

# **Politics Today: 'Only a Suffering God' Can Help Us**

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**Abstract:** A world without racism, sexism, ethnic nationalism or other particularisms; completely nonbinary, multicultural and miscegenated. This might be the world we are supposed to all aspire for. But what if such futuristic freedoms are only the proverbial good intentions that pave the road to hell, an irreversible hurtling into the “time of the end”, little distractions from what is a wholesale ransom. Against such a future which somehow never ceases to hold out a painfully bedraggled promise, we must then be able to pose the question: How can we make sure that the future will not hold a promise? Why does it seem almost impossible to annul the future that is given and actively produced today? It might be time then to move towards inverting the Apocalypse and posit a “suffering God” in order to kill all Gods that produce the future today. We therefore propose a politics of the now-time, following the insights of Walter Benjamin. The ongoing Bhima Koregaon affair in India might provide us a glimpse of what such a politics might look like.

**Keywords:** Futurism, fascism, theology, Walter Benjamin, Agamben, Badiou

Politics is a flitting possibility.

It is as flitting as Benjamin's conception of the image of the past.

“The past”, he says in the Theses on the Philosophy of History,

can be seized only as an image (bild) which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. [. . .] For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.<sup>1</sup>

It is possible then that the image of the past is not recognized by the present and is irretrievably lost – “never seen again”. Benjamin also suggests that “the truth might run away from us”. He is countering the historicist's claim that “the truth will not run away from us”, and, adding with tremendous clarity, “that is the exact point where historical materialism cuts through historicism”.<sup>2</sup> Benjamin here seems to be emphasizing on contingency: the image which flashes up, giving you a chance, and yet might disappear never to be seen again.

Should we then say that Benjamin is doing an internal critique of historical materialism by emphasizing on contingency and multiplicity -- against, say, the “determinism” and the certainties propounded by a

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1 Benjamin 1968, p. 255.

2 Ibid., 255.

particular kind of Marxism, and upholding freedom and an open-ended future?

Mind you Benjamin wrote this in 1940, escaping the deathly fangs of Nazism. He died shortly thereafter. Perhaps sensing that he was running short of time, Benjamin made sure to clearly put out his most heartfelt feelings about the political situation of the time. He is not just writing against fascism, but also critiquing what went on in the name of anti-fascism, as with, say, the Social Democracy of his time. That is why he is at pains to properly delineate historical materialism: “the exact point” which distinguishes it from historicism and social democracy. So he cannot just be pitting the supposed determinism and repressive character of fascism against the contingency and freedom proposed by the anti-fascists and progressives. Widening the perspective a little bit, we can say that he is not following the logic of the “thesis of totalitarianism” which clubs communism and fascism together since both are supposed to be dictatorships as against a (capitalist) democracy. But he is showing the shared presupposition of fascism and liberal capitalism, fascism and social democracy --- that both are invested in the futuristic-accelerationist model following from the very logic of capital.

Where historical materialism diverges from this futuristic-accelerationism, where it sharply “cuts” through this historicism, is then of great significance. He is challenging the historicist notion of a future which works by positing a past as a presupposition — this is of course what allows the historicist to claim that “future will not run away from us” since, well..., it produces and posits its own past. The past oozes out from the future – dystopic and grotesque! The “Future” is deterministic, lacking contingency, in the sense that it produces its own ersatz past, a past which is a derivative of an axiomatic future. In a deeper sense, then, Benjamin is critiquing the notion of the supposed open-endedness and contingency of the future, the future as the repository of freedom, as compared to the past which is supposedly already “done”, “finished”, fixed, the idea that the past is the past and we cannot do anything about it.

Benjamin is in fact doing something which might put off the votaries of “progressive politics”, in the 1940s and today. He is rejecting the supposed expansive “contingency” of futuristic freedoms, and embracing what many would think is a “regression” to the past. The “past” is today mostly invoked by the right-wing populists, isn’t it? And to add to it, Benjamin is not really calling for hastening the dialectic, speeding it up, if such a thing can be imagined, the forward march of history and so on. Rather, as we find in his notes published as part of The Arcades Project, he is really focused on the idea of “dialectics at a standstill”.<sup>3</sup>

Radicals love to quote Benjamin that, “every document of civilization is also a document of barbarism”. Now we have a better sense

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3 Benjamin 1999, p. 912.

of what is the barbarism he is referring to precisely: futuristic freedoms? Surely, I think of the barbaric destruction of Aztec civilization and the Indian civilization by Western colonialism and imperialism. Or of the ongoing destruction of indigenous (adivasi) communities in India due to rapacious mining corporations, and so on. Surely, such is barbarism. But when you grasp this barbarism in terms of its basic inner logic, which includes an embellishing guise, “the Eden of the innate rights of man” Marx describes in *Capital*, one can see that many in the camp of progressive politics have been ensnared by this document of civilization. And that is precisely Benjamin’s thrust in the Theses.

If Social Democracy carried some of the same basic presuppositions of fascism at the time, then today when we talk about the “threat of fascism”, do we not want to ask: Who or what is the equivalent of Social Democracy today? What is antifa and what are its presuppositions? Where is the “cut” of historical materialism today? This essay is about following up the pointers Benjamin provided that would help in answering such questions for our present time. Then perhaps we need to challenge the framework today of progressive politics vs. right-wing populism, of democracy vs. autocracy suggested by those like Timothy Snyder in the wake of the ascendancy of Donald Trump to political power<sup>4</sup> What if today fascism appears dressed as anti-racist, non-binary and multicultural?

