

# Contemporary Critical Theory and Western Theology, With a Focus on the Problem of Kairós

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Abstract:

This article undertakes two tasks: first, it situates the current engagement with theology by Western critical theorists within a longer and very rich history of such engagements; second, it assesses three crucial topics in the nexus between critical theory and theology. In regard to the first task, I outline my five-volume project, *The Criticism of Heaven and Earth*, which provides a detailed and critical commentary on the history of Marxist encounters with theology – from Marx and Engels until today. This outline sets the scene for the second and main part of the article, which focuses on the topics of political myth, the dialectical tension between the secular and anti-secular dimensions of both Marxism and theology, and the problematic role of kairós in recent efforts to rethink revolution. While the first two topics are covered briefly, the treatment of kairós is more involved, since it lies at the heart of much recent critical theory (which tends to be of a

Marxist ilk). My main point in this discussion is that *kairós* is a potentially problematic idea, for it is attached too closely to ruling class ideology from ancient Greece. In response, I argue in favour of *ákairos* – what is ill-timed and in the wrong place.

The current interest in theology by a number of ‘Western’ critical theorists (mostly of a Marxist ilk) may seem like a new phenomenon. Yet a consideration of the long and rich tradition of Marxist interest in theology reveals that it is merely the latest upsurge in a complex history. In order to situate this recent engagement with theology, I offer an outline of my recently completed project, *The Criticism of Heaven and Earth*. This project explores in careful detail the way leading Western Marxists have been fascinated with theology, beginning with Marx and Engels themselves. From here, I explore three central topics: political myth, the tension between secularism and anti-secularism, and the use of the Greek idea, *kairós*, to rethink revolution itself. Since *kairós* is arguably the main issue, I give it more detailed attention. In particular, I argue that the efforts by a number of Marxists – Walter Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben, Antonio Negri, Slavoj Žižek, Fredric Jameson, Alain Badiou, and Ernst Bloch – may be gathered under the rubric of *kairós*. They tend to be influenced at a deep level by the New Testament, where *kairós* designates the critical time, the opportune moment that must be seized. However, when we investigate the ancient

Greek senses of *kairós*, it becomes clear that the term has distinct ruling class connotations, especially as the right place and the right time. In response, I propose that *ákairos* is a better way to understand revolution, for it designates what is in the wrong place and at the wrong time.

## The Criticism of Heaven and Earth

I begin by situating the current engagement with theology by critical theorists within a longer history. When one considers that tradition, two facts stand out: the liaison between Marxism and theology has continued unabated since the time of Marx and Engels; yet, the tradition of that relationship has suffered a distinct lack of critical attention. For this reason, I set out some years ago to write a five-volume series called the *Criticism of Heaven and Earth*.<sup>1</sup>

The project literally grew in the writing. As I wrote, I read, and I kept encountering more and more Marxists who had engaged with theology, often in parts of their works that have lain neglected for too long. An initial study of Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno<sup>2</sup> soon grew to include 24 leading Western Marxists.<sup>3</sup> They appear in the first three volumes

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<sup>1</sup> The individual volumes are called *Criticism of Heaven* (2007), *Criticism of Religion* (2009), *Criticism of Theology* (2010), *Criticism of Earth* (2012), and *In The Vale of Tears* (2014). Except for the final volume, the titles are drawn from Marx's text: "Thus the criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of earth, the *criticism of religion* into the *criticism of law* and the *criticism of theology* into the *criticism of politics*" (Marx 1844 [1973]: 176).

<sup>2</sup> Bloch 1972, 1995; 1985, vols 14 and 5; Benjamin 1998, 1999; 1996: 62-74; 1974-89, vols 1, 5, 2: 62-74; Adorno 1989, 1973; Adorno 1986, vols 2, 3, 6; Horkheimer and Adorno 2004 [1947].

<sup>3</sup> Louis Althusser, Henri Lefebvre, Antonio Gramsci, Terry Eagleton, Slavoj Žižek, Lucien Goldmann, Fredric Jameson, Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Kautsky, Julia Kristeva, Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, Georg Lukács, Raymond Williams, Max Horkheimer, E. P. Thompson, G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, Michael Löwy, Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Antonio Negri.

of the series, with the fourth devoted to Marx and Engels themselves.

