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UNTIMELINESS AND PUNCTUALITY:
CRITICAL THEORY IN DARK TIMES

Criticism is not an “homage” to the truth of the past or to the truth of “others”—it is a construction of the intelligibility of our own time.

—ROLAND BARTHES, “What Is Criticism?”

THIS ESSAY reflects on timeliness and untimeliness in critical political theory. It works outside the intellectual circuits through which both problems are conventionally routed—those offered by Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, and the Frankfurt School—in order to feature aspects of the relationship between political time and critique overshadowed by these traditions of thought. Foucault once defined critique as “the art of not being governed quite so much,”¹ and these reflections might be taken in the spirit of a refusal to be governed quite so much by critical theory’s traditional intellectual signposts. They accord, too, with Benjamin’s counsel to “wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it,” a wresting Benjamin thought could be enabled through igniting images of the past different from those the present routinely paints for or as itself.²

We begin with three tales from contemporary political life, each of which poses a conundrum for the time of critique.

1. The “Geneva Accords,” an unofficial framework for a peace settlement between Palestinians and Israeli Jews, were signed amid much fanfare by selected Palestinian and Israeli representatives in December 2003. Designed to model what “the people” wanted and could agree on (as opposed to what intransigent official leadership would do) and

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to represent a replacement of earlier negotiation processes, including the Oslo Accords, the Geneva Accords mapped in considerable detail a contemporary two-state solution to the enduring, bloody conflict in the Middle East.

Both committed Zionists and Palestinian militants rejected the Geneva Accords as selling out their interests. Ariel Sharon condemned the document out of hand, and even Labor Party Prime Minister Ehud Barak heaped scorn on it. Most Palestinian organizations also rejected it. In addition, many progressives committed to a just peace in the Middle East viewed the accords as representing compromises of Palestinian aspirations and entitlements too great to swallow: they largely gave up the Palestinian right of return (leaving the matter for Israel alone to determine), left intact a number of Jewish settlements (including those around East Jerusalem), and more generally represented significant Israeli incursions into Palestinian territory. In addition, for many committed democrats, the time of the two-state solution, if it had ever existed, had passed, for practical as well as principled reasons. Such critics argued that the aspiration for democracy and peace in the Middle East required a reckoning with the antidemocratic heart of a Zionist state that is also a colonial one, and insisted on the importance of formulating a binational state that would harbor Palestinians and Jews on a one-person, one-vote basis.

Critics in this last group were themselves harshly condemned by supporters of the Geneva Accords. In essence the condemnation ran: "You are holding out for utopia while we are modeling real-world solutions. If you truly care about peace in the Middle East, then you must support the accords. If you do not support them, you care more about your abstract ideals than about politics."

2. Once John Kerry emerged as the clear nominee of the Democratic Party for the 2004 presidential elections, Ralph Nader threw his hat into the ring. While delighting Republicans, Nader's move infuriated most liberals and leftists, including many who had voted for Nader in 2000. "Anybody but Bush" was the cry of the day, which meant that every voter had to line up behind the emerging Democratic Party nominee, whatever one's misgivings about him. Nader was a selfish spoiler, fit for nothing more than denunciation.

A few small voices, however, suggested that Nader was doing what he has always done: namely, working publicly to remind America that obscenely gerrymandered political districts and two corporately financed political parties do not a democracy make.³ What was the harm

of this reminder when Nader knows full well that we all—perhaps even Nader himself—would vote for Kerry in November? And if not during election season, when else could this point be made as powerfully and vividly? What if Nader’s candidacy were to make Kerry even slightly more accountable to the citizenry and less beholden to corporate interests? Above all, what if Nader’s candidacy, based largely on a critique of the corrupt and antidemocratic aspects of the existing electoral and party system, became a way to infiltrate the media lockout of such critique?

