

From Great Deeds to Time Sequence as the Source of the Meaning of History: Christianity, the Enlightenment, and Marx's Alternative Modernity¹

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Abstract:

This essay argues that linear time is not inherently colonialistic; rather, its politics emerge from its interactions with the power structures of its era. I explore the progressive roles of linear time in Christianity, the Enlightenment, and Marxism within key *historical* contexts, highlighting also the diversity of linear temporalities. This diversity enabled Marx to position his “Revolution” against both Christian and Enlightenment temporalities while drawing from them. Key points include:

- All three linear temporalities challenged social hierarchies—for instance, by redefining human identity on their future potential rather than birth origin.

- The Enlightenment's homogeneous time was countered by Christianity on “original sin” and Marx on capitalism. Christianity maintained grace as humanity's only salvation from cycles of “vanities”; Marx advocated for proletariat revolution to break capitalist alienation's vicious cycles.

Building on the (dis-)continuities among these temporalities, I show how Marx initiated an alternative modernity, radically heterogenizing (the temporality of) modernity before post-structuralism. Christianity emphasized grace as humanity's salvation from cyclical time, while Marx advocated for proletariat revolution to escape the cycles of alienation. I illustrate the (dis-)continuities among these temporalities to show how Marx initiated an alternative modernity, significantly contributing to the heterogenization of modernity before post-structuralism.

Keywords: Christianity, Marx, Enlightenment, Dialectic, evolution, revolution, City of God, City of Man

Reinhart Koselleck observed that at around 1750-1850—a period he named the *Sattelzeit*—the social and political vocabulary in German-speaking Europe became increasingly temporalized, democratized, politicized, and ideologized. In the same period, history became historicized (Koselleck 2004, 140). Narratives in the West have not always been “temporalized”—that is, they have not always been concerned with time sequence. (Hi-)story telling in classical antiquity, for example, was preoccupied with great deeds rather than temporal development.

My essay begins by pushing Koselleck's argument much further back by tracing the modern West's penchant for temporalization to Christianity. In contrast to classical narratives' emphasis on

great deeds, Christianity and its secular descendants locate the meaning of history in time sequence. My original contributions include:

- uncovering how the trumping of great deeds by time sequence is *intrinsically* tied to the erosion of social hierarchies by democratization;
- identifying how the divergences in the shared linear temporality of Christianity, Enlightenment liberalism, and Marxism bear on the differences in their ideological *contents*.

By scrutinizing the continuities and the critical differences among the three *forms* of linear time, I demonstrate how Marx already struck a new path for alternative modernity *avant la lettre*, and perhaps, Kierkegaard apart, made the most radical contribution before post-structuralism to heterogenizing the temporality of modernity—and hence modernity itself. I also demonstrate echoes in the atheist Marx’s alternative modernity of Christianity’s heterogeneous temporality—a heterogeneity emptied out by the Enlightenment’s abstract homogeneous progress.

Numerous insightful critiques of linear time in postmodernity exist. Nevertheless, my essay embarks on a distinctive journey by uncovering the progressive roles that linear time assumes within specific historical contexts. I maintain that temporal constructs acquire political significance only when viewed within their historical milieu and in relation to the ideologies of their respective eras.

1. Time Sequence Supplanting Great Deeds as the Key to the Meaning of History: The Modern West’s Abandonment of Episodic Narratives and Its Dismantling of Social Hierarchies

The modern idea that time sequence is charged with meaning and a cosmic purpose was a Christian invention. In classical antiquity, the focus of history was not time (sequence) but the great deeds of men, the meaning and lesson of each was revealed in and by itself, and the purpose of history writing was to rescue these “great and wonderful actions” from the ravages of time. Far from being impregnated with meaning, time for the Greeks and Romans was cyclical and purposeless, and it was mutability generated by the teeth of time that human beings countered with historical writing (Arendt 1954, 64). Herodotus opened his *History of the Persian Wars* with the famous line: “These are the researches of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, which he publishes, in the hope of [...] preventing the ‘great deeds’ of the Greeks and the Barbarians from losing their due measure of glory.”

The monumentalization of great deeds accounts for the episodic structure of Greek narratives—with one heroic episode after another being spotlighted, while time continues without heading toward any particular goal.

Christianity gave the West a beginning and an end to time in a rectilinear manner charged with a salvation mission. Time was made into a *plan*—the divine plan of salvation. This telos saturated time sequence with “a significance independent of and transcending all single occurrences” (Arendt 1954, 65) in contrast to pagan history’s foregrounding of individual deeds. Christian scholars began to read History in order to force from it the ultimate “Truth.” Not surprisingly, only with Christianity

did there emerge a well-defined outline of world history and a philosophy of history (Arendt 1954, 65).

After Christianity, the Enlightenment and Marx also saw meaning in the *ordo temporum*. I demonstrate how the preoccupations of all three with deciphering in time sequence the meaning of history were intrinsically tied to their dismantling of social hierarchies. Christianity, the Enlightenment, and Marxism which invested meaning in *time sequence* rather than deeds share the common characteristic of *dignifying the generic humankind*. Not coincidentally, all three were concerned with “*mass mobilization*.”

The switch from great deeds to time sequence as the force imbuing history with meaning went hand in hand with the equalization of “men.” *Once the meaning of history was vested in time sequence rather than the action of “great men,” birth origins and social ranks ceased to matter*. Greek narratives devoted to great deeds centered on the action of heroes who were noble-born, and history was made up of the achievements of the illustrious few. By contrast, the master/slave distinction did not exist for Christians; they addressed each other as “brothers” irrespective of their social ranks. The spirit of fraternity that resurfaced in the Enlightenment was vividly captured in the French Revolution’s motto “*Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*.” The radical equalization of the people was evident from the revolutionary salutation practice of the First Republic. Everyone was hailed “Citizen X” rather than being greeted by his or her social ranks (such as “*votre Altesse* [your Highness],” “*monsieur* [mon sieur; my lord],” and “*madame* [ma dame; my lady]”)—a practice that would subsequently inspire the communists to address all equally as “Comrade.”