Finally, my own response to this rich tradition appears the fifth volume, *In the Vale of Tears*.

The aims of the project may be listed as follows:

1. To provide a comprehensive critical commentary on the interaction between materialism and religion within the work of the leading Marxist thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

2. To set the current surge of interest in the religion, especially the Bible and theology, by Marxist critics such as Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou and Giorgio Agamben within historical perspective.

3. To explore where possible unknown and neglected theological writings by these critics.

4. To assess the implications of their theological engagements for the thought of each thinker as a whole.

5. To compare with each other the various theological engagements by these figures.

6. To produce my own coherent body of thought in response, with a specific focus on the question as to why Marxists are so interested in religion.

In more detail: apart from the lack of comprehensive assessment of a distinct tradition – the relationship between Marxism and religion – we also have a curious lack of historical perspective. Despite the recent flourish of

interest in the work of Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, Slavoj Žižek, Terry Eagleton, Antonio Negri, and others, such interest operates in a historical vacuum, unaware that religion has always been a constant companion for Marxist thought and politics. So my project sets the interaction between materialism and religion within the context of a longer historical tradition.

Further, I have been constantly surprised at the neglect of the writings on religion by many of the critics on whom I focus. These writings include monographs (Adorno, Bloch, Goldmann, Eagleton, Kautsky and Luxemburg), sections of monographs (Kristeva, Gramsci, Lukács, Williams), essays (Althusser, Eagleton, Lefebvre, Jameson, Luxemburg) and even the odd novel (Williams). The same applies to Marx and Engels: despite the avalanche of critical assessment, their engagement with religion has not been subjected to adequate analysis.

Even more, I am interested in the implications for their work as a whole. For example, Adorno makes the *Bilderverbot*, drawn from the ban on images of the second commandment in Exodus 20/Deuteronomy 5 into a basic motif of his work; Althusser's effort to banish the Church from his later work (it is central to his early essays) turns it into an absent cause of that work; Badiou's attempt to rethink revolution in terms of the 'event' is indebted to the sense of *kairós* that trails the meanings of the New Testament.

In two final areas no work has been done at all – a comparative critique of the various engagements with religion and a constructive response to those engagements. The basis of such an effort is the whole tradition, which enables an assessment of the work of each critic in light of the others. Here I assess whether one position criticises another, whether it is a step back or an improvement, why religion is so enticing for materialist critics, and so on. For example, Adorno's criticism of secularised theology has deep implications for arguments in favour of such secularisation. Or, an insight into the political ambivalence of theology questions the argument that the support of oppressive regimes is a betrayal of Christianity's radical core.

Perhaps the most significant element of this project is the need to offer a response of one's own. In such a project, I have encountered a significant number of insights, which in turn have triggered further reflection. These include the role of atheism, theological suspicion, the translatability of radical religion and politics, the political ambivalence of religion, a suspicion of ethics, the dialectical interaction between religion and materialism, political myth, the dialectic of secular and anti-secular, and problems of *kairós*. In what follows, I deal with political and the anti-secular matters briefly, before giving more attention to *kairós*.

To sum up, my approach in the *Criticism of Heaven and Earth* series is intimate, immanent, comparative, historical and constructive. In other

words, I seek to read patiently and carefully, refusing to rush over texts, to ask what the implications might be for the whole body of thought of each critic, to compare, weigh and assess each contribution in light of the others, to develop a sense of the distinct history of this tradition, and then to construct my own creative and coherent body of thought in response.

## **Political Myth**

A common position concerning the relations between Marxism and religion is to suggest that Marxism borrows some deep assumptions from religion, especially its prophetic criticism of the present world order (capitalism) and its eschatological projection of a future world that is qualitatively different (socialism and communism). This has been a standard move to debunk Marxism as some secular religion, perhaps as ‘church of communism.’ However, it is really a speculative thought bubble that has become accepted through thousands of repetitions.