3. In early January 2004, recently elected Mayor Gavin Newsom of San Francisco declared that the city would commence granting marriage licenses to same-sex partners. In the ensuing weeks, as thousands of lesbian and gay couples descended on San Francisco’s City Hall, other cities in California and in New York, New Jersey, and Oregon jumped on the bandwagon. Suddenly, gay marriage was the civil rights issue of the day. The marriages themselves were compared by liberal pundits to the bus and lunch-counter boycotts of the black civil rights movement. The *New York Times* gave gay marriage a ringing endorsement and, along with scores of other American newspapers and magazines, carried joyous pictures and stories of gay couples tying the knot. When, after four weeks, the California Supreme Court ruled against Newsom’s initiative and halted San Francisco’s issuance of marriage licenses to same-sex couples, San Francisco’s gay district, the Castro, exploded. Under the slogan “We demand the equal right to marry,” demonstrators rallied and chanted through the night.

Meanwhile, those who were dubious about either the egalitarian or emancipatory aspects of the right to marry—whether from feminist, queer, left, or anti-statist perspectives—were largely reduced to silence. So much as mentioning that marriage has functioned historically to secure women’s subordination and male privilege, to hoard wealth and transmit property, and to regulate sexuality, ethnicity, race, class, and nation was tantamount to throwing dirt in the punch bowl. Just as unmentionable was the fact that as a state- and religiously granted “status,” marriage itself buttresses the intermingled power and authority of church and state, which together secure and regulate marriage as *the* legitimate modality for love, for sex, and for child rearing. Equally unspeakable was the suggestion that gays and lesbians promulgating marriage as the ultimate sanctification of love between two people were biting from the same mythohistorical muffin as anti-gay conservatives declaring marriage to be timeless and transcendent in meaning. If this was a civil rights battle, there was no room to cast

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doubt or aspersion on the value or the meaning of the right being fought for. It is therefore hardly surprising that when a threesome unsuccessfully sought a marriage license from San Francisco city officials, they were jeered by their fellow queers: “You’re ruining it for all of us,” yelled the wedding-besotted crowd as the triplet of sexual deviants walked away from the courthouse.

Despite the variation in their political significance, these three political episodes feature a common conservative and moralizing rejection of critique as untimely. “It is not the time,” declare the workers in the political trenches to the critics, a retort that invokes *time* in the triple sense of (1) the timing relevant to successful political campaigns, (2) the constrained or dark political times we feel ourselves to be in, and (3) appropriateness, mannerliness, or civility—timeliness as temperateness about when, how, and where one raises certain issues or mentions certain problems.⁴ The first sense is concerned with strategy and efficiency in reaching a defined political end, the second speaks to holding back the dark, and the third invokes maturity and propriety against infantilism or indecorousness. Critique is taken to be at best irrelevant, at worst damaging, to the value represented by each.

The rebuff of critical theory as untimely provides the core matter of the affirmative case for it. Critical theory is essential in dark times not for the sake of sustaining utopian hopes, making flamboyant interventions, or staging irreverent protests, but rather to contest the very senses of time invoked to declare critique untimely. If the charge of untimeliness inevitably also fixes time, then disrupting this fixity is crucial to keeping the times from closing in on us. It is a way of reclaiming the present from the conservative hold on it that is borne by the charge of untimeliness.

To insist on the value of untimely political critique is not, then, to refuse the problem of time or timing in politics but rather to contest settled accounts of what time it is, what the times are, and what political tempo and temporality we should hew to in political life. Untimeliness deployed as an effective intellectual and political strategy, far from being a gesture of indifference to time, is a bid to reset time. Intellectual and political strategies of successful untimeliness therefore depend on a close engagement with time in every sense of the word. They are concerned with timing and tempo. They involve efforts to grasp the times by thinking against the times. They attempt, as Nietzsche put it, to “overcome the present” by puncturing the present’s “overvaluation of itself,”⁵ an overcoming whose aim is to breathe new

possibility into the age. If our times are dark, what could be more important?

