

Revolution in the Event: The Problem of Kairós

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Abstract

This article undertakes a dual task. The first is to argue that the various positions of major Marxist thinkers on revolution may be gathered under the common framework of *kairós*, understood as a resolutely temporal term relating to the critical time, the opportune moment that appears unexpectedly and must be seized. The second task is to question the nature of *kairós* in terms of its biblical, class and economic residues. An investigation of the use of the term in classical Greece reveals that it refers to both time and place, designating primarily what is in the right time and correct place. Given the class identifications of the Greek writers who deal with *kairós* and their subtle defences of their propertied, ruling class status, the term becomes problematic in light of these associations that trail behind it. In response, I seek to develop the political implications of the true opposite of *kairós*, namely *ákairos*, what is ill-timed and in the wrong place.

Keywords

ákairos, Bible, *kairós*, Marxism, revolution

Kairós is arguably one of the great organizing categories for a spate of recent and not so recent efforts to rethink revolution. With the agreed sense of the critical time, the opportune and revolutionary moment that must be seized, the term enables us to identify the common ground of various proposals by some leading Western Marxists: Walter Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben, Antonio Negri, Slavoj Žižek, Fredric Jameson, Alain Badiou, and Ernst Bloch. However, on closer examination, a number of problems emerge in relation to their efforts. To begin with, *kairós* as it has been passed down to us is heavily indebted to the Bible, particularly the New Testament, where the word is restricted to time and comes to designate the critical, last and thereby eschatological time. It becomes simply ‘*o kairós*’ (‘the time’). Further, if we open the investigation to

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wider usage and move back before the New Testament, it becomes clear that *kairós* refers not merely to time but also to space, with bodily and social senses. Now *kairós* becomes that which is in the right and proper place and time. Most importantly, the opposite of *kairós* in these texts is not *kronos*, the ordered march of time, but *ákairos*, what is in the wrong time and place. In this light, it becomes clear that the efforts by the New Testament writers to appropriate *kairós* for their own agenda bear the traces of these earlier meanings. Thereby, subsequent efforts to develop a *kairological* politics by these Western Marxists also contain elements of this sense of *kairós* as the proper place and time for revolution. In response, I propose that a better term is *ákairos*, the untimely and out-of-place.

Kairós

In our current usage, *kairós* refers almost exclusively to time, designating both a point in time as well as a period of time. On this matter, the New Testament bears heavy responsibility (Barr, 1969; Kittel et al., 1985: 389–390). In that collection of texts, *kairós* may mean the period when fruit becomes ripe and the harvest is ready (Luke 20:10; Mark 11:13, 12:2), a season such as autumn or spring (Galatians 4:10), the present (2 Corinthians 8:14; Luke 12:56, 18:30; Romans 3:26, 8:18), a designated period that is more often signalled by the plural, *kairoí* (Acts 1:7; Matthew 16:3, 21:41). But the term also identifies a specific moment, often in the dative ‘at the right time’, which may be opportune or favourable, or it may be dire and risky (Galatians 6:9; John 5:4; Luke 4:13, 12:42; Romans 5:6; 9:9). Increasingly the word takes the definite article, ‘the time’ (*o kairós*), and in this form its sense is the time that is fulfilled, or of crisis or the last times. Indeed, *o kairós* is one of the New Testament’s major eschatological terms, specifying variously the time of Christ’s appearance (Mark 1:16) or his own death (John 7:6, 8; Matthew 26:18), the fulfilment of his words (Luke 1:20), eternal life after death (Mark 10:30), the time of salvation (2 Corinthians 6:2), the longed-for, albeit troubled, time of final conflict, the end of history, the reign of the Evil One and Christ’s return to vindicate the faithful (Corinthians 4:5; 7:29; Luke 19:44, 21:8, 24; Mark 13:33; Matthew 8:29, 13:30; 1 Revelation 1:3, 11:18, 12:12, 14, 22:10; Romans 13:11). In all this, a crucial distinction operates within the biblical sense, between the unexpected and the expected. The New Testament stresses again and again that *o kairós* will occur at a moment we, from our perspective, do not expect. And yet, when seen from God’s perspective, that time is specifically appointed, occurring at the right and proper time that God has designated. This distinction will become vital in the later treatment of *ákairos*, which opposes this sense of the correct time. In various ways, these senses dominate, for good or ill, our sense of *kairós*, holding up and

restricting *kairós* as a term devoted to time and gathering the semantic field around that point.

