

A Secular Utopia

Remarks on the Löwith–Blumenberg Debate

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In the aftermath of the Second World War, European intellectuals exerted themselves to put into perspective the atrocities committed during the past decades. How was it possible that Europe—the continent that had allegedly given birth to the Enlightenment, to modern freedoms and rights, and to ideals such as tolerance, equality and democracy—had staged this unnamable horror? A number of liberal thinkers, from Karl Popper and Isaiah Berlin to Swedish political scientist Herbert Tingsten, sought to trace the origins of totalitarian ideology back to the grandiose philosophies of history of the nineteenth century. Others, such as the Austrian political philosopher Eric Voegelin, went even further, arguing that the fatal break happened already in the high middle ages: it was the millenarian figure Joachim of Fiore who first turned the eschatological idea of a divine kingdom into the utopian idea of a perfect society.

When in 1949 Karl Löwith published his classic study *Meaning in History*, he went still further and traced the modern belief in inner-worldly progress back not only to Joachim of Fiore, but to the biblical legacy as such. Löwith's not uncontroversial thesis was that the view of history that underpinned modern political ideologies—not merely the extreme totalitarian ones—ultimately depends on the messianic view of history as a redemptive process. If Western modernity has been obsessed with the idea of progress through political and scientific means, it is only because it stands in essential continuity with the biblical idea of history as a journey towards divine fulfillment.

Although influential, Löwith's thesis did not remain uncontested. A little more than a decade later, at the Seventh German Philosophy Congress in 1962, Hans Blumenberg presented a forceful contestation of Löwith's "theorem of secularization," which was later elaborated in his seminal work *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (the German original appeared in 1966). Blumenberg rejected the essentialism that Löwith's argument of historical continuity seemed to presuppose and argued for the modern age as an independent epoch which in important respects stood in contrast to the previous theological worldview. Against

Löwith's claim that modern belief in progress was merely a secular reincarnation of eschatological hope for redemption, Blumenberg set forth the task of defending the "legitimacy" of the modern age by demonstrating that the distinguishing notions of modernity were related to their theological precedents only antithetically. It was only through a decisive break with the theological absolutism of the past that the modern cultural outlook came of age.

In this chapter I shall revisit the so called Löwith–Blumenberg debate in order to raise a number of questions relating to the overall theme of this volume, i.e. the relation between the Jewish theological and philosophical heritage on the one hand, and modern political ideas of utopia, revolution and social change on the other. Is this relation essentially one of continuity or of discontinuity? What are the wider philosophical implications of arguing for a relation of continuity rather than discontinuity and vice versa?

Although I concur with aspects of both Löwith's and Blumenberg's argument, I will argue that both in the end fail to do justice to the complexity of the relation between modern political ideology and its theological past. A striking common feature in their analyses is not least the lack of differentiation between Jewish and Christian traditions within the Western theological heritage, as well as between different strands within each tradition. Neither Jewish nor Christian messianism, to take an obvious example, exists in the singular, but contains varying and even conflicting expressions (apocalyptic and restorative, political and apolitical, eschatological and non-eschatological, etc.). By overlooking these differences, both thinkers are unable to undertake any qualified reflection on how different theologies can inspire—and has inspired—rather different strands within modern political thought.

Above all, and in spite of their opposed positions, Löwith and Blumenberg share a strong conviction that modern political thought is better off without its theological past. Here a sharp contrast emerges in relation to a number of other thinkers that appear in this volume. If Hermann Cohen, Ernst Bloch and Martin Buber—for all their differences—were convinced about the constructive political impulses inherent in the Jewish spiritual heritage, Löwith and Blumenberg remained deeply skeptical about the purportedly constructive impact of the "Judeo-Christian" legacy on modern thought. It is especially on this latter point that I will take issue with both authors. Although one can compellingly argue that theological ideas of redemption have, throughout modernity, inspired reckless utopian enterprises, one can also, along with Bloch, demonstrate how the prophetic heritage has inspired numerous genuinely emancipatory movements. Only when we recognize this complexity can we fully engage in a critical assessment of the relation between modern political ideology and its theological past.