Instead, I propose that Marxism and religion are neither the same, nor does one derive from the other. Instead, they engage with one another because they occupy the same space, which may be named political myth. By political myth I mean an alternative language or narrative saturated with images and metaphors. Myth is a cunning and subtle form of writing and thinking, which enables us to speak about what cannot be spoken of in

everyday terms – especially in regard to the future. In this respect, myth is an extraordinarily powerful political medium.<sup>4</sup>

Let me use the example of Christian communism, which has a long tradition that goes back to early Christianity. Such a myth has an enabling and virtual power with historical consequences. In other words, the myth of Christian communism may initially be an image, using figurative and metaphorical language that expresses a hope concerning communal living, but once it becomes an authoritative and canonical text, it gains a historical power of its own. It becomes the motivation for repeated and actual attempts at Christian communism. In this sense, it is possible to say that the myth of Christian communism will have been true at some future moment.

In its Marxist formulation, the political myth of communism may initially be an image, often making use of figurative language that expresses a hope concerning communal living. However, once it has become an actual lived experience, however fleeting and fraught with problems, it becomes an authoritative and even canonical story that gains a historical power of its own. That experience then generates various plans and programs to bring it about, and thereby becomes the motivation for repeated and actual attempts at such communism. So also, the political myth of communism will have been true at some future moment.

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<sup>4</sup> See further, Boer 2008; 2014: 69-124.

## Secular and Anti-Secular

All too often a very close and long relationship is marked by perpetual arguing and bickering. Those arguments took place from the first moments of socialism. It is not so well known that when Marx and Engels wrote the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* they did so at the request of a group that had not long beforehand been known as the *League of the Just*.<sup>5</sup> The *League*, which had been formed by German workers in Paris in 1836, was an organisation with a substantial religious flavour, propagating utopian socialist and communist ideas and practices on the basis of the Bible. Marx and Engels were invited to join in 1847, by which time the organisation numbered over 1000 in many different countries. The relationship soon became difficult. The old slogan of the *League of the Just* was distinctly biblical: it was to work towards ‘the establishment of the Kingdom of God on Earth, based on the ideals of love of one’s neighbour, equality and justice’. Marx and Engels did not let it remain so for long: it became ‘Working men of all countries, Unite!’ And within a few months, they managed to change the name of the organisation to the *Communist League*. As they did so, they attacked some of the leading figures of the old *League of the Just*, such as Wilhelm Weitling, Hermann Kriege, Karl Grün and Gottfried Kinkel. For instance, Weitling wrote a fascinating work, *The Poor Sinner’s*

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<sup>5</sup> On what follows, see Dirk Struik (1986) and David Riazonov’s classic work (1996), especially chapter 4.

*Gospel*,<sup>6</sup> in which he argued for a violent communist revolution and pictured not merely Christ as the fore-runner of communism, but communism as Christianity without all its later accretions. Despite his early admiration, Marx soon took a distinct stand against Weitling's prophet-like status. Indeed, the letters between Marx and Engels repeatedly discuss the need to counter Weitling's influence.

But why do Marxism and religion argue so much? I have partly answered this second question in the preceding section, for Marxism and religion argue with each other precisely because they have a different take on the crucial question of what a better global future might look like. While a conventional religious answer would work from the world above to the world to come, the former inaugurating the latter, a Marxist answer begins with the world to come and then explores what might follow in any other domain. To stay with our well-tried spatial metaphor, religion operates with a top-down approach, whereas Marxism works from the bottom up.

The problem is that such a contrast is far too simplistic, so let us start again and answer the question from a different angle. It seems to me that Marxism and religion are both anti-secular programs. Responses I have had to this statement invariably assert that Marxism is secular because it takes its stand against religion. The problem with such a response is that secularism is understood as necessarily anti-religious. So let me take a step back and ask

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<sup>6</sup> Weitling 1843 [1969].

what the definition of secularism is: it is a system of thought and action, if not a way of living that draws its terms purely from this age and from this world (*saeculum*) and not from some world above or future age. Other, popular senses of secularism may derive from this basic sense, especially the idea that secularism is an anti-religious program, that it entails the separation of church and state, and that one must keep religion well and truly away from the proper scientific disciplines. Yet these are secondary senses (and therefore not necessary ones) that may flow from the primary sense of secularism.

