

Political Messianism, Redemption of the Past, and Historical Time

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Introduction

It would be pointless to list all the issues driving so much of society to take on a pessimistic view of our near future and view us as living through an age of crisis. Even if one attempts to muster the statistics to show how, despite appearances, the world is getting better overall, the very fact that everybody thinks and acts as if we are in the middle of or heading towards a catastrophe is in itself emblematic of the volatility of the current age. If the pandemic and the charged geopolitical situation triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine were not enough to put to bed the idea that we were living in a utopia back in 2019, the statistics constantly cited by neoliberal optimists like Nicholas Kristof and Steven Pinker to paint the present as the pinnacle of all humanity have been thoroughly debunked as data manipulation by a host of economists and anthropologists.¹ What is less clear, however, are the reasons why we ended up in such a predicament. The centre, left, and right, while occasionally coinciding on certain particular solutions, have markedly different explanations. The left will blame either the inherent structures of an economy structured around the profit motive, American imperialism, or the neoliberal order as instituted beginning in the 70s and 80s; the right laments the breakdown of traditional social hierarchies, immigration, and the erosion of national sovereignty in favour of trans-national trade agreements and rootless global finance; and the centre chastises everyone for losing trust in the 'rational' technocratic structures and norms of the international world-system governing the age of American total hegemony after the collapse of the Berlin wall. Depending on whether they are more left or right-leaning, centrists will also either blame white supremacy and unrealistic demands by the 'far left,' or the Trumpian takeover of the 'Grand Old Party' and the left's excesses of political correctness and identity politics.

While any one of these individual explanations indicates certain real problems that cannot be merely dismissed due to political

disagreements about their causes and solutions, these explanations are not all mutually exclusive and none by themselves can fully describe our current predicament. Although, because nothing exists outside of bias or ideology, I will admit my personal sympathies to lie with the first view that our situation can be elucidated by examining the fundamentally crisis-prone nature of the capitalist mode of production, saying this by itself without context would not be productive. Capitalism as the dominant mode of production has existed for at least two centuries and a more in-depth analysis of economic and state structures would be required to show exactly why it is manifesting in the specific form of crisis we see today. Therefore, rather than examining exact policy and system-change proposals or giving a comprehensive economic analysis of why we are here today (which already produces many hot debates), this article will attempt to examine modes of thought necessary to begin thinking about what redemptive social transformation in a time of crisis would mean. For given the vast power of our technology, high levels of technical and scientific expertise, and over a century of struggles and proposals on how to move to a freer, more sustainable, and less economically precarious society, if it were merely a matter of the right technical fixes and not also of people's consciousness, we would have already been able to construct a better world by now.

The Marxist tradition has traditionally framed the relationship between the consciousness required to change the world and the concrete actions by civil society, political parties, and the state to implement these changes as the dialectic between theory and praxis. While the two are viewed as impotent when taken in isolation, Marx's famous thesis 11 on Feuerbach, that 'the philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in different ways; it is necessary to *change* it', states the primacy of praxis, as theory and philosophy have no actuality outside of the way they inform action in the world.² When one can accurately theorise a situation with the goal of intervening in it in mind, effective strategy combined with proper subjective

¹ Cf. Jason Hickel, *The Divide: A Brief Guide to Global Inequality and its Solutions* (William Heinemann 2017).

² Karl Marx, 'Thesen über Feuerbach' in Volker Gerhardt (ed), *Eine angeschlagene These* (Akademie Verlag 1996) 298. Translation the author's.

'fidelity to the Event' (to use Alain Badiou's terms) then brings about a new reality, meaning that we will then dispense with old ways of thought.³

However, the ability of one's understanding of the world to influence the course of events is dependent on the existence of a political agent or agents who contest the direction of society as a whole. If the battling of competing theories and truth-claims by different organisations and layers of society to model the world after themselves is politics, our recent history before Covid and the Russian intervention was therefore apolitical, marked by political stasis, even with dangerous figures like Trump sticking mostly to standard conservative neoliberal policies. The emergence of issues related to the global commons, such as climate change, Covid, and the war in Ukraine, have caught us completely off-guard. Despite decades of warnings from scientists about pandemics and the consistent build-up of tensions between Russia and the West since the end of the Cold War, few predicted the breakout of these two events. Some would say that this is because we live in a post-truth era, where people ignore facts when making theories about the world, thereby informing bad policy. However, we live in a post-truth era not simply because the facts promulgated by 'experts' are being ignored by the masses, but because no truths with the meaningful power to change and shape the world, rather than merely manage it, arise out of the facts. Following Badiou's conception, truths are not only the correspondence of a statement to facts in the world, but primarily to the struggle of subjects to affirm them and reorganise reality around them.⁴ Therefore, we live in a post-truth world not because nobody recognises facts anymore, but because there are no longer subjects and institutions to push through the repressed truths that should emerge from these facts.

Likewise, as I will explore with reference to the notion of the end of history, we have been living in a post-history era not because there are no events, but because these events have not been the site for the creation of new worlds, subjects, and the implementation of repressed truths. Although it is clear that this era is coming to a close, the events that have brought about this end of the end of history (Covid, the Ukraine war, climate change, and economic instability) have merely politicised people as individuals without bringing back the classical realm of politics proper as the collective fight for the implementation of different theories of society based on differing interpretations of society.

