth cannot be ruled out of those factors that determine our lives and times, indeed the very idea of history itself could be considered to be a myth in its own right. The binarism of myth vs. history then is critical because it suggests a winnowing process by which certain elements of a given set of beliefs can be called “myth” and others “history”, that is to say that some elements are relegated to background while others are set as constituting what passes for reality itself. What our prior discussion of Benjamin’s essay on Surrealism shows us is that this distinction does not exclude the influence of myth and in fact myth can return and, quite paradoxically, serve to counteract history’s own claim to untrammelled reality, serving once again as a kind of pharmakon that neutralizes the vast power that myth wields from both the background and the center of our temporalized existence.

The stringent dialectic between the spontaneity of the revolt – with its suspension of time – and the strategy of the revolution – with

its full place in a linear time – are the two dialectical polarities that Jesi sees as reverberating in the more general dialectic between myth and history. Even on a purely gnoseological level, Jesi attempts to escape from the stringent dialectic between history and myth, between innovation and continuity, between revolution and revolt. To choose one of the two polarities always means to remain trapped in the dialectical logic underlying it: for this reason, in his reading of Rimbaud's *Bateau Ivre*, Jesi proposes an alternative model in the thematization of the relationship between myth/history, as well as between related binarisms such as faith/non-faith of the other world from where myth and poetic platitudes emerges and the model of the «there not-is» and the mythological machine<sup>30</sup>. It is precisely this alternative model that has immediate repercussions on a political level, offering a radically different way of inhabiting temporality.

What is myth in fact? And what is its relationship with the time of history? As we will argue further, this may be an ultimate binarism to be contended with; It is precisely this dialectic that will turn out to be problematic, that is, it will lead to an a-poria, to a lack of passage, to a road with no way out.

If for orthodox Marxism myth has always been seen – through the lens of the enlightenment – as a hallucination of reason, a feverish delirium from which to wake up, for the conservative right it has instead been endowed with substantiality and reality<sup>31</sup>. Both of these theoretical positions lead to theoretical and practical errors that have proved fatal to the history of the twentieth century. If it is easy to identify as dangerously reactionary the fact of giving a substantial reality to myth – thus assuming a purity and authenticity prior to the time of history, to which the latter will always have to dialectically rely on in order to legitimize itself and endow itself with naturalness and eternity – less obvious is the criticism made of the second dialectical polarity, the Marxist one defending history as opposed to myth.

<sup>30</sup> F. Jesi, *Lettura del Bateau Ivre di Rimbaud*, in F. Jesi, *Il tempo della festa*, Notte-tempo, Roma 2013.

<sup>31</sup> For more on Marx's critiques of myth, see for example *Review of Les Conspireurs* by A. Chenu and *La Naissance de la République en Février 1848*, by L. De la Hodde, in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Marx and Engels, Collected Works, Vol 10, 1849-51*, Lawrence and Wishart, Electric Books 2010, pp. 311-25; *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* in R.C. Tucker (eds.), *The Marx-Engels Reader, Second Edition*, W. W. Norton, New York 1978; *On the Jewish Question* also in *The Marx Engels Reader*.

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As Andrea Cavalletti tells us, «if accepting the appearance of the demon, believing to detach oneself from the concreteness of history, is not a real solution to the problem posed by the manipulation of time, the pretension of holding on to the historical level is only a false alternative: revolt and revolution remain terms of an aporia, still separate, yet strictly co-implicated»<sup>32</sup>. Accepting the myth as if it were a substantial reality is certainly not a viable path for Jesi, who sees precisely in this attitude the mode of the conservative right. Yet neither is it possible to claim to remain entirely on the historical level – as the «left-wing critics» of the myth would like – denying the mythologies and symbologies that re-emerge as being resemantized from the past. Revolt and revolution from this perspective are therefore two polarities of the same dialectic, the one between myth and history, which leads to a lack of passage, of way out, that is, to an aporia, what Jesi calls the “bourgeois manipulation of time”.

For Jesi, in fact, the time of history cannot be seen simply in opposition to mythical time: the latter constantly re-emerges in history, re-semanticizing itself in contexts that are completely different from those of its departure. And it brings with it energies and symbologies that cannot be easily removed as if they were hallucinations and delusions. This is one of the variables for which orthodox Marxism has been supplanted in Europe by movements such as fascism and national socialism, which appealed in a fanatical way to a supposed existence and reality of myth. Denying the myth as a hallucination to be removed, makes it re-emerge only in a more intense way in distorted and dangerous forms (although a thinker like Benjamin does a great deal to subvert those very same tendencies).

What is the epistemological attitude to be taken towards myth?

