

NIETZSCHE'S NIHILISM
— *in* —
WALTER BENJAMIN

Mauro Ponzi



Nietzsche's Nihilism in Walter Benjamin

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Abbreviations

- ADHL Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, transl. by Peter Preuss, Hackett, Indianapolis-Cambridge 1980.
- AP Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.)-London 1999.
- B Walter Benjamin, *Briefe*, ed. by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1978.
- C *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, trans. M. R. and E. M. Jacobson, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1994.
- FE Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, transl. by James McGowan, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York 1993.
- GBFA Bertolt Brecht, *Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, ed. by Werner Hecht, Jean Knopf, Werner Mittenzei and Klaus Detlef Müller, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1994.
- GM Friedrich Nietzsche, *On Genealogy of Morality*, ed. by Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. by Carol Diethe, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994.
- GS Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1974–1989.

viii **Abbreviations**

- KG Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, De Gruyter, Berlin 1967–87.
- KS Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, De Gruyter, Berlin 1967–77.
- MECW *Marx Engels Collected Works* <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/cw>
- MEW Karl Marx Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, Dietz, Berlin 1973.
- OC Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, Gallimard, Paris 1975.
- OFEI Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Future of four Educational Institutions*, Edinburgh-London 1910.
- SW Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.)-London 1999–2003.
- TSZ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, trans. by Adrian Del Caro, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge-New York 2006.

Introduction

Walter Benjamin's analysis of modernity and modern society offers us a key with which we can interpret the communicative and cultural trends of our time. He tackles the major trends of the philosophy of his own time and analyses the social and cultural phenomena characterizing the birth of the modern age to develop a critical thinking that is able to deconstruct the myth of modernity: namely, the idea of progress. Benjamin rejects neither progress as a historical phenomenon nor the technical achievements that it brings, but he is against faith in progress as a new mythology. The best aspect of his philosophy is his method, his approach to the modern, and it allows us to apply some of his concepts to the present time. Benjamin's theological-political approach to modern society leads him to consider capitalism as a religion, 'perhaps the most extreme that ever existed'.¹ Liberalism, totally uncritically, sees capitalism as the 'last' (and unique) stage of historical development, growth as a necessary objective, and production forms as synonyms for civilization and culture. Yet capitalism is based on the dispositive of guilt-debt, it is an aimless finality that reproduces endlessly the same profit mechanism.

Although vastly unsystematic, Benjamin's approach to modernity undoubtedly retains a theological character, embodied in his well-known thought image of the little hunchback hiding inside historical materialism. The question therefore relates to the possibility of conceiving, within this 'weak' (and perhaps desperate) messianic waiting, a political

perspective that would allow us to speak of an order of the profane ‘here and now’. If history is a ‘pile of debris’, a permanent catastrophe, then what represents politics—the order of the profane—can only be the ‘organizing of pessimism’. The question is whether in the ‘empty and homogeneous’ time of history, in the ‘meantime’ between creation and the promised, but not yet arrived, redemption, a space exists in which the profane becomes the possibility of being ‘organized’, despite its ephemeral and ‘catastrophic’ prospect. Only in this *dazwischen* (in between) is a political perspective possible. Benjamin builds a ‘secret agreement’ between Marx’s and Nietzsche’s thought systems, extrapolating some of their elements and then discarding them as empty husks. Marx’s system does not work without its immanence of historical necessity; and the thought of Nietzsche without the centrality of ‘bare life’ loses all vital creative impulses. The matrix of Nietzschean philosophy consists not only in the ‘destructive character’ of modernity and in ‘negative theology’, but above all in his ‘analogical’ thinking, which does not include any synthesis.

The spectre that Marx evokes in the *Manifesto* should be compared to another spectre that is more perturbing—the *Uncanny*, as Freud would call it—evoked by Nietzsche when he writes: ‘Nihilism stands at the door: whence comes this uncanniest of all guests?’ This study aims to consider whether in Benjamin’s ‘materialism’ is hidden a ‘perturbing Guest’; namely, Nietzsche’s nihilism. The conceptual core of the book consists in retracing the ‘eccentric’ route of Benjamin’s philosophical discourse in the representation of modernity as a ‘place of permanent catastrophe’, attempting to ‘overcome’ Nietzsche’s nihilism through the notion of a ‘weak’ messianic hope. At the same time, the book also focuses on the function of Nietzsche’s thought in relation to the theory of art, and particularly the theory of the avant-garde, of which Benjamin was the main proponent. The inherent ambiguity of Nietzsche’s thought caused an often irreconcilable diversity of interpretations. Not only has Nietzsche’s thought been interpreted and used differently by German and broader Western culture in the early twentieth century, but even today there is a multiplicity of interpretations. Among the many sources of Benjamin’s thought, the influence of Nietzsche’s nihilism has rarely been explored by literary criticism. Apart from a few essays by Helmuth Pfotenbauer² and Irving Wohlfarth³ (1988, 2005), I am aware of only two systematic

studies on the subject: one in Italian,⁴ which therefore did not have international resonance, and one in English, a book by James McFarland.⁵

The analysis of Benjamin's complex conceptual reception of Nietzsche needs a dual interpretative strategy: at first we must have an interpretation of Nietzsche's thought, and then we have to provide an interpretation of its influence on Benjamin. This seemingly obvious claim holds many difficulties, because the characteristic of both philosophers is to be ambiguous, therefore interpreting them implies the need to choose. And since the two thinkers are radical, these choices must necessarily be radical: namely, to accept some lines of interpretation and exclude others. Benjamin, who repeatedly dealt with the problem of translation, was perfectly aware that Nietzsche's complex and ambiguous thought could be misunderstood. In a note, written between 1935 and 1936, with the French title 'La traduction—le pour et le contre' (Translation—For and Against), he puts the problem of the difficulty of translating a philosophical text and, albeit paradoxically, the problem of the translation of some key words, some fundamental concepts of Nietzsche's philosophy:

When Nietzsche brilliantly misuses the German language, he is taking revenge on the fact that a German linguistic tradition never really came into being—except within the thin stratum of literary expression. He took double the liberties allowed by language, to rebuke it for permitting them. And misuse of the German language is, finally, a critique of the unformed state of the German person. How can this linguistic situation be translated into another?⁶

He draws the conclusion that translation is always and at the same time a comment; that is, an interpretation. Nietzsche 'forced' the German language to radicalize his concepts and used thought images,⁷ metaphors and icons that the reader must decipher; therefore, the translation of his key concepts is always an interpretation of his thought. Even if, in the context of a translation theory, this paradoxical claim of Benjamin's does not say anything new—in fact, the French used to say '*traducteur/tradit-eur*' (translator/traitor)—related to Nietzsche's philosophy his statement does acquire a particular significance. In fact, Nietzsche's thought images have multiple meanings. In German, *Übermensch*, for instance, means a person who claims to be 'above' or 'beyond' the 'normality': the word has a semantic spectrum that simultaneously indicates 'to overcome' and 'to

go beyond'. However, this duplicity and ambiguity of meaning become a clear difference of interpretation if we translate the term as 'superman' or 'beyond man' (or 'overman'). And this happens with the term *Rausch* too, which Nietzsche uses to express the feeling of the Dionysian, and on which Benjamin draws very often in his writings. The word *Rausch* has a very complex and wide semantic spectrum: in German it means at the same time drunkenness, intoxication, euphoria and rapture. If we choose the translation 'drunkenness/intoxication', we reduce the philosophy of Nietzsche (and Benjamin's literary theory) to writing and thinking caused by the use of wine, absinthe or drugs; while if we choose the translation 'euphoria/rapture', we aim to emphasize the Dionysian, philosophical, self-destructive and at the same time creative aspect of his thought.

The fact remains that speaking of Nietzsche in a language other than German—and that is what Benjamin meant in his allusive and esoteric claim—means having to make a choice: to discard some semantic values and to emphasize only one or two of those contained in the original term. In *One-Way Street*, in the section 'To the Planetarium', Benjamin writes:

The ancients' intercourse with the cosmos had been different: the *ecstatic trance* [Rausch]. For it is in this experience alone that we gain certain knowledge of what is nearest to us and what is remotest from us, and never of one without the other. This means, however, that man can be in ecstatic contact with the cosmos only communally. It is the dangerous error of modern men to regard this experience as unimportant and avoidable, and to consign it to the individual as the poetic *rapture* of starry nights.⁸

In the usual English version *Rausch* is translated as 'ecstatic trance' and 'rapture'. However, often in other passages of Benjamin's writing and in literary criticism the term is translated as 'intoxication'. The dual translation of this word implies a dual and different interpretation of Nietzsche's and Benjamin's thought. The duplicity and ambiguity of Nietzsche's thought caused a very different interpretation and reception of his philosophy. He has been considered either the 'godfather of Nazism' or a victim of manipulation and misunderstanding.⁹

At the beginning of the new millennium, we find ourselves again in a 'state of emergency'—in fact, it has become the norm. The West's con-

ceptual and institutional models are made in the midst of crises that stem from both outside and within. Faith in rationality and progress is no longer able to provide adequate responses to new material and intellectual needs. Nihilism really does seem to have become 'world politics'. It is now time to 'rethink' Benjamin in another way and to make an attempt to understand whether it is possible to define an 'order of the profane'. We must—above all—rethink his concept of history, to see whether it can provide a key to reading the most recent past and if it might contain elements that can help us to construct a theoretical apparatus, to understand the present, this 'space' that is in continuous transformation, where old categories are no longer required.

In his *Arcades Project* Benjamin uses some well-known figures (Baudelaire, Marx, Aragon, Proust, Blanqui and so on) as allegories to explain fundamental aspects of modernity. This book is built around these allegorical figures, and aims to explain both Benjamin's interpretation of Paris and the major trends of modernity through his interpretative criteria. Benjamin uses Baudelaire as a paradigm to criticize modernity, or, rather, to emphasize the dark side of the modern era, its immanent negative dimension. He considers Baudelaire to be the key figure of his era, because the French poet consciously lived through the great changes of modernity, and because in his poems he expressed the unease of the individual caused by these great transformations. Baudelaire puts explicitly the problem of poetry's audience and treats his verses as commodities. He is aware that the social function of the poet has undergone a transformation. Benjamin aims to write the 'prehistory of modernity', because he means that the search for origins can help us to understand both the communication mechanisms (in which images play a central role) and the false promises of happiness of modernity and its faith in progress. By extrapolating the significant objects as charged with allegorical meaning, Benjamin wants to write a history of dreams; that is, he aims to pinpoint the origin of the dream images. They derive, in fact, from the dreamer's lived experience of the past and from the image space (*Bildraum*), populated by images originating from advertising, cinema and the collective imagination. In this process he definitely prefers the moment of awakening to that of dreaming, and uses a technique very similar to that of Freud. Communication's images in the modern era are body-and-space

images: they are an expression of the unconscious that takes on itself fragments of bodily experience, instincts and memory traces, combined with the collective imagination. This oneiric language has to be deciphered, interpreted, 'read' like a book. The topography of the image space in the modern presents similarities with the topography of the metropolis: both are to be defined through memory, because of their temporary nature, their continuous changing.