Löwith's Secularization Thesis

When Löwith published *Meaning in History* (originally in English) he had been exiled for over a decade. Raised in a Jewish-Protestant middle-class milieu, Löwith belonged to that generation of assimilated German Jews who, to quote Richard Wolin, “first discovered their Jewishness amid the traumas of political anti-Semitism as institutionalized under the Third Reich” (Wolin, 2001, p. 21–29). Löwith and his wife left for Italy in 1934, but due to the Nazi foreign propaganda they soon had to leave the country and settled in Japan in 1936. With the Tripartite Pact in 1940 Japan too eventually became an insecure place, and in 1941 Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich helped Löwith obtain a position at the theological seminary at Hartford. It was during the years at Hartford that he started working on *Meaning in History*, which was published in the same year—1949—that he left Hartford for New School in New York, before finally returning to Europe in 1952.

As Rodolphe Gasché has remarked, it is important to view the evolution of Löwith's thought against the background of his “eastward trajectory” from Europe to Europe, where especially the sojourn in Japan left an unforgettable impression on him (Gasché, 2012, p. 312). If this observation is true for Löwith's thought in general, it is true for *Meaning in History* in particular. The work is written by an exiled European intellectual at a time when Europe lies in ruins. Like numerous other writers at the time, Löwith seeks to come to terms with the totalitarian degeneration of Western modernity. In contrast to the common endeavor to trace the ideological perversions of 20th century Europe back to either the Enlightenment or to German Romanticism (or to both), Löwith sketches a genealogy that brings us all the way back to the biblical view of history. It was here that humanity for the first time began to conceive of history as salvation history, as an eschatological drama of damnation and redemption governed by divine providence. As a consequence, history was hereafter viewed in the light of an ultimate purpose to which the destinies of the nations became related. In this respect, the biblical legacy also had obvious political consequences.

If “Hebrew and Christian thinking” brought the “colossal question” of history into being—as Löwith suggests already in the introduction to his study—the ancient Greeks were more moderate in their speculations:

They did not presume to make sense of the world or to discover its ultimate meaning. They were impressed by the visible order and beauty of the cosmos, and

the cosmic law of growth and decay was also the pattern for their understanding of history. According to the Greek view of life and the world, everything moves in recurrences, like the eternal recurrence of sunrise and sunset, of summer and winter, of generation and corruption. This view was satisfactory to them because it is a rational and natural understanding of the universe, combining a recognition of temporal changes with regularity, constancy, and immutability. The immutable, as visible in the fixed order of the heavenly bodies, had a higher interest and value to them than any progressive and radical change (Löwith, 1949, p. 4).

The passage is worth quoting at length, because it reveals Löwith's own philosophical preferences. Although it is never made explicit in *Meaning in History*, Löwith actively embraced the Stoic "natural", that is non-historical, view of the world as the better part of wisdom in relation to Jewish and Christian antropocentrism. Already in 1935 he wrote a study on the eternal recurrence of the same in Nietzsche's philosophy, and it has often been argued that his encounter with "Oriental wisdom" during his five-year stay in Japan further enhanced his misgivings about the biblical sacralization of history.

I shall have reason to return to these aspects later in this chapter, but let me for the time being focus on the argument of *Meaning in History*. Unfortunately, according to Löwith, it is not the ancient Greek but the biblical worldview that becomes constitutive for the Western civilization. This is the case even as the biblical worldview eventually fades. With Voltaire, writing in the wake of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, faith in divine providence is explicitly contested. What is not contested, however, is the belief in a universal history directed toward a single end. This belief is merely transformed, from the biblical hope of salvation into "an indefinite hope of improvement" (ibid., p. 111). Nevertheless, Löwith recognizes a crucial difference between the biblical view of history and secular philosophies of history from Voltaire and onwards. Whereas the former, although anthropocentric, maintains a belief in an order that exceeds humanity, the latter make human will and human reason the leading principle for all history. This shift is detectable among other things in the view of suffering, or, more precisely, of humanity's capacity to cope with evil and suffering. If the bible—not unlike the ancient Greeks—expresses a certain humbleness with regard to the deficiencies of the natural world, modern thought is characterized by the "illusion that history can be conceived as a progressive evolution which solves the problem of evil by way of elimination." (ibid., p. 3).