In light of us moving to a new era yet finding ourselves able to neither theorise nor act upon it, it is worth bringing up Hegel's more pessimistic take on the relationship between theory and praxis. 'When philosophy paints its grey in grey, a form of life has grown old, and it cannot be rejuvenated with grey and grey, but only be recognised; the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the breaking of dusk'.⁵ It has been in fashion since post-structuralist thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze to think of Hegel as a 'totalizing' optimist, who merely justifies the status quo by declaring it to be a fully rational system that overcomes all antagonism. However, the previous quote rather exemplifies that Hegel's attempts to rescue and integrate the newly won idea of freedom into a philosophical system, as social conditions of the early 19th century and the rise of industrial capitalism were threatening it. Therefore, the recognition

that his ability to systematise the world, 'when philosophy paints its grey in grey,' coincides with the coming of a newly contested reality, meaning that one must therefore constantly be reconceiving the concept of freedom and the actions and institutions that implement and guarantee it. As Russia's invasion of Ukraine (just as Covid nears the possibility of becoming endemic) definitively marks the owl of Minerva's taking flight from the end-of-history era, this article will attempt to paint the grey and grey that defined our recent political situation and some of its effects in culture. I will rely heavily on concepts from the recently published *The End of the End of History* (2021),⁶ as well as Anton Jäger's notion of 'hyper-politics'⁷ to examine how we came to such a desperate position, lacking both in redemptive ideas, subjects, and organisations. Without offering a definitive solution, I will propose a concept of Messianism that can combine both the Marxian and Hegelian conceptions of the relationship between philosophy and its effects on action in the world and balances anchoring in the past and present necessity for upheaval. For Messianism is not only a desperate plea for the Other to intervene in our existence and does not merely entail waiting about idly for rescue, but is also predicated upon the active use of human intellect to theorise the positive potentials of the current age and put them into practice.

Politics ex nihilo?

To understand why everything appears to be politically contentious nowadays, yet nobody seems able to change anything and we lack competent and inspiring leaders, we should reflect on our recent history of political stasis to note the continuities and differences with the current moment. We should start with the end of the Cold War, as that marked the last period in living memory for many people where there seemed to be an apparent clash of visions for the future and ways of organising society. Francis Fukuyama proclaimed in his essay 'The End of History?' that the fall of the Soviet Union marked not the end of events, social conflicts, or suffering in general, but rather that there would be no more competing paradigms for world hegemony beyond minor flare-ups in areas of the global periphery.⁸

The regime of politics that dominated the immediately post-Cold-War period, exemplified by Fukuyama's triumphalist announcement of the end of real ideological struggle, is designated by Alex Hochuli, George Hoare, and Philip Cunliffe in *The End of the End of History* as 'post-politics'. They define the term as 'a form of government that tries to foreclose political contestation by emphasising consensus, "eradicating" ideology and ruling by recourse to evidence and expertise rather than interests or ideals'.⁹ Despite being premised on the official coronation of liberal democracy and its associated rights and freedoms as synonymous with scientific and technocratic governance, post-politics also coincides with massive popular demobilisation, a foreclosure of the public sphere to administrators and technocrats, as well as the consignment of politics to the level of personal interest, where being interested in politics is at the same level of Marvel fandom or following football. All of this is profoundly anti-democratic, undermining the role that popular will can play in shaping collective decision making.

6 Philip Cunliffe, George Hoare, and Alex Hochuli, *The End of the End of History: Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (Zero Books 2021).

7 Anton Jäger, 'How the World Went from Post-Politics to Hyper-Politics' (*Tribune*, January 3 2022) <<https://tribunemag.co.uk/2022/01/from-post-politics-to-hyper-politics>> accessed 10 June 2022.

8 Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?' (1989) 16 *The National Interest* 3-18.

9 Cunliffe, Hoare, and Hochuli (n 6) 4.

3 Cf. Alain Badiou, *L'être et l'événement* (Édition du Seuil 1988).

4 Cf. Alain Badiou, *The Immanence of Truths* (Bloomsbury 2022).

5 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (first published 1820, Akademie Verlag 1981) 28. Translation the author's.

With mass movements and struggles that put the whole of society in question consigned to the dustbin of history, post-politics emphasises the private individual as the focus of all policy making. Though stated a few years before the post-political period proper, Margaret Thatcher's famous declaration that 'there is no such thing [as society]; there are individual men and women and there are families' exemplifies the individualist maxim of this era.¹⁰ This new post-political order was declared as being no more constructed and determined by humans than the natural world, with Tony Blair proclaiming that 'globalisation is a force of nature', no more debatable than the fact that 'autumn should follow summer'.¹¹ With neither talk of political orders nor reference to anything but the disconnected pursuit of private interests by private persons, with no responsibilities to individuals beyond their most immediate kin, even naming the system we lived in became impossible. 'Shorn of a systemic alternative, even the notion that we lived in a system called "capitalism" receded from view'.¹²

The 90s and 00s were not completely without polarising issues: we might name rising partisanship under the Clinton presidency, the threat of global terrorism after 9/11 and the accompanying attacks on civil liberties, and the wars in the Middle East as examples. All-out rejection of society at large was, however, either completely absent, channelled into silent resignation, or expressed in subcultural scenes (e.g. grunge, rave culture, or bands like Rage against the Machine), which were always caught between the tensions of their radical image and seemingly inevitable corporate co-option. However, once the 2008 crisis showed the unsustainability of 'debt-fuelled consumption' to '[assuage] anxieties', post-politics lead to anti-politics, where antagonism and struggle against power structures were back on the table, yet lacking any program or affirmative proposals.¹³ Anti-politics can be described as the response to the collapse of post-politics after the global financial crash. The most notable political actor of this period was populism, ranging from Occupy, Syriza, and Podemos to Trump, Brexit, and a renewed Front National in France. Anti-politics, rather than aiming at new forms of politicisation around an idea of a new politics, is merely a reaction against what it perceives as the professionalised and sectioned-off world of officially sanctioned politics' corrupted existence. Rather than creating powerful organisations to challenge big capital, the anti-political stance bemoans the mismanagement of the situation by technocratic elites, who forced politicisation upon people by severing their material conditions and introducing market disorder to the post-political space, which was billed as being free of conflict.