The individual is constantly subjected to the shock of the new, which asserts itself as the destroyer of the already existing. The 'pile of debris' on which the melancholic look of Klee's famous angel falls is also the result of continuous renewal, which the modern brings with it, and corresponds to the systematic destruction of the already existing. Baudelaire's allegories (and also those of Benjamin) are comprehensible only if related to the epochal situation, in close contrast to the modern. And in this sense, the allegories express that radicalism and that destructive nature of which Benjamin talked regarding the 'productive impulse' unleashed by the same modernity. This process is directly connected to the conception of expressive means. The poet is far from being spontaneous, but—as Poe said (echoed by both Baudelaire and Benjamin)—he operates programmatically through the process of montage and 'splicing' in order to achieve his purpose. Producing art therefore requires the systematic destruction of the modern world's culture.

Benjamin deals with the 'mythology of the modern', a notion deriving from the psycho-anthropological arena, supported especially by 'eccentric' intellectuals, who were not progressive. His much evoked ambiguity lies in his interest in this kind of methodology, which he partly tries to use, and in his firm intention to fight against a 'mythological' interpretation of the modern on a conceptual level. Paradoxically, precisely when he 'goes' down into the 'subterranean', in the places of the mythical, of the magical, of the 'sacred', he practises his 'political' action: his incursions into these territories have the value of a political-cultural battle against those who would interpret the phenomena of modernity as 'inexplicable'. In his essay on Aragon and the Surrealists, mainly in his *Arcades Project*, Benjamin vehemently denies the possibility of interpreting the contemporary epoch by the myth. The mythological key is, according to him, an insufficient interpretative key, because it is linked to the oneiric element

and because it is not capable of resolving the 'inexplicability' of visible phenomena in current society.

Benjamin's anthropological writings remain fragmentary, but reveal a very precise conceptual strategy. The access to the underworld, to the subterranean realm of the metropolis, is drawn from Greek mythology. That is to say that traces of the ancient city—of its ruins—are to be found, metaphorically, underneath the modern metropolis, and that layered traces, archetypes, dreams and traumas of the ancient and the primitive man are to be found in the human psyche. Psychoanalysis itself relies on a mythical iconography. The icon of the labyrinth unmistakably emerges from such imagery. Benjamin's concern is wholly directed at emphasizing the cunning with which it is necessary to venture into the labyrinth and manage oneiric materials without attempting to build a 'mythology of the modern'. The mythical elements serve to establish anthropological archetypes; as Bachofen claims, they are symbolic expressions and not prehistorical realities. Benjamin aims to make the 'fields' of myth 'arable by reason', he wants to 'clear' the 'primeval forest' of mythical thinking, 'where, until now, only madness has reigned', with the 'whetted axe of reason'.¹⁰

Benjamin tried to determine the threshold between a 'critical' and a 'mythical' thinking. His polemic against the 'mythology of modern' is a result of the fight between mythical and religious thought that has characterized the Jewish tradition. Yet the principal characteristic of Benjamin's 'critical thought' consists in wanting to assign a 'political' value to this choice. The transition from a mythical violence to violence divine or revolutionary, which Benjamin handles in his essay *Critique of Violence*, is the political decision to found a justice based on the Logos and not the instincts of 'bare life'. He does not confer on Nietzsche's nihilism a 'natural' or physical meaning; rather, he refers the 'bare life' to its ephemeral character and its contrastive relation to the Kingdom of God, to eternity. Nietzsche is part of the constellation referring to this archetypal and 'mythical' order that must be overcome in the name of a theological-political dispositif. Benjamin's process is involved in this controversy, leading to the formulation of the allegory of the angel of history.

Notes

1. SW 1, 288.
2. See Helmut Pfotenhauer, *Benjamin und Nietzsche*, in Burckhard Lindner (ed.), *'Links hatte noch alles sich zu enträtseln ...': Walter Benjamin im Kontext*, Frankfurt a. M. 1978, pp. 100–126.
3. See Irving Wohlfarth, *Resentment begins at home: Nietzsche, Benjamin and the University (1981)*, in Gary Smith (ed.), *On Walter Benjamin. Critic, Essays and Recollections*, MIT, Cambridge (Mass.) 1988, pp. 224–259; Id., *Nihilismus kontra Nihilismus. Walter Benjamins 'Weltpolitik' aus heutiger Sicht*, in Bernd Witte – Mauro Ponzi (ed.), *Theologie und Politik. Walter Benjamin ein Paradigma der Moderne*, E. Schmidt V., Berlin, 2005, pp. 107–136.
4. Mauro Ponzi, *Organizzare il pessimismo. Benjamin e Nietzsche*, Lithos, Roma 2007.
5. James McFarland, *Constellation. Friedrich Nietzsche & Walter Benjamin in the Now-Time of History*, Fordham University Press, New York 2013.
6. SW 3, 250.
7. 'The thought-image (*Denkbild*)—a word used by Benjamin as a kind of generic term for his own shorter text-pieces—can be seen as lying at the heart of his work on thinking-in-images (*Bilddenken*)' (Sigrid Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space. Re-reading Walter Benjamin*, Routledge, London- New York 1996, p. 48.
8. SW 1, 486 (my emphasis).
9. See Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1950; Heinz Frederick Peters, *Zarathustra's Sister: The Case of Elisabeth and Friedrich Nietzsche*, Crown, New York 1977; Alexander Kostka – Irving Wohlfahrt (ed.), *Nietzsche and 'an architecture of our minds'*, Getty Research Inst. for the History of Art and the Humanities, Los Angeles 1999; Golomb, Jacob – Wistrich, Robert (ed.), *Nietzsche, Godfather of Fascism? On the Uses and Abuses of Philosophy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton-Oxford 2002; Carol Diethe, *Nietzsche's Sister and the Will to Power: A Biography of Elisabeth Förster- Nietzsche*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana 2003; Ernst Bertram, *Nietzsche. Attempt at a Mythology*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana-Chicago 2009; Ashley

Woodward (ed.), *Interpreting Nietzsche. Reception and Influence*, Continuum, London-New York 2011; Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche. A History of an Icon and his Ideas*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 2012.