1.1. Christian Time and the Equalization of Human Beings

Once divine planning rather than heroic actions was deemed to be the driving force behind history, human beings were not only trivialized but also equalized. Under divine planning, all human enterprises were doomed to the same “vanity of vanities.” Human beings, regardless of birth origins, were equally helpless in their original sin. At the same time, they were equally dignified by being created in the image of God, and Christ’s sacrifice was made for the entire humanity. No human being was “higher” than others, evident in how “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (*Galatians* 3:28).

In contrast to Greek narratives’ focus on heroes, Christian narratives foregrounded humble people. God was incarnated through the vessel of a lowly carpenter, and died a most humiliating death by being crucified between two notorious thieves. Erich Auerbach observes how “the great and sublime events in the Homeric poems take place far more exclusively and unmistakably among the members of a ruling class” (Auerbach 1953, 22).

Corresponding to the high status of the Greco-Roman heroes was the high style of classical rhetoric. This was broken by Christianity. In contrast to the classical elevation of the polis above the *oikos*, “in the Old Testament stories, the sublime, tragic, and problematic take shape precisely in domestic and commonplace: scenes such as those between Cain and Abel, between Noah and his sons, between Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, between Rebekah, Jacob, and Esau, and so on, are inconceivable in the Homeric style” (Auerbach 1953, 22).

1.2. Linear Temporality and the Dismantling of Social Hierarchies in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Europe: Redefining Identity on the Basis of Future Potentials Rather Than Birth Origins

The common folks and the quotidian became dignified subjects of representation in novels and history which were built on the meaningfulness of time sequence and which held sway in Europe in the late eighteenth and especially the nineteenth century. Simultaneous with the elevation of the commoner was the rise of prose as a respectable and preferred language. In the 1890s, the quotidian became an epistemological issue and a substitute for the philosophical notion of “Truth,” thus contributing to the emergence of Sociology as an academic discipline (Gumbrecht 1996, 13-35).

There were reasons why the emphasis on the meaningfulness of time sequence went hand-in-hand with the equalization of “the people” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In classical antiquity, one factor for the irrelevance of time was the inflexibility of social standing. With the possibility of social mobility in modernity, time sequence assumed importance. Social mobility in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries rendered modern humanity much closer to biblical characters than those of the Greek narratives—the low could rise to the top and the high could fall low, *even though such mobility in modernity was seen to be in the hands of human beings rather than God.*

Particularly worth noting is the role played by the new temporal framework—namely, linear time—in the equalization of all. The entire population regardless of birth origins could be deemed equal, because *the linear temporal scheme which projected a future different from the past* opened a channel for *defining people not by their past, but by their projected future.* The more an age pursues the myth of “autonomy”—such as “self-made man” or “We the Nation” in the post-Napoleonic era—the stronger this drive. *The new temporality detaching identity from birth origins and attaching it to “what one would become in the future” created “the people” as equal among themselves and to other peoples—because their futures were equally open to being created anew by their actions.* The redefining of the present by the future rather than the past was also the driving force behind *pouvoir constituant* which impassioned so many political declarations of this period, through which “We the People”—a collective identity without referencing differences in social statuses could literally be created.

The Greek heroes were heroes because their present was based on their past—that is, their birth origins. By contrast, the bourgeoisie could create a “citizen hero,” and Marx could call into being a hero-proletariat changing human history, because future-oriented linear temporality defined human identity in terms of the future. *The bourgeoisie created this new “futurological” identity for the people of modernity via political philosophy and novels; Marx did this via history.*

1.2.1. Historicity: Equalizing Humanity by Focusing on Inner Life Rather Than Outward Attributes

A more direct legacy running from Christianity to the Enlightenment, which contributes to the internal linkage between temporalization and the equalization of humanity in both, was inner life and its correlative historicity.

Augustine's "inner self" which was continued by the "bourgeois interiority" in modernity rendered external attributes such as birth origins and social status irrelevant, and facilitated the equalization of humanity in the common seriousness of their interior lives and existential conditions. Auerbach points out how in the novel—that "bourgeois genre"—the historicity of the human and society is the primary supposition for the serious imitation of the everyday (Auerbach 2007, 439-465). Hence the prominence of the *Bildungsroman* in this period.

1.2.2. *The New Temporality of Modern Warfare and the Equalization of the People*

Unlike ancient Greece where victory could depend on the heroic elites on the battlefield, wars in modernity were of much larger scale and far more *drawn out over time*. This became especially the case with the rise of total wars since the French Revolution. Long wars which developed over *time* require the total involvement of all members of the nation. *New time transpired into new beings*: under the new temporality of modern warfare, all people regardless of their class standing became *citizens* equally capable of creating a meaningful history for their nation.

2. Three Kinds of Linear Temporalities: Christianity, The Enlightenment, and Marxism

2.1. *The Two Temporalities of Christianity*

Christianity pays no heeds to birth origins or human deeds, because nothing lasts in the human world.

With the almighty monotheistic God who absolutely transcends human comprehension presiding over the universe, social ranks lose their ironclad permanence, and individuals find their social standing susceptible to drastic and unpredictable change. In addition, time now is seen as imbued with the grace of God and the possibility of salvation. *Once time becomes the prerogative of God instead of nature, time sequence rather than human deeds emerges as the key to the meaning of history*. Correlatively, *historicity* emerges in figures like Abraham, David, and Job—a historicity intertwined with the biblical characters' inner life and spiritual depth, as Auerbach observes.

It is commonly assumed that Christianity espouses a linear concept of time in contrast to the Greeks. In reality, Christianity maintains two concepts of time—*cyclical time as pertaining to the City of Man, and linear time for the City of God*. *The former is described by Ecclesiastes as filled with "vanity of vanities [...] Nothing new under the sun."* *By contrast, linear time is the time of divine redemption*.