One could take the Occupy Wall Street movement as an example of a movement, which spurned all forms of institution and organisation-building that could take on the economic regime as a whole. Instead, it blamed a particular group of specific figures (the 1%), overlooking class differences amongst the 99% themselves, and praising a version of horizontalist organising based on fetishizing immediate relations between normal people outside of the sanctioned political space of the 1% and economic institutions. The failure of Occupy to effect change epitomised the era which Mark Fisher famously called 'capitalist realism'.¹⁴ People are mad and disgruntled and the

system has been shocked to its core, yet nothing changes and people cannot even think of actually creating a new social order, choosing instead to take a simply negative stance of consternation against the troubled reality thrown upon them as if from outside. The left in anti-politics, still reeling from the post-politics era, shirked from the task of coming to power at a national level. While internationalism and a critique of the viability of nation states as the site of liberation has been and should be a cornerstone of left-wing analysis, this failure to face up to the reality that the global order is structured on national lines is a manifestation of its internalised defeat. To avoid truly contesting national politics, the authors of *The End of the End of History* note that the left has both made vain attempts at transnational politics, such as the DiEM-25 movement, and retreated to local participatory structures and support in certain urban municipalities, such as Berlin, Barcelona, or Seattle's Capitol Hill.¹⁵ Yet this has only served to confirm the retreat of the left from the task of societal transformation to the comfortable place of revelling in minor localised successes.

Taking its incipient form in the Trump era, with an anti-political figure taking power and bringing about polarisation in all parts of lie, and coming into full bloom during our hyper-online forced confinement during Covid, post-politics has now given way to what Anton Jäger has called 'hyper-politics':

A new form of 'politics' is present on the football pitch, in the most popular Netflix shows, in the ways people describe themselves on their social media pages...Yet instead of a re-emergence of the politics of the twentieth century—complete with a revival of mass parties, unions, and workplace militancy—it is almost as if a step has been skipped...Today, everything is politics. And yet, despite people being intensely politicised in all of these dimensions, very few are involved in the kind of organised conflict of interests that we might once have described as politics in the classical, twentieth-century sense.¹⁶

Now, the various divisions of the left, right, and centre's visions of how the world should be are becoming clearer and permeate every single fact of life. Yet, despite this, nothing seems to change, with the technocratic centre reasserting its power with Covid and the election of Joe Biden. Another hallmark of our current moment is the tendency to view all political issues through the lens of 'culture wars' and to make various aspects of personal morality and cultural history the site of political contestation, where we are meant to prove our own individual virtue rather than organising around shared material interests. Given the constant political scrutiny and evaluation of everything from hairstyles to cartoons and comedy shows, it seems the public sphere is everywhere. There are no real civil society organisations to back it up or mobilise people to a positive goal, with religious groups, in-person cultural scenes, and unions that are not mere state or party management of interests having failed to regain their previous levels of participation and militancy. This is made even worse by Covid and social media siloing us both literally and figuratively into our personal bubbles. As Jäger notes, even with politicisation of every facet of life, political parties have not regained their previous levels of membership, which has declined by an average of 69% for the major parties of Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands.

10 Douglas Keay, 'AIDS, Education, and the Year 2000: An Interview with Margaret Thatcher' (*Woman's Own*, 31 October 1987) 8-10.

11 'Tony Blair's Conference Speech 2005' *The Guardian* (London, 27 September 2005) <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2005/sep/27/labourconference.speeches>> accessed 10 June 2022.

12 Cunliffe, Hoare, and Hochuli (n 6) 5.

13 *ibid* 36.

14 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero Books 2010).

15 Cunliffe, Hoare, and Hochuli (n 6) 148-9.

16 Jäger (n 7).

Despite making everything political, hyper-politics has not overcome the post-political erosion of the public sphere. It has rather promoted a public sphere whose every part is merely a reflection of private desires and conflicts. One can invoke here the classic ‘ship of Theseus’ thought experiment, where a museum ship’s parts are slowly replaced over a period of time to the point that the ship’s form stays the same, but not a single physical component of the original remains, begging the question of whether the same ship remains. We could say that, through the various political forms of the end-of-history era, what used to be the public sphere has been slowly replaced with pieces of entertainment, personal spats on social media, and culture war issues. In face of this, it is questionable whether we are still even dealing with a public sphere at all. Instead, mass expression of individual virtues is passed off as politics and interaction with the public sphere takes place only through atomised engagement with social media in the interests of personal entertainment.

People form their political opinions today through scrolling past various punchy headlines as they appear in their feeds and then sharing them without reading through the articles themselves. Far from being a place of meaningful public communication by people around the world to create networks that would bring about social change, the great hope during and after the Arab Spring, the use of social media to share news and engage politically has degenerated into mere feedback loops of outrage, sneering, and mockery. These serve mainly to entertain us in a feed of content, flattening the significance of the various individual articles, posts, and discussions we come across. Covid accelerated this tendency exponentially; during periods of lockdown and semi-normality, certain people accessed the world only through social media. Phenomena such as Neuralink, Metaverse, NFT’s, or Google Glass represent attempts at totalising this type of digital engagement even more completely to all facets of waking life—a dream for those in power who want to prevent our hyper-charged reality from spilling over into real social unrest. Whether or not they are practicable, the fact that our tech oligarchs are moving in such a direction is indicative of the role current virtual online spaces play in our political sphere.

Cultural defence mechanisms against the return of politics

Hyper-politics shows itself to be a synthesis of the globalised political stasis of post-politics, which forecloses thought about any new society, bringing along a hyper-charged environment of extreme polarisation and pseudo-politics without concrete programmatic visions for the future. All of this, in combination with the various cultural pathologies of social media, leads to some very peculiar overlaps between the public sphere, personal entertainment, cultural mores, and political contestation. Though reverence for charisma and for the politician and business figure as a ‘personality’ has existed for a long time, the active celebrification of public figures has reached new heights. This is clearly the case for figures like Trump or Zelenskyy, who built their careers in media and whose rises can be partially attributed to personal charisma and having already been a household name for years. Elon Musk, similarly, has taken advantage of the neuroses of online popular culture to build a falsified image of his ‘genius’. However, this trend is even more notable when mainstream figures are elevated to celebrity status, such as Andrew Cuomo (a classic New York machine politician) and Anthony Fauci (a career bureaucrat) for giving the air of competence in contrast to Trump, while relying on the liberal media’s pandering to their role in the culture war to shroud their own indiscretions.