### **The services of theology**

In this light, the politics of the now-time I propose here seeks to speak from within the image (bild) Benjamin proposes. It is located in the present, one into which the past gushes in torrents, in leaps and bounds --- away from the notion of the present in linear continuous time, something you can mark and locate in the calendar. Here you have what Benjamin would call a monadic constellation, pregnant with tensions — one where “dialectics is at a standstill”. The future which inevitably enters here is not the axiomatic future which treats the past as a retroactive presupposition, but one which is more like the activity of the “weak messianic power”. It has to be necessarily “weak”, the fertile revolutionary moment of “dialectics at a standstill”.

From the vantage point of the politics of the now-time, we have to ask: Does our present recognize itself as intended in the image of the past? Does it come close to a realization that “our coming was expected on earth”, that “there is a secret agreement between the past generations and the present one”?<sup>5</sup>

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4 See for example, his 2017 book providing a “how to” guide for resisting tyranny (Snyder 2017).

5 Benjamin 1968, p. 254.

Such a moment would no doubt be rare, not least because what Benjamin calls “the services of theology” are not enlisted by historical materialism, indeed actively disavowed. To identify and foreground theology as providing its “services” might be the way for historical materialism (some might say, the way of), if we listen to Benjamin carefully. Such a practice of historical materialism however seems quite elusive. Many critics have pointed this out. We can think of Cedric J. Robinson’s *Black Marxism* which critiques Marxism as having overlooked the question of religion and faith. Marx, it is argued, is more in dialogue with Antiquity than the medieval radical tradition:

By evacuating radical medieval philosophy from socialism’s genealogy, Marx privileged his own ideological rules of discursive formation, providing a rationale for distinguishing the scientific socialism concomitant with the appearance of capitalist society from the lesser (“utopian”) and necessarily inadequate articulation of socialism which occurred earlier....<sup>6</sup>

We are alerted to the significance of medieval theological resistance to the emergence of the first seeds of capitalist property and legal paraphernalia. One can also note Cornel West’s attempt to relate black theology with Marxist thought, or for that matter the very important exchange between Ali Shariati and Frantz Fanon on the relation of Islamic egalitarianism and Marxism in the context of the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

One comes very close to detecting a strong but largely disavowed theological element in Foucault’s infamous “political mistake” in his praise of the Iranian regime in the 1970s. The “Muslim” style of politics signalled for him a new form of “political spirituality” not just for the Middle East, but also for Europe.<sup>7</sup> Feminists like Maxine Robinson and Simone de Beauvoir sharply criticise Foucault for his “faux pas” in overlooking the gender dimension of religious authoritarianism. Critics point to a related “faux pas” in Baudrillard’s invocation of the theocratic singularity of 9/11 terror attacks as an understandable response to “power (which) has been so formidably consolidated by the technocratic machine and one-dimensional thought”. We read:

All those singularities (species, individuals, cultures), which have paid with their deaths for the establishment of a global system of commerce ruled by a single power, avenge themselves by transferring the situation to terrorism.<sup>8</sup>

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6 Robinson 2001, p. 115.

7 Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 3.

8 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 170.

In both Foucault and Baudrillard, we notice a tacit and surreptitious conflation between the theological or religious and the non-Western societies supposed to be traditional and anti-modern. This radical valorisation of the non-West as some kind of a basis for counter-power might please postcolonial theorists but in fact involves a very naive and illicit conflation.

Then at the level of what in the Indian subcontinent is called the “vernacular”, or the popular community, we find the criss-crossing of Marxist/communist practice with lived religious practices. What is crucial is the rejection of the high literary traditions within both Marxism and religion, and the turn towards say a lived tradition of Islamic Sufi mysticism as we find in large parts of India and Pakistan.<sup>9</sup>

With Benjamin though it is not about interrelating theology and Marxism, or religion and materialism as such — which can seem ideologically motivated, doctrinaire and deeply unfulfilling, the work of a Marxist academic seeking theoretical nirvana! He takes us directly to the theatre of the world, with an infectious messianic urgency in the midst of the dynamic flow of social, political forces and other intensive materialities. The services of theology can appear as the service of historical materialism to itself, or of theology servicing itself towards the ends of historical materialism. It might not be out of place to remind ourselves of Frederick Engels's engagement with the Peasant War in Germany as also Ernst Bloch's highly original work on Thomas Müntzer. Perhaps more than Engels, Bloch seemed quite keen to open up historical materialism to the services of theology.<sup>10</sup>

### **Moment of danger: Bhima Koregaon**

So, from Benjamin's perspective we must ask: What if we are already living in a period where the services of theology abound and it is just that we are unable to see it?

Benjamin says, the past can be seized only as an image (bild) — which means that the present relates to the past not just in a temporal, continuous sense, but where “the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical, in leaps and bounds”.<sup>11</sup> So we want to know if there are certain conditions or situation that could generate such a dialectical relation

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9 Raza 2022.

10 Alberto Toscano highlights Bloch's rather expansive perspective on theology or religion, a point of difference with Lukacs or even Engels. “Bloch does not see the theological impetus of the 'revolution of the common man' of 1525 as the mere index of socio-economic immaturity... Rather than accepting the disjunction between (premature) political content and (sterile) religious form, Bloch finds in Müntzer the paradoxical union of theology and revolution, without the one serving as an instrument for the other (Wu Ming 2010, pp. xv-xvi)

11 Quoted in Agamben 2005, p. 141.

between the past and the present, generating the time-of-the-now, or now-time (jetztzeit). Benjamin seems to suggest that such conditions can be traced to “a moment of danger” in the present. To recall the past is not to recall the past as it really happened, “the way it really was”. Rather,

“it means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger.”<sup>12</sup>

I am not sure we have clear directions from Benjamin about what he means by “a moment of danger”. Yet some of the happenings recently in India reminded me of such a moment. I had written:

Here in the midst of the struggle, in 2021, in a moment of danger, the 1818 Battle of Koregaon flashes up in the consciousness of the “lower castes”: it is not the battle, “the way it really was”, what actually happened, but as it seizes hold of our memory in the present”.<sup>13</sup>

So, there is the Battle of Koregaon which took place in 1818 in Western India, where “lower caste” Mahar soldiers defeated the “upper caste” Brahmin rulers. And then there is the Bhima Koregaon Conspiracy Case which refers to the arrest of left-wing activists and intellectuals starting from June 2018.<sup>14</sup> The arrests were carried out under draconian extraordinary laws, through an exercise of what can be called the sovereign exception. Here was a moment of danger which seemed to slowly assume the shape of a monadic compression of the present and the past, what in Benjamin is called the time of the now, or now-time (jetztzeit).