CRITICAL THEORY

To make the argument for critical theory as a hope rather than a luxury in dark times, we will need to think first a bit about critique, then about political time, and then about their relation.

Critique is an old term that derives from the Greek *krisis*. As the term flowered in modernity—and indeed, with Kant, came in part to define modernity—this connection between *krisis* and critique has been partly sustained, partly cast off. In ancient Athens, *krisis* was a jurisprudential term identified with the art of making distinctions, an art considered essential to judging and rectifying an alleged disorder in or of the democracy.⁶ (In contrast to contemporary concerns with distinguishing the two, in its original usage critique is an explicit project of judgment.)⁷ Since, in Athenian democracy, a defendant was also a citizen and Senate member, and the subset of the Senate constituting the jury also judged and sentenced the defendant, *krisis* referred to a scene in which the object, agent, process, and result of critique were intermingled. Procedurally, juridical *krisis* thus consisted of recognizing an objective crisis and convening subjective critics who then passed a critical judgment and provided a formula for restorative action.⁸ Socratic critique converges with this practice in its dialectical and dialogical aspect, but breaks with it as it replaces an adjudicated truth with the search for a philosophical one. With the latter move, Socratic critique itself becomes a critique of the originally democratic and holistic form of *krisis*; embodied in the *Republic* and literalized in Socrates' defense at his trial (see Plato's *Apology*), the form, content, aim, and venue of Socratic philosophy is a critique of Athenian critique and, as such, of Athenian democracy.

The sifting and sorting entailed in Greek *krisis* focused on distinguishing the true from the false, the genuine from the spurious, the beautiful from the ugly, and the right from the wrong, distinctions that involved weighing pros and cons of particular arguments—that is, evaluating and eventually judging evidence, reasons, or reasoning.⁹ *Krisis* thus comes close to what we would today call deliberation, and its connotations are quite remote from either negativity or scholasticism.¹⁰ Since this practice also has a restorative aim in relation to the literal crisis

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provoking it, there could be no such thing as “mere critique,” “indulgent critique,” or even “untimely critique.” Rather, the project of critique is to set the times right again by discerning and repairing a tear in justice through practices that are themselves exemplary of the justice that has been rent.

Again, this complex origin is evident in the way the project of philosophical critique takes shape for Socrates. Socratic critique was born of a monumental crisis, responding to the catastrophe of the Peloponnesian War, which resulted not simply in a lost empire but in a profoundly degraded, corrupted, and disoriented democracy. In this context, Socrates conceived the task of critique in keeping with the conceptual lines of the original *crisis*—to sort, sift, and set the times to rights—but as he made Athenian conceptions and practices of justice themselves the object of critique, he worked to remove from the hands of the demos the process of sorting and judging entailed in critique. Reconceived by Socrates as a philosophical activity both deriving from and producing individual virtue, even critique that involved discerning the nature of political justice was hived off from the political-judicial domain. This hiving off is explicitly expressed and defended in the *Apology* when Socrates explains his limited participation in Athenian political life by pointing out the impossibility of pursuing critique (and hence virtue) there. Thus critique loses its jurisprudential and political status and comes to be constituted as viable only at a certain remove from political life. Paradoxically, Socrates depicts critique both as inherently marginalized and neutered *by* politics if it refuses this remove, and yet as politically potent if it can ascertain the right degree of remove. Socrates responds to the collapse of Athenian holism, then, by ontologically separating the domains of politics and critical theory, at which point critical theory becomes (and has been ever after) a gadfly.

