



História da Historiografia

ISSN: 1983-9928

Brazilian Society for History and Theory of Historiography  
(SBTHH)

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Time, History and Subjectivity in an “atopic” approach  
to Walter Benjamin’s theses On the concept of History  
História da Historiografia, vol. 12, no. 29, 2019, January-April, pp. 153-178  
Brazilian Society for History and Theory of Historiography (SBTHH)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15848/hh.v12i29.1374>

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# Time, History and Subjectivity in an “atopic” approach to Walter Benjamin’s theses *On the concept of History*

Tempo, história e subjetividade em uma abordagem “atópica” das teses de Walter Benjamin em seu ensaio *Sobre o conceito de história*

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## ABSTRACT

This article seeks to reflect upon the problems of time and subjectivity in the production of historical knowledge. Its approach is deeply inspired by the thinking of Giorgio Agamben and begins by citing the relationship between history and poetry in the 1451 (a, b) section of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. The passage aims at establishing a difference between history and poetry, which is discussed here with reference to three mythical dimensions of Greek temporality — *Aiôn*, *Chrónos*, *Kairós* — with the objective of characterizing sketches of a conception of time that is different from ours and to which the image of the “body of time” is here proposed. The dialogue that follows with the theses on Walter Benjamin’s *On the concept of History* brings closer the problem of the body of time to the question of action and historical subjectivity, questioning the possibility of conceiving an image of time most appropriate to the constituent action of the historical subject and its relationship with the possible.

## KEYWORDS

Time; Subjectivity; Walter Benjamin.

## RESUMO

Neste artigo, busca-se refletir acerca dos problemas do tempo e da subjetividade na produção de conhecimento histórico. A abordagem escolhida é profundamente inspirada no pensamento de Giorgio Agamben e parte da citação da relação entre história e poesia no trecho 1451 (a, b) da *Poética* de Aristóteles. O trecho procura estabelecer uma diferença entre história e poesia, que é discutida aqui com referência a três dimensões míticas da temporalidade grega — *aiôn*, *chrónos*, *kairós* — com o objetivo de caracterizar esboços de uma concepção de tempo diferente da nossa e para a qual se propõe aqui a imagem do “corpo do tempo”. O diálogo que se segue com as teses incluídas em *Sobre o conceito de história*, de Walter Benjamin, aproxima a problemática do corpo do tempo à questão da ação e da subjetividade histórica, indagando sobre a possibilidade de conceber uma imagem do tempo mais adequada à ação constituinte do sujeito histórico e a sua relação com o possível.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Tempo; Subjetividade; Walter Benjamin.

*Aion is a child playing draughts; the kingship is a child's*  
(HERACLITUS, fr.52)

The image of history I cherish is "atopic". It comes from the time when I was a history student and was preparing a work on the *sans culottes* that ended with a question: "Yes, after all, the fall of the Bastille happened, but it also happened that a child crossed the street to get some loaves of bread at grandma's house". Naive questioning, for sure; many children crossed the street, many women hung clothes on lines through the ages, many people passed by, just as the click of a camera saved forever their portrait on the background in another moment of revolution. However, all these "lapses", small daily absences, are outside history, that is, they have no place in an explanatory chain of causes and effects of the event itself, in the realms of history. Out of place, therefore, outside the historical time in which we produce our texts.

This recurring image of being out-of-history, I found again years later in a reading of H. Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life* (1958, see intro and chapter 6). But it is in *Everyday Life in the Modern World* that an atopy, very close to that of mine, is expressed:

Suppose you have before your eyes the collection of calendars printed since 1900. From that pile you take one at random, which comes to be a year at the beginning of the century. Then you close your eyes and mark a blind day with the tip of a pencil. It is the 16th of June [...]

[...] Leaning on the press and the periodicals of this not so distant time, [...] you can now dream. On this day, wouldn't there something essential, which did not appear in the news, have happened? [...] No one can blame you if you think that on that day an imperceptible, but irreversible slip (an apparently unimportant decision of a banker or a minister) has accelerated the move from a competitive capitalism to another capitalism [...] You can even imagine, at the beginning of the summer, under the sun of the Solstice of Gemini, among the usual noises of a village or of some city, the birth of children destined (but why?) to become acutely aware of these things and of this time. (LEFEBVRE 1991, p. 5-6)