Under this sense of *kairós*, a significant number of Marxist theories of revolution may be gathered, especially those of Benjamin, Agamben, Negri, Žižek, Jameson, Badiou and Bloch. They may all be suitably described as kairological thinkers.¹ To begin with, Walter Benjamin offers variations on *kairós*, or *Jetztzeit*, the ‘now-time’, as he prefers to call it (Benjamin, 2003: 395). Despite his efforts to identify different and unexpected ways out of the baleful myth and dreadful nightmare of capitalism, especially in the context of an apparently unstoppable fascism before the Second World War, these efforts are determined by the biblical heritage not merely of *kairós*, but of *o kairós*, as both a moment and a period of imminent and final crisis. As far as the moment itself is concerned, he prefers not to invoke the conventional Marxist category of revolution, but to seek his answer in one image after another. It may be waking from a dream, with appropriate dialectical debts to the surrealists.² Or it may be the enigmatic dialectic at a standstill (Benjamin, 1982a: 575–576, 1999: 431), or perhaps the flash of a camera, a ‘flash with the now’ (Benjamin, 1982a: 576, 1999: 432), a ‘posthumous shock’ that overcomes the merely temporal relation between past and present (Benjamin, 1973: 132). Another metaphor draws upon the explosive terms of birth in order to rethink history – the well-known ‘monad’ reduced and concentrated in the bowels of history which must then undergo a violent expulsion from the continuum of the historical process.³ The image is one of a bomb, in which the monad (the historical object) explodes to open up the possibility of a new era. All of these shocks, arrests, blasts and explosions try to rip apart the thick blanket that keeps history from opening out to a new moment (see also Benjamin, 1982a: 1026–1027, 1032, 1033, 1999: 857, 862, 863).

If the explicit biblical heritage is implicit in these examples, it becomes explicit in his much-discussed (weak) messianic or fulfilled time, which now becomes *kairós* as a period of time. That messianic time is set over against the humdrum mechanical version: ‘the idea of fulfilled time is the dominant historical idea of the Bible: it is the idea of messianic time’ (Benjamin, 1982b, Vol. 2: 134, 1996: 55–56).⁴ This explicit biblical sense is brought to the fore by Agamben’s ‘time that is left us’ (Agamben, 2005: 68), which expressly sets out to expand and systematize Benjamin’s scattered insights. But now the apostle Paul provides Agamben with a redefinition of the messianic era as an in-between time.⁵ Here we are clearly in the zone of *o kairós*, which is a suspended moment between an instant of chronological time and its fulfilment. For Paul this is the stretch between the first advent of the messiah – ‘Jesus Messiah’ in Agamben’s translation – and his final return. While the time of *kronos*, the regular beat of ordinary chronological time, leaves us powerless and weak, messianic or ‘operational’ time is that moment and period which we seize and bring to an end of our own making (see also Agamben, 1999: 168).⁶

Close to Agamben is Negri's treatment of *kairós*, although the initial impression is that little connects it with its biblical heritage. He defines *kairós* as the 'moment when the arrow of Being is shot' and as 'the immeasurability of production between the eternal and the *to-come*' (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 357; Negri, 2003: 154, 180, 2008: 97; Negri and Defourmantelle, 2004: 104). Yet the biblical distinction between *kairós* as moment and as period of time is clear, as is also the resolutely temporal focus. On the first count, *kairós* is the exemplary temporal point, an opening up in time that is eminently creative. On the second, Negri seeks to recast our understanding of time itself, replacing the conventional 'before' with the sign of eternity and 'after' with the 'to come'. In doing so, he resolutely opposes such a *kairós* to the measurable piling up of time as past, present and future, in which our present is a moving point between the fixed detritus of the past (to be collated, measured and studied by historiography, to be celebrated in triumph or mourned as disaster) and the future (as a repeat performance of the past). Even though Negri emphasizes the distinction, it is still quite conventional, usually cast in terms of *kairós* versus *kronos*.⁷ And the formal resonance of the biblical heritage of *kairós* in Negri's restatement becomes explicit both in his interviews⁸ and in his study of Job (Negri, 2009). Initially Job may seem like an odd choice, a mark of Negri's avoidance of the New Testament, but it is a Job mediated very much by the post New Testament church (hence Negri's significant focus on the messiah and resurrection in his reading). Thus, in Job, Negri pursues once again the contrast between abstract and concrete, pain and oppression, immanence and transcendence. More specifically, *kairological* time is the point of contact between lived, concrete time and the linear movement of divine epiphany – here earth and heaven touch as Job pulls God down to earth, bending transcendence to immanence (see also Negri and Fadini, 2008: 666–668), and forces God to answer his insistent questions. This ontology of time is nothing less than the 'immeasurable opening of *kairós*'.

Equally biblical but more Benjaminian is Žižek. He has been enthused by the possibilities opened up not only by Paul but also by the Gospels and elements of the Hebrew Bible, especially the Law (Žižek, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2006: 69–123; Žižek and Milbank, 2009; see also Kotsko, 2008). Yet the Bible and theology constitute one dimension of a search for a truly radical break, a genuine *kairós* that brings him closer to Benjamin. So we find Žižek exploring multiple possibilities: the feminine formula of sexuation; the Jewish law which is deprived of the law's usual fantasmatic support;⁹ a laicized Pauline grace (following Badiou) as an incalculable and undeserved irruption beyond human agency; the Christian realization of the Jewish rupture of the traumatic kernel through the cross (God really is impotent); Lenin's assertion of actual and not formal freedom. The unique element of Žižek's approach to this Benjaminian rupture is that he also has his eye on revolutions that have actually gone beyond

that initial moment, for they inevitably seem to run into the mud.¹⁰ So how does one avoid this kairological downturn? One approach is to undertake a perpetual search for a thoroughly genuine kairós that does not reinstate the same coordinates, while the other is to entertain the option of refusism.¹¹

