

In search of messianic time*

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Yesterday, while I was reading the booklet containing the abstracts of your lectures, which will be held in the upcoming days and promise to be informative and rewarding, my mind turned to a name not necessarily associated with archaeology in general, or with the Neolithic Age in particular. It is the name of that great German philosopher, that illustrious thinker on culture and its critic, Walter Benjamin. I thought of his short, perceptive and inspiring work entitled *On the Concept of History*, written in early 1940 in the dark days of World War Two, the same year in which Benjamin committed suicide, fearing capture by the Nazis.

In his short text, Benjamin reflects upon the possibility of understanding the past, and develops the idea of a fourth time besides the past, present, and future – messianic time. Three of his insights seem particularly valuable in this context. First, his view that “*the true image of the past is flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again*”. Secondly, that “*history [...] is the object of a construction whose place is not in homogeneous and empty time, but in that which is fulfilled by the here-and-now (Jetztzeit)*”. And thirdly, that “*to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it wie ist es eigentlich gewesen, i.e. as it really was. It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger*”. In short, we can only know the past as a memory that emerges in our lived moment, in our *Jetztzeit*.

When this happens, the extreme human condition in its ultimate moment – in the moment of danger, as Benjamin writes in his *Concept*, but also of delirious joy, as some of his other writings reveal – is covered by the condition of man in the past, and in this coverage the memory is totally released, the memory, from which knowledge arises. And when this happens, the student of the past times is able to grasp “*the constellation into which his own era has entered, along with a very specific earlier one. Thus, he establishes a conception of the present as now time shot through with splinters of messianic time.*” The messianic time is therefore a historiographical time. It is the fourth time alongside the past, present, and future. It is the time of man’s kinship with man in time, with another man in another time, it is the time of memory, of truthful, redeeming memory. Whereas homogeneous empty time is a time of strangeness, messianic time is a time of kinship. Homogeneous empty time is a time of empty meanings, while messianic time is one of full meanings. Homogeneous empty time is quantitative, messianic time is qualitative – the former is in itself meaningless, while the latter is a time of delirium of overlapping meanings. The first is a time of continuous movement, the second a time that has stopped; the former a time of running; the latter a time of rupture. While the first is a time which, with its teachings, is meant to soothe us with regard to death, the second is a time which, with its insights, calls us to life. While the first enslaves us to the ruling order of its time, the second time liberates, redeems us from all order. In messianic time, Benjamin writes, every second is “*the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter.*”

Messianic time is thus not seen primarily in religious terms – although it can, of course, be seen as such as well – but epistemologically, as enlightenment, as the joyful apocalyptic delirium of the knowledge of oneself, of man in time, of man in all times. Messianic time is indeed a time of the Apocalypse, a time of rupture with the conditions of the real(istic) world on the one hand, and of establishing the prospects of a new, sacred world on the other.

Who knows this time better than you archaeologists? In your research, you return again and again to the places where this time is most evident, where the human condition is manifested in its fullest and most complete form, *i.e.* to fireplaces, sanctuaries and cemeteries, to sacred, holy places. For the sake of a completely honest explanation, one must, however, add to these sacred places the dump sites, which, to be honest, also have something sacred in their own way. *Candidi omnia candida*.

In the following days you will be reflecting and discussing the Neolithic ways of living, the social and cultural patterns of change in that remote time in the past, its social dynamics, its understanding of art, its symbolic forms and much more. And when doing so, you will be talking about man in time, about our time as well – you will be talking about man in his entirety. You will speak of all of us. Your lectures will one day be followed by an excellent book, and I am confident that I along with many others will be reading it with great interest and excitement.

I wish you a successful and above all inspiring conference. I wish you the best of times, that the door of knowledge will open, and the Messiah step through it.

Reference

Benjamin W. 2003. On the Concept of History. In H. Eiland, M. W. Jennings (eds.), *Selected Writings. Volume 4 (1938-1940)*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. London: 388-400.

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