Lefebvre immersed himself in a potent dialogue with literature, drawing on Marxist philosophy and the context that enabled him to elaborate the fundamental and critical links of Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, moving towards the problem of alienation and freedom of the subject by the footprint of the *possible* in everyday life. However, the enormous importance of his thought for history, the preoccupation with temporality, formulated in the first volume of *Critique*, unveils its horizon in literature, theater, and cinema, and does not explicitly propose as a problem the way of writing stories that have time as its fundamental landmark, historiography; after all, a conjecture such as "suppose that Einstein between lucidity and delirium had formulated on June 16 the theory of relativity [...]" (LEFEBVRE 1991, p. 5-6), it *still* presupposes a judgment of posterity on significant and universal facts, and therefore presupposes a certain attitude before what becomes historical. However, what if it were not Einstein, but his first wife, for instance, while sipping some tea? What if the theory of relativity had never happened, and the afternoon of June 16 had been nothing but an afternoon of study and calculation in the life of a public official dedicated to science? And what if Einstein had not been delirious; would he still be an ordinary Einstein *a posteriori* acknowledged as subject, portrait and biography in historical time? The valorization of the historical *leap immanent* to everyday life delineates a frontier, which is precisely that which is fundamental to Marxism, the frontier of becoming, of historical time thought dialectically as crisis and mutation (GANDLER 2009, p. 118-127). The boundary of linear time, or rather, dialectical linearity (or spiral) of historical time (MARQUES 2016).

Can historical time be *another*? In *Futures Past* (2006), Koselleck delineates the concept of *historical time* from the fundamental dynamics at play in the various conceptions of time and mutation present in historical literature, but also in the newspaper texts, in the images and ideas that he analyzes. Koselleck, thus, sheds a light and gives some unity to our expectations regarding human history as a *present* link between

past and future. In this process, he differentiates historical time from natural, chronological time grounded in the measurements of mathematics and physics, making historical time look like the image delineated from the “space of experience” and the “horizon of expectation”, even though anchored effectively (but not necessarily) in the natural movement of time (KOSELLECK 2006, p. 308). Historical time, therefore, is human time; and its dynamics depend on a horizon of expectations that is also human. It is this historical time presupposed at the heart of a horizon of expectations that I need to put in question. Therefore it is necessary to make our expectations of historical time (and natural time) somewhat stranger.

To find time “odd” means “to be surprised”, in principle, with the linearity past - present - future in a chain of causes and effects. We already do this when we propose, for example, studies on memory, truth, orality, etc. However, what about contexts, what are they? In other words, what is this that is theoretically designated as “time” for a “space”? In Agamben’s words, we must affirm the possibility of another approach to time as kairological, and an understanding of the temporality of *Kairós* as time as a whole, without a line, and thus without instant, without before and after. Time that comes to be in a whole, in a conjuncture.

The time of gnosis is therefore an incoherent and non-homogeneous time, whose truth lies in the moment of abrupt interruption in which man takes up, with a sudden act of consciousness, the very condition of resurrection [...] Coherently with this experience of interrupted time, the attitude of the Gnostic is resolutely revolutionary: it rejects the past, but reassesses in itself, through an exemplary presentiment, precisely what had been condemned as negative... but without expecting anything from the future. (AGAMBEN 2008, p. 123)

An interrupted time, but whose “denial” of continuity needs to be experienced without the support of the line and the circle. The challenge is, therefore, to express conceptually a historical temporality “setback”, de-structuring it. For this, unlike the way Agamben presents Greek thought according to a western



conception of temporality, I believe that a mythical image of time among the Greeks may indeed provide us with an idea outside of that line and thus helps us to rethink the eternal return as an opening rather than a closure. Therefore, I begin by citing three dimensions of Greek temporality, discussing how they are articulated to the historiography and / or poetics of their time. I try to evoke, in fact, myth and poetry, bringing them to the center of a contemporary questioning about time and history.

## The *hístor* and the myth

Greatly simplifying it, "History" is a Greek word linked to popular justice in its quest for the truth of events (see FOUCAULT 2002, p. 53-55; HARTOG 2003, p. 53-76; CERQUEIRA 2009). The *hístor* is the one who saw and can testify what happened. From this condition of eyewitness emerges among the Greeks the figure of the historian as someone who can, according to oneself and its own pretension, address the people to witness what under what circumstances something has happened (VEYNE 1984, p. 15-26; DARBO-PECHANSKY 1998, p. 48-82).

The historian in the polis coexists with other religious and intellectual figures capable of plotting events in a *myth*, in a story that is told: the poets, the rhapsodists, the fortune-tellers, the decipherers of divine oracles, and so on. The word may be Greek, but the meaning it has acquired throughout the last centuries of European history must be imputed only partially to the ancients (see the studies organized by LIANERI 2011). The first measure that must be taken for the historian to become the narrator / questioner of past events is to separate this time, to make it distinct, to confer upon it a certain status with respect to knowledge: the time between the near and the distant, between the causes and the effects of our present life is the one in which the linearity of the eyewitness unfolds. Even though in Greek and Roman ancient times this temporality has assumed a role in the historical narrative (FONTANILLE 2015, p. 171-192), the connection between linear time and mutation

by the becoming of a society / civilization will predominate only from the nineteenth century on (MOMIGLIANO 1983; VLASSOPOULOS 2007, p. 11-95).