In this wake of Benjamin belongs Fredric Jameson as well, who invokes kairological rupture as a key to utopia, except that he keeps such a rupture relatively low-key.¹² His examples include full employment and the abolition of money, which 'marks the rupture and opens up a space into which Utopia may enter, like Benjamin's Messiah, unannounced, unprepared by events, and laterally, as if into a present randomly chosen but utterly transfigured by the new element' (Jameson, 2005: 231). Jameson hopes such relatively simple demands may lead to the complete reshaping of the whole economic system, opening up a period of kairós after its momentary break. Thus, with the abolition of money, the wage relationship would be replaced by labour chits and work certificates as well as alternatives to market exchange and consumption. And in regard to full employment, labour would be gradually transformed and thereby address a host of other issues, such as 'crime, war, degraded mass culture, drugs, boredom, the lust for power, the lust for distraction, the lust for nirvana, sexism, racism' (pp. 147–148), all of these being symptoms of unemployment or alienated labour. By this time, so many things will need to be changed that the system makes a qualitative leap and becomes something very different.

By contrast, Badiou's (1988, 1997, 2003, 2006) rereading of kairós is much more spectacular and more obviously biblical (here he is closer to Agamben and Žižek), for the Apostle Paul provides an exemplary instance of the event and its procedures of truth.¹³ Badiou offers two unique developments to the notion of kairós we have encountered thus far. To begin with, an event can never be apprehended directly, for it becomes a truth only if it is named as such (although the two are inseparable). Thus Paul comes after the 'fact' of Christ's resurrection,¹⁴ identifies it as something unique and extra-numerary, and thereby establishes that truth-event. As with any event in the four zones of politics, science, art and love, it leaves in its wake linguistic traces, or what Badiou calls procedures of truth. In other words, the event itself may be a specific moment of kairós, but its procedures become the new, intensified kairological period that follows. The second development will have ramifications for the discussion of ákairos below, for the event itself is unexpected and incalculable, crashing into our mundane reality to rearrange the very coordinates of that reality. One cannot earn an event through hard work and planning, predict it through careful calculation, assume it is inevitable or indeed that history will be on one's side. Does not this unexpected dimension of the event

break from the biblical heritage of *o kairós* as the designated time of the end? Although one may identify a potential excess that does threaten to break away, in Badiou's formulation that unexpectedness fits in rather well with the biblical adage to keep watch, for one knows not the day or hour (Matthew 25:13).

I have left Ernst Bloch until last, for he offers one of the most sustained reflections on *kairós* and tries to push beyond the biblical heritage of the term. In contrast to the future-oriented nature of the previous contributions, Bloch argues for a realized eschatology, for in biblical terms *o kairós* has already arrived with Jesus of Nazareth. Thus, 'Jesus preached of *Kairós*, of time which is fulfilled and which is consequently mediated by and through history' (Bloch, 1985: 1492, 1995: 1264). However, Bloch also pushes *kairós* in at least two ways. The first is to provide it with a full philosophical pedigree, in terms of his favoured terms, *Novum* and *Ultimum*. While *Novum* is the combination of both possibility and finality – 'the still unbecome total goal-content [*noch ungewordenen totalen Zielinhalts*]' (Bloch, 1985: 233, 1995: 202) – without *Ultimum* it risks becoming useless repetition (as in capitalist 'innovation'). However, left to itself the *Ultimum* becomes both ontological transcendence and the doctrine of the Last Thing, which bends in a reactionary direction to become the First Thing. So the two need each other, in order to negate their solitary tendencies, coming together so that 'the newness in the *Ultimum* really triumphs by means of its total leap out of everything [*totalen Sprungs aus allem*] that has previously existed' (Bloch, 1985: 233, 1995: 203). The second direction for the realized *kairós* is to connect it with Jesus' miracles, which embody such a rupturing *kairós* at each moment they are enacted. As a 'blasting apart of the accustomed status quo' (Bloch, 1985: 1544–1545, 1995: 1306–1307), miracle introduces a strong element of unexpectedness and unaccountability. That is, the miracle may in some respects be seen as an untimely occurrence, one that is out of place with the accustomed coordinates of existence. This dimension will become vital in the treatment of *ákairos*.

Even if the specific ways of articulating *kairós* vary from one to the other, each is dependent on the biblical heritage of *kairós*. Blast, flash, time that remains, creative tip of the arrow of time, the moment of bending transcendence to immanence event, fulfilment, apocalypse, rupture, event as laicized grace, *Novum* and *Ultimum*, miracle – they are all variations on a persistent motif. Three key elements run through each of the proposals considered: *kairós* is resolutely temporal, and it designates both a specific moment of ruptural crisis and a period of opportune, revolutionary time. Some also (Benjamin, Agamben, Negri) emphasize the contrast with abstract, mechanical time, cast in terms of *kronos* versus *kairós*. Only with Bloch did we note a possibility of breaking from this biblical dependence.