In this politics of the now-time, “caste” is extricated from being another register in the bad infinity of marginalities like race, class, gender, or queer as, for example, in so-called intersectional theory, but is now an index of “a secret agreement between past generations and the present one”. The “lower caste”, it can be said, is the depository of historical knowledge such that the class struggle, inflected by caste, will now be “nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren”.<sup>15</sup>

Against the futurism of a class struggle too focused on the image of liberated grandchildren, we have here a politics generated by “dialectics

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12 Benjamin 1968, p. 255.

13 Giri 2021, p. 25.

14 Giri 2022.

15 Benjamin 1968, p. 260.

at a standstill”, the point where historical materialism draws on the powers of theology. No doubt, the futuristic document of the Indian Constitution is being mobilised in the legal battle to defend the “rights” and “liberties” of those arrested. No doubt, the arrests are playing out as a media spectacle on prime-time TV channels, the “breaking news” of a Hindu nationalist state dismantling the “conspiracy against the nation” by anti-national “urban Naxals”. It is also a major talking point in the hypermediated ‘culture war’ infested by right-wing populists and radical left wokes.

And yet the past is being called to presence from within the bosom of these techno-legal abstractions — this calling into presence of the past ensures a break with the “left progressive” stance of “fighting authoritarianism” through a debilitating dependence on the futuristic juridico-political apparatus tied to capital. Is this not a radical rupture within and against “left progressive” politics”?

So let us provisionally state: Politics is possible through a capture of the “now-time” which simultaneously breaks with the futuristic abstraction of the law and the economy — where the sovereign exception is no longer disavowed but has exposed itself as the basis of normal democracy: as Carl Schmitt would say, it must be reckoned to be not a “degenerate decision” but a “genuine” one.<sup>16</sup>

In our case here, the capture of the now-time takes place through a commemoration — or rather an event of commemoration. The 1818 victory is commemorated every year in Koregaon as a festival and popular event of “lower caste” masses. The arrests and use of extra-judicial violence had taken place in the aftermath of the commemorative events of 31 Dec 2017 and 1 Jan 2018.<sup>17</sup>

Given the extra-ordinary circumstances due to the use of sovereign violence by the state and dominant powers, the commemoration in the name of Bhima Koregaon now becomes the site of a wider interrelationship between the past, present and the future. Commemoration is now no longer about human beings “who take inventories of their past as of lifeless merchandise”.<sup>18</sup> Instead,

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16 For Schmitt sovereignty involves a genuine decision and not a degenerate one. He critiques those who emphasize on “merely a degenerate decision, blind to the law, clinging to the ‘normative power of the factual’ and not to a genuine decision.” Schmitt 2006, p. 3.

17 Interestingly the “lower caste” Mahar soldiers fought and achieved their victory in 1818 as part of the British colonial army against the “upper caste” Indian rulers. This complicates the usual narrative of anti-colonial struggle since here is a progressive victory for the oppressed which is part of what was also a victory for a colonial power. So this commemoration becomes controversial. It is opposed by India’s elites, and the anti-colonial left too is uncomfortable with it. One section of the revolutionary left however went ahead with participating in it. But since the right-wing authoritarian government started carrying out arrests around it starting 2018, Bhima Koregaon has now become a rallying point for much larger sections of the left.

18 Benjamin quoted in Jameson 1974, p. 73.



commemoration now brings back the fullness of the past, in the present, where the flow of thought is arrested into a monad, putting “dialectics at a standstill”. Commemoration seems to herald the “messianic cessation of happening”, a cessation pregnant with tension, as though the dialectical flow has taken a deep breath — rather, like an animal which gathers himself before lunging.<sup>19</sup>

### **Death as an externality**

The discourse of life, liberty and rights as enshrined in the Indian constitution is being deployed by lawyers in order to defend the arrested activists against the state’s prosecution. And yet given the particular relationship with the past and to historical oppression, Bhima Koregaon simultaneously prescribes the politics of the now-time, no longer homologous to late capitalism’s cult of life and liberties, to what Foucault would call the sovereign’s power of fostering life rather than deciding on life and death. The power which works by giving life can no longer keep the movement enchanted and thereby limited within its scope of futuristic freedoms. In consonance with Wendy Brown’s thesis on the “states of injury” and “wounded attachments” we now find that the jailed activists in the conspiracy case (for example Stan Swamy) define a political subjectivity outside of such “states of injury” and outside of the law and the constitution.<sup>20</sup> One is reminded here of the subject-position of Bobby Seale (who was not represented by a lawyer) of the Black Panther Party not just vis-a-vis the racist state, but also with respect to the other activists (who were represented by lawyers) called the Chicago Seven during the 1969 trial. With Seale, the state of exception or sovereign violence can no longer be counterposed to the normal functioning of the rule of law — rather we have to confront the non-law or the legalisation of violence, what Benjamin would have called mythic violence.

The positioning outside of the “states of injury”, outside of the subjectivity enunciated by the violence-preserving law and the liberties it offers, opens new possibilities. There is now a possibility of veering towards a trope where now life will not converge with the sovereign power and its life-giving glory to be venerated by all. Instead, it will now be replenished by the power of death, the power of what Badiou would call “death as an externality”.<sup>21</sup> Now life is not about immanently carrying the possibility of death, but of a sharp separation from death — where death is what instils life in life, death as an externalised force. We will come to it below.