Etymologically, after antiquity, *criticism* and *critique* move apart from *crisis*, save for a certain sustained connection in the field of medicine, a usage that, according to Reinhart Kosseleck, developed in Latin in the Middle Ages to designate “the crucial stage of a disease in which a decision had to be made but had not yet been reached.”¹¹ Crisis and criticism as a demand for judgment remain closely intertwined here, as indicated by the contemporary medical designation *critical condition*. Tellingly, we do not speak of the condition of someone mortally wounded or dying alone or among laypersons as “critical”; rather, this terminology is reserved for the dangerously ill within a medical facility or least in the presence of medical personnel, indicating that

accurate diagnosis and judgments about appropriate interventions potentially stand between life and death. This meaning lingers in political crisis as well. When we call a threshold moment in an international standoff, in negotiations, or in a campaign “critical,” we signal the need for accurate assessment and effective strategies of action, all in a context designated as urgent. A critical condition is thus a particular kind of call: an urgent call for knowledge, deliberation, judgment, and action to stave off catastrophe.

What is interesting in this contemporary trace of the old usage is the sustained linking of the objective and subjective dimensions of critique, the ways in which a worldly event or phenomenon, whether a collapsed empire or a diseased body, connects a specific condition with an immediate need to comprehend by sifting, sorting, or separating its elements, to judge, and to respond to it. Also noteworthy is the way that critique is linked to temporal rupture and repair; critique as political *krisis* promises to restore continuity by repairing or renewing the justice that gives an order the prospect of continuity, that indeed makes it continuous.

This quality of urgency, this depiction of critique as nonoptional in the restoration of an organism’s or polity’s health, continues through Kant’s account of the imperative of critique in establishing the moral autonomy and hence freedom of the subject, and through Marx’s turn of this imperative to establishing the conditions for collective human freedom. Attunement to this lineage provides a counterpoint to contemporary characterizations of critique as disinterested, distanced, negating, or academic. It also counters the distinctly modern presumption of critique’s dependency on and involvement with transcendent Truth.¹²

POLITICAL TIME

This intentionally partial exercise in etymological memoration suggests certain ways in which the practice of critical theory inherently invokes a set of concerns with time. The crisis that incites critique and that critique engages itself signals a rupture of temporal continuity, which is at the same time a rupture in a political imaginary, a rupture in a collective self-understanding dependent on the continuity of certain practices. Or, as Derrida has taught us to read a line from Shakespeare, for a polity suffering an internal crisis, where justice is

ruptured “the time is out of joint.” Here is Derrida, riffing on the line from *Hamlet*: “‘The time is out of joint’: time is disarticulated, dislocated, dislodged, time is run down, on the run and run down, deranged, both out of order and mad. Time is off its hinges, time is off course, beside itself, disadjusted.”¹³ A polity in crisis is living out of its time, dissynchronic. In crisis, “the age is dishonored” consequent to what Derrida terms a rupture in *dike*’s conjoining power.¹⁴ When a polity is in crisis, the times are unhinged, running off course; time itself lacks its capacity to contain us and conjoin us.

Critique’s relation to crisis thus turns us toward the problem of political time, a time that is like no other time and incessantly morphs in meaning from tempo to temporality to periodicity to world condition, each sense implicated in every other. As with critique, it will be useful to juxtapose some formulations of specifically political time. Machiavelli figured political time as both beyond human control—the movement of events always has *Fortuna*’s hand in it—and as that element which every political virtuoso shapes to his own ends so as to triumph over Fortuna. While Fortuna signifies the extrahuman movement of political time, Machiavelli also conceived political time (and political space) as a wholly theatrical production, to be fashioned and fabricated as a political weapon. For Machiavelli, the construction of political time was importantly psychological in its effect, capable of producing different responses—panic, fear, boldness, lassitude—according to the seeming imminence or remoteness of a danger or possibility.¹⁵