Ákairos

At this point I would like to reinterrogate *kairós*, for it has not yet told us everything. Despite the strength of the biblical kairological tradition, this provides a limited picture of the dimensions of *kairós*. In particular, the biblical heritage serves to conceal a range of class and economic traces that are associated with the term. So in order to identify those traces, I shall take a step beyond this biblical legacy and widen our search to consider the Greek context of *kairós*.

When I first began chasing down *kairós*, I undertook the simplest of exercises. I began with a comprehensive lexicon of New Testament Greek, where of course the temporal senses of *kairós* we encountered earlier were laid out with an impressive range of examples. But then I reached across to my well-used lexicon of classical and Hellenistic Greek. A cursory glance seemed to confirm the familiar sense I had uncovered earlier: *kairós* appears initially as a temporal term, designating the right, critical and proper time or season. But now the deeper implications and associations of the word's semantic cluster began to emerge, for the word has distinct economic undertones, which slowly come to the surface. In a predominantly agricultural economy, *kairós* indicates the right season for planting or reaping, with a particular emphasis on the time the fruit is ripe, so much so that *kairós* also bears the sense of fruitfulness and advantage.

Yet we are still in familiar territory, dealing in time and its permutations. Along with philosophical commentary, biblical exegesis and theological elaboration, this delving into classical Greece seemed to confirm that sense that *kairós* designates the right time and a time of crisis. But now my search began to run into one surprise after another. The first of these was that *kairós* is not only a term of time but also of *place*, indeed that the spatial sense is earlier (Rickert, 2007: 72–73). And in this spatial sense, *kairós* designates what is in or at the right place, particularly in terms of the body. *Kairós* and especially its adjective, *kaírios*, designate a vital part of the body. For example, in Homer's *Iliad*, the adjective is used to mark the right place on the body for an arrow to find its mark. And in the works of Pindar, Aeschylus and Euripides the word means a target, especially on the body in battle. It is the point where a weapon can inflict the most damage (see Onians, 1973: 343–347; Rickert, 2007: 72).

So now we have an extended sense of *kairós*, one that goes well beyond time. Even more, both temporal and spatial meanings of the term find their basis in the sense of measure, proportion or fitness. As time, *kairós* is then a distinct measure or the appropriateness of time – the exact, critical and opportune time. As place, it becomes measured space, as well as the way space is proportioned, preferably 'correctly' when one refers to the body where everything is in its right place. Given the distinctly masculine dominance of Greek culture, especially of elite,

ruling-class males, it takes little imagination to see that such a kairological, that is, properly proportioned, body would be a male body, athletic, warlike and virile. One gains a distinct sense that kairós actually refers to what is in its *right place and time*, duly measured, appropriate and opportune. Indeed, although kairós takes on a range of meanings – convenience, decorum, due measure, fitness, fruit, occasion, profit, proportion, propriety, symmetry, tact, wise moderation, as well as opportunity, balance, harmony, right and/or proper time, opening, timeliness – the semantic cluster coalesces around the idea of what is duly measured and proportional, in short, the right time and the right place (see further Carter, 1988; Enos, 1976: 44; Kinneavy, 1983; Rickert, 2007; Sipiora, 2002; Thompson, 2000: 75; Untersteiner, 1954).¹⁵

Not quite the sense of kairós to which we have become accustomed, for its deeper sense concerns measure, proportion and harmony. However, I am interested in uncovering the economic and class dimensions of kairós. In order to identify those features we must follow a path through two further dimensions of kairós, namely, the expansion of its sense to a universal category or law, and its concern with the harmony of opposites. As for expansion, let us begin with Hesiod, in which agriculture unfolds to include economics. In that agricultural text par excellence, *Works and Days*, Hesiod (1973: 81) writes: ‘Observe due measure, and proportion (kairós) is best in all things.’ Here kairós means the right season of the year for planting, cultivating and harvesting crops and fruit. But it also indicates the right place, due to soil, landform and amount of moisture, for planting a particular crop or orchard. However, note that kairós inescapably bears an economic sense, for the business of agriculture is not merely concerned with soils and seasons and the right practice, but also and fundamentally with economics. Two further examples illustrate a far greater expansion of kairós. Thus, Plato writes in *The Laws*:

Pleasure and pain, you see, flow like two springs released by nature. If a man draws the right amount from the right one at the right time, he lives a happy life; but if he draws unintentionally at the wrong time [*ektos tōn kairōn*], his life will be rather different. State and individual and every living being are on the same footing here. (Plato, 1970: 62; see also Foucault, 1985: 57–59)

As with Hesiod, due measure and proportion are invoked here, now in terms of a harmony of opposites, in which one draws appropriately from pleasure and pain in relation to individual happiness. The key, however, lies with the last sentence, for Plato indicates that kairós applies not merely to individual life, but also to the state and ‘every living being’, an expansion that includes medicine, navigation, sex and universal harmony (Eskin, 2002). A further example comes a little earlier from the

Pythagoreans, for whom *kairós* embodies a universal law in which opposites, 'bound together by harmony, give life to the universe' (Untersteiner, 1954: 110–111). *Kairós* has expanded its sense considerably, for now it is a law of the universe, if not crucial to the creation of that universe in the resolution of the tension between form and matter (Carter, 1988: 102).