Even a figure like Jeremy Corbyn was memeified, with his name chanted at football stadiums and declared as the ‘absolute boy’: this despite him being personally rather uncharismatic and unable to build a robust counter-image of himself against smears by the mainstream press beyond the insipid slogan of ‘a kinder, gentler politics’.

In the broad realm of what gets called ‘identity politics’—a vague term, which nonetheless refers to a large set of generally recognised phenomena—one can see how a hyper-political landscape is used to gloss over the bread and butter issues pertinent to the mostly working class members of historically marginalised groups. A classic manifestation of this, which has reached its peak since the hyper-political MeToo movement, is the ‘girl-bossification’ of vapid, corrupt, and uninspiring political leaders and corporate executives, taking shape with Sheryl Sandberg’s ‘Lean In’ and reaching its apex with Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign. Criticism of their records, class status, or elite-friendly policy proposals, even from a feminist standpoint, could easily be reduced to mere sexism. In racial politics, a similar framing of all sociological categories through hyper-mediated exposures of individual racism has been called ‘race reductionism’ by political scientist Adolph Reed.¹⁷ Unlike when racial struggles were more directly connected with socialist movements, trade unions, or basic material demands and universalist messages, social justice movements increasingly focus on diversifying elite positions in business, media, and politics, closing the wealth gap (which exists primarily between the upper classes of various races) as well as attempting to restrict cultural exchange to fight ‘cultural appropriation.’ This coincides with the rise of what Haitian-American writer Pascal Robert calls ‘the Black Political Class’: a minority of black people in positions of power within their own community, who proclaim their own interests, i.e. as members of the middle and upper classes, as the interests of black people at large and ‘who work as a “race management” elite that metaphorically corrals Black electoral choices into a politically contained vessel’.¹⁸ What Robert is identifying is a generalised phenomenon not specific only to African-Americans, whereby the struggle against various particular racial, religious, or gender-based oppressions is conceived not in universalistic terms, but rather through the concept of ‘representation.’ This serves more to benefit those already in a privileged position to speak for their marginalised group than to remedy the less glamorous problems shared by poor and working class people of all identities. Furthermore, identity reductionism also serves as tool of the ruling class at large to portray anything that opposes either their self-serving cultural policies or elite technocratic rule at large as rooted in racism, sexism, or other forms of intolerance, the accusation of which can (justifiably) discredit someone’s political ideas. An example of this was the painting of the Canadian trucker protest against vaccine mandates and the biomedical security state as ‘conspiracy theorists’ and ‘white supremacists’ by the Liberal government to justify invoking war-time security measures: or the labelling of Bernie Sanders’ male supporters as ‘Bernie bros’ to falsely conflate critique of Hillary Clinton and support for social democracy as sexist.

17 Adolph Reed, ‘Socialism and the Argument against Race Reductionism’ (2020) 29(2) *New Labor Forum* 36–43.

18 Pascal Robert, ‘A Black Political Elite Serving Corporate Interests Is Misrepresenting Our Community’ (*Newsweek*, 23 November 2021) <<https://www.newsweek.com/black-political-elite-serving-corporate-interests-misrepresenting-our-community-opinion-1652384>> accessed 10 June 2022.

Parallel to the use of identity politics is the generalised tendency of modern hyper-politics to reduce every conflict to one between the forces of good and the forces of evil. This was present to a degree in George Bush's famous identification of an 'axis of evil.' A contemporary example of this is the coverage regarding Ukraine. Although Putin's war of aggression bears as little justification as Bush's invasion of Iraq, almost the entirety of the media has framed the conflict as one of pure innocent freedom-loving Europeans against 'Eastern despotic hordes,' rather than a more nuanced examination of the different factions within both countries. Instead, we are throwing our own cultural quarrels onto a regional conflict and framing Ukraine, another impoverished post-Soviet oligarchy with moderately stronger liberal civil liberties than Russia, as the bastion of everything free and civilised about the West. In doing so, we end up infantilising Ukrainians and whitewashing their leaders, such as Zelenskyy himself, who, as honourable as his decision to stay in Kyiv was, is himself supported by oligarchs,¹⁹ holds wealth in offshore accounts,²⁰ and recently banned all independent media and 11 political parties in order to stop 'pro-Russian disinformation', even though some on the list have condemned Russian aggression and are non-aligned socialist parties.²¹ By praising Ukraine as the upholder of *our* free liberal democratic order, despite recognising for years our system's decay to a point where freedom is becoming merely formal, we are being morally blackmailed to accept our own state of unfreedom and our societies' giving up on their avowed liberal principles as the pinnacle of human freedom. We can thereby see a clear attempt to restore the post-history consensus in light of the shocks of both Covid and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Pop culture and culture war metaphors of goodies and baddies were used in similar ways to justify curtailments of our freedoms and collective well-being during Covid lockdowns. As discussed, calls for censorship and 'content moderation' on tech platforms were justified by painting anybody who questioned the conclusions of officially sanctioned experts as right-wingers, conspiracy theorists, and racists. This was used to suppress important and potentially politically influential stories such as evidence for the lab-leak theory and the Hunter Biden emails. With the re-fetishisation of technocracy in the aftermath of the 'populist decade', in which experts started to appear discredited, management and technocracy have reasserted their cultural cachet while simultaneously feeling constantly like the embattled underdogs in a fight against the evil forces of 'disinformation' and 'Russian meddling'. The authors of *The End of the End of History* call this phenomenon 'Neoliberal Order Breakdown Syndrome':

This section of society assumes their views and predilections are common sense, while at the same time feeling constantly embattled...While "the liberal package" (combining elements such as cosmopolitanism, respect for expertise, individualism, an emphasis on

personal ethics) is culturally hegemonic, liberals refuse to acknowledge their own hegemony. The liberal always has her back to the wall. While their views find home in the newspapers of record, they feel submerged under a tsunami of tabloid content. They flaunt their commitment to tolerance and diversity, but balk at the expression of non-liberal views from their fellow citizens.²²

This explains how the naturalisation of the ruling technocracy of the post-political period, with its emphasis on neutral expertise, can at the same time coincide with an emphasis on personal morality and individual common sense in the polarised world of hyper-politics.