William Connolly, drawing on Paul Virilio, emphasizes the phenomenon of speed as one of the most important features of late modernity. For Connolly, we are in the age of speed, which we had best catch up to if we are to be effective democrats.¹⁶ Sheldon Wolin argues against such a catching up, indeed argues for a deliberate resistance on the part of radical democrats to the forced speedup of the political workplace. Wolin urges this resistance because political time, which he equates with democratic time, is necessarily *slow*, slower than anything else in late modern life: “It requires an element of leisure . . . in the sense . . . of a leisurely pace. This is owing to the needs of political action to be preceded by deliberation . . . [P]olitical time is [also] conditioned by the presence of differences and the attempt to negotiate them.”¹⁷ Without the possibility of both deliberation and negotiation, and of the leisureliness that affords them, the conditions for democracy are literally eviscerated. This suggests that the political-as-the-democratic is terribly

endangered in our time. Connolly regards Wolin's conclusion as an understandable but ultimately unacceptable nostalgia for a different (slower) age. If the tempo of late modernity is largely given by political economic and cultural forces, Connolly asks, hadn't we best locate or fashion democratic practices that can keep, or counter, the beat?¹⁸

Fredric Jameson diagnoses postmodernity as a condition in which "time consists in an eternal present and, much further away, an inevitable catastrophe, these two moments showing up distinctly on the registering apparatus without overlapping or transitional states. It is the next instant of time that falls out; we are like people only able to remember their distant pasts, who have lost the whole dimension of the recent and the most familiar."¹⁹ The collapse of a sense of historical movement in the present betokens the loss of future possibility. This condition both occasions and allegorizes a collective paralysis that Jameson anguishes over. A present experienced as eternal is a present experienced as Total, with no imagined elsewhere. "It is a situation that endows the waiting with a kind of breathlessness, as we listen for the missing next tick of the clock, the absent first step of renewed praxis."²⁰

The conference for which this essay was originally composed was titled "Critical Theory in Dark Times." It borrowed the phrase "dark times" from Hannah Arendt, and Arendt borrowed it from Brecht, and Brecht, I think, from the ancient Greeks. Such a chain of borrowings figures dark times as recurrent, thereby suggesting a certain genericism to the problem, just as the invocation of critical theory draws on a long historical vocation whose temporally local minions we would be. There have been dark times before—this is the significance of the plural noun, the reason why we speak of dark times rather than a dark time or a world cast into darkness. Indeed, there is something perversely hopeful in the appellation: dark times are episodic and finite, to be contrasted with an enduring condition or teleological trajectory. I wonder, though, if this hopefulness is self-certain, or perhaps instead counterphobic.

If this time of ours feels dark, in what does its darkness consist? I do not think we are talking simply about the difficulties of action or even about despair for the future in the face of unparalleled constellations of undemocratic power (neocolonial, capitalist, imperial, religious, terrorist) and of political visions dimmed by a century of failed alternatives. Rather, the reference would seem to conjure a child's experience of darkness, one rife with diabolical forces that can neither be mastered or comprehended, forces that frighten as they spook and

heighten a felt impotence. The darkness signals not only danger but absence of illumination, and links the two: the dangers are greater because of the lack of light . . . or a good part of the danger inheres in the lack of light. We are disoriented, frightened, and stumbling in the dark.

There are two powers in our times whose main currency is fear: terrorism and empire. The principle of terrorism is unpredictable violence; it is the opposite of systematic, visible, routine, or regularized domination. What renders terrorist violence as power is its inevitable, anticipated, yet random arrival, its capacity to disrupt and destroy everyday life any time and any place. Because terrorism has no regular time or place, we are made fearful less by actual terrorist events than by the specter of terrorism, a specter that works through incalculability. This is the fundamental absurdity of color-coded “terror alerts.” Feigning an ability to measure and predict the moves of a power form that mocks measurement and prediction, the alerts pretend in a way that convinces no one that we know what will happen next, that we are in control when we are not, even as they no doubt increase the fearfulness of those imagining themselves to be targets.

The principle of fear at work in contemporary practices of empire is quite different from that in terrorism and is related to the modern illegitimacy of empire vis-à-vis principles of democracy and popular sovereignty. This illegitimacy means that empire today can be justified only through fear, by declaring a perpetual state of emergency that would allow conventional democratic principles to be overridden. So modern empire mobilizes human fear on a mass scale; it is above all parasitic on the fear incited by the specter of terrorism, but it is also dependent on the fear related to the porousness of modern nation-states and to the exposure of vulnerable individuals and deracinated communities to the vicissitudes of global forces. Empire promises protection from dangers that it rhetorically magnifies in order to secure itself, a magnification that intensifies our fear in the dark.