The term *modernus* was coined in medieval times. Although it was used to denote "of today" (which includes both the "now" and the "just now" in contrast to the more remote past), under Augustinian influence, the term came to acquire a special overtone designating Christianity with its linear time as a radical break from the preceding pagan world. One articulation of this break was the replacement of cycles of the "old and new" noted by pagan antiquity with a sense of the present as an irreversible break with the past (Osborne 1995, 9). Especially consequential was Augustine's *City of God*, written to refute those who blamed the fall of Rome on Christianity. Central to that refutation

was the contrast between the cyclical time theories of Augustine's era, and the Christian linear time foregrounded by the radical singularity of Christ's life and death on earth: "Once Christ died for our sins; and rising from the dead, he dieth no more" (Augustine 1882, Bk. XII, chap. 13). Two points worth noting in Augustine's quote: (1) the radical singularity of Christ's Incarnation which gave rise to the subsequent philosophical idea of "the Event" was made possible by a linear temporality with faith and hope looking toward the future; (2) the Incarnation of Christ marked the Event in history when eternity erupted into the course of earthly mortality. *Time for the saved henceforth became redemptive, because time itself had been redeemed by the Event.*

In contrast to the time of grace, *secular time expresses change as the transiency of human existence and the inevitable decay of even the most majestic human edifice—amply documented in pagan lamentations over mutability, and continued by Christian equation of secular time with the "vanity of vanities."*

Arendt calls Augustine "the first philosopher of history" (1954, 65). From the viewpoint of Christianity and modernity—only linear, goal-directed time could create real history—because only non-repeatable time promised *real change*. *Under linear, goal-directed time, history was not a mere string of random episodes or deeds, nor an endless repetition of the passing of all human enterprises. Rather, time made up a meaningful sequence—shot through and through with divine purpose, which brought the Europeans a concept of change that could be positive, in contrast to the classical culture which depicts Kronos as devouring his children.*

2.2. The Enlightenment

With the success of Christian ideology, *modernus* gradually gained grounds in the West after its coinage, such that—after the triumph of "the modern"—all periods from the late Medieval Ages onwards came to be regarded as modern—be it early modern, modern, or post-modern. In modernity's secularization of the Christian temporality, the agent of change switched from God to human beings. In place of theonomy, modern time sequence told the tale of the realization of human *autonomy* through reason and knowledge.

Part of the Enlightenment's confidence in modernity ("the new") and progress was triggered by the scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries which undermined a range of old presuppositions conditioning previous philosophical inquiry. Confident about humanity's infinite capacity for progress, *modernity tried to seize the power of redemption from religion by taking over linear time from God, displacing it from the sphere of the transcendent to a system of complete immanence. What Christianity promised to bring in the afterworld, modernity vowed to realize in this world through progress.* Inscrutable divine planning got secularized as human rational planning to create paradise on earth.

Due to space limitations, my characterization of the Enlightenment will reflect primarily the mentality of frontline thinkers such as Adam Ferguson, Abbe Saint-Pierre, Turgot, and Condorcet, and their demonstrated optimism that knowledge and the progress of reason would solve all human problems. I might also add that even their colleagues with more ambiguous views subscribed to

“progress” (except Rousseau). For instance, despite Voltaire’s acknowledgment of evil in history, he fervently believed that reason and expanding literacy would lead to progress, and joined other philosophes in lauding material acquisition and commerce for advancing progress and civilization in *Essay sur les moeurs*.

2.2.1. *The Enlightenment’s Two Temporalities; “Progress” Combining the Infinity of Perfection with the Dynamic Process of Achieving this Ultimate Goal*

Christianity contrasted the linear time of salvation to the cyclical time of unredeemed human beings who were doomed to repeat the purposeless cycles of nature. When transferring the agency of salvation from God to human beings, *modernity gave the control of linear time to human beings, leaving cyclical time to nature alone*.

While the Enlightenment thinkers were not a homogenous group, there was prevailing anticipation of humanity progressively mastering nature, general confidence in human civilization advancing forward, and even optimism that progress had no limit.

Progressus, a secular term that emerged as a key concept toward the end of the eighteenth century (see Koselleck 2004, 246), displaced the spiritually charged *perfectus*. “Progress,” signifying the *processual* character of the Enlightenment’s linear time, subjected the completeness of the telos to *temporalization* and the process of *worldly* occurrences: “*progressus est in infinitum perfectionis*,” wrote Leibniz who first temporalized perfection. With this act, “the objective of possible completeness, previously attainable only in the Hereafter, henceforth served the idea of improvement on earth and made it possible for the doctrine of the Final Days to be superseded by the hazards of an open future” (Koselleck 2004, 265-266). Perfection was also temporalized in France as *perfectionnement*, to which Rousseau assigned the meta-historical sense of the *perfectibilité* of men (Koselleck 2004, 265-266).

Kant’s *Fortschritt* in the 1780s incorporated both *perfectibilité* and *perfectionnement*, bringing together in one word “perfection” (or “completeness”) and the *process* of its realization. The term also summed up in one “collective singular” various empirical expressions of progressions—such as *Fortgang*, *Fortschreiten*, and *Fortrücken*, all of which were natural translations for the French plural *les progrès* (Koselleck 1997, 18).

2.2.2. *Abstract Homogeneous Idea of Linear Progress (1): Quantitative and Cumulative Progress, Including Capital Accumulation*

The Enlightenment concept of time was homogeneous and empty in the Cartesian sense, devoid of existential concreteness and historicity. A major factor for this homogeneous and abstract character is the Enlightenment’s tendency to understand progress in quantitative, cumulative terms. As Gabriel A. Almond, Marvin Chodorow and Roy Harvey Pearce point out: “the powerhouse of progress has always been the growth of knowledge, and the pattern which this growth has been held to take has been one of cumulativeness” (Almond, Chodorow, and Pearce 1982, 11). Along with the *growth* of knowledge came *development* in science and technology, *increase* in material comforts, etc.,

leading the liberals to scrutinize historical growth at an incremental rate, such that the Enlightenment created a legacy that continues to influence sciences today—namely, the legacy of viewing progress as a cumulative advance, and science as a collective and cumulative enterprise.

