MYTH AND REVOLT

Breaking with “normal time”?

Sara Minelli*

ABSTRACT

The normative quality of temporality has been widely acknowledged by scholars. In capitalist modernity, revolution can, in a sense, be understood as a revolt against time itself. As Walter Benjamin writes in Theses on the Concept of History (1940), revolutionaries make the “continuum of history explode.” Nearly thirty years later, in the aftermath of May 1968, the Italian author Furio Jesi revisits the issue. In Spartakus: The Symbology of Revolt, he distinguishes between revolution and revolt based on their differing experiences of time. While revolution remains embedded in historical time, revolt is defined as its “suspension.” Analyzing the Spartacist revolt of 1919 “from within,” Jesi interprets it as an “epiphany of myth” that disrupts “normal time,” the time of normality. But does revolt truly transcend the norms of bourgeois society? Does its suspension of time create a new form of normativity, or is it merely a temporary rupture that ultimately reinforces capitalist time? How can the singular experience of myth in revolt avoid the risk of its own mythicization? Jesi’s analysis in Spartakus, recently translated into multiple languages, offers crucial insights into the ambivalent nature of revolt, beyond its celebration or condemnation.

KEYWORDS

Temporality; Revolt; Myth; Furio Jesi; Spartakus

* Associate researcher at Centre Marc Bloch, Berlin. ORCID: 0000-0002-1116-2385; Email: saraminelli55@gmail.com

MITO E REVOLTA

Rompendo com o “tempo normal”?

RESUMO

A qualidade normativa da temporalidade tem sido amplamente reconhecida por pesquisadores. Na modernidade capitalista, a revolução pode, em certo sentido, ser entendida como uma revolta contra o próprio tempo. Como escreve Walter Benjamin nas Teses sobre o Conceito de História (1940), os revolucionários fazem o “continuum da história explodir”. Quase trinta anos depois, na esteira do Maio de 1968, o autor italiano Furio Jesi revisita essa questão. Em Spartakus: A Simbologia da Revolta, ele distingue revolução e revolta com base em suas diferentes experiências do tempo. Enquanto a revolução permanece enraizada no tempo histórico, a revolta é definida como sua “suspensão”. Analisando a revolta espartaquista de 1919 “a partir de dentro”, Jesi a interpreta como uma “epifania do mito” que perturba o “tempo normal”, o tempo da normalidade. Mas a revolta realmente transcende as normas da sociedade burguesa? Sua suspensão do tempo cria uma nova forma de normatividade ou é apenas uma ruptura temporária que, em última instância, reforça o tempo capitalista? Como a experiência singular do mito na revolta pode evitar o risco de sua própria mitificação? A análise de Jesi em Spartakus, recentemente traduzida para múltiplos idiomas, oferece reflexões cruciais sobre a natureza ambivalente da revolta, para além de sua celebração ou condenação.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Temporalidade; Revolta; Mito; Furio Jesi; Spartakus

Introduction: the normativity of time

In his unfinished work on the *Paris Arcades*, Walter Benjamin wrote, in the thirties, that "the belief in progress – in an infinite perfectibility understood as an infinite ethical task – and the representation of eternal return are complementary". These temporal conceptions are "indissoluble antinomies", in the face of which the task of developing a "dialectical conception of historical time" must be tackled (Benjamin 1999: 119). The philosopher emphasized that the two dominant conceptions of Western history – progress as an arrow and eternal return as a circle – were just two sides of the same coin. History was in fact still a prisoner of myth, a fact that was clearly apparent in the notion of temporality. Yet, awareness of temporality's normative nature was not limited to the materialist historian; revolutionaries also recognise it, according to the anecdote reported by Benjamin in the fifteenth of his *Theses on History*. He recounts how, during the July Revolution (1830), "clocks in towers were being fired on simultaneously and independently from several places in Paris" (Benjamin 2006: 395). The revolutionaries knew, he writes, that they were making "the continuum of history explode" (Benjamin 2006: 395).