But while darkness today implies not only fear but also disorientation, the latter pertains to an arc of powers shaping the present that exceed a dialectic of empire and terror. We are disoriented by the literal loss of trajectory following the collapse of historical metanarratives in a present that appears fraught with injustice and misery and not only apocalyptic danger. It has become a commonplace to describe our time as pounded by undemocratic historical forces yet lacking a *forward* movement. This makes the weight of the present very heavy: all mass, no velocity. Or, in the terms of the late modern speediness invoked

earlier: all speed, no direction. If this heaviness mixed with speediness were analogized to a mental state, the diagnosis would be profound depressive anxiety, a disorder for which an astonishing number of persons today seek treatment. Depressive anxiety is a truly terrible state: you cannot move because of the bleakness but you cannot rest because of the anxiety; you can neither seize life nor escape it, neither live nor die. There may not be a better appellation for our condition, for the bleakness of a seemingly eternal present with catastrophe limning its horizon. Permanent daylight, Nietzsche reminds us, is one with unbroken darkness; the unbearability of both is time stopped, an endless present.²¹ Unbroken time is the time of eternity, death's time. Little surprise, then, that we speak idiomatically of both time and darkness as "closing in on us." This quality of closure, this entrapment in an unbearable present, is a significant part of what makes our times dark today, what makes us unsure that it is just the times rather than the world that is darkening—indeed, what makes time and world collapse into one, because time, for all its speed, appears to have stopped going forward or taking us anywhere.

CRITICAL THEORY AND POLITICAL TIME

From Walter Benjamin, however, we know that there is fecundity and not only bleakness in the arrest of time. Benjamin regarded progressivism and historicism as the Scylla and Charybdis of critical thinking in dark times. For the journey through, he reconceived historical materialism as precisely that which stills time in the present and does so in order to make the present swerve, to knock it off course. Here is the sixteenth thesis of "Theses on the Philosophy of History":

A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history. Historicism gives the "eternal" image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past. The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called "Once upon a time" in historicism's bordello. He remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history.²²

In contrast with a conventional historical materialism that renders the present in terms of unfolding laws of history, Benjamin argues for the political and the philosophical value of conceiving the present as a time in which time is still(ed). But not only still—rather, it is a present in which time has come to a stop, thereby implying movement behind it. The affirmation of this temporal rush behind a still present, an affirmation that belies the stillness itself, avoids presentism and ahistoricity in political thinking even as it conceptually breaks the present out of history. But why does the historical materialist require this break? What is at stake in extracting this present from what Benjamin calls the “lifework” of history? Why this trick, and in what sense can we not do without it?

Benjamin’s own answer: “this notion [of stillness] defines the present in which [the historical materialist] himself is writing history.” Yes, this singular present impels and shapes the history being written, bringing Benjaminian historical materialism closer to genealogy as a past of the present, a past *for* the present, a history that has an aim with the present. But there is more at stake here than the self-consciousness of the theorist, and more too, than an empirical claim about how the living actually experience the present. Rather, an unmoving present, a present that is not automatically overcome by time, a present that is out of time in both senses, is a present that calls to us, calls on us to respond to it. Both the historical perspective and the political urgency of the critic are precipitated from this stillness—it contains the present’s call. This is a call we will eventually want to articulate with the call, considered earlier, issued from a “critical condition.”