In fact, Jesi tells us that myth as such is unknowable; we cannot establish whether myth exists or does not exist within or as the origin of historical time. More precisely, the very logic employed in posing the question is wrong. Myth as substance, for Jesi, is unknowable. All that we can study and thematize is mythology as a process, including the discourses around it. Discourses are performative, they have real and practical consequences, but these derive from something of which we can affirm neither the existence nor the non-existence: both these apodictic formulations would remain trapped in the dialectic logic of

<sup>32</sup> A. Cavalletti, *Prefazione. Leggere Spartakus*, in F. Jesi, *Spartakus. Simbologia della rivolta*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2013, p. XIX.

myth and history if they were left as they are. As Jesi tells us in another writing:

What exists before mythology is myth: but it will be very difficult for scientific research to grasp this precedent of precedents, destined as it is to remain in the sphere of history and therefore to encounter behind every mythology another more ancient mythology, not a myth in the strict sense [...]. We should rather speak of a mythological theme and therefore explicitly circumscribe research to the thematic developments of a myth in a mythology, [...] renouncing a priori the impossible scientific study of a myth in itself<sup>33</sup>.

For this reason, Jesi will formulate the epistemological and gnoseological model of the «mythological machine»: myth is like an empty center which, however, generates around itself performative discourses, it is an «effective word». We can study myth only as a machine that produces, as an uninterrupted process, never as a substance:

Just like myths, they [poetic platitudes] are first and foremost something whose existence a creative experience insists on making us believe, while keeping its essence hidden from us [...]. A real mythological machine is at work here, the mythological machine, which produces mythologies and induces us to believe, under pressure, that it conceals the myth within its own non-penetrable walls<sup>34</sup>.

The cunning of the mythological machine is precisely to make us believe that there is something substantial at its center, that is, that there is myth as substance. If, on the other hand, we understand the theoretical mechanism behind the creation of performative mythologies, we are also able to disable the false problem of the existence or non-existence of myth as substance. Whether it “exists” or not (“ci non-è”) myth still has an “effect”.

To think more clearly about all of this we must first note that Jesi argues that believing or not believing in the reality of myth are two sides of the same coin, of the same dialectical logic, (in the same way as both the supporters of the conservative right and the critics of the left are trapped in this same logic). To deny something apodictically is to remain trapped in the exact same logic as those who preemptorily affirm that something: «Even the most convinced supporter of non-faith is forced to allow an involuntary act of faith: there is no more exact faith towards an ‘other world’ that there-is-not than the declaration that such an «other world’ is not [...] There is, moreover, an im-

<sup>33</sup> F. Jesi, *Thomas Mann*, La nuova Italia, Firenze 1972, p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> Jesi, *Lettura del Bateau Ivre di Rimbaud* cit., p. 51

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portant difference between denying in order to affirm and denying in order to deny, between saying that this «other» world there not-is and saying that it is not»<sup>35</sup>.

For the first time here in his *Reading of Rimbaud's Bateau Ivre*, Jesi introduces the theoretical device of «there not-is» («ci non-è»). Regarding the dialectic between myth and history, we can neither affirm the existence of myth nor deny it. This is for the simple fact that we cannot say that myth exists as a substance, but neither can we deny the performative effects that myth as discourse, therefore as mythology, has. The gnoseological mechanism of «there not-is» allows exactly this, the deactivation of the dialectic between the opposed polarities of myth and history, for an interruption of them. This same cognitive behavior, however, immediately reverberates in the practical:

This difference is very instructive about the behavior of the men it discriminates between. Some of them, the men of the «there not-is», can be the men of the revolt and certainly are predisposed to become its prophets, to be used as its prophets or as its supporters who promise its repeatability; the others, the men of the «it is not», have only the revolution in front of them, or conservation if they decide to renounce themselves and accept the relationship of forces in which they find themselves<sup>36</sup>.

The fact that revolt and revolution are also two polarities of the same dialectic, that is, of the bourgeois manipulation of time does not prevent the human beings of the revolt from being at least aware of what is not. In the revolt, in fact, historical time is suspended and mythologies and symbologies from the atavistic past re-emerge, so their participants can't help but take them on: their task, rather, will be to deactivate and play with them, not to deny them. Moreover, within the revolt, there are neither presuppositions nor purposes: what happens makes sense in itself; there is no faith in the constant flow of linear temporality, nor in the nexus of cause and effect. The human beings of the revolution, on the other hand, are those who support the non-existence of the myth, they are the «left-wing critics», those who deny it make reason itself a myth, as Adorno and Horkheimer demonstrate at length in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

Revolt, for Jesi, is analogous to poetic experience. In fact, the power of the poetic word lies in its symbolism, in its being free from the instrumental link of having to communicate something outside of it-

<sup>35</sup> Ivi, p. 53.