Already we have moved to the question of conflict and resolution, the second step on the path to the economic and class dimensions of *kairós*. As we have just seen, in both Plato and those upon whom he relied, the Pythagoreans, *kairós* involves a doctrine of the harmony of opposites. While Plato speaks of pleasure and pain, Pythagoreans such as Empedocles were concerned with the opposites of form and matter, odd and even, right and left, limited and unlimited – all of them embodied in the fundamental conflict of monad and dyad. The universe could be generated only through the resolution of this conflict (Carter, 2003: 101–102; Gorman, 1979: 135–141; Untersteiner, 1954: 111).

So *kairós* now involves a universal principle focused on the balance or harmony of opposites. Yet, given this fuller meaning, a question lurks in the shadows of this classical *kairós*: what is its opposite? Not *kronos*, and thereby chronological, measured and dominating time – the position emphasized in Benjamin, Agamben and Negri, and indeed a standard opposition in most philosophies of time. In classical Greek, *kronos* became a byword for an old fool or dotard, especially in the comedies of Aristophanes. As a proper name, *Kronos* is, as is well known, the father of Zeus; but he also designates that period before the current era, the distant past which may be either a golden age or the dark ages, depending on one's perspective.

Instead of *kronos*, the opposite of *kairós* is determined by a series of prepositions: in the text from Plato quoted above, we have already seen that the opposite of *kairós* is *ektos tōn kairōn* (without or far from *kairós*, or simply wrong). Other prepositional opposites include *apó kairoû* (away or far from *kairós*); *parà kairón* (to the side of or contrary to *kairós*); *pró kairoû* (before *kairós* or prematurely); *kairoû péra* (beyond measure, out of proportion and unfit). These senses all bear the weight of what is outside the zone of *kairós*, untimely, out of place, unbalanced and non-harmonious. And all of them may be gathered under *ákairos*. If *kairós* designates the well-timed, well-placed and harmonious, then *ákairos* means the ill-timed, displaced and non-harmonious. I cannot emphasise enough how important this opposite of *kairós* is. Over against measure we have beyond measure; timely versus untimely; in the right place versus the wrong place. One who is *ákairos* is in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Kairós has considerably expanded from its temporal sense, now designating space, universal law in which the resolution of opposites is crucial, and being opposed by *ákairos*. In light of these developments,

it becomes possible to identify the economic and class dimensions of *kairós* and *ákairos*. In order to do so, we must ask: due measure, timeliness, harmony and universal law for whom and for what purpose? The answer begins with Wood, who has made clear in regard to Plato that he embodies the thought of an aristocratic and anti-democratic elite, in short a ruling-class ideology (Wood, 1997: 142–143, 2008: 50–98). A characteristic feature of such an ideology is the claim that its own particular perspective is applicable to all, that it is a universal law. A further dimension in our search for the class dimensions of *kairós* involves an unwitting insight by Kinneavy, who was instrumental in recovering *kairós* as a term in recent debates over ethics and rhetoric. Asked whether *kairós* is a political term, Kinneavy responds:

In its origins it was. As a matter of fact, you may remember that the symbolic reference was to *kairos* as a god. He was a god in Greece, and he was represented as a young man, a student at the two-year, kind of junior-college preparation they had for policing and for war. (Thompson, 2000: 79; see also Kinneavy, 1983: 93)

But what kind of young man does this god represent? Here Aristotle, true to the spirit of his teacher Plato, provides the best definition. Such education is appropriate not for persons of low tastes, who are the vast majority: ‘The utter vulgarity of the herd of men comes out in their preference for the sort of existence a cow leads’ (Aristotle, 1955: *Eth. Nic.* I.5: 30; see also X.9: 309–310). In other words, only ruling-class males, precisely Plato’s and Aristotle’s students, if not of every philosopher–teacher,¹⁶ are capable of philosophical reflection, rhetorical training and political leadership, thereby excluding slaves, peasants, artisans and women. Yet this particular ideology is assumed to be universal, applicable also to those members of the vulgar herd.