Therefore, this measure was not taken first hand by the people who used the word “history” to designate the inquiry. Neither Homer, nor Herodotus, nor Thucydides created “history”. As Finley affirms (FINLEY 1989, p. 3-27, and seq.), they were certainly interested in the memory of past deeds, mainly as a kind of proof — in the agonistic sense of the term — than as a science. In his constructive criticism of the myth, the history of Herodotus, as Thucydides’ paleography, did not claim his primacy over the truth of the facts at a time of a yesterday, but sought to erect “truer” monuments/ memorials that... However, “truer” does not mean (yet) more real or factual, but, precisely, purged from the mythical, critical elements of its vain words (VEYNE 1984, p. 71-83; GINZBURG 2002, p. 47-63).

There is an effective closeness between poetry and history in this Athenian context, which means a closeness between agents — poets, philosophers, historians — and between techniques and knowledge from the perspective of a social field. Aristotle affirmed in *Poetics* 1451a-b that poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history, for the first speaks of the universal, whereas the domain of the latter is the particular, that is, one brings to light what *could happen* and the other addresses “what Alcibiades did”. But how can we understand this statement without situating it in the discursive and rhetorical context of the *Poetics*, without placing, at the same time, a minor question about the “community of interpretation” implied by the Stagirite as it provides us with those lines that overflow from the specific subject of the *Poetics* and proceed towards a (possible) debate among “intellectuals” of that time?

What is of history and what is of poetry do not differ because of the pronouncing with or without meter. In fact, what is in Herodotus could be put in meter and still it would be a type of History, in meter or not. Otherwise, they both differ because one [history] talks about what happened and the other [poetry] about what had to happen. For this reason, poetry is more philosophical and



more zealous than history, for poetry speaks of the universal, while history speaks of the particular. By "universal", I call what one will do or say according to what is possible or necessary. "Particular" is what Alcibiades did or suffered. [...] From what he said it is clear that the poet should not be a maker of verses but of myths, since he is a poet by virtue of mimesis, and what he mimics is the action. Even supposing that he mimics what happened, he is still a poet, for there is nothing to prevent some events from being the kind of ones that would happen, possibly or inevitably, and that is why he is the "fabricator" [...]. (ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, 1451 a-b).<sup>1</sup>

The narrative of history is that which deals with the events that have taken place and which derives from the *particularity* of an agent — "what Alcibiades did or *suffered*". Poetry differs from this because even when it tells what happened to Achilles or Odysseus, it is not about this or that person but of *characters*. Alcibiades is someone who lives in the ephemeral and human-mortal time (birth, growth, death). Heroes, like the characters of poetry and tragedy, are *poeticized* by the activity of mimesis, constituting themselves, therefore, not as persons who live in time, but as characters who unfold timeless lines of action (*ethos*). On the other hand, the historian does not "poetize", he talks about what he knows / saw in relation to what happened in the past. This separation that leads poetry to the universal (and thus the lines of characters to the universal) and history to the particular (of the life "in that day" of this or that person) is not yet the one between the real and the fiction. The distance between "what Alcibiades did" and the action of a hero like Theseus, who in this sense is understood under the sign of the particular and the universal, escapes from what has "happened" in a human time and goes in the direction of the question of truth. In short, Aristotle's solution leads us to distinguish the truth or truer philosophical, poetic, universal order, from human time-space of events or deeds, suggesting that there is no "more truth" to be sought, in principle, in man's lived time (WEISS 1941, p. 173-180, and seq.).

*1 - The passage is part of an ongoing translation of the first part of Poetics by Marta M. de Andrade and Stephania S. Giglio, based on an edition by Paulo Pinheiro (2015).*

Such controversies are expressed elsewhere in the way historians criticize the myth. The Herodotean *autopsy*, for

instance, could be considered, according to Darbo-Pechansky (1998, p. 185-214) and Hartog (1999, p. 15-30) an instrument that seeks to give the author's opinion a more credible *status* in contrast to poetry and myth. To convince by shifting the credible in the sense of the visible and the lived, being careful to keep the lines of action of the heroes and the narratives of the poets intact, was part of the work of Herodotus: Agamemnon led the Greeks in the Trojan War, the kidnapping of Io caused the kidnapping of Helena and the insane Greeks retaliated against the barbarians because of a woman... (Herodotus, *Histories* I, 1, 1-5) Thucydides does differently: Agamemnon led the Greeks into the Trojan war, but they were all looters and that is all about that war (Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* I, 1, 23); his concern seems to have been to criticize these events with much more interest in those who were contemporaries to him, based on documents that he had at hand or could consult and traditions which he knew and depurated; no mythical element would survive in his archeology of the Peloponnesian War (GINZBURG 2001, p. 42-84). This historian seems to have overcome the problem of autopsy, having placed the narrative of the deeds of men in the record of that eternity and of the universality that Aristotle would still preserve after him for poetry.