In this light, we can see that Marxism and religion are both thoroughly secular and anti-secular. But let me stay with the prime meaning of secularism: as a way of acting and thinking that draws its terms from this world, the implication is that a fully secular program does not draw its reference point from something beyond this world, whether that is a god or the gods above, or a better society and economic system in the future. On the first count religion is disqualified; on the second count, Marxism is ruled out of order. So we have a delectable paradox: Marxism is thoroughly secular in one sense (did not Marx develop his deepest insights by immersing himself in the study of capitalism?), but in another it is not (it takes as its reference point a better society beyond capitalism). So also with religion: while it is vitally concerned with this age and this world, with its concerns over anthropology (the term is originally a theological one), history

and shape of human collectives, it seeks to draw its terms of analysis from a realm beyond this secular one.

I am most interested in the anti-secular side of the equation, for it is here that Marxism and religion struggle over similar territory. While Marxism works towards a revolution of capitalism in favour of whatever communism might be, theology has its New Jerusalem that marks the end of one history and the beginning of an entirely new one. It is no wonder they argue so much, for the stakes are high: what will be the shape of this new society, this new socio-economic system? Will it draw its terms from above (the New Jerusalem descends from heaven) or from the new era of communism (what I have called elsewhere a temporal transcendence)?

## **Kairós**

Both political myth and the secular-anti-secular tension provide two brief examples of the issues at stake in contemporary debates concerning Marxism and religion. The third topic concerns *kairós*, with which I take more time, since it is crucial to many of the critical theorists dealing with religion today. 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.<sup>7</sup> In that collection of texts, *kairós* may mean the period when fruit becomes ripe and the harvest is

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<sup>7</sup> Kittel, Friedrich, and Bromiley, 1985: 389-90; Barr, 1969.

ready,<sup>8</sup> a season such as autumn or spring,<sup>9</sup> the present,<sup>10</sup> a designated period that is more often signalled by the plural, *kairoí*.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> Increasingly the word takes the definite article, ‘the time’ (*ὁ καιρός*), and in this form its sense is the time that is fulfilled, or of crisis or the last times. Indeed, *ὁ καιρός* is one of the New Testament’s major eschatological terms, specifying variously the time of Christ’s appearance<sup>13</sup> or his own death,<sup>14</sup> the fulfilment of his words,<sup>15</sup> eternal life after death,<sup>16</sup> the time of salvation,<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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 *ὁ καιρός* 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. Above all, *kairós* appears as a term referring to time.

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<sup>8</sup> Mark 11: 13; 12:2; Luke 20:10.

<sup>9</sup> Galatians 4:10.

<sup>10</sup> Luke 12:56; 18:30; Romans 3:26; 8:18; 2 Corinthians 8:14.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 16:3; 21:41; Acts 1:7.

<sup>12</sup> Luke 4:13; 12:42; John 5:4; Romans 5:6; 9:9; Galatians 6:9.

<sup>13</sup> Mark 1:16.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 26:18; John 7:6, 8.

<sup>15</sup> Luke 1:20.

<sup>16</sup> Mark 10:30.

<sup>17</sup> 2 Corinthians 6:2.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 8:29; 13:30; Mark 13:33; Luke 19:44; 21:8, 24; Romans 13:11; 1 Corinthians 4:5; 7:29; Revelation 1:3; 11:18; 12:12, 14; 22:10.

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.<sup>19</sup> To begin with, Walter Benjamin offers variations on *kairós*, or *Jetztzeit*, the ‘now-time’, as he prefers to call it.<sup>20</sup> Despite his efforts to identify different and unexpected ways out of the dreadful myth and nightmare of capitalism, especially in the context of an apparently unstoppable fascism before World War II, these efforts are determined by the biblical heritage not merely of *kairós*, but ‘the time’ (of *ó 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.<sup>21</sup> Or it may be the dialectic at a standstill,<sup>22</sup> or perhaps the flash of a camera, a ‘flash with the now’,<sup>23</sup> a ‘posthumous shock’ that overcomes the merely temporal relation between past and present.<sup>24</sup> 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

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<sup>19</sup> This exclusive focus on the temporal dimension of *kairós* also afflicts the recent work of Marramao (2007).

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin 2003: 395

<sup>21</sup> ‘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, 854-55, 863, 883; 1982a, pp. 1006, 1012, 1023, 1033, 1157-8).

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin, 1999: 431; 1982a: 575-76

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin, 1999: 432; 1982a: 576.