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted from 1 Corinthians 7, in Agamben 2005, p. 68.

<sup>20</sup> Wendy Brown 1995.

<sup>21</sup> Badiou 2015.

The subjective self-destitution of the “lawless rebel” (arrested activists were suspected to be lawless “urban Naxals”) and the “civil society activist’s” willingness to break with the mould of life and liberty, the willingness to exit what Marx called “the Eden of innate rights of man”, means that now one breaks with late capitalism’s boldest moves on preserving life, the cult of life.

Now “mythic violence” is directly counter-posed to “divine violence”.<sup>22</sup>

Radical as such a subjectivity involving self-destitution or divine violence might sound, it does not in itself ensure the break with the futurism of capital, the futurism of progressive politics, or the futurism of fascism. This is where the relationship with the past, the fullness of the past in the moment of redemption, enters the picture. Now we know: the relationship with death as an externality must be seen as cohering with the citability of the past in all its fullness involving the rejection of the futurism of the law and capital.

This is where the weak messianic power enters history. Agamben explains it in terms of the passing of the figure of this world, not really another figure or another world.<sup>23</sup> Highlighting the Pauline *hos me* (“as not”), he gives the instance of “weeping as not weeping”. He explains: “The weeping is pushing toward the weeping, the rejoicing toward the rejoicing”; “it revokes the factual condition and undermines it without altering its form”.

What is involved is a kind of a fertile immobility, “the immobile anaphoric gesture of the messianic calling”. And again: “the vocation calls the vocation itself, as though it were an urgency that works it from within and hollows it out, nullifying it in the very gesture of maintaining and dwelling in it. This and nothing less than this, is what it means to have a vocation, what it means to live in messianic *klesis*”.<sup>24</sup>

For us, though, Bhima Koregaon is both the “immobile anaphoric gesture” of the weak messianic power as well as the subjective volition of divine violence. Such would be the politics of the now-time, in consonance with a historical materialism buoyant with the services of theology.

### **Socio-historico-mythical unconscious**

Let us now draw the wider theoretical determinations of such a politics of the now-time.

Consider the following alarming statement from Agamben:

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22 Of course, we are referring to Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence”.

23 Agamben 2005, p. 25.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

Today humankind is disappearing, like a face drawn in the sand and washed away by the waves. But what is taking its place no longer has a world; it is merely a bare and muted life without history, at the mercy of the computations of power and science.<sup>25</sup>

Agamben points to the destruction of humanity and history — in fact, of sociality itself. Such a destruction of history and sociality is also what one associates with the rise of the neo-feudalism of tech-capitalism or what Edward Snowden calls the crypto-fascism of the Central Bank Digital Currencies.<sup>26</sup> Some would go further, as would Agamben, and point to the pandemic lockdown and vaccination as the work of a totalising power imposing an intensive colonisation of human life.

Recall Žižek's rather optimistic and upbeat take on Ray Kurzweil's *The Singularity is Near*.<sup>27</sup> He would say that while the AI-based Singularity might take over everything yet the minimal human subjectivity will persist, cannot be erased:

“Everything will be taken of me, or from me, including my dreams. But I will not be dead. I will maintain a minimum pure distance. This will be the preserve of new freedoms”.<sup>28</sup>

Looks like Agamben does not see much of a possibility of this “minimal pure distance”, such an “outside”. Indeed, he overlooks one crucial dimension. While he is right that capital undoubtedly is parasitic on the destruction of the social and the historical, he forgets that it also mobilises these registers in the historical struggle between capital and labour. It would be wrong to assume that this historic struggle is over or that capital is able to fully detach its requirement of labour-power from all forms of human sociality and history. There is a tendency in capital to always disavow its necessary mobilisation of (and hence the attachment to) the social and historical dimensions, as also of the mythical. This needs unpacking. Otherwise, we might end up replicating the accelerationist-futurist paradigm of capital and the techno-legal apparatus, precisely, “the computations of power and science” which Agamben wants to critique. “The bare and muted life without history” might not yet be already all that “mute” and is perhaps still marked by an interplay of both life and history.

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<sup>25</sup> Agamben, 2020.

<sup>26</sup> A perversion of cryptocurrency, writes Snowden, “central bank digital currencies will ransom our future” (Snowden 2021).

<sup>27</sup> Žižek 2020.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 762.

Politics of the now-time must therefore expose the hidden assumptions of the accelerationist-futurist paradigm, something like its socio-historico-mythical unconscious. We must expose the social and mythical relations that are the crucial support to the capturing machine. (Foucault and Baudrillard's flaw above is to view the two registers in complete isolation and not in their mutual interpenetration, portraying the "technocratic machine" as a pure codified abstraction without a dialectical "outside".) We will see below that postcolonial immigrant's relation with capital carries the weight of the world, the plenitude of the past, sociality and history. This much we already knew: that multiculturalism is the vehicle through which capital sought to engage with the culture and the dense notion of the social which the migrant carried with them into the metropolitan countries. We must carry this insight forward and beyond its intended thrust.

### **Futurism and fascism**

But first let us start here by highlighting the integral connection between fascism and futurism which today's left progressive politics seem to have completely forgotten — partly because they are too engrossed in focusing on fascism's relationship with political authoritarianism at a very facile level of electoral democratic wins and losses.

A good place to start from is perhaps the insights of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who suffered incarceration at the hands of the Nazis in Germany. Writing from prison in fascist Germany in 1944 Bonhoeffer famously proposed that "only a suffering God can help" us now.<sup>29</sup> God is suffering. God also must be suffering. God is not available for transfiguration, for putting a veneer over this world. With the human world all shattered, living an infernal hell under Nazism, it cannot be that God is left unscathed.