If Voltaire paves the way for the modern utopia of a definitely just society, this idea reaches its apex with Marx. It is also Marx's idea of a classless society that better than any other secular vision reveals both the continuity and the discontinuity with the biblical legacy. If Marx is commonly presented as one of modernity's fiercest critics of religion, Löwith does not hesitate to inscribe him in the two and a half thousand years old tradition of Jewish prophetism:

He was a Jew of Old Testament stature, though an emancipated Jew of the nineteenth century who felt strongly antireligious and even anti-Semitic. It is the old Jewish messianism and prophetism—unaltered by two thousand years of economic history from handicraft to large-scale industry—and Jewish insistence on absolute righteousness which explains the idealistic basis of Marx's materialism (ibid., p. 44).

The assessment is not without a spark of reluctant admiration, and when Löwith describes the *Communist Manifesto* as a “prophetic document” this is certainly not to be taken merely as a critical remark. If Löwith is appreciative of Marx's criticism of social injustice, he remains nonetheless deeply skeptical toward the quasi-scientific pretensions that underpin his view of history. After a brief comparison between classical theology and historical materialism, Löwith accordingly concludes that the latter “is essentially, though secretly, a history of fulfillment and salvation in terms of social economy” (ibid., p. 45).

At this point it should be clarified that the argument of *Meaning in History* is not intended to be political. As Löwith explains in the introduction, “the following outline aims to show that philosophy of history originates with the Hebrew and Christian faith in a fulfillment and that it ends with the secularization of its eschatological pattern” (ibid., p. 2). At the explicit level Löwith's concern is thus not about the political outcome of biblical faith, but merely about its historico-philosophical consequences. Viewed in the light of the context in which it was written as well as in relation to Löwith's wider thought, I nevertheless want to argue that *Meaning in History* has a political purpose (cf. Barash, 1998). If we take into account Löwith's earlier writings, we soon discover that especially his critical assessment of Marx is part of a larger argument which is not made explicit in the current work. Already in 1935 Löwith writes an article on Carl Schmitt (Löwith, 1995), where he analyses the “decisionism” of Schmitt as a distorted extension of Marx's theory of history. With the Marxian concept of ideology, values are made relative to their place in an objective historical

process and ultimately to the revolutionary goal of overcoming class society. What Löwith is suggesting is that Marx, by eliminating the reference to extra-historical goals (in a Platonic or Christian sense), also eradicates the autonomy of any criteria capable of transcending historical contingency. It is precisely this aspect that reverberates in the decisionist theories of Schmitt (but also, Löwith later argues, of Heidegger and Friedrich Gogarten), with the significant difference that these 20th century nihilists no longer believed in the dialectical movement of history toward universal justice. As Jeffrey Barash aptly summarizes Löwith's argument:

Once the historical process offers no hope of overcoming the historical contingency of ideology to encompass a universal perspective, this contingency becomes the mark of truth itself which, in the context of the human historical world, can provide nothing more than a mere occasion for the realization of existential decision (Barash, 1998, p. 80).

In the case of Carl Schmitt, this rejection of a universal perspective uttered itself in his disavowal of overarching moral principles in favor of resolute decisions grounded merely in the actual (*faktische*) alliances of friend or foe in war.

Although Löwith in this early article turns to Marx in order to detect the shift in philosophical perspective that paved the way for later distortions, it is thus obvious that the real target for his criticism is the right-wing totalitarianism of Europe—and especially Germany—in the 1930s. However, when Löwith a decade and a half later finishes *Meaning in History*, several nuances of his argument have disappeared. The explicit reference to Schmitt is gone and, as already indicated, he de-emphasizes the political intentions of the work. To the extent to which these intentions nonetheless shine through, another shift is discernable, for example in the concluding words of his chapter on Joachim of Fiore's notion of a "third age" of the Spirit: "The third dispensation of the Joachites reappeared as a third International and a third *Reich*, inaugurated by a *dux* or a *Führer* who was acclaimed as a savior and greeted by millions with *Heil!*" (Löwith, 1949, p. 159). If his original target was right-wing totalitarianism, both right and left-wing ideologies are now counted among the distorted consequences of the Western view of history and seemingly judged according to the same measure. Above all, the scope of the argument is extended. Whereas Löwith in his early analyses traced totalitarian ideology back to 19th century philosophies of history, he now makes the much stronger claim that the root of the evil can be tracked down to Joachim of

Fiore and ultimately to the bible. These elaborations certainly rendered his argument more impressive, but it also made it vulnerable to the charge of simplifying what was in reality an extremely complex historical development.