Many have attempted to explain the Left's lack of resistance to, and even outright support of illiberal and technocratic policies on the basis of moral victimhood, by blaming its capture on the Professional Managerial Class (PMC). However, the socialist movement has always relied on being able to take certain sections of the radicalised middle and upper-middle-classes to bring their intellectual and professional skills to mass organising—from radicalised middle-class progressive liberals like (arguably) Marx himself, to high bourgeois and aristocratic figures who commit 'class suicide' like György Lukács. Nonetheless, the fact that this 'professionalisation' of the Left has taken place in the post-political era has largely foreclosed the events that would previously have pushed this social stratum towards a working-class politics. Instead, there remains a petty managerialism that serves only to counteract the unfulfilled promises of social mobility through education and credentialization. The political gap caused by the absence of a radical Left has been filled by the tech industry's promise to release us from all previous scarcity and social hierarchy. We consigned the thought of the new to marketing wizards like Steve Jobs, to sell us on surrendering every aspect of our social sphere to algorithms. However, the novelty these produce is merely quantitative, regenerating infinite new variations upon a static underlying logic. By adjusting our human behaviour to the impersonal forces of the algorithm, we end up producing things with the sleek presentation of novelty, whilst being progressively deteriorating variations on the same underlying model. Marxist technologist Dwayne Monroe notes, for example, how the term 'artificial intelligence', designating mere pattern matching algorithms combined with vast storage, works to diminish the value and dignity of human labour and ingenuity.²³ In the cultural sphere, the tech-driven explosion of the hours of music available has similarly resulted in a drop in the consumption and production of new music; the 200 most popular new songs account for less than 5% of streaming.²⁴

We can see hyper-politics as a correlative to this hyper-charged, yet somehow indifferent domination of all our lives by technology. For, likewise, without a subject borne out by parties and institutions with the power of transforming the state, we cannot turn the quantitatively rising polarisation of every aspect of reality into qualitative political change. Quoting Jäger again:

19 David Clark, 'Will Zelenskyy Target All Ukrainian Oligarchs Equally?' (*Atlantic Council*, 10 July 2021) <<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/will-zelenskyy-target-all-ukrainian-oligarchs-equally/>> accessed 10 June 2022.

20 Aubrey Belford, Luke Harding, and Elena Loginova, 'Revealed: 'anti-oligarch' Ukrainian president's offshore connections' *The Guardian* (London, 3 October 2021) <<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2021/oct/03/revealed-anti-oligarch-ukrainian-president-offshore-connections-volodymyr-zelenskiy>> accessed 10 June 2022.

21 Grayson Quay, 'Zelensky Nationalizes TV News and Restricts Opposition Parties' (*The Week*, 20 March 2022) <<https://theweek.com/russo-ukrainian-war/1011528/zelensky-nationalizes-tv-news-and-restricts-opposition-parties>> accessed 10 June 2022.

22 Cunliffe, Hoare, and Hochuli (n 6) 62.

23 Dwayne Monroe, 'Attack Mannequins: AI as Propaganda' (*Computational Impacts*, 19 September 2021) <<https://monroelab.net/attack-mannequins-ai-as-propaganda>> accessed 10 June 2022.

24 Ted Gioia, 'Is Old Music Killing New Music?' *The Atlantic* (Washington DC, 23 January 2022) <<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/01/old-music-killing-new-music/621339/>> accessed 10 June 2022.

In many ways it seems that the lesson which has truly been learned from the 'post-political' era is that politics must be reintroduced into the public sphere. But without the re-emergence of mass organisation, this can only occur at a discursive level or within the prism of mediatic politics: every major event is scrutinised for its ideological character, this produces controversies which play out among increasingly clearly delineated camps on social media platforms, and are then rebounded through each side's preferred media outlets. Through this process much is politicised, but little is achieved.²⁵

At the same time, as shown in Hegel's 'owl of Minerva' quote, although the ability to theorise the totality of an era corresponds to its passing, it also coincides with the recognition and preservation of an original idea of freedom that has been lost and must be recovered. As much as I have criticised in this article the current state of liberal democracy, scientific management, and technology, at various points these have brought with them the promise of liberation from earlier forms of domination and rigid positions within a social caste. It is once these had wholly swept aside older forms of unfreedom that the contradiction of free labour itself showed itself in its full form and brought about the demand for it to be overcome. In order to break out of our continuing death spiral, we must relearn how to think about the unrealised potentials of the past, so as to make them actual in a radically new form.

How can we think this freedom in an age of rising unfreedom? Hegel attempted to preserve the notion of liberty sparked by the French Revolution by systematising it into the Absolute in his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1820). Theodor Adorno, in *Negative Dialectics* (1966), takes an inverse approach by introducing the notion of the 'non-identity' of any concept raised to the level of the Absolute:

By immersing itself in what confronts it a priori, the concept [*Begriff*], and becoming cognisant of its immanently antinomic character, thought dwells on the idea of something beyond contradiction. The antagonism of thought to its heterogenous object is reproduced in thought itself as its own immanent contradiction. Reciprocal critique of universality and particularity, identifying acts that judge whether the concept does justice to what it is concerns itself with and whether particularity fulfils even its own concept, this is the medium of thinking the non-identity of concept and particularity.²⁶

Adorno is essentially arguing that the non-identity of any positive content with the material reality it engenders points to the possibility of moving beyond a certain contradiction. Thus, to recover lost ideas of freedom, we must—Adorno suggests—focus on the non-identity of the world as it is with the ideals and structuring principles it is built upon. This is the task of figuring out how to build the new out of the ideas and materials currently at hand.