Is Bonhoeffer taking away the last hope of God and the Almighty who can save? For one might end up imagining that "a suffering God" would mean that there is nothing to look forward to, particularly after the Holocaust. That there is no hope. Poetry and singing are no longer possible after Auschwitz.

Bonhoeffer further writes:

"For most people not to plan for the future means to live irresponsibly and frivolously, to live just for the moment, while some few continue to dream of better times to come. But we cannot take either of these courses.

.....  
29 Writes Bonhoeffer, "The Bible however directs him (man) to the powerlessness and suffering of God; only a suffering God can help". And also, "It is not some religious act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world" (Bonhoeffer 1959, p. 164, & p. 166).

It might seem extremely dis-empowering to not “continue to dream of better times to come”. But is that really so?

We are still left with only the narrow way, a way often hardly to be found, of living every day as if it were our last, yet in faith and responsibility living as though a splendid future still lay before us”.<sup>30</sup>

The course available then is to live in faith and responsibility in the present and not displace attention to the future as the sole repository of freedom. Living every day in full fidelity to the present, without an axiomatic future, is the way to the “splendid future (still lay) before us”. Future is not axiomatically given, for it to then retroactively posit the past or the present.

Today however we are living in a culture saturated with the notion of an axiomatic future, or what we can call futurism. The only way to live, it seems, is by planning for the future or rather to let the future plan you! At the flamboyant bombastic level, we know of the Elon Musk kind of futurism. It involves “the making of alternative futures by situating imaginaries of humanity becoming a multiplanetary species in the present realities of political economy”.<sup>31</sup> Then you have those like Peter Thiel who thinks that we are not accelerating enough. He argues that we are not innovating enough, we are not making breakthroughs, we are stuck in the horizontal expansion of One to Two and not vertical expansion, what he calls Zero to One.<sup>32</sup> Andreessen’s essay “Its time to build”, very popular on Twitter, similarly pushes for a “full-throated, unapologetic, support for building new technologies”.<sup>33</sup> The message is clear: Our present and our past are what the future is parasitic upon.

Another sphere where the model of futuristic freedom has taken massive strides is with regards to gender and trans rights. Kadji Amin points to the manner in which non-binary identification within gender theory — and, I would add, marginalities discourse as a whole including the habitual reduction of the “working class” into “class identity” — lends itself to the “neoliberal identity machine”.<sup>34</sup> A dystopic scenario need not be ruled out. It is as though “class”, “gender”, “race”, “non-binary” are produced by a code-generating machine which itself guzzles what these “identities” really stood for in an earlier time or within another more expansive register.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>31</sup> Palmãs, 2022.

<sup>32</sup> Thiel 2014.

<sup>33</sup> Andreessen 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Amin 2022.

So let us ask: Do we have any grounds to believe that Bonhoeffer's proposal (taking the "narrow way" of fidelity to the present, living every day as if it were our last...) holds good for a break with not just the fascism of his times but also with the fascist logic at work today? If we have grounds for doing so, then this would mean that Bonhoeffer's proposal holds good even when you do not have full blown fascism Nazi-style.

Surely, there will be those who will argue that Bonhoeffer's proposition holds true only for Nazi-style fascism which blocks all possibilities of a good future. They might say, under liberal capitalism, we have a different situation — it is not fascism we are living under (Biden victory will save us!) hence it might be fine to "plan for the future". And is not fascism really about raking up the "glorious past" though a regressive politics (as with, it will be argued, "Trump's white supremacist politics") while anti-fascism is about breaking with the past through a progressive politics? Fascism is irrational and backward looking, while anti-fascism is rational and forward looking, futuristic!

Is that so?

The thing is that futurism and accelerationism seem to be the tissue connecting fascism and capitalism. We might here read with benefit Walter Benjamin's eleventh Theses on the Philosophy of History. He shows that Social Democracy, its anti-fascist politics notwithstanding, was invested into precisely those features of fascism which pushed the working class into the ecstasy and excitation of technological advancement.

The conformism which has been part and parcel of Social Democracy from the beginning attaches not only to its political tactics but to its economic views as well. It is one reason for its later breakdown. Nothing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current. It regarded technological developments as the fall of the stream with which it thought it was moving. From there it was but a step to the illusion that the factory work which was supposed to tend toward technological progress constituted a political achievement.<sup>35</sup>

Social Democracy's "political tactics" might be ideologically anti-fascist but their "economic views" are seeped in those that are upheld by fascism. For the working class, moving with the current or riding the stream of the technological development, being the advanced vanguard of the accelerationism of capital, creates the ecstasy and excitement inseparable from their investment into the fascist myth.

One person who seemed alert to this nexus between fascism and futuristic freedom in the post-WW2 period was Pier Paolo Pasolini.

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<sup>35</sup> Benjamin 1968, p. 258.

One can read his film *Teorema* (1968) as really exposing this nexus. It shows that the much-vaunted individual freedoms and gender-fluid self-exploration as a critique of the traditional social order have largely meant exposing the deeper self and socio-familial structures to the determinations of capital.

### **End of humanity, not of capitalism**

Bonhoeffer's sentiments can be captured through an expression used by Slavoj Žižek, the "inversion of the Apocalypse" — the Apocalypse is not coming but we are already in it.<sup>36</sup> Such an insight as the point of departure makes the belief in the future redundant and forces us to really probe what is going. It frees the past from the historicist hubris of "the truth will not run away from us", opening us to the power of the past and the "weak messianic power" of the calling.

Future, the impassible God, capitalism — this triad can be said to capture pretty much every shibboleth and the zeitgeist of our times. Without a suffering God, without the capacity to invert the Apocalypse we will forever be invested in the promises of capitalism and can never imagine the end of capitalism --- worse, we will be led astray by the false promises of anti-fascism peddled by today's left progressive politics.