Aristotle taught poetic lessons to his disciples at least a generation after Thucydides, and twice as much in relation to Herodotus. The interposition of history in the lessons of poetics suggests the presence and the debate around a very lively problem that separated the truth of ideas (poetic, religious) from the truth of the facts, the one that was verified in the courts and depended on certain procedures of investigation. Poetic, religious and philosophical truth having at its side this other homonymous truth applied in separating from the false through investigation and submitted to the scrutiny of the courts of the city. If the *Poetics* of Aristotle refers to the first and the *Histories* of Herodotus to the second, the paleography of Thucydides constitutes a good step on the bridge between one and another, but with a detail that separated it from historians and philosophers: having as a



purpose an eternal good in the form of a true narrative about the events that led to war and combating vehemently the mythical elements, Thucydides sought to formulate the connection between the factual and the *possible*.

What it means to say that, as far as the field of knowledge is concerned, both for Thucydides or the Aristotle of the *Poetics*, truth would not be experienced as a revelation by time, but as a spectacle out of time, a spectacle of the universal "truer" drama. The time of poetry is integral (myth, at least in tragedy, implies the closed circle of recognition and turnaround). Thus, no construction, whether of the word (narrative), spectacle, or characters, can be anything other but total: drama must open and close a cycle (PIRES 2014, p. 71-72). It is no wonder that Thucydides defines his paleography — writings about ancient things — as *ktema es aei*, an eternal good, forever (Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* I, 22, 4). He postulates identifying from the particular events of the Peloponnesian War and its protagonists a wisdom concerning the *cyclical* unfolding of human tendencies. What we call "history" in Thucydides is a binding of events to the eternal return; because the temporality of the ephemeral, of what is born, grows and dies, does not unfold in the same temporal dimension of the past, present, future. What was, what is and what will be belong to the *Aiôn*, "forever", as *Chrónos* (the movement of becoming). In this dimension, it is not what is happening, but what returns equal in the form of the different that constitutes the *ktema is aeí*.

## Aiôn, Chrónos, Kairós

When historiography bases its foundations vividly interested in the truth contained in the mutation, inscribed in the becoming and perceived as historical time, it also postulates other images with which historical time is filled and that allows it to act as an instance capable of conferring intelligibility to facts and significant factors: time, but also space, individual and

society. Foucault draws attention to this appropriation of time (past, present, future) when he approaches the archaeology of the human sciences in *Order of Things: Man, subject and object of knowledge*, in his natural vital movement, a being that is born, grows and dies; a being who works and speaks; a being that constitutes and transforms one way of life in time (FOUCAULT 1999, p. 417-474). A subject who does not master *his* past and for whom the future is a *promise*. A subject who is rational measure of the godless world, in whom the myth causes shivers. From then on, the becoming is the becoming of man into civilization. And each stage of the process is a dialectic construction of the future, overlapping layers, remains, ruins and new buildings embedded in them.

The living body of time had, at the very beginning of Greek philosophical thought, at least, the three dimensions of *Aiôn*, *Chrónos*, *Kairós*, dimensions present in various myths (BAPTISTA 2010, p. 85-100; BOCAYUVA 2010, p. 399-412, for a brief overview of the theme of temporality, for a reflection on the three dimensions, see MARRAMAIO 2008, p. 397-405, for the connection between *Aiôn* and *Chrónos*, see WEISS, 1941 and HEIDEGGER 1983, p. 454-469). *Chrónos*, "is the time in its indefatigable sequence" (BAPTISTA 2010, p. 87), the running of the river, events and the (necessary) differentiation. We know the origin of our "chronologies": important dates, regardless of their system of notation, they are points that mark the turning of a continuous process. Now it is Heraclitus who gives us also the most famous image of the continuum and the flow, in the fr. 91:

For, according to Heraclitus, it is not possible to step twice into the same river, nor is it possible to touch a mortal substance twice in so far as its state is concerned. But, thanks to the swiftness and speed of change, it scatters [things] and brings [them] together again, [(or, rather, it brings together and lets go neither again nor later, but simultaneously)] it forms and dissolves, and it approaches and departs. (HERACLITUS, fr. 91).<sup>2</sup>

Our sieve directs attention to the becoming as a movement of differentiation, equating it with linear time: "You cannot step twice in the same river"<sup>3</sup> as the waters run inexorably

2 - <http://www.heraclitusfragments.com/files/ge.html> (access 4 Feb. 2018)

3 - As in Burnett's version of fr. 91. See <http://philoctetes.free.fr/heraclite.pdf> (access 4 Feb. 2018)



towards the mouth and are never the same waters. However, it is the whole interpretation by ancient quotes of the fragment that speaks of becoming (including by the interventions of its commentators) and, according to his sentence, one cannot enter twice in the same (river): the *same* is what's remarkable. This *same* river disperses and gathers, associates and dissolves, approaches and drives away. There is an identity, the same one, that acts as the waters pass and they *always* become different. This means that before we take *Aiôn*, eternity, by inertia or continuity in an undifferentiated time, we must consider a continuous, cyclical movement of return of an agency (of the same river, in this case), for nothing and for no reason because it simply "is". Thus, *Aiôn* would be the "soul" of becoming — "the original sense of *Aiôn* is 'vital force', as evidenced by its approach to *psyché*" (MARRAMAQ 2007, p. 8-10) — in the same movement in which *Chrónos* is its impression in a transitory world of sensitive experiences. And about this "sensitive soul" of becoming, Heraclitus says that it is child's play; reign of the child (fr 52, see epigraph).