At this point, a connection opens up between *kairós*–*ákairos* and a wider series of moral, class and economic oppositions, each of which favours one term over another. As Ste. Croix has shown, the apparently innocent Platonic question, ‘what is good (*agathos*)?’ is far from innocent. It has distinctly class assumptions, in which ‘good’ designates the values of the ruling, propertied class and ‘bad’ (*kakos*) those of the ruled. Overlapping with good vs bad are a host of other terms that reveal the intersections between politics, class, ethics and even physical appearance: wealthy vs poor, noble vs ignoble, brave vs cowardly, well-born vs ill-born, blessed vs cursed, lucky vs unlucky, upright vs lowly, elite vs masses, pillars of society vs dregs, beautiful vs ugly.¹⁷ Within this constellation the opposition of *kairós* and *ákairos* finds its home, if not the organizing principle itself (Sipiora, 2002: 3). Thus, the harmony of opposites is a harmony from the perspective of the ruling class in which an apparent harmony is actually the domination of one term

over another. The universal law of *kairós* becomes the claim of a particular perspective to universal status at the expense of others.¹⁸

It has become apparent that *kairós* has a rather unsavoury class sense. The body out of proportion, one that is 'ugly' and out of proportion, is also the body of the poor, exploited majority of Greek society – what, following Negri, we might call the monstrous (Negri and Casarino, 2008: 193–218). From here *kairós* may also, in connection with this cluster of other terms, apply to social measure and order. A *kairological* social order has everything in its proper place – aristocratic elites, exploited peasants, driven slaves, women, and so on. Such a proportioned and fit society, one characterized by 'eugenia', ensures the ruling elite remains precisely where it is. Disorder and immeasure, what is contrary to *kairós* and thereby *ákairos*, designate an unfit and unhappy society, one in turmoil and on the rocks, when time is out of joint and events take place outside their proper time and season.

To take an example from our own experience, is not the wildcat strike an excellent example of *ákairos*? For the ferociously independent Georges Sorel, the strike was as much a potent political weapon as it was a myth (Sorel, 1961). This great admirer of action over contemplation saw in the general strike the most forceful weapon in the war of socialism against capitalism. More recently, for Antonio Negri and his comrades, the industrial involvement of the 1960s and 1970s, with its ongoing battles and wildcat strikes, was a key component in the development of workerism, or *operaismo*. And both Negri and Sorel still have a point, given the way business and the owners of capital seek to curtail the possibility and effectiveness of the strike. While we still see the use of scab labour to replace striking workers, in our own time the big end of town prefers to pressure governments to enact more and more legislation in order to restrict the strike to an 'appropriate' time, carefully measured and portioned out. They say: you may strike only at this point (*kairós*) in the process of negotiating a new award; before or after is illegal and you will be charged. The untimely, *akairological* strike must be brought to order, allotted its place and time.

Conclusion

Kairós has turned out to be far more multifaceted than its biblical heritage has suggested. Not content to be restricted to a temporal register, it has now spilled out to include agricultural and bodily spaces, the sense of measure and then blurred out its potential class allegiances. The implications for my earlier gathering of *kairological* theories of revolution should be obvious, but some care is needed. To begin with, a key term such as *kairós* inescapably carries with it the rich and at times unwanted dimensions of its semantic cluster. This is so for both the distinctive biblical appropriations of *kairós* as it is for the Marxist efforts to rethink

revolution in light of that category. Further, a crucial dimension of that legacy is the opposition in which *kairós* is located. As we have seen, the opposition is not, as many have argued, between chronological and *kairōlogical* time, between the mechanical march of time and the opportune moment; rather, the opposition is between *kairós* and *ákairos*, between timely and untimely, well-placed and out of place. In this light, *kairós* begins to show its true colours. Not quite a shift in sides to that of mechanical, abstract time, yet the word now becomes associated with moral, economic and class associations that stress order over chaos, proper functioning society over the improper, the right time and place against the wrong.

What of the shift into biblical usage? Is that not a change in direction, indicating the opportune time of crisis, the unexpected end time? The full picture provides us with two elements in that appropriation, with a distinct emphasis on the temporal. First, the sense of a right and proper time is indeed found in the Bible, with respect to the seasons and harvest, which take place at the appointed time. However, the minor role this sense has indicates a more systematic avoidance of the ordered class and economic dimensions of *kairós*. Or rather, they are not so much avoided as occluded, conveniently relegated to another sphere, hidden and thereby unknown. Let us put it in terms of the unexpected, for *kairós* is clearly represented as such in the Bible. Here we need to take into account a tension between human and divine perspectives. From our earthly perspective we may not know the day or hour of the Lord's return and therefore must be prepared for the unexpected. Yet from a divine perspective, that *kairós* has already been appointed by the one who knows precisely when it will occur. For us it may be unexpected and certainly unannounced, but for God it will occur at the right and proper time.

All of which has distinct implications for the appropriations of *kairós* in order to recast revolution. Initially, it may seem that the emphasis on the undeserved and unexpected dimensions of *kairós* – as blast, rupture, event and miracle – signals that some dimensions of *ákairos* have crept into the Marxist appropriations of *kairós*. Thus, revolution has a spontaneous, unseasonable, immeasurably creative element that cannot be predicted or planned. The rupture or event or miracle crashes through the door without a polite knock, or perhaps like a thief in the night; we should be always alert, for we know not the day or hour, as the New Testament would have it. Apart from the fact that this dimension is contained within the biblical notion of *kairós*, as I have just indicated, it also resonates a little too uncomfortably with certain elements of capitalism. For instance, the emphasis on the unexpected nature of *kairós* sounds like 'good' business practice, as when one seizes an unexpected turn in the market to one's advantage. Opportunity, innovation, creativity – these are watchwords for

‘successful’ business. The catch here is not merely that one may also see a greater plan beneath the unexpected, in which the biblical God becomes Adam Smith’s famous ‘invisible hand’, but that the leaders of business and of wealthy nations are always well-positioned – in the right place and time – to take maximum advantage of such apparently unexpected turns.