Paraphrasing a quote attributed to Fredric Jameson we can say that it easier to imagine the end of the humanity or the world but not the end of capitalism. Be it climate disaster or an apocalypse due to a Frankenstein monster or a hurtling asteroid from space: popular culture is replete with such premonitions of the end of humanity or of life on earth. Such anxieties of the end of humanity is however underlain by the belief that the future will deliver. The future is an inexhaustible store-house of freedom and deliverance. What we have is some kind of a post-human iteration of the idea of Progress.

Consider American radical politician Alexandra Ocasio Cortez's statement linking climate change with the supposed urge among young people not to have children.<sup>37</sup> Or the climate change group BirthStrike for Climate which declares: "climate change is making me rethink whether I want to be a mum".<sup>38</sup>

Their approach is, "the climate situation is so bad, how can people still engage in normal socialisation and community life", "how can they for example still have families or have children". On the face of it, this is a perfectly valid expression of outrage at the prospect of ecological disaster. And yet one can detect a convergence with the essential logic

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36 Žižek and Gunjević 2012.

37 Quoted in the story on singer-songwriter Blythe Pepino of BirthStrike for Climate. Dow 2022.

38 Ibid.

and thrust of the same productive apparatus responsible for climate change. And that is a tendency to reduce basic forms of human sociality into a negotiable calculus based on the contingencies of elite activism. Second, that it overlooks how it is precisely forging such deep human solidarities at the local, community and familial level that could lead to autonomous action outside the capturing machine of capitalist accelerationism, which guzzles more energy, perpetuates consumerism and basically colonises human sociality and social communication.

Anything which is not subject to the Coming Singularity or the algorithm of AI, or not part of the New Green Deal, that is, outside of the machine's control and modulation, say things like childbirth or natality that still retain some kind of a distance from the capturing machine are tacitly assumed to share an automatic homology with sexism, racism, and right-wing politics. It is not difficult to imagine where theology would be placed in this discourse --- surely, on the side of right-wing politics. Such radicals would be aghast at the suggestion that historical materialism must avail of the "services of theology", seeing in it nothing but an attempt to legitimise the nexus between left-wing and right-wing authoritarianisms.

Interestingly, there are positive developments from our perspective in gender theory. For example, there is an attempt to wean away trans and nonbinary "identity" away from the dogma of futuristic freedom that you can supposedly chose whoever you want to become, or identify as. Against this, there is an emphasis on evolving forms of sociality that are not a derivative of "the neoliberal identity machine". Kadji Amin is therefore critical of how

nonbinary discourse has doubled down on the notion of gender as an internal, psychic identification, adding the corollary that nonbinary identification is "valid" regardless of outward expression.<sup>39</sup>

Then he suggests that

What is therefore necessary is to repair the historical wound opened by the cis/trans binary by creating one or more socially legible gender categories — based on presentation and behavior, not self-identification alone — for those who want to transition from men or women to something else, something with positive social content rather than something devoid of it, as nonbinary currently is.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Amin 2022, pp. 114-115.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 116.



He also writes that we must

relinquish the fantasy that gender is a means of self-knowledge, self-expression, and authenticity rather than a shared, and therefore imperfect, social schema.<sup>41</sup>

Clearly, Amin's propositions are solid steps towards a critique of futuristic freedoms that capital constantly generates. One can read his emphasis on sociality as a critique of the positions taken by BirthStrike for Climate which we discussed above.

### **The postcolonial immigrant**

Conceiving the end of humanity but not of capitalism comes naturally — a zeitgeist — and feels like the most obvious thing to do. One reason for this is that capital is able to disavow some of its real dependencies on the social, historical and the mythical and instead present itself as self-reproducing and self-contained — a self-representation which actually underpins much of the presuppositions of today's progressive left politics. This was part of the self-image of Western societies in the post WW2 period. If it was the “society of the spectacle” for Guy Debord, then for Baudrillard it was a passage “from a metallurgic into a semiurgic society’ ... in which signs take on a life of their own and constitute a new social order structured by models, codes, and signs”.<sup>42</sup> It is as though value is generated purely through “real subsumption” of labour in a society supposedly veering towards Marx's “general intellect”, without a dialectical “outside”.

Nothing is served if I simply point to the immigrant labour entering the Western societies in droves since the WW2 — and claim to show the disavowed “outside” to, say, Baudrillard's “semiurgic society”. For what is more to the point is the mythical, social and historical relation to global capital that the immigrants hold.

To begin with, the journey of postcolonial immigrants to the shores of the Western countries itself is mythical, the stuff of so much stories, movies and novels. Clearly, there is no time to imagine the end of humanity or of capitalism — there is so much going on here, so much to look forward to in the search for the proverbial “better life”.

The primary image from the viewpoint of migrants relevant here is not that of Fortress Europe but of Mama Merkel, always so happy to bring in migrants to be put to work in Europe. Big companies were pleading with Merkel to bring in migrants based on the kind of work skills they

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41 Ibid., pp. 117-118.

42 Best, Steven 1991, p. 118.

possess. Mama Merkel inspired the Syrian migrants in 2015 so much that they would name their children Angela Merkel.<sup>43</sup> Yet the same Mama Merkel would make sure to please the technocratic bosses of EU in pushing Greece into a debt trap.

Indeed, here the mythical and historical registers were completely in your face as Merkel is glowingly compared to Ashama Ibn Abjar, the Righteous King, from African history:

“Some posts carry the hashtag #Merkel\_TheEthiopian, a reference to the story of Ashama ibn Abjar, a benign Christian ruler who gave shelter to Muslim refugees in the kingdom of Axum (now northern Ethiopia and Eritrea) at the time of Muhammad. Other images are photoshopped to contrast the German politician’s compassion with the perceived heartlessness of Arab leaders.”

That is a lot of meat to chew on.