Since then, the normative quality of temporality has been the subject of much debate: the dominant "regime of historicity" (Koselleck 2004; Hartog 2016) dictates the frameworks through which history is perceived and constructed,

shaping both individual and collective imaginaries of the past and future; but time is a social norm also in the sense that temporal structures delimit the organisation and rhythm of social relations (Adam 1995). Linear, progressive temporality as specific to the hegemonic temporal regime of "modernity" has been criticized as both symptom and instrument of marginalization of entire regions of history and erasure of alternative narratives (cf. Fabian 2014; Goody 2012). Another line of research has shown how the development of industrial capitalism has been accompanied by the imposition of an abstract clock-time on worker's lives, functioning as a normalising force (Thompson 1967). Going further, Postone (1983) has influentially argued that the domination of people by time constitutes the form of social domination intrinsic to capitalism, as resulting from labor as a specific capitalist form of social mediation. Hence, heteronomous history is not (only) a narrative, he argues, but a structure of domination (Postone 2006: 43; see also: Martineau 2023) that cannot be dispelled discursively but should be overcome.

Revolution is thus always a revolt against time. This is what Furio Jesi[1] had grasped in his book *Spartakus: The Symbology of Revolt*, written in 1969, although he obviously could not have been familiar with much of this debate. But

1 Furio Jesi (1941–1980) was a self-taught intellectual who defied traditional academic categorization but could best be described as a mythologist. His research initially focused on ancient Egyptian mythology, but in the 1960s, he became increasingly interested in the metamorphoses of myth in modern literature and political ideology. For a bibliography of his works, see Schiavoni (1983: 381ff.).

while Jesi never quotes Walter Benjamin in this book, the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, to which he will refer in other works (cf. Jesi 2021), are implicitly present here. In this short book, published posthumously in 2000, Jesi analyses the Spartacist uprising of 1919 and shows that, at the moment of revolt, "normal" time is interrupted – or rather, as he puts it, suspended. *Spartakus* is perhaps the book by Jesi that has attracted the most interest recently.[2] It is probably a sign of the times, seen by some as a "time of revolt" (Di Cesare 2020), when social struggles become more fragmented and intermittent. Yet the book is not an apology for revolt – nor its condemnation, as it is also read sometimes. It does, however, raise the question of the connection between temporality and revolt. If revolt interrupts the abstract linearity of normal time, is it at the same time the site of another temporality? Against the backdrop of criticisms of oppressive temporality, the question is whether in the revolt, time and norm are configured differently.

Drawing on a critical reading of *Spartakus*, I argue that revolt does not overcome the "structural domination" of time, but through its specific relation to time, it compels us to abandon the *a posteriori* view according to which revolt would be a failed or defective revolution. From the point of view of revolt, history thus appears as the "force field" of conflicting temporalities (Tomba 2020: 13), as the non-con-

2 *Spartacus* has been translated in English (2014), Spanish (2015), French (2016), Portuguese (2018) and German (2024).

temporaneity of the contemporary (Bloch 1991), where anachronistic elements from the past emerge as unrealised futures. In Jesi's words: revolt happens at the intersection between history and myth.

Revolt as myth

> *The kind of historical change that would leave myth behind because the new nature really had brought about a new society has not yet occurred. And this confronts us with an even greater paradox [...] Because such a radical historical change has never existed before in history, it can only find expression as myth.*
>
> (Buck-Morss 1991: 109)

The Spartacist revolt became a myth the moment it broke out. First, it was called the "Spartacist" uprising, even though the *Spartakusbund* had in fact very little influence on the masses who took to the streets on the 5th of January (see: Fröhlich 1990: 357; Gietinger 2018: 110). Paradoxically, it was the counter-revolutionary version, which portrayed the uprising from the outset as a Bolshevist operation, that gave it its name (Haffner 1986: 136). The summary execution of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg on the 15th of January

was aimed primarily at symbols of the revolution, its accusing voice in the *Rote Fahne*, rather than its organising minds. By their assassination – Luxemburg's body, thrown into the Landwehrkanal, was not found until months later – they became martyrs of the revolution (Gietinger 2018: 126). But it is precisely this highly symbolic quality that interests Jesi.