The Enlightenment's cumulative concept of progress is inseparable from its endorsement of "capital accumulation." Turgot's *Discourse on the Historical Progress of the Human Mind* included the concept of development by capital accumulation and investment as crucial for progress. Like Turgot, Condorcet was a great enthusiast of liberal economy. Continuing Turgot's legacy, Condorcet's *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* portrays the history of progress as the cumulative ordering of ideas into more and more comprehensive combinations.

The secularization of Christianity via Calvinism's legacy of quantifying and "counting your blessing" was one way how *the radically heterogeneous temporality of Christianity became emptied out by the Enlightenment*, leading to what Weber calls the "disenchantment of the world." *This heterogeneity was subsequently revived by Marx.*

2.2.3. Abstract Homogeneous Idea of Linear Progress (2): Hasty Conjoining of Natural and Human Sciences

Understanding progress in cumulative terms went hand-in-hand with the Enlightenment's propensity to reduce hard sciences and human sciences under the one umbrella "progress," and the era's naïve assumption that the two would advance together. The Enlightenment belief in the symbiotic relations between scientific and political advancements is described by Gabriel A. Almond, Marvin Chodorow, and Roy Harvey Pearce as follows:

the spread of knowledge, science, and technology and of material welfare has both contributed to and been furthered by the development of modern organizations—political parties, organized interest groups, governmental bureaucracies, corporations, schools and universities, and the mass media of communication. Political parties and organized interest groups have been the instrumentalities that created modern mass representative democracy, made public office generally accessible, democratized and "meritocratized" educational opportunity, and introduced the welfare state (Almond, Chodorow, and Pearce 1982, 6 and 9).

The abstract homogeneous character of Enlightenment "progress" allowed it to make claims to universality, by glossing over many eruptions of *die Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen* on both local and global levels produced by modernity.

2.2.4. Modern Politics under the Aegis of "Progress": "-isms" Legitimated by the Future Rather Than the Present

Koselleck and his followers observe how European social and political languages around 1750-1850 became charged with a strong future dimension and teleological overtone. Numerous future-loaded neologisms emerged including the different forms of "-isms." These "-isms" were concepts of

movement which justified themselves in terms of what they promised to bring in the future and not what they were. All “-isms” thus necessarily took on the form of *movement*, suggesting a movement into the future. Take, for instance, the following example:

Republicanism was [...] a concept of movement which did for political action *what ‘progress’ promised to do for the whole of history*. The whole concept of ‘republic,’ which had *previously indicated a condition*, became a *telos*, and was at the same time rendered into a concept of movement by means of the suffix ‘ism’ (Koselleck 2004, 287; my italics).

2.3. Marx

In their strong orientations towards the future, the Enlightenment and Marxism are both secularized products of Christianity. Future-oriented history is directional and purposeful, and all three modes of thought deem time sequence as meaningful. Of the three kinds of linear time, one might assume that Marxist temporality is closer to that of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment and Marx are not only much closer in chronology. Both are products of modernity, whose faith in progress could be traced to the rise of modern science in the seventeenth century. For both the Enlightenment and Marx, linear progress is powered by reason, and the agent of progress is human beings rather than God.

However, Marx is no blind follower of the Enlightenment. Similar to Rousseau’s counter-Enlightenment voice within the Enlightenment, Marx argues for an alternative modernity to counter the liberals’ modernity. I will demonstrate how the *form* of Marx’s disjunctive temporality bears certain resemblances to Christianity. But even as he inherits certain legacies from both the Enlightenment and Christianity, Marx *inverts* both, such that he comes up with *a third way—an alternative modernity—which would not duplicate either the Enlightenment or Christianity, but a modernity expected to be free from contradictions, and whose progress to humanity’s telos would not be stalled by alienation*.

2.3.1. Marx’s Dissection of Capitalism’s Disjunctive Temporality

Marx detects serious self-contradictions in the liberals’ modernity project. Far from depicting modernity as one-way progress, *Marx’s heterogeneous historiography highlights the self-contradictory and self-alienating nature of capitalism*. According to Marx:

- accumulation by the capitalists equals deprivation of the workers; the former’s progress means the latter’s regress;
- far from benefitting the whole humankind, the liberals’ modernity decimates the lives of the workers. Modernity is marked by a disjunctive temporality whereby the workers are ruined by the growth of the capitalists’ profits and their correlated modern bourgeois institutions;²
- there exists a contradiction between advances in science and regresses in society and politics. Every advance in the forces of production is stymied by reactionary relations of production, such that *utopia can only be achieved by a revolution rather than an evolution—by a radical rupture rather than a continuity with the bourgeois project of progress*.

Voltaire, Diderot, and Kant already doubted that increasing knowledge and technical development would necessarily produce political and moral improvement. *Marx goes beyond them*, however, by detecting that *the contradictions between the developments of the infrastructure and the superstructure (i) reduce linear temporality back to the cyclical; and (ii) a categorical break with Enlightenment historiography is required in order to arrive at true utopia.*

2.3.2. Marx's Criticism of the Enlightenment's Cumulative View of Progress

Marx detects a sinister side to modern "accumulation," including capital accumulation from the division of labor. In Part VIII, Volume 1 of *Das Kapital*, he spells out an analysis of exploitative accumulation via a criticism of Hegel's philosophy of history—that is, Hegel's conversion and sublimation of violence into the World Spirit. What Marx discerns in Hegel's Spirit is the *accumulation* of violence, suffering, and evil "productively converted in the service of the forces of emancipation, culture, civilization, and order" (Balibar 2016, 42-43).

To the extent that Marxism is a product of modernity, it also adopts the secular modern belief in linear time, but only up to a certain point. According to Marx, once human history enters the stage of capitalism, time switches from linear progress to self-contradiction and a vicious cycle: the more the workers work with capitalism toward the modern promise of liberation, the more disempowered they become.

2.3.2.1. Capitalism's Two Temporalities: Human Labor versus Animal Labor, and the Dehumanization of the Workers

As demonstrated in §2.1, careful examination shows that two temporalities are present in Christianity, and only the time of redemption is linear. Likewise, Marx's investigation reveals two temporalities in modernity. Contrary to the liberals who associate capitalism with linear progress, Marx reveals that capitalism engineers both linear and cyclical time. While the forces of production progress in a linear manner, its relations of production keep reducing the progress made back to the "vanity of vanities," until a communist revolution eliminates the cycles of production-alienation and progress-regress in capitalism. Only then could humanity truly advance in a linear manner to its telos.