However, unlike Adorno, we must not stay forever at the level of critique by non-identity. To do so would bring about criticism that is either unable to change anything (it is hard to affirm a concept if we retain the compulsion to deconstruct everything), self-reproducing for the sake of mere theoretical activity, or easily co-optable by the

status quo (like tendencies of so-called 'post-modernism'). If we are to think about non-identity, we must not merely think of it in its empty critique as an abstract concept structuring all political theoretical engagement; this would be taking non-identity outside of its intensity and vivacity. Or, as Friedrich Nietzsche would say, this would be a taming of the concept's real effectivity and vitality in the world, in favour of a purely theoretical exercise that degrades concrete experiences of this non-identity.²⁷

While not dispensing with the notions of totality or identity, using them rather as operators whose unreality still structures the immediacy of non-identity to reality, we must learn to consider the absolute totality of non-identity in order to tackle its vicissitudes in a historical era like ours. More simply put, we must learn to experience the discontinuity of the past and the future as colouring the tensions of the present situation. This process is immanent, but not exclusively a critique. To overcome both the pitfalls of a systemic justification of the world as it is (such as that undertaken by Right Hegelianism) and the deflationary practice of incessant critique, it strives for renewed self-conscious engagement with the Absolute, i.e. the whole of society as self-consciously shaping its future, at the hinge-points of history where we are faced with either total tragedy or coming redemption: Messianism. In the next section, I will suggest a conception of Messianic thought, based particularly on Walter Benjamin's late works on history, to formulate a generic concept, universalizable throughout particular spiritual, political, and secular contexts, that can engender renewed engagement with the ideas of freedom and redemption of the past so as to break out of the hyper-charged yet languid space brought about by the end-of-history era.

The proposition of Messianism

At first glance, the Messianic longing that there be sent a figure from beyond all conceivable present horizons of possibility seems to have nothing to do with politics. Politics is ultimately about the management and allocation of, and conflict over decision making power, distribution of resources, and mobilisation of labour. On the one hand, then, the notion of a redeeming force coming from outside of all currently imaginable horizons to save us from our own impotence seems to contradict the active engagement and concrete strategising required by politics. On the other hand, we have seen supposedly transformational political movements contenting themselves merely with the technical management of state political affairs. For there to be true politics, there is also the need for a Messianic idea of something outside of what is currently conceivable in state politics to be actively pushed through by partisan political subjects. The task of Messianism is to figure out how the current range of possibilities can be transformed into something that appears impossible in our current horizon.

Rather than being apolitical, the experience of working towards a Messianic or even utopian future and seeking to transform the whole of society responds to the demands of all three of the contemporary regimes of politics discussed in this essay. Firstly, Messianism, in the post-political landscape of the end of history, seeks to bring about a culmination of all previous events as leading to a single point in the present. Rather than being the mere transition between fleeting moments, the present then becomes a monad containing all the congealed influence of the past and its respective potential futures in decisive suspension. This conception of the historical temporality

²⁵ Jäger (n 7).

²⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (first published 1966, Suhrkamp 1999), 149. Translation the author's.

²⁷ Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist* (first published 1888) in *The Portable Nietzsche* (Walter Kaufmann ed, Penguin Classics 2008).

of the present is intended to lead away from what Walter Benjamin calls the 'empty homogenous time' of liberal progressivism in his essay 'On the Concept of History'.²⁸ This was seen clearly in the Third Way politicians of the nineties, who viewed any progress to come out of indifferent cycles of global markets managed by neutral technocrats in a system which seemed to stand outside of the twists and turns of history. While completing a sort of end of history, or rather 'consummation' (*Vollendung*) of history, Messianism differs from post-politics in that it reintroduces politics by bringing all of its conflicts to a decisive hinge point, which, by opening the opportunity for redemption at any moment, does not so much end history as rather transforming it so radically that its concept must be rethought.²⁹ The kingdom of God on earth brought about by the Messiah is thereby not the ultimate destination of fate, but rather marks the end of a certain period of existence, marking that 'a form of life has grown old' as Hegel said.³⁰

Secondly, political Messianism, like populist discontent, contains an antipolitical moment of rejection of the precarious conditions of the present and its institutionally sanctioned ideology. It is in this sense that Messianic thought relates to a sense of crisis and impending catastrophe, rooted in a plea to a force that can save us and let us no longer have to deal with the dreadful present. However, in rejecting the anti-political impulse to sweep away evil actors causing disorder in order to preserve a previous order, it is necessary to concretely introduce new goals and models of social organisation to avoid an impotent sense of nihilistic resentment, which can only push towards the far right. For one must always remember not to reduce political problems to being a matter of an intact social organism, 'the people,' that is undermined by an outside group or factor of essentially different character. Rather, a Messianic view seeks out the contradictions of society in itself and considers redemption not to be the removal of a particular enemy, entity, or institution, but rather the redirection of the past that brought about the current disorder towards a new future: and hence a new past and present.