Now consider this: For every statue of a former colonialist like Edward Colston which is toppled by the radical left wokes in the Western world in the name of decolonisation and anti-racism, there are at least a few of these colonial masters who are routinely celebrated or rehabilitated as having led the way for the empowerment of those trapped in the oppressive structures of pre-colonial India. Lord Macaulay (one of the key architects of the ideology of the “civilising mission” and the “white man’s burden”) for example is a hero to the “lower caste” Dalits in India. Chandra Bhan Prasad poignantly proposes that, radical “lower caste” saint-reformers were supported by Macaulay in order to oppose the oppressive Brahminical traditions.<sup>44</sup> Macaulay’s proposal to compulsorily teach English as part of public education as also the establishment of the rule of law, the Indian Penal Code, are not just positively evaluated by India’s oppressed but heralded as milestones in their liberation.

A recent BBC report on small town India reads: “English Goddess for India’s downtrodden”.<sup>45</sup> It then mentions that the bronze statue of the Goddess is modelled upon the Statue of Liberty.

I do not need to give more “evidence” of the social, historical and mythical registers that are at work in the relationship between global capitalism and migrant labour from non-Western societies. The question to be posed is this: How does this capital-centric mythical movement of millions of masses from the postcolonial world in the post-WW2 period compare to the past mobilisations of working masses, some of them under fascism?

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43 Oltermann 2015.

44 Prasad 2007.

45 15 Feb 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12355740>

Between the two world wars leading unto fascism, huge masses of working people were mobilised in extreme fascist ecstasy, in what Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe have called “the Nazi myth”.<sup>46</sup> Now that the Western working class is derided as redundant “deplorables” (Hillary Clinton) by the captains of Wall Street, it is surely the postcolonial immigrants who are the new candidates to occupy if not the “fascist myth” then, to begin with, at least a warm mythical relation with capital. Whether through a purely politico-representational “insurrection” (like the Jan 6 Capitol Hill riots) or some such disruptive mechanism, the white “deplorables” can at least temporarily occupy centerstage, remains an open question. Much of it devolves on sheer numbers and demographics and things like the birth-rate of the white population — no wonder then, in the heated culture wars, the question of abortion gets framed not as a question of women and their rights but in terms of white genocide or even black genocide. Not completely unrelated here is the bitter and often uncivil contestation over trans-women vs. natal women. The Great Replacement underpinning the Great Reset, QAnon would say!

As of now, the white “deplorables” might sign up for right-wing racist populisms but perhaps not the accelerationism and futurism led by the multicultural, non-binary, gender-fluid, pro-abortion technocratic machine! Enter the postcolonial immigrant!

I had earlier pointed out, in the context of the United States, the Capitalist International of Silicon Valley and the Postcolonial Immigrant.<sup>47</sup> At the time too, I found it very important to add a caveat: the postcolonial immigrant or the “model minority” in this Capitalist International cannot but reinforce the social death of the black in the United States. Toni Morrison trenchantly pointed out:

Every immigrant knew he would not come as the very bottom. He had to come above at least one group -- and that was us.<sup>48</sup>

In this context, the Afro-pessimist approach of writers like Denise Silva and Fred Moten are very important for us here.

So if new fresh blood is pouring into the veins and arteries of capitalism each passing day, we know where it is coming from. One half of humanity is busy supplicating itself to the futuristic God of non-binary capitalism!

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<sup>46</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1990.

<sup>47</sup> Giri 2017.

<sup>48</sup> Morrison, Toni 1989.

## Non-binary, antiracist fascism?

In the eleventh part of the Theses, we noted above, Benjamin goes on to critique the ideology of the “improvement of labour” which, for him, already “displays the technocratic features later encountered in Fascism”. Today, this ideology of the “improvement of labour” is manifest in the systemic necessity for capital to focus on the improvement of the lot of the postcolonial immigrant worker, through multiculturalism, diversity, and fight for racial justice. It is possible then that the multiculturalist ideology “displays the technocratic features” of fascism or its equivalent today. This might run counter to not just the shibboleths of liberal politics today but also to “common sense”. For we are trained to think that it is only racism and not multiculturalism which might be seen as coterminous with fascism.

Recall here that some writers like Kenan Malik and Žižek regard multiculturalism as the cultural logic of multinational capitalism. Why stop at that? What if it is something far more and far worse than that? It could be that we are encountering anti-fascism itself as the political logic of multinational capitalism — antifascism as ambient consciousness, the conscience of our times, ostentatiously proclaimed as the moral compass by everyone from Putin to Biden, Jeff Bezos to George Soros.

A little reflection will make it clear that the political firmament based on the “progressive” idea of opposing 1930’s style blood-soil-and-race fascism provides fertile soil for capitalism today. We discussed the circumstance: Accelerationism and futurism can today mobilise and deploy the working class without having to resort to the rhetoric and unity of the nation or a volkisch community. Historical fascism’s accelerationism mobilised the working class through the racist Aryan myth and anti-Semitism. But today fascist total mobilisation can very uncontroversially ride on the back of multiculturalism, and more so, on the mythical nexus between the postcolonial immigrant and capital, white-washed with multiculturalism but whose underbelly is anti-blackness.

So we can say that Capital has found the perfect solution: The possibility of detaching racism from the fascist project and ushering in the “pure” logic of capital — more than that, it could cannibalise on anti-racism itself making it the basis for perpetuating the rule of capital.

Almost all CEO’s from Silicon Valley who are spearheading the technocratic machine are vocal about opposing Donald Trump and his racist policies, particularly on immigration. Jeff Bezos and others of his ilk would publicly demonstrate their support for Black Lives Matter, duely acknowledged by some activist-leaders leading to a dystopic leftist alliance of oligarchs and activists! They mobilise tropes about opposing the Nazi-style fascism, asking for more powers for themselves in the name of their broad vision of anti-fascism!