In contrast to the capitalists who experience modernity as a linear progress toward "self-liberation," the workers encounter it as an alien hegemony destroying their agency. Marx distinguishes between human labor and animal labor. Human beings produce beyond physical needs and therefore "only truly [produce] in freedom," versus animals which produce merely in response to their natural urges by which they are driven, and hence are not free, as Rousseau and Kant already elaborated.

I wish to add another contrast between human labor and animal labor, in order to shed new light on Marx's problematization of the liberal concept of history, and his diagnosis of how capitalism, far from leading humanity toward self-realization and autonomy, is heading toward the exact opposite.

By laboring *beyond* immediate physical needs, human beings labor for the *future*, in contrast to animals who labor according to the dictates of their natural rhythm, and continually repeat the

same cycle of hunting-consuming without any possibility of moving beyond their current states of existence.³ Human beings work more than they can consume at the moment. Through *accumulation*, they break through the cyclical form of existence. Like the Enlightenment thinkers, Marx believes that only through linear progress can humanity liberate and realize itself.

In capitalist societies, the path to human fulfillment is, unfortunately, repeatedly destroyed by alienated labor. The goal of capitalism being profit maximization, appropriating the workers' surplus labor is built into the system. Surplus appropriation entails keeping the workers laboring from hand to mouth, so that the business owner gets ever enriched by appropriating the surplus from the workers. *Appropriating the workers' surplus means taking away their future, and the linear temporality that would allow them to achieve freedom.* The harder the workers work, the more empowered their exploiter becomes, and the more oppression they suffer. As Marx points out, "the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful becomes the alien world of objects which he creates over and against himself, the poorer he himself – his inner world – becomes, the less belongs to him as his own" (Marx 1972). The workers become *dehumanized*, not least in the sense that their chance for breaking out of the cycle of subsistence existence is appropriated from them. *Deprived of a future, they lapse from humanity's linear time into the animalistic way of repeating the same cycle of working-consuming day after day, generation after generation.* To expropriate Marx: "in his [the worker's] human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal" (Marx 1972).

In contrast to Kant's association of the Enlightenment with autonomy, what modernity brought to the workers was unprecedented heteronomy. The disjuncture between the capitalists and the workers' experience of modernity is complemented by the acute dissonance between the forces and relations of production. Modernity boasts of great advances in science and technology, which carries unprecedented potentials for liberating humankind from deprivation. Unfortunately, modernity's progressive forces of production are constantly being pulled back by its (self-)destructive relations of production which retards the ability of the workers, keeping them in a dependent and servile position, poorly educated, and ill-equipped for modern life. In so doing, modernity retards history in general.

Against the Enlightenment liberals' one-dimensional view of progress, Marx thus sees capitalism as a force that pulls in two opposite directions. For this reason, Marx and Engels criticize just about every Enlightenment liberal's concept of progress as naïve, superficial, unhistorical, and shamelessly apologetic. Inversion is a typical Marxist strategic response to Enlightenment thinkers. As Meyer puts it:

Marxism represents an inversion (*Umstülpung*) of Ricardo's political economy or of liberal ideology in general, including eighteenth-century theories of progress [...]. Marxist theories incorporate and invert such ideas as the Lockean theory of property [...]; the Smith-Ricardo model of the market; Voltaire's hatred of bureaucratic arbitrariness; the materialistic and atheistic views of Holbach and Helvétius; and the skepticism of Hume (Meyer 1982, 68).

Against the liberals' depiction of modernity as linear progress in all spheres of human life, Marx detects in modernity a (self-)destructive superstructure that keeps compromising its progressive base

into a reactionary and retarding tool, by which the modern project of human emancipation is degraded into human enslavement.

2.3.3. *Deconstructing the Liberals' Homogeneous Empty Time: Rousseau and Marx*

Marx's temporal scheme shows how modern progress keeps negating itself—a pattern that *makes visible* the (self-)destructive, unjust, and oppressive elements in the liberal version of modernity. His temporality which features a series of inversion-subversions of Hegel and the Enlightenment liberals is deeply indebted to Rousseau—Marx's harsh criticism of certain Rousseauian ideas notwithstanding.

Rousseau's understanding of *alienation* goes far deeper and is far more existentialist than Hegel's, likewise his wrestling with alienation as it is rooted in the Christian concept of original sin. It is Rousseau, not Hegel, who enables Marx to see that *utopia cannot be achieved via the homogeneous empty time of the Enlightenment or Hegel; rather, to achieve utopia, a radical break with both is necessary. For Marx, only revolution—not evolution—could bring about the self-actualization of humanity.*

Engels describes Marx's fascination with Rousseau's dissection of the self-contradictory temporality of modernity in the latter's *Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality Among Mankind*.⁴ Engels highlights Marx's keen focus on Rousseau's belief that “each new advance of civilisation is at the same time a new advance of inequality. All institutions set up by the society which has arisen with civilisation change into the opposite of their original purpose” (Engels 1877, Chap. 13). In Rousseau's *Second Discourse*, Engels finds “not only a line of thought which corresponds exactly to the one developed in Marx's *Capital*, but also, in details, a whole series of the same dialectical turns of speech as Marx used: processes which in their nature are antagonistic, contain a contradiction; transformation of one extreme into its opposite; and finally, as the kernel of the whole thing, the negation of the negation” (Engels 1877, Chap. 13).

This is to say, the Enlightenment on its own would never allow humanity self-realization, given that progress in the forces of production is perpetually reversed by the relations of production. Marx thus proceeds to offer *an alternative concept and even a counter-concept to the liberal version of modernity*. The *Marxist “counter-modernity” is by no means “anti-modern.”* Rather, it is an incorporation-inversion of the liberal project.