<sup>36</sup> Ivi, p. 54.

self (as seen in Benjamin's essay on language too): thanks to this symbolic power of the poetic word, to the fact that it is Bachofen's «symbol resting in itself», there is a subversion of bourgeois temporality<sup>37</sup>. The poetic word is indeed a resemantization of commonplaces, of myths – therefore not a “removal” of the world of mythology and of the energies linked to it, but rather its deactivation and its play through quotation, the complete availability of poetic precedents, and its total usability – but it is at the same time radically new and not subject to the nexus of means and ends, typical of bourgeois instrumental rationality. In other words, the poetic word takes on mythology, it does not avoid and simply remove it, but, playing with it, it deactivates myth as a conservative temporality that would legitimize the present as the fruit of an unattainable, authentic, pure past. In this way, the poetic word gives us a sense of how something that is removed from normative historical time can return with a big, and radical impact, much like those things learned in revolt itself.

In the same way, we have seen how the revolt is for Jesi a moment of suspension of “normal” historical time, a reappearance of mythologies – in the form of dialectical polarities to which it is unfortunately easy to be subjugated, such as that of the great sacrificers and the great victims, of the sanctified heroes and the inhuman and monstrous enemies – where, however, each action is valid in itself, and is therefore free from the cause/effect, means/end nexus. Exactly like the poetic word, the revolt does not need to communicate anything; it is a symbol that rests in itself, and points towards a temporality other than that of the bourgeois manipulation of time.

It is no coincidence, in fact, that Jesi puts as the exergue of his book *Spartakus* – almost as an emblem that crystallizes in itself the sense of the book – a quote from Nietzsche that reads, «and then suddenly a moment of inexplicable hesitation, like a gap that springs up between cause and effect, a dream-inducing pressure, practically a nightmare»<sup>38</sup>.

Suddenly, therefore, in a moment that cannot be rationally and logically predicted, there is an inexplicable instant, that is autonomous from what happens before and from what will happen after, a moment of hesitation, that is, of suspension from the regular flow of time. And this

<sup>37</sup> F. Jesi, *Bachofen*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2005; also, for more on Benjamin and language, see S. Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2010.

<sup>38</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, p. 131.

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instance represents a gap, an interruption, between cause and effect: right in this “moment of danger”, as Benjamin would say, there is both the nightmare of having no more presuppositions and, immediately, the dream of being able to escape from the historical dialectic. What Jesi is attempting here is precisely a phenomenology of bourgeois temporality, whose basic grammar is that of the dialectical nexus of mutual presupposition between cause and effect, the same nexus that Benjamin criticizes in his *Theses on the Concept of History*.

#### 4. Conclusion

The exploration of these binarisms, and their suspension is meant, not so much to gain a greater appreciation of the philosophical complexities of Benjamin and Furio Jesi’s thought but rather to think concretely about politics, about the power and possibility of revolution in historical time (which is the only time that revolutions can occur within) that do not simply replicate the fatedness that that same history is normally meant to convey. Accordingly, our claim is that the concept of revolution, as with dialectical theory, is enhanced precisely by those elements which are experienced beyond the confines of historical time. While we can speak of “failed” revolutions as well as of “failed” revolts, our argument is that the failure of the latter is not of the same kind and, in fact, even as a failure from the position of historical time, the failed revolt can influence or effect (once again from within historical time there is no avoiding the language of historical time itself) revolution as such. When revolution comes into contact with a revolt, even (or perhaps especially) a failed one, it benefits from that connection. Ideas, knowledges and experiences from the time of revolt can be brought into historical time. In doing so, they not only give specific ideas for revolutionary practice but, much more critically, they serve to reduce the monopoly that historical time has on revolution as such. By offering objects and thoughts from an entirely different dimension of experience, time and space, the time of revolt haunts the revolution and helps (certainly with no guarantees but then again guarantees are the stuff of presuppositions basic to historical time as such) to make some outcome that is not teleological, that is not predetermined or fated, possible (or at least less impossible).

This also has important implications for how to think about the relationship between Benjamin and Jesi and Marxism. For many thinkers, Benjamin in particular is simply not a Marxist, despite his frequent citation of Marx and his own claims to being a communist. When we read Benjamin and Jesi, not so much as disciples of Marx but rather as figures who expand upon and extend the Marxian logics, we can better see what their contributions to dialectic theory actually are.

In this way, we are claiming that there is a subversive possibility in Marx (and Hegel too for that matter) but only/especially when unlocked by Benjamin and Jesi. Marx used the dialectic in a radical way but it was limited by the temporal structure that he relied on via the dialectic itself. It might even be said that Marx's radicalism (and he is undeniably a radical thinker) came, not because but actually despite his own devotion to dialectical thought. More accurately, since as we've been arguing all along, dialectical thought is a necessary but not sufficient precondition for what emerges from its suspension, we see that it is not only as a dialectical theorist but as something else as well that makes Benjamin and Jesi two thinkers who have an affinity with Marxism after all.