What some observers have called neo-feudalism or tech-capitalism must therefore be understood as a component part of this catastrophe

without a racist Holocaust, a multicultural fascism, not of pure blood and race, but a highly miscegenated, non-binary one. Yanis Varoufakis recently used the term techno-feudalism, explaining: "What we are experiencing is not merely another metamorphosis of capitalism. It is something more profound and worrisome".<sup>49</sup> I would urge those like Varoufakis to also take account of the wider political firmament of anti-fascism which underpins the self-righteous claims of techno-feudalism.

Politics of the now-time must cut through this rhetoric of anti-fascism.

### **Badiou, Agamben**

It does look like capitalism has found the way to end humanity without the enchantment of fascist mythologisation. But this peculiarity might be driving some thinkers like Agamben to yearn for a kind of re-enchantment or re-mythologisation as a counter to this new fascism. This is of course notwithstanding the fact that Agamben for sure would agree with our thesis of the suffering God, of the need to invert the Apocalypse.

We know his pandemic writings, one where he was referring to "faith" as a way to counter the depredations of the technocratic machine during the lockdown in 2020. He wrote that the Church "has forgotten that one of the works of mercy is that of visiting the sick. It has forgotten that the martyrs teach that we must be prepared to sacrifice our life rather than our faith and that renouncing our neighbour means renouncing faith".<sup>50</sup> Put faith over life: that was his message. If the Church had gone out among the public to attend to the dead and the sick during the pandemic, it would have surely gone some way to expose and counter the juggernaut of the "cult of life" of the pandemic lockdown. The totalizing stranglehold of the technocratic machine on the discourse around the virus, masking and then vaccination was indeed extremely disturbing.

When most "thinkers" had carted away their independent mind, Agamben's gesture of opposition seemed to have opened a tiny "space of truth" against the futuristic-accelerationistic capturing machine.

My problem here is not that Agamben invokes faith or something on the register of the religious if not the theological. Rather, it is that he seems to assume that faith, tradition or the mythical are somehow automatically an "outside" to the operation of capital and the capturing machine — which has strong affinities with the kind of "mistake" made by Foucault and Baudrillard we saw above. (In the case of Foucault, the mistake was with regard to Islamic theocracy; in Baudrillard, terrorism as not subject to the logic of equivalence.)

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<sup>49</sup> Varoufakis 2021.

<sup>50</sup> Agamben 2020a.

This is where Badiou points the way towards a novel subjectivity as a real “outside”. His thesis of death as radical externality is a better position than one emphasising on some kind of a prescient value of pristine life, or of the social and the historical, as we find in Agamben. It seems to be able to escape the empiricism of human sociality and life as a given, flat cathartic-mimetic proliferation. Such a proliferation of endless iterations might look like a radical heterogeneity or radical alterity but it is actually well allied to big capital’s cult of life which understands death as the cessation of life, as always internal to life.

For Badiou, “death is something that happens to you; it is not the immanent unfolding of some linear programme.” Death is not the cessation of life, the natural terminus of life, but “death is something which comes from the outside”. Badiou wants to defend a “thesis that upholds the absolute exteriority of death, that makes death radically non-immanent”.

What Badiou wants to negate is the idea of the finiteness of life, thereby opening up the possibility of immortality. Writes Badiou: “The idea of immortality is that in this world — the world that prescribed the intensity of an existence proper to this world — x is dead, but that does not mean that he is dead in every world”.<sup>51</sup> Death does not and cannot mean death in every world: this is a tremendously powerful concept. Here Badiou points to sociality and history enriched not just by life as it is empirically lived, say as a “form of life”, or life which the pandemic lockdown wanted to protect and endlessly valorized — but also life as the immortality brought about by death, a negation of the finiteness of life. In some ways, one can say that Agamben’s invocation of faith was meant to carry, at the formal level, a similar function, of inaugurating another realm, power and life which is not completely exhausted by the life which the pandemic lockdown was out to supposedly defend --- the life as defined by the technocratic machine. And yet it is clear that Badiou’s approach is more convincing as it seems to provide a more fundamental break with the systemic logic.

### **Time-of-the-now and divine violence**

That is, the way out of this fascism without mythologisation, fascism without the “Nazi myth” (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy), is not by way of seeking re-mythologisation of supposedly the good kind which would foster sociality and history in the empiricist sense — since that would be stuck in the Aristotelian cathartic-mimetic proliferation homologous to capital’s horizontalist logics and again, Agamben’s “muted life without history”.

In order not to get sucked into this empty proliferation even while breaking with the technocratic machine, the politics of the now-time must be aware of the convergence between the thesis of death as an

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51 Badiou 2015.

externality and grasping the flitting image of the past in a moment of danger. This is what it means to have dialectics at a standstill, the monadic configuration pregnant with tension, like an animal which gathers himself before lunging.

Against the fear and paralytic hope fomented by capitalist futurism we must assert our ability to still dwell and inhabit moments in the Benjaminian image (bild), where the past and the present are in a dialectical relationship, in dialectical “leaps and bounds”. Bhima Koregaon is precisely such a dwelling, staying, inhabiting where the “vocation calls the vocation itself” — that is why the memory of the 1818 Battle in the present is not really limited to the “past” but is part of the time-of-the-now, “an image (bild) of the past recognized by the present as one of its own concerns”. But this “immobile anaphoric gesture of the messianic calling” attains a felicity only when illumined by the dialectical powers of divine violence.

Finally, the redundancy of humanity, and, by extension, of the past, its un-citability, is homologous to the disavowed mythic relation between the postcolonial immigrant and big capital. Retrieval of the pivotal role of the socio-historico-mythical dimension, the unconscious, in the reproduction of the present seems to facilitate the Benjaminian relation with the past, the way for historical materialism to keep replenishing itself with the “services of theology”.

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