Not surprisingly, *Marx's search for an alternative modernity or counter-modernity* (which is generated within and by modernity itself) echoes *Rousseau who represents the counter-Enlightenment voice generated by and from within the Enlightenment*. This despite Marx's Communist utopia and his disdain for the Rousseauian small idyllic community of simple, honest, and virtuous folk uncorrupted by power, knowledge, or refinements.

2.3.4. *Hegel's “Productive” Dialectical Conversion of the History of Violence and Sufferings into Civilization and Spirit: Marx's Critique*

Hegel's dialectic is already a step beyond the one-dimensional Enlightenment temporality by including a dialectical other. History according to Hegel is not a straight advancement. Rather, *history*

features the “redemption” of cyclical time by linear temporality with the spirals of retrogression and alienation being progressively sublated toward the telos. Hegel’s ingenuities, as Balibar points out, reside in his dialectical conversion of the negativity of historical violence into the positivity of civilization. The realization of the World Spirit, traced by Hegel in the form of a *Bildungsroman* in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, is the civilizing process whereby violence becomes converted into non-violence, becomes sublimated or spiritualized, and transformed into political institutions and legal state power.

In the dialectical process of the realization of the Absolute Spirit, there is no cruelty in history, however extreme, that cannot be assimilated, converted, and sublated into institutions and civilization. Through Hegel’s negation of negation, past human sufferings are “reasoned” away as a mere moment in World History, a means to an End—that is, the telos.

This is precisely how and where Marx breaks with Hegel and his Enlightenment predecessors. The break reveals the divergence between the temporal scheme of modernity with its reliance on the inner development of reason in an entirely immanent structure, and *Marx’s hybrid of an immanent and an eschatological temporal structure*.

2.3.5. *Marxism as an Alternative Modernity to Counter the Liberals’ Modernity in order to Truly Realize Modernity as a Human Emancipation Project: Revolution versus Evolution*

What Hegel fails to take into account in his negation of negation is precisely something absolutely inconvertible, not negatable, and non-negotiable—a remainder left over from the dialectics of violence and civilization, an excess, an ob-scene jouissance associated with the superego which Balibar calls “cruelty.” At the center of what Marx discerns as a non-negotiable, inconvertible cruelty is the overexploitation of capitalism: the capitalist economy is not only based upon exploitation, but on an *excess* of exploitation.

The cruelty of capitalism—inconvertible and unoblatable into civilization—renders necessary a revolution, a blowing up of the system which is rotten to its core, before the time of redemption or what Marx calls “real human history” can begin.

To Hegel’s “negation of negation,” Marx responds with the “expropriation of the expropriators” by way of revolutionary violence which acts as the “midwife” of history. Marx hunts for the real modern which is more modern than (the liberals’) modern, by aiming at a modernity that is progressive in *both* its base and its superstructure. This *real modernity* can only be achieved when capitalism is blown up. Capitalist modernity is both necessary, and at the same time necessary to destroy, before real human emancipation—the true meaning of “modernity”—can be realized.

Marxism is thus the alternative modern or counter-modern voice within modernity. “Counter-modern” here does not mean “anti-modern.” Rather, it is an alternative modern concept that Marx offers to counter the homogeneous liberal version of modernity. Marx’s counter-modern is *more modern than modern*—and being “more modern than modern” does not mean that Marx is post-modern either. Rather, Marx is striving for the real modern and its project of human emancipation, in contrast to the superficial modern of the liberals which only appears to be modern but in reality

keeps dragging humanity backward with a *(self-)destructive superstructure*. Marx seeks to go beyond the self-alienation and self-annihilation of the false modern to truly realize modernity's project of human emancipation.

The self-alienation of the workers and the self-inflicted doom of the capitalists are not the only manifestations of self-destructiveness inside capitalism. Marxism itself embodies the self-contradiction of Western modernity. Marxism is the nemesis of Western modernity; it is the "heresy" created by modernity itself. In Christian language, the "ripening of the sins of capitalism" is that which produces Marxism.

3. Marx's Alternative Modernity: Affinities with Christianity in Marx's Subversion of the Enlightenment, and Enlightenment Influences in Marx's Critique of Christianity

Thematic, structural, and historical continuities exist between Christianity, the Enlightenment, and Marx:

- all three promise humanity liberation, salvation, and fulfillment;
- all three promise such through linear time;
- all three justify themselves in terms of what is to come in the *future*.

Nevertheless, *Marx offers an alternative to both Enlightenment and Christianity by inverting and going beyond both*.

It is worth noting that *the chronology "Christianity-the Enlightenment-Marx" by no means reflects a linear progression*. In my examination of how Marx inverts and goes beyond both the temporalities of the Enlightenment and Christianity, I scrutinize not only the legacies of the Enlightenment in Marx's critique of Christianity, but also *Marx's affinities with Christianity (however secularized) in his subversion of the Enlightenment*.

3.1. Marx's Affinities with Christianity in His Search for an Alternative to the Modernity of the Enlightenment

As shown in §2.3.5, Marxism is both the symptom and the product of the (self-)destructive superstructure of modernity. It is an *internal* growth of Western modernity that turns back on modernity. It is a counter-modernity generated *within*, and *by*, the modern West, and it features a heretic linearity that involves modernity blowing up itself before real modernity of human emancipation can be accomplished.

The following establishes certain proximities between Christianity and Marx in the latter's critiques of the Enlightenment.

3.1.1. Liberal Modernity Doomed to Lapse Back into Cyclical Time

In Marx's temporal scheme, *once human history enters the stage of capitalism, time lapses back from linear progress to cycles of self-contradictions*: the more the workers labor for a future, the more

they deprive themselves of one. The same self-contradiction also characterizes capitalism: the more capitalism thrives on exploitations, the closer it brings itself to its doom, until the “rational progress” of economic modernity explodes, before utopia—that is, the time of redemption—can finally be achieved.

In this critique of capitalist modernity, Marx comes quite close to Christianity. Capitalism’s linear progress is bound to lapse back into the cyclical temporal pattern—the “vanity of vanities” which Ecclesiastes warns about. This is because, contra the Enlightenment’s naïve optimism, both Christianity and Marx see the existing world as moving toward the exact opposite of human realization, the reason being that the existing world is *deeply flawed*.