As he writes in the first pages, the book will not delve into the historical events that shook the city of Berlin in 1919. The revolt is not analysed in historical detail, but through the myths and symbols that accompanied it.[3] The German uprising, because of its rapid unfolding and the tragedy of its end – with the brutal repression of the workers and the murder of Spartacist leaders Luxemburg and Liebknecht – seemed to the author to be the most revealing example of the "symbology of revolt" evoked in the title, allowing him, as he writes, to also "draw conclusions of a general character" (Jesi 2014: 27). As the editor Andrea Cavalletti remarks in the introduction to *Spartakus*, in many pages "the Berlin of Rosa Luxemburg lives in and merges with the Paris of 1968", whose May revolt Jesi experienced first-hand, while "in all these cities of the past and present the Paris of the Commune still shines through" (Cavalletti 2014: 9). Before becoming a "mythical"

3 Historiography has minimised the role of the Spartacist movement and above all of the Spartacist leaders in the actual uprising of 1919 (Gietinger 2018; Haffner 1986: 143). However, Luxemburg and Liebknecht "embodied the German Revolution […] They were its symbols" (Haffner 1986: 149). Jesi's sources for the reconstruction of the events are the writings of Rosa Luxemburg and two biographies by Paul Fröhlich (1992 [1940]) and John Peter Netti (1966), as well as the monograph by Eric Waldman, *The Spartacist Uprising of 1919 and the Crisis of the German Socialist Movement* (1965), see Jesi (2014: 47).

event in the collective memory, however, the revolt is – and this is Jesi's original thesis – a collective experience of the "epiphany" of myth. It stands, "paradoxically", at the crossroads between historical and mythical time, between "once and for all" and "eternal return" (Jesi 2000: 100).

Myth plays an ambivalent role in Jesi's critique of revolt: the epiphany of myth refers to the collective reality experienced at the moment of revolt, the interruption of "normal" time; but it also points to the fascination that the symbols of power hold for the insurgents. Jesi thus describes a dialectic of myth: its epiphany, in revolt, suspends the mythical temporality of the eternal return of bourgeois society, but always threatens to be reintegrated into it.

Myth as eternal return

> *Bourgeois profession as a form of life signifies, in the first place, the primacy of ethics over life—life dominated by something that recurs systematically and regularly.*
>
> (Lukács, quoted by Jesi 2014: 24-5)

In a dense introduction, Jesi examines the specific form of temporality in bourgeois society. In a similar gesture to that of Critical Theory, he notes that it is one of cyclical

return, a naturalised time in which nothing seems likely to change. The norm with its cyclical temporality rules the bourgeois form of life, Jesi writes, quoting the young Lukács (Jesi 2014: 24). We might add, in more Benjaminian or Adornian terms, that history is thus trapped within the cyclical temporality of nature and society appears under the spell of myth. Any subversion is to be reintegrated into the continuity of memory, under the law of "eternal return":

> The defensive reduction of the idea and its subversive value to an ideological formula, that is, the submission of the idea to the law of eternal return, which, in its cyclical framework, makes every subversion relative, is a constant of bourgeois society (Jesi 2014: 25).

Indeed, in bourgeois society, politics itself is bound by a seemingly inescapable destiny. Subversive ideas crystallize into ideological formulas, thereby conferring a mythical quality on ideology. A similar fate befalls propaganda, which does not mean the propagation of truth – although, even in this case, it would admittedly be a relative truth, specific to those who defend and receive it (Jesi 2014: 36) –, but rather the mere instrumentalization of myth "à la Georges Sorel" as techniques of mass mobilisation (Jesi 2014: 38; see Minelli 2020).

To illustrate this dynamic, Jesi quotes Schiller: "when the soul *speaks*, alas, it is no longer the *soul* that speaks" (Jesi 2014: 24). But, precisely, sometimes the soul does speak, and Jesi remarks, referring to the Spartacist uprising:

> [it is] necessary to draw attention to a time which is still not distant from us (50 years have passed since) in which some were able to embrace and pay the price for their choice of Marxist political propaganda, showing in that very instant that their propaganda was genuine, in other words, that it did not rely on deformed myths and that it had become, instead, an authentic language of truth (Jesi 2014: 38-9).