For some views of Lacanian psychoanalysis, the child, *paîs*, does not immediately experience a chronological shape of time. In the child's reign, it plays undoing, disarticulating the gears of that machine, until such gears are *incorporated* after the age of seven (BERGER 2005, p. 507-510). Of course, the chronological time of the development of subjectivity and inscription in the body of the "self" and the "other" is the starting point of this understanding, and therefore a starting point is a gradual abandonment by the subjectivity of non subjective (in) formalities, *infans*, as De Certeau, for example: the scriptural machine that constitutes us liberates (as repressed) quotations of infinite voices themselves *infans*, empty of language and playful. (DE CERTEAU 1998, p. 221-258). It is the playfulness of the child in the realm of "always", whose past, present, future have not been incorporated and will not be incorporated into the game of identity / otherness.

There is a life before birth that gives it dating. There is a world before the world in which it arises. There is a fetus before the

*infans*. There is an *infans* before the *puer*. Incessantly, there is a previous one without language in time: it is time. Fetus, *infans*, before identity are, one and the other, without language. The scene where every scene originates in the invisible without language is an *ever active virtuality* (emphasis mine) (QUIGNARD 2002, p. 14-15).

Therefore, it is not the equality, the inertia, the immutable of a kingdom of God, but precisely the soul of a child who presides over the game of the eternal return of difference. *Aïon* is like a soul in the body of time. Because it is inspired on this infantile reign in the soul, "time" has neither head nor face, but has long limbs that love the interlace, as if they were contortionists; they go far, they are archaic. In their passage through human territories, they walk in a row like *Chrónos*, from the spring to the mouth of the river, that same god that in diverse iconographies appears as a very old gentleman threatening to cut off the wings of a baby *Eros*.<sup>4</sup> If it were not for time, the same time as always, bringing back the game, starting again unsuspected of the self, of life, of death, if it were not *for that virtuality always active, so active* that the Zeus of the sharing of cosmos and the prerogatives of the gods had to swallow *Métis*, reversing the *Kairós* (the "coup") in his favor, if it were not for that and *Chrónos* would follow indefatigably towards the end. However, the "right time" connected to the circular wisdoms of *métis*, or simply the time when *everything* opens, Zeus *knows*, it is genesis, always. When swallowing *Métis* (HESIOD, *Theogony*, v. 887, seq.), Zeus gives birth to Athena, which means that, curiously, something escapes him by the head. Zeus, who knows everything, foresees all, knows everything that happens, will happen or has happened. This makes him invincible, unbeatable in the intents, but at no time does the omniscience of Zeus refer, in mythical accounts, to the eternal return that is characteristic of the *coup*. Mastering the right time for the *coup* is a technical art shared by hunters, fishermen, warriors, politicians, fortune-tellers, sponsored by Athena, this daughter of Zeus and *Métis* (DETIENNE; VERNANT 2008, p. 9-14); Zeus is created, not The Creator, and therefore the opening of the *Kairós*, the instant, is recorded in the body

4 - See [http://masp.art.br/masp2010/acervo\\_detalheobra.php?id=770](http://masp.art.br/masp2010/acervo_detalheobra.php?id=770) (access 13 Mar. 2018)



of time as vision and gestation without language, without face, without power, without time.

This *mystery* favors the transmutation of *Kairós* into a religious concept with a very long history of theological, mystical and philosophical interpretations, on which I will not dwell. The scope of *Kairós* in Jewish-Christian theologies since the Antiquity itself is immense and is far beyond my purpose here. But as it plays a crucial role for understanding the revolutionary instant in Benjamin, the notion of *Kairós* has a fundamental meaning in the discussion about time and the body of time in philosophy of history. It is from Benjamin's theses that I can properly discuss the *Kairós*, the instant of danger and reminiscence, stating that *Kairós* is the return, the *possible* and even the *impossible* of transformation and differentiation in the body of time (AGAMBEN 2008, p. 127-128), the instant that opens itself to the event, and for this reason is always active virtuality (AGAMBEN 2008, p. 111-128; MARRAMAO 2007; MARRAMAO 2008; NEGRI 2003, p. 63-70).