Thus, the Marxists I considered in the first part of this argument risk an unwitting connection with those associations, thereby providing a bulwark for the status quo they seek to oppose and overthrow. Does not Benjamin’s fulfilled messianic time sound uncomfortably close to Fukuyama’s (1992) argument for the end of history with the ‘end’ of communism in Eastern Europe? Does not Agamben’s time that is seized out of kronos and brought to fulfilment lend itself a little too easily to astute business practice? Is not Negri’s infinitely creative moment at the tip of the arrow of being too close to the bourgeoisie’s attribution of supernatural creative power to labour, as Marx pointed out in *Critique of the Gotha Programme*?¹⁹ Does not Žižek’s tension between a search for the genuine shift in the coordinates of existence and refusism echo the business executive caught between the big break-through and throwing it all in for a cottage in the woods? Is not Jameson’s growing rumble of a low-key rupture too much like a social-democratic reform program that has made its peace with capitalism? Is not Badiou’s event comparable to an unexpected stock market crash that enables one to buy bankrupt businesses at basement prices? And does not Bloch’s miraculous leap into the highest newness risk veering towards Schmitt’s (1985: 36) counter-Reformation notion of the miracle as the constitutive exception that supports, *sub specie aeternitatis*, the status quo?

Is there nothing retrievable from these various efforts at a kairological revolutionary politics? I hinted earlier that the point where they may break out of the heritage of kairós lies in their emphasis on the undeserved, unannounced and unexpected dimension, with a particular emphasis on Bloch’s miracle as the *Novum et Ultimum*, now on a radical political trajectory in which miracle is but one, theological code, for revolution. However, what is needed is a push that will take this element of kairós out of the spatial, social and economic dimensions that trail the term from its Greek and thereby biblical heritage, a push that will take it away from its associations with the well-proportioned ruling elites and towards the ill-proportioned and untimely, that is, to ákairos. The catch is that the opposition itself is one determined by the ruling classes, a way of asserting their own right and proper role and of marginalizing those who would oppose them. If we were to shift to an akairological perspective, then the very terminology would shift and the opposition itself would be cast aside.

Notes

1. This exclusive focus on the temporal dimension of *kairós* also afflicts the recent work of Marramao (2007).
- 2.

Accordingly, we present the new, the dialectical method of doing history: with the intensity of a dream, to pass through what has been, in order to experience the present as the waking world to which the dream refers! (Benjamin, 1999: 838; also 845, 854–855, 863, 883, 1982a: 1006, 1012, 1023, 1033, 157–158)

As Margaret Cohen and Max Pensky point out, the influence of surrealism is more obvious in the earlier drafts of *The Arcades Project*. Benjamin differed from the Surrealists in emphasizing not so much the dream itself as waking from the dream. If the dream is one way of characterizing the mythic world of 19th-century capitalism, then the rupture is the stunned moment of awakening (Benjamin, 1982a: 998, 577–80, 1999: 831, 261–264; Cohen, 1993; Pensky, 1996).

- 3.

If the object of history is to be blasted out of the continuum of historical succession, that is because its monadological structure demands it. This structure first comes to light in the extracted object itself. And it does so in the form of the historical confrontation that makes up the interior (and, as it were, the bowels) of the historical object, and into which all the forces and interests of history enter on a reduced scale. It is owing to this monadological structure that the historical object finds represented in its interior its own fore-history and after-history. (Benjamin, 1982a: 594, 1999: 475).

This text is of course the forerunner of the more well-known one on the monad from the theses ‘On the Concept of History’ (Benjamin, 1982b, Vol. 1: 703, 2003: 396).

4. For a detailed discussion and critique, with all the references, of Benjamin’s use of the ‘messianic’, see Boer (2007: 96–103).
5. But see Agamben’s (2005: 138–145) carefully perverse effort to trace Paul’s influence in some of Benjamin’s key statements, in which some of Benjamin’s manuscripts are understood to refer to Paul by spacing out the letters of crucial words. For a full discussion, see Boer (forthcoming).
6. Even more, this heightened moment is conversely a period of deactivation, when the law (Agamben’s other great motif in his interpretation of Paul) is deactivated so that its potentiality may be pumped up, awaiting its fulfilment. Like the scribe whose full potentiality is manifested when he does not write, *energeia* (act) becomes disengaged so that *dynamis* (potentiality) may flourish. For a sustained critique of Agamben, see Boer (2009: 181–204). Note also Agamben’s definition of *kairós* as the moment in which ‘man, by his own initiative, grasps favourable opportunity and chooses his own freedom in the moment’ in a way that is a ‘qualitative alteration of time’ that ‘would alone be immune to absorption into the reflux of restoration’ (Agamben, 1993: 104–105). For a trenchant criticism of Agamben and Badiou see Ojakangas (2009),

and for a comprehensive effort to move the debate further concerning Paul and political philosophy see Blanton and DeVries (2013).