"To pay the price": Jesi is saying that, by willing to risk their lives for a revolt that Luxemburg considered a strategic error (see Gietinger 2018: 116), the two leaders of the movement demonstrated that propaganda was not a means of affecting the masses, but corresponded to a lived truth. Jesi is here implicitly in polemic with the mythologist Karl Kerényi, with whom he had been in close contact (see: Cavalletti 2014: 12ff). In a lecture held in Rome, Kerényi (1965) made an important distinction between "authentic" and "inauthentic" myths. The latter, he argues, are controlled, if not manufactured, by an intention, an orientation towards a goal, they are instruments of political propaganda.[4] In contrast, the former, the "genuine" myths, are characterised by their spontaneous nature and the absence of motivation and goal. Using the same terminology but reversing it, Jesi refuses to regard the political reality of myth as a technicisation opposed to a supposed "authentic" myth. Against the essentialist distinction between an "authentic", non-political, myth, and a false

4 Kerényi makes here a similar argument to that advanced by the philosopher Ernst Cassirer in his posthumously published book *The Myth of the State*. See in particular the last chapter "The Technique of the Modern Political Myths" (1946: 277).

one, contaminated by an instrumental aim, Jesi argues that in the revolt against capitalist society myth can have another reality.

So, we may argue that if political myth appears as pure technicality, emptied of its content, an instrument used to deceive the masses, it is because it is caught up in the falsity of bourgeois society, because – if we follow the diagnosis of Critical Theory – capitalist modernity, in the continuity of domination, is under the spell of a "mythical" temporality. Yet, in the revolt against this society, its cyclical temporality may be suspended. From the point of view of the insurgents, myth is therefore experienced as subversive reality. This epiphany of myth is the moment of a true collective experience, which is opposed to the isolation of the "normal" time of regulated dailyness of work and mandatory pauses.

Myth as suspension of time

> *A tremendously brief apparition of an atypical time in which everything that happened—with extreme speed—seemed to happen for ever.*
>
> (Jesi 2014: 47)

Already by choosing the name of Spartacus, the leader of the slaves' revolt of the 1st century BC, as the name of the

movement, the Spartacists were drawing on myth, quoting anachronistically an unrealized future in the past, presenting themselves as the continuators of the universal struggle against oppression. In doing so, they strategically evoke an epiphany of mythical time, of the time when Spartacus was leading the insurrection (Jesi 2014: 38). But it is at the moment of the revolt that the mythical quality of time is experienced most powerfully.

In January 1919, an unexpected mass insurrection broke up. As Sebastian Haffner (1986: 130) writes, in these days, "no one was more surprised by this universal eruption than the people who had triggered it off [...] they had no idea of the avalanche they were unleashing". It all began with a demonstration in support of Emil Eichhorn, Berlin's police chief, who had refused to accept his dismissal demanded by the Ebert government. By January 5, it was not yet a question of overthrowing the government, but the dissatisfaction of the masses with the (in-)actions of the ruling social democracy had accumulated. It took everyone by surprise when, on that Sunday, they poured into the streets of Berlin, occupying the publishing headquarters of pro-government newspapers. The next day, the winds of revolution were palpable. A revolutionary committee was formed, but in reality, it played only a very marginal role in the course of events. What manifested itself in those days was rather a spontaneous, unorganized mass movement.

The feeling of the insurgents, during those short days of January, was that they had to act "now or never!" (Jesi 2014: 47). They had just come out of the war, time was filled with expectation of the next move, of the end of the fighting. Now, this accumulated tension and anxiety for the future exploded in an "atypical" (Jesi 2014: 47) time where tactics and strategy play no role. The war had certainly also been a suspension of normal time, but in the fifteen days of January, the experience of time changed radically: the long wait seemed suddenly to be fulfilled. In the revolt, action is to be taken once and for all, and not in anticipation of long-term consequences. Consequences are neither known nor predictable. The fruit of action is the very content of the action itself, each and every act is valuable in and of itself. In this sense, revolt suspends time, extracting it from the chain of causes and consequences.

While also making the classic distinction between revolt and revolution, Jesi does not rely on the reasons often given. For him, the difference lies not so much in political quality, in the aims, nor in the ability to bring about lasting change, but in the different experience of time. If revolution requires "a correct evaluation of the times grounded in the analysis of socioeconomic conditions and the balance of forces present within them", as well as "a progressive effort to develop and organize the exploited class", revolt is a sudden outburst (Jesi 2014: 46) that does not in itself imply a

long-term strategy. While revolution is thus immersed in historical time, revolt is the suspension of historical time.