The Legitimacy of the Modern Age

Löwith's secularization thesis was widely discussed and cited by both theologians and philosophers during the decade after the publication of *Meaning in History* (which was also translated into German in 1953, the year after Löwith returned to Germany). It was not until 1962 that the thesis for the first time was systematically criticized. The criticism was launched by Hans Blumenberg, a younger German philosopher who was partly of Jewish decent and like Löwith had had his share of the Nazi brutalities. At the Seventh German Philosophy Congress that year, Blumenberg read a paper which he in the following years revised and expanded into the comprehensive study *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* which appeared in 1966.

As the title indicates, the ambition of the work is to elaborate an apology for the modern project. Given the intellectual climate of the time, one may well argue that this was a somewhat unexpected undertaking. From Heidegger and his disciples to Adorno and the Frankfurt School, the Enlightenment had been a favorite target in the German philosophical discourse. As Richard Rorty remarks in a review of the English edition of the book, against this background, “about the last thing one would expect to come down the pike is a great sweeping history of the course of European thought, built on the Hegel-Heidegger scale, which has Francis Bacon as one of its heroes, speaks well of the Enlightenment (of all periods), and suggests that the future lies (of all directions) ahead” (Rorty, 1983, p. 2).

If we turn away from the inner-philosophical debate and instead consider the wider cultural climate of the time, Blumenberg's endeavor is perhaps less surprising. The 1960s in West Germany—as in most of the Western world—experienced a number of very concrete social and scientific achievements and, as a consequence, a regained faith in human capacity and historical development. This is an equally important background against which Blumenberg's defense of modernity must be seen. Having said that, however, it should immediately be clarified that his endeavor by no means should be mistaken for an indiscriminate appraisal of progress, least of all in the deterministic sense that is often associated with the term. If Blumenberg, to quote Rorty once more, made “all the things that

Heidegger made look bad look good again” (ibid., p. 3), it was not in order to repeat the teleology and purported inevitability characteristic of earlier German philosophies of history.

It was in fact his aversion against any purported teleology that inspired and formed the core of his argument against Löwith’s secularization thesis. By insinuating that modern theories about historical development were achieved through the secularization of Judeo-Christian patterns of eschatology, Löwith committed a fatal reductionist error. Drawing on his own meticulous account of the intellectual origins of the modern world, Blumenberg in contrast sets out to demonstrate that modernity rests on its proper foundation and by no means can be reduced to an “illegitimate” degeneration of earlier theologies of history. Where Löwith sees an essential continuity, Blumenberg is thus eager to emphasize the discontinuity. Yet this is not to say that he denies or ignores the apparent structural similarities between the theological motif of a future redemption and the modern notion of progress. Only, to demonstrate such similarities is not equal to having proved that the latter is generated from the former. One may well argue that modern philosophies of history picked up and elaborated on questions originally posed by medieval theology (like that of the meaning and goal of history). But in so doing, all that is established is a certain permanence with regard to the questions that are asked: “The continuity of history across the epochal threshold lies not in the permanence of ideal substances but rather in the inheritance of problems” (Blumenberg, 1983, p. 48). If the theorists of early modernity struggled to make sense of problems that originated in a medieval discourse, the *solutions* they offered were quite distinct and derived from entirely other sources.

Which were these sources? A large part of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* is dedicated to an account of the birth and growth of modern science and how it profoundly altered the relation between humanity and the natural world. This is also where Blumenberg locates the sources to what he considers to be the distinguishing features of modern thought. With scientific pioneers such as Copernicus, Galileo and Kepler an exploration of the hitherto invisible world was set forth, the result of which was a constant widening of the cognitive field. It was the concrete empirical achievements of these early scientists that successively engendered a more general belief in progress.