## The angel of history

I will follow Lowy (2005, p. 13-32), Sarlo (2007), Cantinho (2008) and Agamben (2008, p. 129-150; 2015, p. 185-210) closely, seeking an analysis of Benjamin's theses *On the Concept of History*, particularly those in which the importance of the three dimensions of Greek temporality to the question of the eruption of the instant in the historical process can be perceived in spite of the foundations that the problem may have for the author himself. We are accustomed to creating a correlation between the philosophy of history in Benjamin and Jewish theology, considering not only its explicit references, but also the evocation of the mystical and Jewish thinker Walter Benjamin by Scholem (SCHOLEM 1976; 2008; see MOSÈS 2008). The approximation I will make here between the historical time of the theses and the three Greek dimensions of the mythical body of time is

my responsibility, although Agamben (2015) has opened this possibility insofar as it also deals with the insertion of the theses – mostly with the figure of the angel of history – in a more encompassing tradition, including Greco-Roman philosophy.

Certainly, the problematization of temporality is fundamental in all theses. It is fundamental and intriguing as, for example, in the changes of the second thesis, whose text is long and proposes the connection between happiness, past and redemption, but not exactly through the choice of chains of events; rather, “happiness” and redemption come from a subtle relationship with non-event, with the possible experienced in the “same air we breathe” – we and the generations that preceded us, in what we did not have. From this long text we extract the question:

[...] Does not a breath of air blow upon us, which enveloped those who were before us? Does it not resonate in the voices to which we hear an echo of those who are now silent? And the women we court, don't they have sisters they've never met? [...] (BENJAMIN, thesis II, p. 48)

And the conclusion of the proposal:

[...] If so, a secret meeting is marked between the past generations and ours. So, we were expected on earth. Then we were given, as well as to each generation that preceded us, a weak messianic force, to which the past has pretension [...]. (BENJAMIN, thesis II, p. 48)

The linear, circular or instantaneous time will not be of great help here. Because the generation that has come before us is present, as well as are the sisters who may never be known by the women we court. Instead of representing time spatially, the myth or *tale* of the waters of the same river is the one that best assists us in understanding what, in this thesis, has the impetus to modify our understanding of historical time. This secret meeting between generations is *always* marked, just as we *always* find the same course of the river in the passage of time. The messianic force is the driving force and unites what should never have been separated in the conception of *becoming*: the positivity of the destructive force that ends



and creates at the same time, leaving behind "possibles" that accompany us *during the whole time*. In this sense, the encounter marked with the generations that preceded us, just as we have preceded other generations, is the dynamics that makes us careful and attentive, *à l'ordre du jour* (thesis III). And historical time does not "walk", rather it stops and urges.<sup>5</sup>

To articulate the past historically does not mean to know it "as it really was". It means appropriating reminiscence, just as it flashes in an instant of danger. It is up to historical materialism to fix an image of the past, as it presents itself at the moment of danger to the historical subject, without being aware of it. Danger threatens both the existence of tradition and those who receive it. For both, the danger is the same: to surrender to the ruling classes, as their instrument. In each epoch, one has to tear tradition apart from conformism, which wants to seize it. For the Messiah does not come only as a savior; he also comes as the vanquisher of the Antichrist. The gift of awakening in the past the sparks of hope is the exclusive privilege of the historian convinced that the dead too will not be safe if the enemy wins. And this enemy has not ceased to win. (BENJAMIN, thesis VI, p.65).

*5 - The historical materialist cannot renounce the concept of a present that is not a transition, but in which time stagnates and remains immobile... BENJAMIN, thesis XVI, p. 128*

In terms of the factual, that is, of the writing about "what happened", "seizing history" takes us back to a past that is reminiscent, and to appropriate reminiscences according to another point of view is a compelling task of a historian who recognizes the danger of the present: surrendering to the traditions of the ruling classes (thesis VII). According to the theses, historicism in its rigor applied to a single causal process favors the reproduction of the same significant events, of the same facts, of the same heroes. As long as the oppressed do not seize history, they will not seize the future. In the dimension of historical thought, of the perception and consciousness of the revolutionary subject, history (reminiscence) and the future are present at the same instant, a flash. In terms of becoming, seizing history means interrupting it, diverting it and blowing up the timeline.

The explosion of the line refers to a small text of 1979, in which Foucault tries to reject criticisms in *Le Monde* that had been made to him for having given sympathetic declarations to the Iranian revolutionary process. In the beginning, according to him, a revolutionary outburst; later, a fundamentalist government that is inadmissible to European liberals. In explaining himself, Foucault emphasized the moment when the rebellious man assumes the absolute risk and imposes a “no” to the prevailing order. I read Foucault’s text on the Iranian revolution with deep attention to the echoes of Thesis VI, even though there was no intention on the part of the author to refer to it. In *Is it useless to revolt?* Foucault says that the uprising is a fact, for “that is where subjectivity introduces itself into history and gives it the breath of life”. (FOUCAULT 1979, p.12)

There are different ways of interpreting this movement. For example, are we facing a process of growing awareness that transforms action and unfolds *praxis*? I do not think so, since the urgency and absolute risk spoken of by Benjamin and Foucault involve a leap rather than a consciousness or the representation of the self in action. In addition, I would agree with Lefebvre’s critique upon the philosophies that separate everyday life and *praxis* by throwing the everyday life out of history itself. The relationship between everydayness and alienation marks the philosophies of Marx, Hegel, Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, and it is in his critique to that mark that Lefebvre perceives in everyday life the concrete conditions of appropriation and revolt. That is where subjectivity enters history... and therefore, it was not in history before, it will not be there after, but now, that is, *always*. This is a problem. “Something” that is always there, whose historical nature is to stop, to erupt, to urge and not exactly to walk in line, to think or to exist. What is this subjectivity that is so devoided of the substance contained in the very philosophical definition of *subjectum*?