Finally, the hyper-political moment we are in, with its polarisation of every aspect of politics and social life, while so far merely confused due to the inability to see positive changes, sets the preconditions for actively determining society as a whole. Whereas the incessant debates about every cultural and historical institution and the heated accusations flying on every side are tedious due to their apparent lack of resolution, this is at least an indicator that our current ways of existence socially, economically, civically, and with nature cannot continue sustainably. Hyper-politics, nonetheless, tends to amount to a frantic quibbling over the precarity of the present. It is neither an attempt to redeem the potential of the past nor yet to implement concretely different conditions for the near future. One potential positive of the tendencies for nostalgia shown by culture and art is an at least unconscious memory of the past's lost potentials. Though nostalgia is often a conservative force when engaged in modern phantasmatic reconstructions (as it is neither possible, nor desirable, to resuscitate the past 'as it actually was'), the focus on the absolute difference of the past to the present, as showing the possibility of social reproduction along almost unrecognisable logics, also creates the theoretical space for thought of the new and the redemption of

lost futures. Messianic thought is meant to fill the conceptual gap that hyper-politics is currently stuck in, by attempting to think about the redemption of past history through the immediate possibility of a future that overcomes the extreme tension and emergency of the present point in time.

This sense of 'dialectics at a standstill' ('Dialektik im Stillestand'³¹) that Benjamin uses in his inversion of Marxist dialectics, which usually emphasises history's constant movement rather than stasis, helps us to think of how the present, beyond its mere fleeting into the past, can hold all of the contradictions of the past and the potentials of the future at a point, where the subjective factor of history can play a determinate role in shaping the future. Benjamin thereby conceives the Messianic moment not as something flashing up for no reason to our help to bring about an unconditionally good world, but rather as when the whole material and causal nexus that determines our present is halted due to internal breakdown, and can be redirected towards and present the image of a new future.

History deals with connections and with arbitrarily elaborated causal chains. But since history affords an idea of the fundamental citability of its object, this object must present itself, in its ultimate form, as a moment of humanity. In this moment, time must be brought to a standstill. The dialectical image is an occurrence of ball lightning that runs across the whole horizon of the past. Articulating the past historically means recognizing those elements of the past which come together in the constellation of a single moment...The dialectical image can be defined as the involuntary memory of redeemed humanity.³²

This uniquely charged moment cannot come about randomly at any time in history. Rather, it has a tragic dimension and is occasioned by desperation and potential catastrophe. The revolutions that make new forms of politics and social life do not come about as seamless transitions from one progressive age to the next in times of prosperity, but arise when the material and intellectual foundations of a state show themselves to be in crisis. To quote Benjamin: 'Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train—namely, the human race—to activate the emergency brake'.³³ Furthermore, the scholar of Jewish mysticism Gershom Scholem noted that every instantiation of Messianism in the Jewish tradition entails not only a utopian dimension, but also the restoration of an ideal original condition. This restorative element likewise also contains utopian implications, because, given change in conditions, what is intended to be reinstated is actually novel and differentiates from both the present and the past. Here is Scholem, in his essay 'Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism' (1963):

The restorative forces are directed to the return and recreation of a past condition which comes to be felt as ideal. More precisely, they are directed to a condition pictured by the historical fantasy and the memory of the nation as circumstances of an ideal past. Here hope is turned backwards to the re-establishment of an original

28 Walter Benjamin, 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte' in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften I-2* (first published 1940, Suhrkamp 1980) 704. Translation the author's.

29 Walter Benjamin, 'Theologisch-Politisches Fragment' in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminationen: Ausgewählte Schriften I*. (first published 1921, Suhrkamp 1977) 203-4. Translation the author's.

30 Hegel (n 5) 28.

31 Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften V* (Suhrkamp 1982) 577.

32 Walter Benjamin, 'Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History"' in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 4: 1938-1940* (Belknap 2006) 403.

33 *ibid* 402.

state of things and to a "life with the ancestors". But there are, in addition, forces which press forward and renew; they are nourished by a vision of the future and receive utopian inspiration. They aim at a state of things which has never yet existed...the Messianic idea crystallizes only out of the two of them together.³⁴

What most defines the potentially tragic character of the Messianic moment is that redemption is ultimately not guaranteed. Complete destruction and death, collapse into barbarism, or even continued slow decline and increasingly whitewashed suffering, are all possible. The fact that both overcoming present despair and succumbing to it are absolutely possible is what gives Messianism a central place in intervention by people into history, because it confronts historical antagonism from a point that cannot be smoothed out and seamlessly integrated into the passage of time, shaping individuals out of this experience. It involves a use of political will which cannot be reduced through consensus or conflict mediation. The political actor who takes part in a Messianic project for the future identifies a space that is more originary than either the past individual's material determinacy or subjective will. Theologian Franz Rosenzweig calls this the 'metaethical' dimension of human life,³⁵ along with the metaphysical and metalogical, critiquing Hegel for attempting to reconcile the individual with the social whole and history through a smoothly integrated system of contradictions.³⁶ The metaethical aspect of personhood rather, which both extends beyond particular contemporary norms and is always linked to a determinate place in history, comes about at moments where the political subject must act and make decisions to reorient the past and its connection to the future. In conceiving the Messianic moment as one where the incessant movement of history is taken 'at a standstill', one connects with the metaethical dimension of humanity, where subjects intervene to self-consciously shape the rules and structures of social life and morality.

History at the moment of rupture and possible redemption or ruin therefore brings about a reflection on society's past and current potentials as a whole, beyond the apparent chaos of the crisis-ridden situation. For Messianism entails an encounter both with the positive and progressive elements of the past, such as capitalism's institution of free labour, liberal rights, and productive capacities, as well as the present situation of its missed potential, such as in climate change, rising inequality and poverty, and increasingly illiberal and repressive political systems. To self-consciously shape the future and implement a possible redemptive new idea of society, one therefore needs to think both the potentials of the concepts in the past and their non-identity, à la Adorno, with the present situation they have conditioned. The task is to spot the presence of the formerly redemptive ideas of the past as they appear when fleeting from the present. 'For it is an irretrievable image of the past, which threatens to disappear with every present that does not recognise itself as meant in it'.³⁷ Rather than being fixated on abstract lofty ideals, the Messianic promise of freedom is likewise predicated on having an idea of unfreedom and the threat of total subjugation (by fascism, climate austerity, economic breakdown, etc.). Therefore, instead of being beholden to the hopeful promise of a better future, one must actively fight the enemies of freedom to realise a Messianic future.