10. 'To cultivate fields where, until now, only madness has reigned. Forge mead with the whetted axe of reason, looking neither right nor left so as not to succumb to the horror that beckons from deep in the primeval forest. Every ground must at some point have been made arable by reason, must have been *cleared of the undergrowth of delusion and myth*. This is to be accomplished here for the terrain of the nineteenth century' (AP, 456 s. [NI, 4]. My emphasis).

1

Capitalism as Religion

1 The Dispositif Guilt-Debt

In his brief text entitled *Capitalism as Religion* (1921), Walter Benjamin defines capitalism as a ‘cultic religion’ (*Kultreligion*). In this text, much like its predecessor *Theological-Political Fragment* and the essay *Critique of Violence*, he lays the theoretical foundations—the first draft, if you will—for his understanding of the concept of history and his political theory. These notes allow us to access the source of Benjamin’s thought, even though when tackling his philosophical reasoning it is particularly important to understand *how* he uses the ‘conceptual pearls’ that he ‘extracts’ from the most diverse heuristic systems.¹ These sources have already been studied in detail,² so it makes rather more sense here to highlight the changes in function taken on by a whole series of conceptual definitions within Benjamin’s project.

Benjamin’s intention to turn on its head Max Weber’s thesis, as laid out in *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*, is evident both in his consideration of capitalism *as* a religion and in his critique of asceticism as a masked affirmation of consumerism. ‘Capitalism is a purely cultic religion, perhaps the most extreme that ever existed’,³ writes Benjamin.

From the outset he draws attention to capitalism's 'extremist' nature, which permits neither responses nor critiques, and will not accept any discussion of either free enterprise or the self-regulation of markets. However, worship '*sans trêve et sans merci*' consists of being continually in debt.⁴ 'And third,' continues Benjamin, 'this cult makes guilt pervasive. Capitalism is probably the first instance of a cult that creates guilt and debt, not atonement [*nicht entschuldigend, sondern verschuldigend*].'⁵

The cornerstone of Benjamin's reasoning is the equivalence between moral guilt (*Schuld*) and economic debt (*Schulden*), terms that, in German, are condensed in the same word. The theses emerging from this notes are clearly laid out: capitalism is a 'cultic religion' that manifests itself as a pure rite; this is the religion that does not stop ('*Money never sleeps*' is one of the latest slogans of financial capital); this religion does not bring redemption but brings debt and a sense of guilt, while the God of this indebted religion remains hidden.⁶

In his text, Benjamin clearly cites the sources for his theory, calling Max Weber, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud the 'priests' of this religion. The equivalence between guilt and debt in fact derives from a reading of Nietzsche, who dedicates an entire section of *Genealogy of Morality* to this subject.⁷ Nietzsche states that morals come about as the result of a contract, which brings with it a debt to be paid to the gods in herds, one's own body and even in blood.⁸ The origins of guilt therefore lie in a contractual relationship. Indeed, under Roman law creditors were even permitted to use torture in order to ensure their debt was repaid.⁹ Nietzsche writes:

The feeling of guilt, of personal obligation, to pursue our train of inquiry again, originated, as we saw, in the oldest and most primitive personal relationship there is, in the relationship of buyer and seller, creditor and debtor [...].¹⁰

We can see, then, that Nietzsche understands guilt as a debt, a guarantee that must be physically repaid or secured against something of real value. Debts come with an inherent sense of guilt, which becomes a moral and legal guilt, leading ultimately to punishment. This model stands not only within a cultic religion, but as the basis for the understanding of

capitalism as religion. However, what is most important is Nietzsche's conviction that one can never be fully free from this debt.¹¹

Nietzsche's wish to emphasize the vital 'purity' of the 'blond beast' is the expression of an aristocratic view of culture, a material conception created, in a truly 'physiological' sense, by the aristocracy. Benjamin's position, while utilizing some of Nietzsche's nihilistic categories, is entirely different: he is firmly on the side of the masses (workers and intellectuals) and against the aristocracy. Thus the Nietzschean elements bring tension to Benjamin's thought, precisely because their elitist roots are in direct conflict with his basic aim to liberate the oppressed masses from 'all rulers'.¹²

So when Nietzsche, with his scientific and positivist language, talks of human nature as elitist and aggressive, he tends to confer a 'natural' basis on his concept of 'will to power', redirecting the moral sense of 'guilt' towards the economic roots of 'debt', and turning his back on previously accepted notions in order to interpret capitalism as a religion: 'Punishment is supposed to have the value of arousing the *feeling of guilt* in the guilty party; in it, people look for the actual *instrumentum* of the mental reflex which we call "bad conscience" or "pang of conscience".'¹³