There is an element in Marx, one that Benjamin and Jesi pick up on and extend, which is not bound by its own teleologies, which seeks out the same suspensions of the very system that normally order Marxist thought at its core. It is tempting to call this the anarchic kernel of Marxist theory but Marx's strenuous denunciation of anarchism is such that this is probably not a sustainable or credible argument. Whatever we call it, this is the basis of an unscriptedness in Marxism that comes out of and through dialectic, which could be said to transcend (although descend might be a more accurate word) its own transcendence and bring us into contact with forms of politics that, having been read entirely out of time and space, can nonetheless be present in our actual and political lives after all.

To put our arguments in a nutshell and by way of analogy, we can say that we, the subject, are like a bull in an arena – the arena being the zone of historical time – and dialectic is akin to the red cape that the toreador waves. Something has to lure the bull away from a firm belief that what they are experiencing is “reality”. The red cape is part of that perceived reality, within the arena, part of historical time, but the purpose of the cape is to draw the bull's attention (and rage) away from that context. When the bull tries to attack the cape, what he finds

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instead is nothing (assuming the toreador can draw the cape away in time). Dialectic is like that cape; it is part of historical time and yet it serves to draw our attention away from our context and towards only itself. And, like that cape, dialectic moves, either forwards or backwards. But dialectic, like the cape itself, is not the ultimate object. The ultimate object is the nothingness that we encounter at the other side. That nothing is what suggests that the world as we know it is not, never was actually real. We have to experience the disappointment in our lack of fulfilment from the dialectic as the ultimate promise of liberation *within* historical time, in order to be able to have an inkling of something that is not itself bound to and part of historical time. Here again we can see the critical value of dialectic. The movement it creates is vital. Without it, the bull would never be distracted from its own reality and in that way, it would miss the opportunity to “interrupt the interruption,” that is, to experience the absence of what the cape enticingly promises. The cape gets us to experience nothing and, as such, gives us a taste of our own exile from reality, a taste that could (but also could not) lead us to the kinds of experiences that come with revolt as such. So, in a nutshell, we *need* dialectic to get us out of the myth disguised as reality that constitutes historical time but if we *only* use dialectic – if we focus on it instead of the emptiness that comes when we miss the cape – we will never be more than bulls in an arena and everyone knows what kind of fate lies in store them/us.

### Abstract

In this paper, we will argue that, looking at the work of Walter Benjamin and Furio Jesi, we see a full-fledged alternative to dialectical theory. More accurately, we see a take on dialectical theory, what Benjamin calls «dialectics at a standstill», which may assume the form of a dialectic at times but which takes things in an entirely different – and non, or other temporal – direction<sup>39</sup>. We are reading these two authors in constellation with one another because we believe that taking

<sup>39</sup> W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, MA: Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1999, N3,1, p. 463. For more on Benjamin, temporality and entanglement, see K. Barad, *What Flashes Up: Theological-Political-Entanglement Fragments*, in C. Keller, M. J. Rubenstein (eds.), *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science and New Materialism*, Oxford University Press, New York 2017.

either of them separately does not give a full enough view of the depth and alterity of this other way of thinking about and occupying time. While Benjamin is the better known of the two figures, we will argue that Furio Jesi supplies a critical set of illuminations that gives us, not just the outlines of this alternative but also a keen sense of how it functions, how it uses the form of dialectical presupposition to deliver us from its otherwise inevitable outcomes.

*In questo articolo sosterremo che, guardando al lavoro di Walter Benjamin e Furio Jesi, vediamo un'alternativa a pieno titolo alla teoria dialettica. Più precisamente, vediamo una versione della teoria dialettica, quella che Benjamin chiama «dialettica in stato d'arresto», che può assumere la stessa forma di una dialettica ma che porta le sue variabili in una direzione completamente diversa – non più temporale e processuale, bensì spaziale. Leggiamo questi due autori in costellazione l'uno con l'altro – utilizzando su Benjamin lo stesso metodo benjaminiano della costellazione di estremi – perché crediamo che prenderne uno dei due separatamente non dia una visione abbastanza completa della profondità e dell'alterità di quest'altro modo di pensare e abitare il tempo. Mentre Walter Benjamin è la più nota delle due figure, sosterremo che Furio Jesi fornisce una serie critica di illuminazioni che ci danno non solo i contorni di questa alternativa ma anche un senso acuto di come essa funzioni, di come cioè utilizzi la forma della presupposizione per garantire i suoi esiti inevitabili.*

Keywords: Dialectics, mythology, temporality, revolt, revolution.

Parole chiave: Dialettica, mitologia, temporalità, rivolta, rivoluzione.