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin, 1973: 132.

which must then undergo a violent expulsion from the continuum of the historical process.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup>

While the theological heritage is implicit in these examples, it becomes explicit in Benjamin's much-discussed (weak) messianic or fulfilled time, which now becomes *kairós* as a period of time. That messianic time is in contrast to the mechanical version: 'the idea of fulfilled time is the dominant historical idea of the Bible: it is the idea of messianic time'.<sup>27</sup> This explicit biblical sense is brought to the fore by Agamben's 'time that is left us',<sup>28</sup> which expressly sets out to expand and systematise Benjamin's scattered insights. Now it is the apostle Paul who provides Agamben with a redefinition of the messianic era as an in-between time.<sup>29</sup> Here we are clearly in the zone of 'the time' (*ὁ καιρός*), which is a suspended moment between an instant of chronological time and its fulfilment. For Paul this is the

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<sup>25</sup> '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 1999: 475; 1982a: 594). 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 2003: 396; 1982b, Volume 1: 703).

<sup>26</sup> See also Benjamin, 1999: 857, 862, 863; 1982a: 1026-27, 1032, 1033.

<sup>27</sup> Benjamin, 1996: 55-6; 1982b, Volume 2: 134. For a detailed discussion and critique, with all the references, of Benjamin's use of the 'messianic', see Boer (2007: 96-103).

<sup>28</sup> Agamben 2005: 68.

<sup>29</sup> But see Agamben's carefully perverse effort (2005: 138-45) 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 (2013).

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.<sup>30</sup>

Close to Agamben is Negri’s treatment of *kairós*, although the initial impression is that little connects it with its theological heritage. Negri 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*’.<sup>31</sup> Yet the biblical distinction between *kairós* as moment and as period of time is clear, as 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

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<sup>30</sup> See also Agamben, 1999: 168. 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: 104-5). 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).

<sup>31</sup> Negri and Defourmantelle 2004: 104; Negri 2003: 154, 180; 2008: 97; Hardt and Negri 2004: 357.

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 emphasises the distinction, it is still quite conventional, usually cast in terms of *kairós* versus *kronos*.<sup>32</sup> Negri's theological reference for *kairós* becomes explicit both in his interviews<sup>33</sup> and in his study of the biblical book of Job.<sup>34</sup> Initially the book of Job may seem like an odd choice, but it is a Job mediated very much by the post New Testament church. Thus, in the book of 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,<sup>35</sup> 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 indebted to Walter Benjamin is Slavoj 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

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<sup>32</sup> For an incisive critique of this conventional, albeit troubled distinction, see Marramao (2007: 40).

<sup>33</sup> 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: 146-47). 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).

<sup>34</sup> Negri 2009.

<sup>35</sup> See also Negri and Fadini 2008: 666-68.

the Law.<sup>36</sup> 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;<sup>37</sup> a laicised Pauline grace (following Badiou) as an incalculable and undeserved irruption beyond human agency; the Christian realisation 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.<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup>

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

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<sup>36</sup> Žižek 2000, 2001, 2003; 2006: 69-123; Žižek and Milbank 2009; Kotsko 2008.

<sup>37</sup> On Žižek's changing positions regarding the Jewish law, see Kotsko (2008: 88-93).

<sup>38</sup> As Žižek 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?' (Žižek, 1996: 133). One cannot help wondering whether this tension, to which Žižek returns again and again, marks the trauma of his own part in the breakup of Yugoslavia.

<sup>39</sup> '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 to not"; 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: 382-83; italics in original).

rupture relatively low-key.<sup>40</sup> 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’.<sup>41</sup> 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’,<sup>42</sup> 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, Alain Badiou’s 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

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<sup>40</sup> 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’ (Jameson 2005: 231).

<sup>41</sup> Jameson 2005: 231.

<sup>42</sup> Jameson 2005: 147-48.

and its procedures of truth.<sup>43</sup> 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,<sup>44</sup> 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 becomes the new, intensified kairological period that follows. The second development is that the event itself is unexpected and incalculable, crashing into our everyday 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. In Badiou’s formulation, the unexpectedness of the event fits in rather well with the biblical adage to keep watch for when the messiah returns, for one knows not the day or hour.<sup>45</sup>

I have left Ernst Bloch until last, for he offers one of the most sustained reflections on *kairós* and tries to push beyond the theological

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<sup>43</sup> Badiou 2003, 1997, 2006, 1988. 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).