Nietzsche talks of the *Unlösbarkeit der Schuld* ('impossibility of paying back the debt') and the *Unlösbarkeit der Busse* ('impossibility of discharging the penance'), as within this condition of perennial reproduction, the guilt-debt can never be erased. There is no redemption for humankind; instead, there is a constant renewal of 'guilt' and the feelings of guilt that grow and take control of the individual's conscience, 'like a polyp' (*polypenhafte*).¹⁴ Nietzsche defines this 'fixed idea' as an inherently negative and nihilistic 'madness' (*Wahnsinn*), precisely because it denies humankind's primary vital instincts. His whole discourse is turned against Christian morality: his is a critique of religion. However, if we take as a starting point the relationship that he highlights between economy and the origins of guilt as debt, many of his considerations—particularly those regarding the 'madness' of creating an irrational and fundamentally nihilistic system with 'finality without aim', an end in itself and entirely self-referential—could be applied to capitalism, just as Benjamin does in *Capitalism as Religion*.¹⁵

Yet the madness of capitalism is precisely this: setting in motion a mechanism that has an aimless finality in itself, under whose gaze the individual (but also social class and even entire nations) can do nothing but recognize their own impotence. That which Nietzsche sets out in *Genealogy of Morality* as a 'fixed idea', like a 'madness' or even the 'will' of humans to view themselves as guilty because of an 'eternal' debt, with capitalism has become a reality. It is no longer a 'sensation' or a 'state of conscience', but a real and insurmountable debt towards the banks.

2 The Credo of Capital

Benjamin quotes Marx as another significant source for his philosophical thought regarding the relationship between moral guilt and economic debt. In the first book of *Capital* (section VII, chapter 24), dedicated to primitive accumulation, Marx refers explicitly to a structural relationship between capitalism and religion:

This primitive accumulation plays in Political Economy about the same part as original sin in theology. Adam bit the apple, and thereupon sin fell on the human race. Its origin is supposed to be explained when it is told as an anecdote of the past. In times long gone-by there were two sorts of people; one, the diligent, intelligent, and, above all, frugal elite; the other, lazy rascals, spending their substance, and more, in riotous living. The legend of theological original sin tells us certainly how man came to be condemned to eat his bread in the sweat of his brow; but the history of economic original sin reveals to us that there are people to whom this is by no means essential.¹⁶

Marx draws a parallel between original sin and the torment of 'eat[ing] bread in the sweat of his brow', the economic legend of an original sin, according to which an active and parsimonious section of the population would have accumulated capital, while the rest—lazy 'squanderers'—would have frittered away the little they had. Marx deconstructs this legend by drawing a parallel with the theological legend of original sin. Both theological damnation and economic condemnation are justified by an

‘original sin’. Capitalism is therefore founded on a ‘guilt’, which is, in itself, also ‘debt’.

According to Marx, the process of primitive accumulation was determined by the division of salaried labour and capital, and by the fact that the sharecroppers had to use land owned by the state or landowners, using a workforce composed of labourers. Accumulation was attained by reinvesting a large percentage of the profits in the manufacturing, while colonialism obviously played a significant role in increasing accumulation. This entire process is explained by Marx using theological terminology:

It was ‘the strange God’ who perched himself on the altar cheek by jowl with the old Gods of Europe, and one fine day with a shove and a kick chucked them all on a heap. It proclaimed surplus-value making as the sole and end aim of humanity.¹⁷

The global domination of capitalism and colonialism is expressed here in theological terms, where the thinly veiled irony is less significant than the confirmation of that parallel between capitalism and religion, postulated at the beginning of the chapter: in one fell swoop, capitalism freed itself of ‘idols’—or, rather, of the previous forms of production (remnants of which were still in existence)—and proclaimed the ‘production of surplus value’ as humanity’s only purpose.

It is often claimed that Benjamin’s method of using political language to speak of theology, and vice versa, came from his studies of Hebrew mysticism, in particular Kabbalah. This passage by Marx points to a new source, not just for Benjamin’s idea of a structural relationship between capitalism and religion, but for a way of structuring an argument in such a way as to create an inverse relationship between political language and that attached to religion. It is widely known that Marx derives his language from biblical metaphors and careful study of the classics.¹⁸ If at the time of writing his text it was unlikely that Benjamin had any direct knowledge of *Das Kapital*, he was nevertheless familiar with the 1848 *Manifesto*, in which biblical hyperbole and sudden digressions are very much a defining trait.¹⁹

At the very end of his chapter on primitive accumulation, Marx maintains that the accrual of debts and production of guilt are struc-

tural characteristics of capitalism, and he finds a correlation between the increasing debt in which state finances find themselves and the religious notion of original sin:

The system of public credit, *i.e.*, of national debts, whose origin we discover in Genoa and Venice as early as the middle ages, took possession of Europe generally during the manufacturing period. The colonial system with its maritime trade and commercial wars served as a forcing-house for it. Thus it first took root in Holland. National debts, *i.e.*, the alienation of the state—whether despotic, constitutional or republican—marked with its stamp the capitalistic era. The only part of the so-called national wealth that actually enters into the collective possessions of modern peoples is their national debt. Hence, as a necessary consequence, the modern doctrine that a nation becomes the richer the more deeply it is in debt. Public credit becomes the *credo* of capital. And with the rise of national debt-making, want of faith in the national debt takes the place of the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, which may not be forgiven.²⁰

In German, the coincidence between the concepts of 'guilt' and 'debt' is rendered by the same type of word: *Schuld* (singular) means 'guilt' and *Schulden* (plural) means 'debt'. It is worth highlighting that here the two concepts of guilt and debt coincide, even in terminology: Marx talks precisely of *Staatsschuld* (understood as 'state debt'), making particular reference to treasury bonds, but which, in the singular, has strong resonances with the term 'guilt'. The contextual root of capitalism as religion can be found in this passage, and it is made particularly explicit when Marx talks of 'public credit' as the '*credo*' of capital, therefore postulating a 'faith', which Benjamin then transforms into a cultic religion in which worship goes uninterrupted.