The political stakes of the historical materialist, whom I am provisionally allowing to become one with the critical theorist, also appear in the next line of the thesis: “Historicism gives the ‘eternal’ image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past.” Benjamin does not make the contrast of historicism with historical materialism turn simply on a particular method or conceptualization of history, though he does draw these distinctions (especially in the following thesis).²³ Rather, the present is the site of a particular *experience* of history, one in which the present is grasped as historically contoured but not itself experienced as history because not necessarily continuous with what has been. This experience of the present allows the historical materialist to render the present as ripe with non-utopian possibility—non-utopian because it is historically situated and constrained, a possibility because it is not historically foreordained or

determined. Historical materialism renders the present historically yet *arrests* history for the present, and in that double gesture of power it becomes critical theory.²⁴

In the final sentences of the thesis, the warring figures are manliness and whores: "The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called 'Once upon a time' in historicism's bordello. He remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history." The trope of the whore who drains, who through her cheap yet seductive lure undermines man's will and strength, is no less misogynist because historicism itself is referred to as a bordello. The other of the whore is the virtuous wife and sublimated sexual energies, just as the other of the bordello is the procreative marital bed and sexual repression or regulation. Both recall the endless rehearsal in Western thought of manly autonomy undone by ungoverned female sexuality. The whorehouse figured not simply as moral corruption but as the scene of enervated masculine energies also figures woman controlled and subordinated (in marriage) as the precondition of manly public action. The whore that is historicism drains; the wife that is dialectical materialism leaves man in control of his powers to make the world.

If we were to paint this concern with action on a different lexical and literary landscape, however, we might examine without wincing Benjamin's aim to retrieve historical materialism both from the fatalistic "empty time" of the historicist and from the deterministic sigh of another conception of historical materialism. In insisting on the Nowness of the present as the impetus for the historical materialist, Benjamin depicts the historical materialist as rerouting by rethinking the work of history in the present, stilling time to open time. The possibility of "blasting open the continuum of history" with this rethinking literally makes the historical materialist, the critic, into dynamite.

There is a danger at this moment, of course, of conflating critical theory with political action, a conflation we will want to avoid.²⁵ But it is not clear that this is what Benjamin is arguing. Rather, he seems to be staging the present in terms of a constructed historical-political consciousness that itself blasts the present out of the continuum of history. A present figured as fecund rather than as determined on the one hand or as theologically presided over by empty time on the other produces what Benjamin famously calls "a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past."²⁶ Only a chance, but a revolutionary one: this struggle over what the past could mean in the present is at the same

time a struggle for the future. Benjamin's meditation makes the project of critical theory into this reconfiguration of time in order to open the present, literally to let light into dark times.

THE TIME FOR CRITICAL THEORY

The art of engaged critical theory today involves attending to at least four related problematics of time, timeliness, and untimeliness: (1) knowing what time it is, a knowledge that includes (2) reckoning with the "out of jointness" of dark times, (3) thinking against the age or being untimely, and (4) shooting at the clocks, stilling or blowing up time in Benjamin's sense. To interweave these four problematics of time involves grasping the age historically, a comprehension that, with Nietzsche and Benjamin, sets it off from itself insofar as it breaks with the age's own self-conception, and at the same time tears the present out of a continuum of history. It also involves understanding untimeliness as the fruit of historical thinking, a genealogical plum that emerges not from an antihistorical stance but as a historical consciousness that works against an eternal present on the one hand and history as a run-on sentence on the other. Untimely critique that seeks to speak to our time is launched not from outside time, or indifferently to the times, but rather from historical materialism in control of its powers and wielded as a power. Thus Nietzsche's call for an "arrow shot into the age randomly and without guaranteed effect" is spurned by Sheldon Wolin's and Norman O. Brown's conviction that potent political critique must know what time it is—in short, must grasp the age.²⁷ Untimeliness is a technique for blowing up historical time, yet is only non-utopian to the extent that it exercises a profound reading of the times. If historical materialism aims to fracture a seamless present and to lift that present from seamless time, untimely critique insists on alternative possibilities and perspectives in a seemingly closed political and epistemological universe. It becomes a nonviolent mode of exploding the present.