<sup>44</sup> 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 2003: 4-6; 1997: 5-7).

<sup>45</sup> Matthew 25:13.

heritage of the term. In contrast to the future-oriented nature of the previous contributions, Bloch argues that in biblical terms ‘the time’ (ὁ *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’.<sup>46</sup> 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* (the ‘new’ and the ‘ultimate’). The ‘new’ (*Novum*) is the combination of both possibility and finality, or in Bloch’s terms, ‘the still unbecome total goal-content’.<sup>47</sup> However, without the ‘ultimate’ (*Ultimum*) it risks becoming useless repetition (as in capitalist ‘innovation’). Then again, left to itself the ‘ultimate’ (*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 as 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’.<sup>48</sup> The second direction for the realised *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’,<sup>49</sup> miracle introduces a strong element of unexpectedness and unaccountability. That is, the miracle may in

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<sup>46</sup> Bloch, 1995: 1264; 1985: 1492.

<sup>47</sup> ‘*Noch ungewordenen totalen Zielinhalts*’. Bloch, 1995: 202; 1985: 233.

<sup>48</sup> Bloch, 1995: 203; 1985: 233.

<sup>49</sup> Bloch, 1995: 1306-7; 1985: 1544-45.

some respects be seen as an untimely occurrence, one that is out of place with the accustomed coordinates of existence.

To sum up my brief survey: even if the specific ways of articulating *kairós* vary from one to the other, each is dependent on the theological and 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 laicised grace, new and ultimate (*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) emphasise the contrast with abstract, mechanical time, cast in terms of *kronos* versus *kairós*.

## **Ákairos**

At this point I would like to reinterrogate *kairós*, for it has not yet told us everything. Thus far I have gathered a catalogue of various ways to think revolution in terms of *kairós*, but I am not one who sits happily with encyclopaedic collections of knowledge. If I were, then it would be time to nod that my task is done, pack my bags and head for the door. So in order to take a step beyond our kairological catalogue and undermine the influence of the New Testament on our perceptions of *kairós*, let us move back to classical Greece.

When I first began chasing down the deeper meaning of *kairós*, I undertook the simplest of exercises. I began with a comprehensive dictionary of New Testament Greek, where 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 dictionary of classical 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 began to emerge. For the word has economic undertones, which come to the surface with difficulty: in a largely 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 bore the sense of fruitfulness and advantage.

Yet we are still in familiar territory, dealing with time. Along with philosophical commentary, biblical exegesis and theological elaboration, this delving into classical Greece seemed to confirm that *kairós* designates the right time and a time of crisis. But now my search began to bump into one surprise after another. The first of these was that *kairós* is not only a term of time but also of *place*. And in this spatial sense, *kairós* designates what is in or at the right place, particularly in terms of the body. *Kairós* also 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

other authors (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.<sup>50</sup>

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 an appropriate and measured 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. It takes little imagination to see that such a 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*, properly 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 meaning focuses on the idea of what is duly measured and proportional, in short, the right time and right place. As the early Greek author, Hesiod, puts it in *Works and Days*: ‘Observe due measure, and proportion (*kairós*) is best in all things’.<sup>51</sup> But *kairós* as

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<sup>50</sup> See Onians 1973: 343-47; Rickert 2007: 72.

<sup>51</sup> Hesiod 1973: 81. On *kairós*, see further Carter 1988; Untersteiner 1954; Kinneavy 1983; Sipiorka and Baumlín 2002.

properly ordered right time and place also applied much later than Hesiod, being a fundamental feature of Greek life, covering areas such as medicine, government, navigation and sex. Plato, for instance, 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.<sup>52</sup>