At the beginning of the chapter, Marx talks about a 'vicious circle' in reference to the process of capital accumulation. This definition could easily be extended to the process of debt accrual and the generation of guilt that characterizes this system. The 'debt of the living', as discussed by Stimilli,²¹ is a vicious circle involving not only the state, but also all capitalist enterprise and all citizens in the accrual of an eternally renewed debt to the banks, independently of their expenses or their quality of life. Everyone is indebted: a real debt is owed to the desperate and impossible attempt to break even, but, at the same time, they are victims

of a guilt-debt when it comes to the state, the banks and even God—both the metaphysical god and the money god.

Guilt—which Marx calls ‘original sin’ and to which Nietzsche also makes reference—is everlasting (although Nietzsche does talk of the grace [*Gnade*] that God bestows on the chosen few), but debt is eternal because the economic and social system is built on a perpetual increasing of debt by the state and enterprise and, to a lesser degree, by all citizens. This *whole movement*, to use Marx’s words, in addition to being a ‘vicious circle’,²² has the traits of a religion; or, rather, it is the religion of capital that speaks the language of Christianity. If capital has created a society ‘in its own image’, its ‘credo’ was created in the image of Christianity.

3 *Umkehr* and *Steigerung*

Two key concepts of Benjamin’s brief text are *Umkehr* (reversal) and *Steigerung* (increase). The latter is used in the Nietzschean sense, ‘growth’ as ‘an increment in capital’, but also as an increment in capital owed, a perpetual accrual of debt. In Nietzsche’s philosophy ‘is magnificently formulated’ the ‘capitalist religious thought’:

The idea of the superman transposes the apocalyptic ‘leap’ not into conversion, atonement, purification, and penance, but into an apparently steady, though in the final analysis explosive and discontinuous intensification. For this reason, intensification and development in the sense of *non facit saltum* are incompatible. The superman is the man who has arrived where he is without changing his ways; he is historical man who has grown up right through the sky. This breaking open of the heavens by an intensified humanity that was and is characterized (even for Nietzsche himself) by guilt in a religious sense was anticipated by Nietzsche.²³

Nietzsche’s philosophy is so connected to an apocalyptic dimension and a ‘religious thought’ that it makes Nietzsche a ‘priest’ of capitalism: his idea of superman corresponds to the capitalistic ideal of *Steigerung* developed to infinity, which denies the existence of God, but is based on a mechanism of debt and guilt. In this passage Benjamin seems to identify in Nietzsche an apologist of capitalism, not only because he uses the

theological-political device, but also because he projects in a metaphysical dimension the typical capitalistic model of unlimited growth without any moral scruple. The *Übermensch* is here the capitalist, who seeks profit all the way, who reproduces indefinitely this aimless finality. The capitalist, the 'economic agent' (as Foucault writes), becomes quite a deified man, a superman who practises capitalism as religion. Here Benjamin anticipates the meanings of Heidegger and Löwith; namely, he considers the *Übermensch*, which is undoubtedly linked to the concept of eternal recurrence, the reclaiming of a metaphysical dimension, a representation of a capitalistic ideal. The political value of Nietzsche's thought does not consist in being the 'godfather of Nazism',²⁴ but in this (sometimes *ex negativo*) apotheosis of capitalism as religion.

In *Critique of Violence*, Benjamin talks of 'demolishing' the violence of the myth, and uses the term *Entsetzung* in his aim to 'depose' the mythical order through 'pure violence', 'divine violence', 'revolutionary violence'.²⁵ However, this implies a reversal in temporal direction, the foundation of a new historical era; the 'spatial conversion' of a historical direction moving from a mythical right to a religious one.²⁶ Key-concepts of *Theological-Political Fragment* are 'direction', *Richtung*, of *historisches Geschehens* (historical events) and the *Intensität* (intensity) of a *Pfeilrichtung* (arrow direction). The 'task of world politics' is to erect the order of the profane and to point it 'towards happiness'. Yet the method used in order to do this is nihilism, as we cannot attain happiness on Earth. The 'reversal' (*Umkehr*), the change in direction, consists in overcoming the theocracy.

The reference to Nietzsche (which also appears in this fragment with the nihilism of world politics) is realized in the concept of *Umkehr*, which we also find in the *Genealogy of Morality*:

Whereas all noble morality grows out of a triumphant saying 'yes' to itself, slave morality says 'no' on principle to everything that is 'outside', 'other', 'non-self': and *this* 'no' is its creative deed. This reversal [*Umkehrung*] of the evaluating glance—this *essential* orientation to the outside instead of back onto itself—is a feature of *ressentiment*: in order to come about, slave morality

first has to have an opposing, external world, it needs, physiologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all,—its action is basically a reaction.²⁷

Nietzsche uses the term *Umkehrung*, which in Benjamin's essay reappears as *Umkehr*, in this case meaning 'reversal'. The 'conversion' (*Umkehr*) to which Benjamin refers is also a change of direction, and therefore a reversal: an *Umkehrung*.

Even within the capitalist system, there needs to be a 'reversal'; that is, a reversal of its religious character, a politics that breaks with religious and ritualistic logic and the guilt-debt that lies at the basis of capitalism. This means that the critique of Christian morals used by Nietzsche in the field of philosophy of religion must be brought to the domain of the economy and *Weltpolitik*. The idea of happiness is therefore antithetical to that of capitalism, and the task of world politics is to aim to abandon the *saeculum* in a total and messianic way.