The navigation of these four problematics of time might be conceived in terms of an *ethic* of timeliness and untimeliness in critical theory, one that involves both close attunement to the times and aggressive violation of their self-conception. This is by no means a comprehensive ethics but rather something like *an* ethic in Weber's sense—less a set of guidelines for action than a caution about what may not be

discounted in acting.²⁸ (Weber's brief for "an ethic of responsibility" in politics has little positive content; it instead mainly consists of ruling out the disavowals entailed in other possible ethical stances.) An ethic of untimely critical theory, then, might consist in the following cautions.

On the one hand, critical theory cannot let itself be bound by political exigency; indeed, it has something of an obligation to refuse such exigency. While there are always decisive choices to be made in the political realm (whom to vote for, what policies to support or oppose, what action to take or defer), these very delimitations of choice are often themselves the material of critical theory. Here we might remind ourselves that prising apart immediate political constraints from intellectual ones is one path to being "governed a little less" in Foucault's sense. Yet allowing thinking its wildness beyond the immediate in order to reset the possibilities of the immediate is also how this degoverning rearticulates critical theory and politics after disarticulating them; critical theory comes back to politics offering a different sense of the times and a different sense of time. It is also important to remember that the "immediate choices" are just that and often last no longer than a political season (exemplified by the fact that the political conundrums with which this essay opened will be dated if not forgotten by the time this book is published). Nor is the argument convincing that critical theory threatens the possibility of holding back the political dark. It is difficult to name a single instance in which critical theory has killed off a progressive political project. Critical theory is not what makes progressive political projects fail; at worst it might give them bad conscience, at best it renews their imaginative reach and vigor.

On the other hand, critical theory concerned with politics is modestly bound not only to speak to the times but also to affirm them. In its historical-mindedness, critical theory is distinct both from normative moral theory, in its general refusal of historical specificity for its norms, and from utopian intellectual exercises, which attempt to leap out of history. But critical theory focused on political life is not negation, destruction, or nihilism; rather, critical theory aims to render crisis into knowledge, and to orient us in the darkness. Critique that does not affirm life, affirm value, and above all affirm possibilities in the present and the future, while certainly possible, is not making a bid for political power and hence cannot be understood as political. This does not mean that critiques must carry a full-blown political vision, declare "what is to be done," or advance transcendental or universal

norms. But critical theory as political theory cannot get off the block without affirming contestable and contingent values, values that are themselves an affirmation of this world, and this time.

This final point can be put a little differently by returning to Foucault, with whom this essay begins. In “What Is Critique?” Foucault argues that historically, “critique is biblical,” by which he means that for much of Western history not wanting to be governed “so much” or not wanting to be governed “like that” involved resisting church authority or scriptural prescription, in short, “refusing, challenging, limiting ecclesiastical rule.” But this resistance, Foucault tells us, “meant returning to the Scriptures, seeking out what was authentic in them, what was really written in [them,] . . . questioning what sort of truth the Scriptures told.”²⁹ Here we not only are recalled to the early meaning of critique as a process of sifting and distinguishing but are invited to understand critique as a practice of affirming the text it contests. Critique passionately reengages the text, rereads and reconsiders the text’s truth claim. In so doing, critique reasserts the importance of the text under consideration (whether a law, nation, principle, practice, or treatise), its power to organize and contain us, its right to govern us. This affirmation of the text through an insistent rereading seems to me the heart of the distinction between critique and its cousins—rejection, refutation, rebuttal, dismissal. Critique, whether immanent, transcendent, genealogical, or in yet some other form, is always a rereading and as such a reaffirmation of that which it engages. It does not, it cannot, reject or demean its object. Rather, as an act of reclamation, critique takes over the object for a different project than that to which it is currently tethered. Critical theory in dark times thus affirms the times, renders them differently, reclaims them for something other than the darkness. In this sense, critical theory in dark times is a singular practice of *amor fati*.