As he writes:

> Mythical epiphanies are not repetitions following the thread of memory or the laws of a cyclical history grounded in an ancient precedent. Rather, they are interferences of extra-temporal truth into the existence of those who think themselves engaged in historical time (Jesi 2014: 27, trans. Amended).

The "extra-temporal truth", of which myth is an instance, is the collective reality experienced in the moment of insurrection. If myth, once signifying truth, had come to be synonymous with irreality or fable (Jesi 2014: 37; see also Jesi 2024), in January 1919, in the streets of Berlin, something of the reality of myth could still be experienced, Jesi argues. In passages that become almost lyrical, he depicts how, when revolt breaks out, individual alienation gives way to a sense of belonging:

> You can love a city, you can recognize its houses and its streets in your remotest or dearest memories; but only in the hour of revolt is the city really felt as your own city – your own because it belongs to the I but at the same time to the 'others'; your own because it is a battlefield that you have chosen and the collectivity too has chosen; your own because it is a circumscribed space in which historical time is suspended and in which every act is valuable in and of itself, in its absolutely immediate consequences (Jesi 2014: 54).

Individual concerns are transcended in the collective action, the epiphany of myth, and the shared experience of powerful symbols:

> The instant of revolt determines one's sudden self-realization and self-objectification as part of a collectivity. The battle between good and evil, between survival and death, between success and failure, in which everyone is individually involved each and every day, is identified with the battle of the whole collectivity—everyone has the same weapons, everyone faces the same obstacles, the same enemy (Jesi 2014: 53).

Each individual have different reasons to join the revolt. Capitalist exploitation of workers is certainly a most important reason, but private frustrations, or the desire to unite with a group can also play a role – and here Jesi recognizes the source of "pure revolt" (Jesi 2014: 69). These reasons, however, become irrelevant during the hours of revolt, where individual struggles for survival merge into the collective battle. It is the shared time of festivity (cf. Jesi 2021). What gives the revolt its mythological quality is, on the one hand, the collective experience of a non-normal time and, on the other, the sharing of powerful symbols that transfigure the perception of reality.

Myth of sacrifice and defeat

> *The murder of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg meant the murdering of a superior courage and a superior spirit. It meant murdering the irrefutable truth.*
>
> (Haffner 1986: 149)

Commenting, a century later, on the photographs from the "Spartacus week", Enzo Traverso observes that there are no gestures of joy, unlike in pictures of other insurrections. It is a tremendously serious festivity. The postcard photos of 1919 portray a "tragic and desperate" revolt, the armed workers patrolling the streets of Berlin showing "tense faces", and "no one smiling" (Traverso 2020). The rebels are engaged in a fight to the death against powerful and monstrous enemies, they seem aware of the impending defeat.

May the analysis of oppression in capitalist society be as advanced and clear for those involved in the battle, in the moment of revolt, only its symbolic elements are truly perceived by the rebels. Shared symbols and myths become the lens through which reality is apprehended for those involved in the insurrection. In this moment, they are less concerned with a plan to overcome exploitation than with the immediate battle against the enemy:

> The adversary of the moment truly becomes the enemy, the rifle or club or bicycle chain truly becomes the weapon, the victory of the moment — be it partial or total — truly becomes, in and of itself, a just and good act for

> the defense of freedom, the defense of one's class, the hegemony of one's class (Jesi 2014: 53).

In January 1919, only a few months after the end of the First World War, this symbolic production was burdened with the reproduction of an imaginary (as we might say today) that originated in the war. After months spent in the trenches, enduring inhuman conditions, with the use of new weapons and gas that forced soldiers to use masks, to become "faceless", but also after years of war propaganda, the enemies had taken on the form of real "monsters". In contrast to a pure Sorelian exaltation of the "social myth" generated by the revolutionary masses (Sorel 1999), Jesi shows that symbolic production is permeated by the imaginary of power. The symbols, he writes, appear as the true bearers of power: the banks, the publishing houses, the Reichstag must be occupied, for the revolutionaries to become hold of the power. In the cold Berlin winter, the city displays its "granitic" symbols of power, appearing as a city of "bosses" (*padroni*) (Jesi 2014: 73-4).