Another aspect of the scientific developments in early modernity is that research was now assigned intrinsic value. According to Blumenberg, this is where the most important shift in perspective occurs. In the third part of the study he illustrates by numerous examples—from Augustine’s condemnation of *curiositas* to the medieval church’s attempt to quench Aristotelian influences at the University of Paris—how Christian theologians

throughout history have censured intellectual desire and thus effectively hampered scientific development. It was precisely this theological taboo that was broken by the early modern scientists, who turned the perspective around and declared intellectual curiosity a virtue rather than a vice.

Yet one can ask what it was exactly that triggered the early scientists to break the taboo against intellectual curiosity. Blumenberg's answer is that humanity, at this moment in history, increasingly found itself living in a universe marked by radical contingency; a world exempt of divine laws. This discovery prompted humanity to interact with the world in an entirely new manner, which Blumenberg summarizes in the term "self-assertion" (*Selbstbehauptung*). Left alone in a universe indifferent to the fate of humanity, the human being of early modernity began to elaborate her own norms for being in the world. Against this background, the modern struggle to master the world through science and technology appears as an altogether legitimate endeavor for humanity to secure its existence in a de-enchanted world.

The remaining question is only why humanity in the first place found itself living in a contingent universe. Blumenberg has a precise answer also to this question. Not unlike certain currents in contemporary theology (cf. Milbank, 1990; Blond, 1998)—but for quite opposite purposes—he traces the origins of modernity to the nominalist shift that occurred within Western theology in the late Middle Ages. This shift implied, among other things, that God from now on was defined in terms of absolute power and undecipherable will. The long-term consequence of this shift was that humanity learnt to live in a world characterized by God's absence:

The modern age began, not indeed as the epoch of the death of God, but as the epoch of the hidden God, the *deus absconditus*—and a hidden God is *pragmatically* as good as dead. The nominalist theology induces a human relation to the world whose implicit content could have been formulated in the postulate that man had to behave as though God were dead. This induces a restless taking stock of the world, which can be designated as the motive power of the age of science (Blumenberg, 1983, p. 346).

What Blumenberg here suggests is that the modern view of nature, history and humanity came into being as a *reaction* against the theological absolutism of the late Middle Ages: when William of Ockham argued that there was no rationale accessible to human mind why

God actualized one possible world rather than another, he in fact cleared the ground for the scientific pragmatism of Galileo, Bacon and all the subsequent theorists who sought to overcome the deficiencies of nature by transforming it through human activity.

Blumenberg's argument for a radical break between the medieval worldview and the modern age sheds further light on his misgivings about Löwith's secularization thesis. Rather than continuing medieval theology by secular means, modern thought is brought into being through a critical confrontation with the distinguishing motifs of the dominating theological worldview. This is also true for the *Leitmotiv* in Löwith's genealogy—the notion of a future redemption. When Löwith argues for a substantial connection between Judeo-Christian eschatology and modern belief in progress he overlooks a crucial difference: whereas the former aims at a transcendent consummation whose main actor is God, the latter refers to an immanent process of development whose main actor is humanity. From these two visions two entirely different attitudes to life follow; in the first case a passive anticipation of divine interference, in the second an awareness that history is only as successful as human beings attempt to make it. Blumenberg never made any secret that his own preferences lay in the latter attitude.

Reconfiguring the Debate

Although neither Löwith nor Blumenberg focus particularly on the Jewish heritage—but rather on the “Judeo-Christian” or merely Christian—the debate brings forth a number of principal questions of interest for the overarching theme of this volume. In this final section I will address a few of these questions with particular focus on the political aspects of their arguments. But let me begin by bringing attention to the fundamental issue at stake in the debate between the two thinkers, that of the nature of the relation between the religious heritage of the Western civilization and different philosophies of history and political ideologies throughout modernity. Is this relation essentially one of continuity or of discontinuity?