7. For an incisive critique of this conventional, albeit troubled, distinction see Marramao (2007: 40).
8. In the conversations with Anne Defourmantelle, he describes *kairós* as the moment each day when 'one creates God'; everything one does is a creation of God, since 'to create new Being is to create something that, unlike us, will never die' (Negri and Defourmantelle, 2004: 146–147). Further, this process of creativity is marked by naming: 'Whatever thing I name exists' (Negri, 2003: 147), which is then explicated in the interview as 'at once the Bible and what makes epistemology possible' (Negri and Defourmantelle, 2004: 119).
9. On Žižek's changing positions regarding the Jewish law see Kotsko (2008: 88–93).
10. As Žižek (1996: 133) puts it:

it is easy to suspend the big Other by means of the act qua real, to experience the 'non-existence of the big Other' in a momentary flash – however, what do we do after we have traversed the fantasy?

One cannot help wondering whether this tension, to which Žižek returns again and again, marks the trauma of his own part in the break-up of Yugoslavia.

11.

This is how we pass from the politics of 'resistance' or 'protestation,' which parasitizes upon what it negates, to a politics which opens up a new space outside the hegemonic position *and* its negation. We can imagine the varieties of such a gesture in today's public space: not only the obvious 'There are great chances of a new career here! Join us!' – 'I would prefer not to'; but also 'Discover the depths of your true self, find inner peace!' – 'I would prefer not to'; or 'Are you aware how your environment is endangered? Do something for ecology!' – 'I would prefer not to'; or 'What about all the racial and sexual injustices that we witness all around us? Isn't it time to do more?' – 'I would prefer not to.' This is the gesture of subtraction at its purest, the reduction of all qualitative differences to a purely formal minimal difference. (Žižek, 2006: 382–383, emphasis in original)

12. Low key despite his various statements – the future as 'radical and systemic break' (Jameson, 2005: 228) and disruption as 'the name for a new discursive strategy' (p. 231).
13. Alongside love, art, science and politics, one can trace the ghostly presence of a fifth, theological procedure of truth in Badiou's thought (Boer, 2009: 155–204).
14. I write 'fact' here within quotation marks, for the problematic feature of Badiou's engagement with Paul is that the crucial event of the resurrection is for him, a 'fable' (Badiou, 1997: 5–7, 2003: 4–6).
15. Apart from Rickert, these critics are concerned with recovering *kairós* as a useable term in contemporary rhetoric and ethics, a task that is as

- equally problematic as the critics I discussed in the first section of this article.
16. For the importance of *kairós* as a principle of teaching such students see Sipiōra's (2002: 14) discussion of Isocrates.
 17. See Ste. Croix (2006: 338–339), who provides a host of related terms: *oi tas ousias echontes, plousioi, pacheis, eudaimones, gnōrimoi, eugeneis, dunatoi, dunatōtatoi, kaloi kagathoi, chrēstōi, esthloi, aristoi, beltistoi, dexiōtatoi, charientes, epieikeis* – all for the 'good' propertied classes; for the 'bad' unpropertied classes we have *oi penētes, aporoi, ptōchoi, oi polloi, to plēthos, o ochlos, o dēmos, oi dēmotikoi, mochthēroi, ponēroi, deiloi, to kakiston* (see also Ste. Croix, 1972: 371–376). One might gather a similar collection of terms with such moral, class and economic overlaps in our own day: uneducated, trailer-trash, bogan (an Australian term with a similar sense), rabble, low culture, unfashionable, and so on. On the devalorization of the lower classes even within communism, in which 'golden communism', with its emphasis on education, activism and the romantic ideal, denigrates the 'iron worker' as an egoistic individual concerned only with the here and now of economic struggle, see Rancière (2010: 171–172). He goes on to show how this tension, with one valorized conversely against the other, has been to the detriment of communism.
 18. A contemporary example of the way *kairós* offers a ruling-class perspective may be found in the work of Kinneavy, who seeks to provide a universal code of ethics based on *kairós*: 'My code is based upon five principles: respect for life, respect for family, respect for property, respect for truth, and respect for liberty' (Thompson, 2000: 84). Kinneavy goes on to argue that this universal kairological code provides the basis for the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, albeit used appropriately. Thus, if someone attacks him or his family, the kairological response would be a defence that entails extinguishing someone else's right to life. He remains blind to the fact that such a code is the expression of a specific, bourgeois ideology that claims universal validity.
 19. 'The bourgeois have very good grounds for falsely ascribing *supernatural creative power* to labour; since precisely from the fact that labour depends on nature it follows that the man who possesses no other property than his labour power must, in all conditions of society and culture, be the slave of other men who have made themselves the owners of the material conditions of labour. He can only work with their permission, hence live only with their permission' (Marx, 1891a: 81, 1891b: 17).

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