It is a filament of *ethos*, subjectivity from the perspective of the universal that literally introduces itself into history in an instant of danger, giving it the breath of life: a *daimon*, the



flapping of the wings of a terrifying angel. A *non subjective subjectivity*, therefore; because *ethos* does not refer to the psychological tendencies of individuals, but to universal lines of becoming, lines of possibility in the dynamics of becoming "someone" or the *daimon* that dwells in man, as Heraclitus says (HERACLITUS fr.119).<sup>6</sup> "Demonic" in the Greek sense of *daimon* — different from the demonic as criticized by Agamben in Scholem (SCHOLEM 1976, p. 198-236) — the subjectivity that introduces itself in history, history in the face of the *universal*, constitutes an impasse at the same time, a negation and a point of mutation. Foucault had in mind the irreducible in the uprising, when an ethical subject imposes to power an absolute not on the horizon of his own death and thus of his annihilation. But what is history in the light of the annihilated subject? Does it not seem contradictory that a breath of life "enters" at the very moment when the rebel decides to die? A utopia tears the threads; the subject of history does not change oneself without an instant of decision: "Messianic time is rather a time of action, because only through action we become revolutionary subjects, subjects capable of effecting a conversion from the political to the messianic" (MARRAMAIO 2008, p. 402). Paradoxically, this instant is the point of annihilation of a life, an infinitesimal point in which free will is impossible simply because infinity does not concern it. This cosmic place is one in which the moment happens dangerously, releasing the chains of events from their assumed, past, present, and future identities. It is important to point out that when Benjamin connects the instant to the Last Judgment and to the Redemption in a Philosophy of History, the philosopher allows us to glimpse what is out of history but in no way transcends the being in the world. Like the "demonic", subjectivity *exists* and *does not exist*.

6 - <http://www.heraclitusfragments.com/files/ge.html> (access 4 Feb. 2018)

In this sense, the historical subject becomes a revolutionary. I do not understand this revolutionary (the historian by whom Benjamin claims) as the subject of the sentence, nor as that localized atom which a tradition fixes as the point of origin of acts, causes, and intentions: Man. I do not understand it either, primarily (recognizing that for Benjamin, differently,

this was an important point), as that individual willing to do everything to change reality. I do not understand it as a *person*. I understand as revolutionary the subject of history from the point of view of an engagement that deconstructs subjectivity as the representation of oneself, its particularity, and incorporates it into the body of time, at the moment when the possible remembrance opens the nature of things, giving meaning to the daily lived experience by the memory of what was *not* (as said in the second thesis discussed above); when what was said is *not* a question, *not* what was done, *not* what was built; when the potential to destroy is urgent.

Thus, the angel of history presented in thesis IX is not the master, but the perpetrator of that power. He does not rule and should not rule the mutation, he is moved by the necessary ruin that the flapping of his wings contributes to accumulate (GANDLER 2013, p. 537-1238). The ruined image of the past (BENJAMIN, thesis IX), the image of a future that risks *retaking* the past is therefore fundamental. Because the reminiscences, the debris, are presented to the one who will come. Entering history, claiming its potency outside linear time, in the interim in which the imagination stops and receives the *breath* of reminiscence in a flap of wings, is the anti-historicist gesture capable of remaking the *truth with which the author walks* (BENJAMIN, thesis XVI, p. 128); this is the horizon of *praxis* in which an expression such as "historical subjectivity" gains, in my understanding, a more adequate conceptual foundation than those that separate "subject" and "object", "experience" and "narrative", "representation" and "practice", "conceived" and "lived" at the very core of action (CRANE 2006, p. 434-456; TUCKER 2013, p. 205-229).

7 - "Who would believe! It is said that they were irritated against the time / New Joshua, at the foot of each tower, shooting the chimes to stop the day". Excerpt quoted by Benjamin in the thesis XV, p. 129.

