Theological-Political Fragment

Only the Messiah himself completes all history, in the sense that he alone remains, completes, creates, its relation to the messianic.¹ For this reason, nothing that is historical can relate itself, from its own ground, to anything messianic. Therefore, the Kingdom of God is not the telos of the historical dynamic; it cannot be established as a goal. From the standpoint of history, it is not the goal but the terminus [Ende]. Therefore, the secular order cannot be built on the idea of the Divine Kingdom, and theocracy has no political but only a religious meaning. To have repudiated with utmost vehemence the political significance of theocracy is the cardinal merit of Bloch's Utopia.²

The secular order should be erected on the idea of happiness. The relation of this order to the messianic is one of the essential teachings of the philosophy of history. It is the precondition of a mystical conception of history, encompassing a problem that can be represented figuratively. If one arrow points to the goal toward which the secular dynamic acts, and another marks the direction of messianic intensity, then certainly the quest of free humanity for happiness runs counter to the messianic direction. But just as force, by virtue of the path it is moving along, can augment another force on the opposite path, so the secular order—because of its nature as secular—promotes the coming of the Messianic Kingdom. The secular, therefore, though not itself a category of this kingdom, is a decisive category of its most unobtrusive approach. For in happiness all that is earthly seeks its downfall, and only in happiness is its downfall destined to find it—whereas admittedly the immediate messianic intensity of the heart, of the man in isolation, passes through misfortune, as suffering. The spiri-

tual *restitutio in integrum*, which introduces immortality, corresponds to a worldly restitution that leads to an eternity of downfall, and the rhythm of this eternally transient worldly existence, transient in its totality, in its spatial but also in its temporal totality, the rhythm of messianic nature, is happiness. For nature is messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away.

To strive for such a passing away—even the passing away of those states of man that are nature—is the task of world politics, whose method may be called nihilism.


Notes

1. The dating of this fragment remains a puzzle. Benjamin’s literary executor, Theodor Adorno and Gershom Scholem, both attached enormous importance to the text; yet they were adamantly opposed in their attempts to date it. Scholem insisted that its ideas are consonant with Benjamin’s ideas from the early 1920s; Adorno recalled that Benjamin had read the text, describing it as the “newest of the new,” to Adorno and his wife in San Remo in late 1937 or early 1938. (Adorno also claimed to have given the text its title, “Theologisch-politisches Fragment.”) Rolf Tiedemann sided, however reluctantly, with Scholem, and dated the text 1920 or 1921. The editors of this edition view it, with equal hesitancy, as an early formulation of the complex of ideas that finally took shape in the essay “On the Concept of History” (1940), to appear in *Selected Writing*, *Volume 4: 1938–1940* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, forthcoming).

2. The philosopher Ernst Bloch (1885–1977), a personal friend of Benjamin, taught at the University of Leipzig (1918–1933), where he drifted toward Marxist thought in the 1920s. After a period of exile in Switzerland and the United States, he returned to Germany in 1948, teaching at Leipzig and Tübingen. He is the author of *Geist der Utopie* (The Spirit of Utopia; 1918), *Spuren* (Traces; 1930), and *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (The Principle of Hope; 3 vols., 1952–1955). When the dispersion of German scholars began in 1933, there was no field which gave those working in it a reputation that excluded them from other disciplines. Nevertheless, Europe’s gaze was upon them, and it expressed more than concern. It harbored a question of the kind addressed to those who have confronted an unusual danger, or been visited by some unprecedented horror. It took some time for those affected to form a clear image of what had befallen them. Five years, however, is a considerable period. Cited on one and the same experience, used by each in his own field in his own way, it was enough to enable a group of academics to develop an act toward themselves and others, of what had befallen them as scholars and that would determine their future work. They owed this account not least, perhaps, to those who had showed them trust and friendship in exile.

In the Weimar Republic, the group in question formed around the Frankfурter Institut für Sozialforschung. It cannot be said that, in terms of their disciplines, these scholars formed a unified academic body. The institute’s director, Max Horkheimer, is a philosopher; his closest collaborator, Friedrich Pollock, an economist. Other members are the psychoanalyst Fromm, the economist Grossmann, the philosophers Marcuse and Rottweiler (the latter also a musicologist), the literary historian Löwenthal, and a number of others. The idea which brought this group together is that “social theory is develop today only in close association with a number of disciplines, especially economics, psychology, history, and philosophy.” Equally, these scholars have the common aim of orienting the work in their own disciplines toward the current state of social development and the theory related to it. What is involved here could hardly be called a doctrine, still less a