The liberals presuppose that humans are rational autonomous beings. They believe in human perfectibility and the attainment of utopia via evolution. This is contradicted by both Christianity and Marx:

- Christianity preaches that *human beings on their own can never make the leap from cyclical time to linear time due to original sin*.
- Marx admonishes that *liberal modernity on its own can never deliver itself or humanity from cyclical time to linear time due to its self-alienating superstructure* which is bound to doom capitalism.

3.1.2. *Marx and Christianity Contra the Homogenous Empty Time of the Enlightenment: Evil, Suffering, Faith, and Revolution*

Michel Foucault remarks that “History becomes ‘effective’ to the degree that it introduces discontinuity into our very being” (Foucault 1984, 88). Expropriating Foucault, I am going to demonstrate how Marx’s “effective history” relentlessly disrupts the pretended continuity of the Enlightenment’s historiography of progress.

For both Christianity and Marx, *time is out of joint*⁵ until a radically new order displaces the existing one. The abstract homogeneous empty progress preached by the Enlightenment is disrupted by evil, sufferings, and an apocalyptic extinction of the existing order in both Christianity and Marx.

While Marx omits the term “evil,” it has a concrete presence within both Christianity and Marxism—be it original sin or social ills. The correlative of evil is human suffering. Suffering—abstracted away by the superficial narrative of progress in the Enlightenment, and spiritualized and sublated into “civilization” by Hegel—has a potent and prominent presence in Christianity and Marx. The two’s promises of delivering human beings from misery constitute their strongest appeal.

For Marx, no less than for Christianity, “evil” must be extinguished—that is, the existing order must be destroyed—before humanity could be emancipated. This means that, in contrast to the Enlightenment for whom the future is on a continuum with the present, Christianity’s Apocalypse and Marx’s Revolution posit a radically heterogeneous future marking a categorical break with the present and a complete overturning of the existing oppressive order. For both Christianity and

Marxism, therefore, there is a definitive break between the “before” and the “after” of the apocalyptic destruction of the existing order. For Marx, the time of redemption—which he called “real human history”—can only begin on the other side of the uncompromisable divide. A parallel can be found in the Last Judgment when the existing world will be destroyed before the unveiling of a categorically different world.

3.1.2.1. *Suffering/Immiseration: History Became a Book to be Deciphered*

The temporal-political significance of suffering in Christianity—referred to as “immiseration” in Marx—cannot be overstated. It is suffering that compels the human spirit to force open an *other* world in the *future* when humanity will be liberated from oppression: it is *suffering/immiseration in the present—and the struggle to be liberated from such—that calls linear temporality into being, and infuses time sequence with meaning*. In contrast to the Enlightenment which takes for granted the future to be the outgrowth of current progress, *Christianity and Marx required a radical rupture with the present which calls the future into being*. Consider how the Christians faced down their Roman executioners with the belief that martyrdom would send them on to a radically different future free from miseries. Or consider Marx, for whom the *ultimate trigger of revolutionary consciousness is not reason but immiseration*. *Extreme suffering* ignites the revolutionary consciousness, explodes the Enlightenment’s homogeneous empty time, before real progress can begin.

Given that for Christianity and Marx, the future is categorically different from the existing state of affairs, a more sophisticated reading of time sequence is called for, and their hermeneutic compulsion with regard to the meaning of history goes deeper than the Enlightenment thinkers. It is no accident that eighteenth-century Europe’s preoccupation with political theory was succeeded by its nineteenth-century obsession with history. The latter epoch witnessed a diversification of views on what forms and routes progress would take—or even whether history was indeed advancing forward. Under such circumstances, human beings began to read history in a way no one had done before. Arendt explicates it as follows: “they ‘read in order to force from history the ultimate truth it could offer to God-seeking people’; but this ultimate truth was no longer supposed to reside in a single book, whether the Bible or some substitute for it. History itself was considered such a book, the book ‘of the human soul in times and nations,’ as Herder defined it”.

3.1.2.2. *What Christianity and Marxism Promise to Do for History in its Entirety: The Temporality of Faith and the Leap to the Other World*

Faith does not enter Greek narratives because of their emphasis on deeds themselves rather than a yet-to-be-realized future.

By contrast, faith is central to Christianity, the Enlightenment, and Marxism, each of which is built on what it *promises for the whole of history*. Faith is a default requirement of all believers in linear time: given linear time’s constitutive gap between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation, the future offered by all three modes of thought is merely promissory notes—carrying no value at all in the absence of faith.

Although all three modes of thought require faith, this mandate is far more stringent for Christianity and Marxism. The Enlightenment's future is a continuation of the present, and it takes no great effort to envision a future based on the present, however more desirable is the former. By contrast, both the Christian Paradise and the Marxist utopia transcend absolutely hitherto human experience. As Koselleck observes, "The lesser the experience, the greater the aspiration." However, precisely because such language owes more to hope than experience and trumps experience with aspiration, its visionary quality leaves unclear what the future Paradise looks like. For this reason, the promised lands of both Christianity and Marxism defy clear description, and can only be accepted on faith.

Faith is the insistence on unconditional and unwavering loyalty and devotion to a belief, even in the face of extremely unfavorable circumstances, a lack of tangible evidence, and situations that defy reason. The entire Christian life is lived out on the foundation of faith. Despite Marx's attempt to build his system on reason and science, there are neither empirical nor rational proofs for his claims about "historical necessity" or utopia either. Ultimately, both Christianity and Marxism rely on their followers' *leap* of faith.

Faith necessitates a leap across an unbridgeable divide across two worlds. There is no continuity whatsoever between the future and the present. Faith, similar to miracle, opens up radically heterogeneous temporality.