The answer, I will argue, is both. In this respect, Löwith and Blumenberg are both partly right and partly wrong. To pick up a concrete example, let me return to Blumenberg's central argument that the theological absolutism of the late Middle Ages prompted a radical break which resulted in human self-assertion. As it is presented in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, the argument is certainly compelling and I contend that it sheds light on important aspects of the origins of the modern age. However, as the Protestant theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg early remarked, the force of Blumenberg's argument is

partly due to what he chooses to leave out. For instance, Blumenberg pays little attention to the specific nature of biblical creation theology, where the tendency to see the human being as the head of creation prompted an emphasis of the independence of humanity with regard to cosmos. Although this motif from time to time fell into the background, it remained central within Western theology and—for better or worse—ultimately cleared the ground for the modern self-understanding of humanity. Furthermore, according to Pannenberg, Blumenberg exaggerates the anti-humanist tendency of late medieval nominalism and neglects the fact that the nominalist theologians not only defended the freedom of God, but also that of the human being. With these aspects taken into account, a more complex image emerges of the shift from the late Middle Ages to the modern age (Pannenberg, 1973).

If Pannenberg—who actually was a disciple of Löwith—makes a case for Löwith's secularization thesis, there are nevertheless equally strong reasons not to over-emphasize the continuities at the expense of the discontinuities. Now I would not claim that this is what Pannenberg does; although he problematizes Blumenberg's account of medieval nominalism, he also stresses that the emergence of modernity indeed involved a number of important ruptures, not least with the rigid system of church authority in the late Middle Ages. However, if we return to Löwith's thesis as it is developed in *Meaning in History*, there is little space devoted to such ruptures. The consequence is—and here I concur with Blumenberg's criticism—that Löwith fails to do justice to the fact that modern science and politics also involved decisive breaks with the earlier theological worldview, such as the struggle to liberate law from ecclesial authorities, or, to pick up the favorite example of Blumenberg, the struggle to establish free scientific research driven by theoretical curiosity, experiments and the right to question inherited authorities.

The point I want to make at this stage is thus that the relation between secular modernity and the religious heritage of the West is much more complex than both Löwith and Blumenberg allow for. As my brief recapitulation of their arguments indicates, it is easy to isolate either the ruptures or the recurring patterns in the Western history of ideas and argue for a relation of discontinuities or one of continuities—whereas a more meticulous account allows for no such simplifications. This brings me to yet another question announced in the introduction to this chapter. If the focus on either the continuities or the discontinuities finally turns out to be a matter of deliberate choice, one might ask what the underlying ideological assumptions are for arguing in the one way rather than the other.

Interestingly both Löwith and Blumenberg avoid to admit any overt ideological ambitions with their works. This does not mean, however, that their arguments are free from

normative assumptions. As I pointed out in my presentation of Löwith, his urge to overcome the illusionary attempts to impose a divine order on history can in many ways be seen as a warranted reaction against totalitarian ideology. But what politico-philosophical alternative did he propose? The answer is none. Löwith's philosophical preferences lay in the Stoic ideal of *amor fati*, i.e. in recognizing historical and contemporary social phenomena, but as far as possible entertaining neither hope nor fear for the future. Yet this is only part of the picture. For all his incisive critique of Schmitt and Heidegger—his teacher and mentor for years—Löwith was steeped in the same ideals and shared the generational prejudices against the modern world (charged with instrumental reason, individualism and progressivism). This combination of cultural pessimism and Stoic detachment sheds further light on Löwith's endeavor in *Meaning in History*, but also on some of the criticism it has prompted. Thus Richard Wolin writes:

Stoic detachment can too easily be deployed as a pretext for simply avoiding to taking a stand. As such, it threatens to become ideological, a strategy of complacency vis-à-vis the “human world” and its problems. When philosophers, as the self-appointed guardians of eternal value and meaning, shelter “nature” and “cosmos” from the real-world demands of history, the distinctiveness of the human world—forged in labor, language, and political practice—disappears (Wolin, 2001, p. 98–99).

Despite the absence of explicit ideological intentions, Löwith's argument for continuity serves to unmask the illusion that history has a purposeful direction of any kind. The problem, which Wolin hints at, is that Löwith in his criticism comes dangerously close to a fatalistic indifference which prevents him from distinguishing reckless utopian enterprises from the entirely legitimate political developments and progresses of the modern age.