This is not quite the sense of *kairós* to which we have become accustomed, for it concerns measure and proportion. Yet, given this fuller meaning of *kairós*, a question lurks in the shadows of this classical *kairós*: what is its opposite? Not chronological time (*chronos*), the standard position in most philosophies of time that seek to oppose *kairós* and *chronos*. In classical Greek, *chronos* (merged with *kronos*) became a term for an old fool, especially in the comedies (Aristophanes). As a proper name, *Kronos* is 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 *chronos*, the opposite of *kairós* is determined by a series of prepositions in Greek: without or far from *kairós*, or simply wrong (*ektos tōn kairōn*); away or far from *kairós* (*apó kairoû*); to the side of or contrary to

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<sup>52</sup> Plato 1970: 62. See also Foucault 1985 [1984]:. 57-59.

kairós (*parà kairón*); before kairós or prematurely (*pró kairoû*); beyond measure, out of proportion and unfit (*kairoû péra*). These senses all bear the weight of what is outside the zone of kairós, untimely and out of place. And all of them may be gathered under another term: ákairos. If kairós designates the well-timed, opportune and well-placed, then ákairos means the ill-timed, inopportune and displaced. 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.*

Too often commentators neglect the unavoidable economic dimensions of kairós, especially with its agricultural flavour. In this case, as Hesiod's *Works and Days*, indicates, 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. But now the economic sense explodes well beyond these agricultural references. I would suggest it is connected to a collection of terms in Greek that have simultaneous moral, class and economic dimensions. Kairós and ákairos join words like good and bad (*agathos* and *kakos*), as well as a host of related terms, in which moral and class status, as well as physical appearance are closely interwoven – good vs. bad, 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.<sup>53</sup> It soon becomes apparent how the spatial sense of *kairós*, with a focus on the human body as one that is appropriately proportioned with every item in its ‘proper’ place, also has a 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. From here *kairós* may also, in connection with this cluster of other terms, apply to social measure and order. A social order under *kairós* has everything in its proper place – aristocratic elites, exploited peasants, driven slaves, women and so on. It goes without saying that such a proportioned and fit society ensures the ruling elite remain precisely where they are. Disorder and immeasure, what is contrary to *kairós* and thereby *ákairós*, designate an unfit society, one in turmoil, when time is out of joint and events take place outside their proper time and season.

## Conclusion

Let me sum up and offer some concluding comments. After attempting to situate the current interest in theology by critical – especially Marxist – theorists in terms of my project, *The Criticism of Heaven and Earth*, I dealt with three topics that have arisen from that project. The brief discussions of political myth and anti-secularism made way for a more

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<sup>53</sup> See Ste. Croix 2006: 338-39. He provides a host of related terms: *hoi tas ousias echontes, plousioi, pacheis, eudaimones, gnōrimoi, eugeneis, dunatoi, dunatōtatoi, kaloi kagathoi, chrēstoi, esthloi, aristoī, beltistoi, dexiōtatoi, charientes, epieikeis* – all for the ‘good’ propertied classes; for the ‘bad’ unpropertied classes we have *hoi penētes, aporoi, ptōchoi, hoi polloi, to plēthos, o ochlos, o demos, hoi demotikoi, mochthēroi, ponēroi, deiloi, to kakiston*. See also Ste. Croix 1972: 371-76.

detailed treatment of the question of *kairós*. It turned out to be multifaceted term, including agricultural and bodily spaces, the sense of measure and then its class allegiances. These moral and class connotations have significant implications for my earlier gathering of kairological theories of revolution. The biggest problem is that the word is 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.

Thus, the Marxists I considered in the first part of this argument risk an unwitting connection with those associations, thereby providing a support for the status quo they seek to oppose and overthrow. Does not Benjamin's fulfilled messianic time sound uncomfortably close to Fukuyama's 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*?<sup>54</sup> Does not Žižek's tension between a search for the genuine shift in the coordinates of existence and refusism echo the business executive caught

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54 '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 1891 [1989]: 81; 1891 [1973]: 17).

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<sup>55</sup> counter-Reformation notion of the miracle as the constitutive exception that supports, under God's eyes (*sub specie aeternitatis*), the status quo?

Is there nothing retrievable from these various efforts at a kairological revolutionary politics? They do offer the possibility of breaking away from the heritage of *kairós* in their emphasis on the undeserved, unannounced and unexpected dimension, with a particular emphasis on Bloch's miracle as the new and ultimate (*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

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<sup>55</sup> Schmitt 1985: 36.

proper role and of marginalising 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.

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