## Final considerations

Qui le croirait! on dit qu'irrités contre l'heure  
De nouveaux Josués, au pied de chaque tour,  
Tiraient sur les cadrans pour arrêter le jour.<sup>7</sup>



Future-past dialectics in the experience of historical time impels our understanding of the becoming towards a representation of the nature of mutant things as process, procedure, development, unfolding, ultimately, chains of combinations that "lead" in one direction (even if that direction is only apprehended *a posteriori*), often towards the "new", as if to differ was largely the same as to innovate. The evolution of the species, millennialism, the end of capitalism, the expanding universe, all imply transformation in linear time. Even dialectics has often been taken in a unique sense in the movement of contradiction in the eternal return of transformation. A mythical narrative, thus, makes no sense as "History"; it does not have this statute for us, also because, since it is generally associated with the rite, we tend to see it as a ritual operation and not as a presentiment of the past, a retaking of the *ethos* to the cosmos and to the child kingdom of "always"; and when we see this, we call it "religion", mysticism. But what if the theology and mysticism of a philosopher like Benjamin create a possible language for the expression of a philosophy of materialist History? It is symptomatic that immanence in historical materialism and other historiographical strands depends entirely on the concreteness of facts in a linear time; but the question of how to reach a verdict on the concreteness, meaning and relevance of the facts is not as it should be, inasmuch effectiveness, meaning, and importance are values rather than laws. It is encouraging that Benjamin and others, like Agamben, provide us with mystical concepts for effecting a profoundly materialistic thought which significance is devoided of the primacy of the acknowledgment of events disposed in causal threads driven by the time of the passing hours, a political historical thought that observes scintillations in the margins, details on the edges, folds in the remains of what we build, proceeding by leaps. A thought that preserves the memory of destruction and the recovery in each new unfolding.

Every conception of history is always accompanied by a certain experience of time which is implicit to it, which conditions it and which must therefore be brought to light. In the same way, every culture is, first, a certain experience of time, and a new culture is not possible without a transformation of this experience.

Therefore, the original task of an authentic revolution is not imply to “change the world”, but also, and above all, to “change time” [...] (AGAMBEN 2008, p. 111).

Can we change the way we understand History by “changing time”? The image of the boy running in the square of the French Revolution is understandable as a historical image considering this questioning. The temporality lost and regained in the body of vivid time of becoming is not expressed by the ticking of the clock and is not expressed in a concatenated process, it does not need it in order to *change* the way of being of things, the way of seeing things, the action, the imitation of the action does not, in fact, produce capital, but waste, scintillations, especially in fragmentary vestiges in built castles - “as dust, rain takes its revenge on the arcades” (BENJAMIN 2009, p. 143 [D1a, 1]). We need, therefore, to experience histories with *possibles* (BENJAMIN, thesis XVII, p. 130; I also refer to TARDE 2007, p. 193-233). That is to say: to write history by bonding with that which potentially reconfigures the world not because it is necessary to give it a new face, but because it is necessary to repeat the feat of Prometheus: to steal the fire of the gods and give it to mortals. Political achievement par excellence, an arduous attempt to undo the divine deed, as the myth of the origin of the gods in Hesiod tells us — which can also be read as the myth of the origin of time, according to Jacques Fontanille (2015, p. 117-192). To undo the deed, the first step is to disconcert natural time from its normal course, which, in fact, mystifies us more than the mythical body of time. For our relationship with history, what puts us before the mirror as individual and collective subjects of conjunctures and processes is not the concatenated narrative of facts, but precisely the rejoicing of remembrance, that is the *now* of the past. The possibility of remembering brings with it the staggering force of destroying worlds; but the return of the historical narrative to a univocal image of linear time condemns us to the reproduction of the line of a single drama: the drama of repetition by the oppressed of the oppressor’s model of history.



It is necessary to emphasize that it is not the truth of the explanations of the concatenated historical processes that is in question since the problem of temporality is a problem of magma, of what underlies and is safeguarded in the writing of history, outside of it. We know that you do not have to make the same connection to everything; maybe it is not even desirable and probably something impossible. We know the value of de-structuring processes, denaturalizing rhythms and change, to which I add only one final note: events, causality, and history do not walk under the guidance of the hours, despite our expectations. They walk with the power. Perhaps this is one of the happiest lessons of the theses: is no good to those who intend to change the course of a life to experience in time something that weighs on their back and escapes under their fingers without redemption. It is no good to reproduce yesterday's powers, that is to say, the powers of yesterday, today and tomorrow. Thus, it is not of our interest to go on reproducing a line or a lineage. The mythic body of time, its image as soul (*Aiôn*, eternity of becoming), limbs (*Chrónos*, the dynamics of passage), the "pulse that still pulses" (*Kairós*, the urgency of the right time of action) gives to those who need to change the course of life — of their life and of the common life<sup>8</sup> — a horizon to dialogue with things, a horizon that is opened to what has been muted in them or simply *were not*, in the course of their invisibility. The body of time is a juncture or rather a co-juncture, and the challenge is to make History a science for the transformation of the present by its tenacity — *a weak messianic force* (thesis II) — in the excavation of ruins. For me, in particular, history is an instrument of sewing in a horizon of utopia.

8 - "Just as [historical materialism] explodes a definite life of an epoch, so it also does to a particular work of the work of a life" (BENJAMIN, thesis XVII, p. 130)

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Research funded by CNPq

RECEIVED IN: 02/NOV./2018 | APPROVED IN: 03/DEC./2018