Blumenberg's apology for modernity is in many ways an understandable reaction against such fatalism. Here we also find the normative assumptions behind his argument for a radical discontinuity between modernity and pre-modernity. As his English translator Robert M. Wallace stresses, Blumenberg “has taken pains to [...] defend the Enlightenment and its would-be continuers (such as Marx) from charges of fundamentally false consciousness, by reconstructing a legitimate (un-secularized) concept of possible progress” (Wallace, 1981, p. 79). Nonetheless one can ask whether Blumenberg is not also very much a child of his time, more precisely of the progressivist atmosphere of the 1960s.

For instance, as Parvez Manzoor has remarked, Blumenberg's ideological model of modernity shows little if any awareness of the crisis of knowledge and legitimation which marked the subsequent philosophical debate in Europe during the 1970s and 1980s (Manzoor, 1987). In addition—and with yet a couple of decades' perspective—one may remark that his optimistic view of humanity's struggle to overcome the deficiencies of nature by transforming it through human activity is not altogether unproblematic in an age of climate changes and ecological crises (cf. Monod, p. 250–251).

In spite of their contrary ideological positions and the quite different political implications that arguably follow from each position, Löwith and Blumenberg nevertheless share one fundamental concern, to which I shall finally turn my attention. When Löwith traces the excesses of modern historical consciousness back to Jewish and Christian salvation history, his endeavor is ultimately to do away with biblical religion and its understanding of history altogether. Blumenberg, as we have seen, repudiates this genealogy. But his concern with emphasizing the novelty and independence of the modern age in relation to its religious past is—no less than Löwith's—to defend an account of humanity and nature liberated from the biblical legacy.

Interestingly, this shared concern has seldom been a matter of discussion in the analyses of the Löwith–Blumenberg debate. Also, very few scholars have critically discussed the reductionist accounts of the Western theological heritage that both Löwith and Blumenberg operate with in order to make their arguments persuasive. The most flagrant example is perhaps the lack of differentiation between Jewish and Christian traditions within the European heritage. Löwith, for all his sensitivity when it comes to criticizing German idealism, most of the time pictures the “Hebrew and Christian faith in fulfillment” as a seamless whole, thereby suppressing the particularity of the Jewish view of history and redemption. If he had devoted more of his attention to this particularity, he would have been compelled to admit that Jewish messianic expectations throughout history have looked quite different from Christian expectations. Especially within halakhic Judaism, redemption has not to the same extent been linked to eschatological visions of historical consummation, but more to an ongoing transformation of the creation through the practice of the Law in everyday life. A similar observation can be made with regard to Blumenberg. As we have seen, a central argument in his attempt to legitimate the modern age is that its idea of progress does not aim at a vast-scale historical consummation, but rather at a gradual process of development where the main actor is the human being. However, the latter characterization could just as well do

for important strands within Jewish messianism, and is consequently by no means unique for a culture which has left religion behind.

By overlooking the differences between the Jewish and Christian traditions—but also between different theological strands within each tradition—Löwith and Blumenberg are not only unable to undertake any qualified reflection on how different theologies tend to have very different implications for political thought. They are also, as a consequence, unable to see any constructive potential in the Western religious heritage for modern political theory and practice. For Löwith, the ultimate outcome of the messianic impulse of the biblical heritage is the totalitarian ideologies of the 20th century, whereas Blumenberg, in equally unflattering terms, depicts religion as first and foremost an obstacle to the human struggle to create a better world through political and scientific means.

Here a striking contrast emerges to most of the other thinkers who figure in this volume. In spite of considerable philosophical and ideological differences, Adorno, Arendt, Benjamin, Bloch, Buber, Cohen, Derrida, Landauer and Levinas were convinced about the constructive political impulses inherent in the Jewish spiritual heritage. As is demonstrated throughout the various chapters, these thinkers articulate quite different understandings of the messianic dimension of Jewish thought. But none of them would think of linking messianic hope for redemption with an anti-humanist denial of the world, and even less so with totalitarianism. If what ultimately characterizes totalitarianism in its various shapes is the desire to make everything present—to install “heaven on earth”—the messianic idea in Judaism rather teaches us that there is always more to history, more to hope and strive for, and thus urges us never to grow complacent with the present state of affairs. Messianism, in this light, appears more like the counter-force to dangerous utopias, which is the exact opposite of what Löwith claims.