According to this interpretation, the 'secret' relationship between the profane and the theological lies in the fact that the profane 'takes place' only in its downfall, and therefore the method of world politics can only be nihilism, or rather the tendential obliteration of the *saeculum* with a 'weak' messianic hope. Nihilism is the prerequisite for messianism, just as the apocalypse is the prerequisite for redemption and apocatastasis. This thesis²⁸ contradicts the more traditional view that sees messianism as the *overcoming* of nihilism and Nietzsche's philosophy only as an intermediate stage of Benjamin's thinking.²⁹ It is clear that Benjamin combines Nietzsche's nihilistic suggestions with negative theology, even in the Kabbalistic sense of *tsim-tsum* (that God has retreated from the modern world). However, the question remains whether the aperture to messianism and messianic times is founded on nihilism or on messianic destruction (and overcoming) of the profane. Yet perhaps—deep down—it is the same thing: the messianic breaks into history when the profane ends (*endet*), so the caesura between the profane and the theological cannot be overcome. Nihilistic world politics 'favours', or rather 'increases', 'anticipates' the messianic, just as it 'anticipates' the destruction of the profane. However, if this makes sense from a theological (and messianic) point of view, it makes a little less sense from a political one.

4 Forgiveness of Debt

Following in the footsteps of Nietzsche, Marx and Benjamin, the refocusing of the discourse from a legal or religious-philosophical level to one that deals with the economy and 'bare life' was carried out by Foucault. He puts the problem of legitimacy, deconstructing the pretexts of neo-liberalism, demonstrating how in reality, beyond the slogans on the 'free' market and the freedom of individuals, the liberal and neo-liberal mechanics of power are based on economic principles.

Homo oeconomicus obeys his own material interests, which (according to neo-liberalism) would spontaneously converge with those of others.³⁰ Here we once again see the 'invisible hand' of which Adam Smith spoke: neo-liberalism tends to make us believe that by pursuing our own personal interests, we are in fact pursuing the common good, automatically deriving from this assumption the law of the free market. However, the optimism and faith in the 'invisible hand' that characterize this theory are remnants of a theological concept of natural order: it is a religious faith.³¹ The 'spirit of capitalism', its 'credo', as Marx calls it, consists in a religious-type faith, what Benjamin terms a 'cultic religion', in which the 'invisible hand' 'harmonizes' nothing, but instead leads to an increase in the infinite dispositive of guilt and debt.

Marx had already defined this theory as a 'legend'. Events of recent years have demonstrated how the free market is in no way capable of 'self-regulation'. However, Foucault points out the trick forming the basis of neo-liberalism, which from the outset privileges economic principles, both in theory and in practice. The principle of an irreducible and non-transferable subjective choice is called interest. English empiricism constructed its own theory around the concept of 'subject of interest' and conceived interest as a form of will, basing it entirely on the empirical principle of a contract. The subject of interest is an irreducible element of legal will. It never demands that an individual renounce their own interests.³² The general profit was understood as the maximization of each person's interests. This has proved to be the most false of all principles. The laws of the market favour the strong and crush the weak. Furthermore, with advanced capitalism, it is financial capital that brings the greatest

profits, while sapping the resources of individuals and entire states alike. In recent years, starting with the crisis in 2008, Marx's analysis has been proven correct, not only regarding the crisis of over-production but also with the tendential decrease in salary. The capitalist system's response to the crisis was the traditional cutting of labour costs (with redundancies and pay cuts), which has been proven ineffective because it has done nothing more than accentuate the crisis in over-production and, therefore, that affecting businesses. Short-sighted individual interests have brought about the self-destruction of industry.

If, at first glance, the analysis from the eighteenth century could be connected to that of the social contract, up close we see that it is characterized by the presence of the subject of interest: *homo oeconomicus* cannot be superimposed onto *homo juridicus* or *homo legalis*. Neo-liberalism tends to consider the destiny of individuals and businesses to be uncontrollable. *Homo oeconomicus* is placed within an undefined field of immanence and owes the positive character of his calculation to everything that it does not take into account.³³

The essentially anarchic character of capitalism—as theorized by Marx and assumed by Benjamin—is identified by Foucault within the economic theories of English empiricism and a belief in natural law. These 'rules' of natural law, which believe themselves to be 'universal', are in reality a trick to legitimize legal and (above all) economic differences in property and decision-making rights that play a major role in determining the life of an individual, but are described as 'uncontrollable', 'unpredictable', 'inevitable and necessary' precisely because they are the laws of the market. Even the 2008 crisis was defined as 'improbable'.³⁴

In order for collective profit to be a certainty, it is absolutely necessary for each of the actors to be blind to this possibility. The common good must not be an objective: obscurity and blindness are necessary for all economic agents, and no political agent must interfere with the free market. The expected economic rationality therefore reveals itself to be founded on the unknowable totality of the process. Economics is an atheist discipline, without God and without totality.³⁵ It subtracts itself from the legal form of the sovereign.

Paradoxically, Foucault takes as his starting point the thesis that universals do not exist, as such deconstructing any normativist discourse,

since the political-legal world and the economic world have, since the eighteenth century, appeared to be heterogeneous and incompatible.