34 Gerschom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (Schocken Books 1971) 3.

35 Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung* (first published 1921, Suhrkamp 1988) 12.

36 *ibid* 7-8.

37 Benjamin (n 28) 695.

'For the Messiah does not only come as the redeemer; he comes as the conqueror of the anti-Christ'.³⁸ Because the idea of utopia only gains meaning when contrasted with its reflected dystopic potentials. 'Freedom can only be grasped in determinate negation, in proportion to the concrete form of unfreedom'.³⁹ A Messianic political movement therefore does not conceive of utopia through ahistorical figments of reified thought, but rather as arising out of the concrete potentials of the movement of history in its present moment.

The inversion of the movement of history into a politically charged Messianic moment, where both the concept of freedom and the reality of unfreedom are immanent to political action, puts our subjectivity and connection to the world, social structures, and ourselves into question at its zero-level. In opposition to pure historicism, which presents an invariant history in which human subjects are merely moving parts, the Messianic conception of material history takes this nexus of material contradictions discovered by the historian or political scientist as they matter immanently to historical subjects, who can affect society's direction. With the confusion of events taken in their absolute singularity qua crystallisation into a single moment, one is able to 'burst the continuum of history'.⁴⁰ This does not mean an end of history as such or the descent into pure degeneration, but rather the attempt to split the history of humanity into two parts. What Messianism introduces is a way to think about the centre between these two parts, where political agency can be expressed in the subject's engagement. The political-messianic subject therefore comes about by crystallising both its prior historical determination and the accelerating continuum of time into the full gravity of the present moment, in order to mark an absolute break between past and future.⁴¹

Conclusion

To conclude, it is worth reemphasizing the situation of political foreclosure that generates the need for its overcoming by Messianic thought and action. Recent history has shown both the flatness of the post-history era and the directionless impotence of anti-politics and hyper-politics, all premised on deemphasizing the role of collective affairs and of political order in shaping individuals' lives and creating transformative change. Although we cannot simply choose to think ourselves out of our predicament, we must again affirm the ability of current circumstances to generate ideas of new possibilities and state that any political order, even one declared to be post-history, will inevitably generate ruptures. Where Messianism enters is in thinking about how these breaks in history occur not merely as a seamless unnoticed transitions between systems, but are based around decisive moments, which manifest concretely, beyond both immanence and transcendence, to political actors in the present. This is not simply the imposition of a 'totalising' political idea on top of discrete individuals. By understanding historical events as monads containing past determination, future possibility, and present subjective engagement, Messianism applies universally, allowing anyone to consider the relationship between their own actions and the external arrival of world redemption at the crossroads of history. Combining what Scholem called the 'utopian' with the 'restorative',⁴² Messianism is a paradigm that allows the individual to conceive better possible futures through a double reflection on the past: both

38 *ibid*.

39 Adorno (n 26) 230.

40 Benjamin (n 28) 702.

41 *ibid* 702-3.

42 Scholem (n 34) 3.

as conditioning the ways that the future must distinguish itself from the past, and recalling the lost possibilities contained in our origins. For though Messianism is ultimately future-orientated, it rests upon the necessity to think about the Origin, both to understand the causal chains determining our current predicament and conceive of absolute novelty based on our original creative essence.

Rather than the unchanging continuum of the post-history era, Messianism situates the historical subject between the rooted mass of the past events and the idea of human redemption and a rupture in history. Without the notion of something external coming with to help us dig ourselves out of this tension, we are haunted by the past, rather than revering it by transforming the present. Rather than overcoming past failures by reviving their lost liberatory potentials, we pathologise them excessively in our politics. As Marx said, 'the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living'.⁴³ Current hyper-politics sees past ideologies infecting us parasitically, as a neurotic defence mechanism against our own powerlessness. Without prospects for political agency, the left and right take pleasure in unseriously using political tension around every facet of life as an escape from the mundanity of every-day powerlessness. The concrete Messianic thought of redemption in the future, which remained unimaginable during the era of 'capitalist realism', rather views in the past 'a secret index, through which it is pointed towards redemption'.⁴⁴ This allows the past to always point to the possibility of its future redemption, and creates links between political subjects and truths across historical epochs: the Origin that constantly is renewed, transformed, and re-individuated.

Nothing about any of this is 'deterministic' or 'reductionist'. Any radical change in the world being pushed through by free and imperfect human subjects can fail based on a variety of unpredictable factors. The Messianic moment is an unconditioned encounter with the possibility of reconnection with the past through a utopian future, which Badiou calls the Event, the point at which the contradictions of the world crystallise and engender a new organising principle of society. This promise of a different future engendered by the Event requires a certain subjective 'fidelity' and a name—the Messiah—upon which its success is not guaranteed from the outset. The Messianic moment is only confirmed in retrospect, once it has already been completed and having initiated a new mode of existence requiring different forms of thought. This is why we are always ultimately in waiting for the Messiah, for whose arrival one is always working and rethinking the past. Whenever a crisis-ridden present and the potential for tragedy brings about what Scholem calls 'the plastic hours of history',⁴⁵ where political subjects have the leeway to establish new orders, a 'light messianic force'⁴⁶ persists, which bears the constant task of redeeming lost conceptions of freedom and investigating the historical structure of our desperate situation to see how it can give birth to new worlds.

43 Karl Marx, 'Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte' in *Karl Marx / Friedrich Engels: Werke, Artikel, Entwürfe Juli 1851 bis Dezember 1852* (first published 1852, Dietz Verlag 1985) 97. Translation the author's.

44 Benjamin (n 28) 693.

45 David Biale and Gerschom Scholem, 'The Threat of Messianism: An Interview with Gershom Scholem' *The New York Review of Books* (New York, 14 August 1980) <<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1980/08/14/the-threat-of-messianism-an-interview-with-gershom>> accessed 10 June 2022.

46 Benjamin (n 28) 694.