Not surprisingly, *both Christianity and Marx mobilize across nations with prophetic voices; both prophesied the destruction of the current rotten order and the coming of a perfect world. Faith is central to both, so is propaganda—which originated in Christianity as "the propagation of the Faith."* Despite Marx's rejection of religion, *holding fast to the belief against all odds—that is, keeping faith that Paradise (on Earth) will come—is ultimately the groundless ground upon which his program is founded.*

3.1.2.3. The Heterogeneous Temporalities of Marx and Christianity both Reflect and Effect Their Revolutionary Contents

Forms of time are both constitutive of, and constituted by, their contents. Not surprisingly, the heterogeneous temporalities of Christianity and Marxism are characterized by struggles, contradictions, and apocalyptic ruptures. Both feature revolutionary contents—namely, categorical changes which turn upside down the current state of affairs.

Marx's prophecy about the dictatorship of the proletariat needs no further elaboration. Let me demonstrate how Marx's radicality has a predecessor in Christianity: The Bible tells a (hi-)story where the humble are elevated and the overbearing is struck down. Christianity does not concern itself with heroes and nobilities, but with how the lowest can be lifted high while the highest can fall low. The stronger a worldly power, the harder it will fall. As Augustine explains, it is no accident that even Rome is doomed to fall. "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth" (*Matthew 5:5*), whereas "a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven" (*Matthew 19:23*).

Contrast the predicaments of Adam and Job to the Greek tragic heroes. *In ancient Athens, there is no divine consciousness manifested in and through time, and there is no meaning to time sequence. Nor is there a monotheistic God monopolizing power. For these reasons, the fall of Greek heroes is never as radical and categorical as it is in the Bible: a tragic hero remains a hero, however tragic. As Auerbach points out, the pagans “are far more untouched in their heroic elevation than are the Old Testament figures, who can fall much lower in dignity (consider, for example, Adam, Noah, David, Job)”* (Auerbach 1953, 18). Yet there is “hardly one who is not deemed worthy of God’s personal intervention and personal inspiration.”⁷⁷ The biblical characters’ fall and salvation being situated within the Almighty’s planning and execution, they assume a magnitude not within the reach of the Greek heroes, and their “humiliation and elevation go far deeper and far higher” (Auerbach 1953, 18).

The Christian radical overturning of the existing order finds an echo in the Marxist revolution which elevates the oppressed and knocks down the rich and the powerful. Another affinity can be found in Marx’s promise that the miseries of the workers are a *passing* stage to be supplanted by utopia as the “final truth.” This seems to echo Christianity’s preaching that the oppressors’ reign is *transient*, and will be replaced by the eternal Paradise where the oppressed will be free. The two are similar in spirit, despite Marx’s insistence on returning agency from God to human beings.

3.2. Enlightenment Influences in Marx’s Alternative Utopia to the Christian Paradise

Marxism offers a counter-temporality not only to his Enlightenment predecessors but also to Christianity.

In Marxist historiography, capitalism’s exploitative relations of production doom the system to a cyclical temporality of self-contradictions: the more the worker produces, the less he has to consume; the more values he creates, the more valueless, the more unworthy he becomes; the better formed his product, the more deformed becomes the worker; the more civilized his object, the more barbarous becomes the worker; the mightier labour becomes, the more powerless becomes the worker; the more ingenious labour becomes, the duller becomes the worker and the more he becomes nature’s bondsman.

Above all, the more capitalism thrives on exploitations, the closer it brings itself to its doom. Here the Marxist temporal schema sounds *almost* like that of Christianity: the ripening of the sin of capitalism, so that the grand enterprise of Modernity and Progress is once again reduced to “vanity of vanities,” and history lapses from its grand linear trajectory back to the cyclical.

There, however, the similarities between Christianity and Marx end, because Marx locates the motive force of history within history itself—in class struggle—rather than in some idealist or spiritual forces dominating history from the outside. According to the temporal scheme of Marxism, communism’s combination of progressive relations of production with progressive forces of production will finally make good modernity’s promise of creating Paradise on Earth—allowing human potentials to fully flourish—without lapsing back into the self-alienating and self-annihilating cyclical time.

Christianity on the other hand insists that the world is plagued by original sin and that salvation can only come from God. Human beings on their own are doomed to remain trapped in

cyclical time. Marx's "progress," no less than that of the Enlightenment, is an illusion doomed to "vanity of vanities." For Christianity, no human effort will be able to deliver humanity from cyclical time. Between human time and the time of redemption, cyclical time and linear time, there exists an unbridgeable divide.

The secular world for Christianity is anything but a preparation for Paradise. By contrast, Marx wants to explode the capitalist relations of production, but not the capitalist forces of production. The revolution has already happened in the latter, with advances in science and technology unleashing great potential for liberating humankind.

3.3. To Conclude...: The Temporality of Marx's Heroic Proletariat in Contrast to that of the Greek Hero

The main themes of Marx's theory of history can be found in the 1844 manuscripts. Robert C. Tucker sums them up as follows: "History, particularly under modern capitalism, is seen as a story of man's alienation in his life as producer, and communism is presented as the final transcendence of alienation via a revolution against private property" (Tucker 1978).

I wish to add, in conclusion, that Marx sees humanity not just passively caught in a temporal web into which they are thrown, but also actively fighting to access a reality *transcending* their temporal history. This is one reason why time is never homogeneous for Marx. Human beings' freedom and vitality are limited by the structures of nature and human society—but it is in their *refusal* of such limitations that they participate in the *historical* process not merely as its object but also its agent. In other words, while history is no doubt a web of givens restricting human beings, *history* is no less a product of humanity's heroic efforts to *negate* their given conditions. In place of the Greek individual hero caught up in deeds and his glory, the Marxist proletariat fight for the integrity of humanity in world history, and for a time sequence featuring "a present big with the future"—to expropriate Leibniz through a Benjaminian spirit.

Endnotes:

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2. This disjunction is later developed by Ernst Bloch as "the synchronicity of the non-synchronous."
3. Even though some animals store food for the winter, they merely store enough to survive through spring, at which point they start the hunting-consume cycle all over.

4. The book is singled out by Engels as a dialectical masterpiece in Friedrich Engels, *Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science (Anti-Dühring)*.
5. See Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* for an elaboration.
6. *Hebrews* 11:1 says: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."
7. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 18.

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