Political economics presents itself as a critique of the reasoning used by government and confirms the impossibility of an economic sovereign. All of Foucault's analysis of the state, the government and political economy looks at the 'classical' form that these dispositifs have had in Great Britain, Germany and France; in short, in the civil areas of northern Europe. These same entities, but this time in Italy, Greece, Spain and other southern countries, have taken on specific forms, 'Mediterranean' variants that present compromises and contaminations of previous and/or parallel regimes and dispositifs. It would be interesting to analyse these 'Mediterranean'—in particular Italian—variants of state, nation, localism, biopolitics, government and political economics. Here, for example, the programmatic impossibility of the economic agent identifying himself with *homo legalis* has the consequence that the capitalist often considers himself outside and above the law, believing that he has the right not to pay taxes and to increase his profits with outlawed business. *Homo oeconomicus* often assumes the form of a *mafioso* or drug runner. This does not deconstruct the Foucauldian categories, but submits their meaning to a small modification. It is not worth saying how this 'Mediterranean variant' proceeds in parallel to the second model of metropolises analysed by Benjamin (Naples, Marseilles, Moscow),³⁶ since the backward or Mediterranean model of government, civil society or whatever it might be can be applied to all Eastern European countries, formerly part of the Soviet bloc, where criminal organizations count more than the government.

Since the eighteenth century, liberalism and neo-liberalism have installed (through, as Foucault refers to them, the English empiricists and believers in natural law) a principle for determining the truth with the conception of the free market (Adam Smith's 'invisible hand'), which determines prices and salaries according to the free game of supply and demand, and for viewing the market itself as a place of truth that cannot and must not be influenced or controlled by political action. Yet, as Foucault himself demonstrates, these principles, these petitions for 'natural' truths, reveal themselves to be nothing more than a defence of the particular material interests of *homo oeconomicus*, the economic operator,

the capitalist, who is capable of sacrificing not only the ‘common good’ but also the livelihoods of his workers and even the budget of his state at the altar of personal profit. The presumed truth is revealed not only to be false, but to be a highly useful lie.

With the technological revolution of the early 1980s, the regulation of the market (or rather, the *deregulation* of the market) introduced a mechanism that guaranteed the scam, making it untraceable. The whole history of financial capital over the last few decades, which reached its pinnacle in 2008, is a scam based on the sale of financial products at an unjust price and the desperate search for a way to balance the budget; or rather, a way to increase the profits of financial operators and banks by plundering savings, imposing unfair price rises on banking services and state intervention to save those banks.

We have reached the unprecedented paradox in which citizens are forced to pay in order to balance the banks’ budgets, and therefore in order to stop banks that have invested in junk bonds from failing, states are caused to fail instead (Argentina, Ireland, Greece).

Criticizing capitalism means overcoming its religious conception, it means historicizing it (Marx), but also ‘secularizing it’ (Benjamin). If this remains on a purely theoretical level, we find ourselves in the field of political economics, critiques of religion or, at best, political philosophy. If the ‘power of rapture’ comes into play in order to find a ‘space of political action’, then, in the meantime, we must find a new development model that breaks the rule of guilt-debt. Freeing ourselves from *Schuld* means neither paying the debt nor expiating the guilt, but rather not feeling either indebted or guilty, and in order to do this we must interrupt the mechanics of capitalism—something that can only happen with *Gewalt*, with its dual meaning of ‘power’ and ‘violence’.

In the Fragment *Welt und Zeit* (World and Time, 1920/1921), Benjamin wrote: ‘The real divine power [*Gewalt*] can manifest itself *in other ways than destructive* only in the world to come [of accomplishment]. Where instead the divine power enters the earthly world, this breathes destruction.’³⁷ Here emerge both the presence of the ‘perturbing guest’ and the anarchic character of Benjamin’s political position. ‘So nothing durable and no order must be founded in this world’, he writes subsequently. Therefore the divine power too is considered as destructive.

In fact, in German the word *Gewalt* means 'power' and at the same time 'violence'.

The way to avoid the dispositive guilt-debt passes through the rejection of the 'mythology of modernity'.³⁸ Benjamin attempted to define the threshold between 'critical' and mythical thought very clearly. He found in politics and philosophy the depravity of the Romantic notion of myth that reverses here the original progressive impulses into their opposites. Benjamin's attitude is also somewhat ambivalent towards this trend in thinking. Even if he drew on much of the Romantic theory of language and art, he contrasts it strongly with the universalist interpretation of myth.

The Romantic conception of myth as 'form' takes the value of 'confering sense' as a legitimization of capitalistic forms (division of labour and so on), which produces the 'power of synthesis'.³⁹ Here we can perhaps find one of the 'philosophical' keys of Benjamin's thought: the Nietzschean root of his philosophy results not only from the 'destructive character', from the 'negative theology', but above all from his 'analogical' thinking that does not include any 'synthesis'. Benjamin's thought, like that of Nietzsche, is—*stricto sensu*—not 'dialectical'. In Benjamin's critique of Romantic thought emerges the definition of 'synthesis' as 'mythical thought'. The 'political nature' of this definition consists in conceiving the 'power of synthesis' as 'giving sense' to the forms of capitalism.

Neo-liberalism can be considered as the technological version of Adam Smith's 'invisible hand'.⁴⁰ Capitalism is indeed a mechanism of aimless finality. The logical consequence of these notes of Benjamin is that to overcome capitalism we need to escape from its religious dispositive and look to the political theology. Benjamin draws on some ideas of Heinrich Heine on the cult of money as the new God⁴¹ and bases his critique of political theology on 'very old conceptions of Judaism'. In his reflections on the figure of the 'true political' he defines the laws of Moses as a 'direct' divine influence.⁴² When Witte insists that Benjamin refers to an 'ancient Jewish tradition',⁴³ he aims to emphasize the need to break the dispositive guilt-debt and the run to indebtedness without salvation, referring to 'Jubilee', a sabbatical year that, according to Jewish tradition, meant the liberation of slaves and the remission of debts. It occurred at the end of seven cycles: every forty-nine years (seven times seven)⁴⁴: 'In the year of this jubilee ye shall return every man unto his possession.'⁴⁵ However,