One might even ask whether the endeavor to do away with the biblical legacy does not in itself come close to a sort of secular utopia, which has both cultural and political consequences. Whether we want it or not, the biblical legacy in all its varieties remains the crucible in which the political and intellectual cultures of the West have been molded. To distance oneself from this legacy instead of making claims on it as a common cultural concern is arguably to hand it over to the groupings within both Judaism and Christianity who want their respective tradition to be in ways that correspond to the excesses which Löwith and Blumenberg see as representative for biblical religion (dangerous utopianism, censure of intellectual desire, otherworldliness at the expense of the life here and now, etc.).

Finally, to do away with the biblical legacy for politico-philosophical reasons is also to fail to see that religion can be an important resource for constructive political engagement. I even want to argue that Jewish theology—to cling to the perspective of this book—in several ways can be a critical corrective to the political positions of Löwith and Blumenberg. Hence, if Löwith's ideal of *amor fati* tends to offer little more than a principled indifference to the dehumanizing logic of the contemporary political and economic world order, the messianic dimension in Judaism—as Mattias Martinson argues in relation to Adorno—calls for a radical political *restlessness*. Interestingly, it is precisely this aspect of restlessness that Löwith fails to recognize in the messianic hope for redemption, something which also sheds light on the disparaging portray he draws of Marxism. In Löwith's eyes, the prophetic view on history as a redemptory process—from the bible to Marx—seems inextricably linked to dangerous utopianism. But Marx's legacy, as it has been displayed by Jewish philosophers from Benjamin and Adorno to Derrida, can equally be staged as a radical critique of the kind of philosophy and politics that see redemption or revolution as something which can be achieved once and for all.

If Löwith comes close to a fatalistic position which in its indifference only plays into the hands of the contemporary cultural condition, Blumenberg's liberal progressivism to my mind also fails to offer a viable politico-philosophical alternative to a world order increasingly governed by the Thatcherist TINA (“there is no alternative”) slogan. Here too, a radical interpretation of Jewish messianism may offer a critical corrective. In contrast to Blumenberg's optimistic account of scientific and political development as a gradual and accumulative process, the messianic idea in Judaism offers a more compound notion of progress and change. For instance—as Michael Löwy shows in his contribution to this volume—Martin Buber and Gustav Landauer, in spite of considerable differences, both rejected the positivist perception of progress as quantitative accumulation. Instead they proposed a qualitative conception of time, where change was conceived of not in terms of progress, but in terms of a sudden interruption of what until then was considered as impossible. Now, if Buber's and Landauer's criticism was first and foremost directed toward the contemporary Social-Democrat belief in progressive reform, today the prime target would rather be the liberal credo of economic growth as the undisputable matrix of cultural flourishing.

Yet this messianic conception of change in terms of the impossible (which is, incidentally, also echoed in Jacques Derrida's later writings on the messianic) should not be confounded with the year zero romanticism which in recent years has been (re)launched by

figures such as Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek. Drawing explicitly on biblical—or, to be precise, *Pauline*—messianism, Badiou and Žižek conjointly argue for an entirely new kind of political subject defined by its fidelity to the revolutionary event (see e.g. Badiou, 2003; Žižek, 2010). The problem, as Daniel Bensaïd (2004) has convincingly argued, is only that this subject is entirely separated from the concrete material conditions which in the first place renders a revolutionary practice possible. In their categorical emphasis on radical novelty, the neo-Pauline endeavor of Badiou and Žižek prompts a divorce between the revolutionary event and its historically determined conditions which in the end tends to render politics impracticable. By contrast, the perhaps most important contribution of Jewish messianism to political thought is its strong emphasis on the dialectical relationship between history and event, past and future, memory and hope. For is it not precisely the practice of memory, of remembering our history, that reminds us that the struggle for political and social justice is never achieved once and for all, and which therefore incites us never to grow complacent and imagine that heaven is around the corner?

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