Jesi does not dismiss this kind of Manicheism, which is an element of every revolution, but underlines that, while Manichean visions motivate the battle, they also foster the necessity to oppose absolute evil with absolute moral good. He explains in those terms the choice of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht not to leave the city, even though they were aware that the revolution had been defeated and they were risking their lives.[5] The readiness to risk one's life was for Jesi the proof of the genuine character of the

5 As Haffner (1886: 147) remarks, both Luxemburg and Liebknecht published on the 15th January their last articles in the *Rote Fahne*, which read "like parting words of farewell". Even if they recognize defeat, both end with the announcement that "by tomorrow" the Revolution will rise again, "in spite of everything".

propaganda. However, the decision, as the defeat was inevitable, to "sacrifice" themselves testifies the fascination exercised by the pseudo-myths of power, as if only a proof of absolute heroism could confront the absolute evil. The bourgeoisie had won also on an imaginary ground, having invaded and colonized lives "to the point where their very gestures are placed within the sacrificial horizon offered by bourgeois tradition" (Tabacchini 2019: 91).

Some years before the debate on "left-wing melancholia" (Brown 1999; Traverso 2016), Jesi points out the implicit mythologisation of defeat in the imaginary of revolt, the pseudo-myth of the lost battle (Jesi 2014: 82), from the Paris Commune to the Spartacist revolt or Spanish Civil War. Instead of fighting to win, the "Manichean" revolt aims to counter the enemy with "heroic victims" (Jesi 2014: 82), it is bound to defeat and sacrifice. Jesi then insists on the necessity of *demythologize* leftist imaginary, in order to free the consciousness of the exploited class from the fascination of myths of the bourgeoisie (Jesi 2014: 73): "it is a question", he writes (Jesi 2014: 96), "of finding a way out of the dead end of the great sacrifices or the great victims".

The revolt is therefore a highly mythological event. But precisely because of this, it is also doomed to defeat. The suspension of time, which seemed capable of halting the cyclical temporality of oppression, is merely a moment, quickly over. The Spartacist revolt was a mistake, writes Jesi, and the party, the organization, failed, partly because it was unable to limit the extent of the disaster. The revolt failed; the masses could not seize the symbols of power. But even worse, it ended up being the very means by which bourgeois society reintroduced normal time, after the four

years of war. "Once the revolt came to an end", writes Jesi, "it became evident that, to a considerable extent, it had served the very power it attacked" (Jesi 2014: 60). The Spartacist revolt had been functional to the reinforcement of bourgeois order: it was the *release* that made it possible to dissipate the accumulated tension during the years of war.

The revolt seemed to be a possible break from the rule of myth. As an epiphany of myth in historical time, revolt appeared in fact as the suspension of the "normal time", as Jesi calls it, of bourgeois society. However, it has become clear that there is a difference between suspending time and interrupting it. In fact, revolt does not really interrupt the cycle of eternal return, but merely suspends it. Revolt is a moment of critique against the oppressive normativity of bourgeois society, and an immediate experience of collectivity. Before and after the revolt, however, the power of normalization seems unchanged, if not even reinforced by the outburst enabled by the uprising. In this way, revolt ultimately remains internal to the dynamic of subversion and eternal return that characterizes bourgeois society, as outlined in the introduction of *Spartakus*.

Between revolt and revolution

> *Revolt is the hyperbole of bourgeois world, pushed to the point of overcoming it.*
>
> (Jesi 2014: 142)

If revolt ultimately remains inscribed in the same normative horizon as bourgeois society; if, by condemning itself to defeat, it contributes to the perpetuation of the cycle of eternal return, then isn't revolt the failure of revolution, the failure of the radical overthrow of all social relations? Isn't "revolt" the name given to those revolutions that, due to their lack of organization, leadership and maturity of consciousness, as well as their fascination with the symbols of power, are destined for defeat? Is revolt the "tiger's leap" mentioned by Benjamin in his *Theses* – a leap that, however, "takes place in an arena where the ruling class gives commands", whereas the same leap "in the open air of history" is the revolution (Benjamin 2006: 395)? Or how should we conceptualize the relation between revolt and revolution? It is worth reconsidering this much-debated distinction.

Celebrations

Drawing on the difference marked by Arno J. Mayer, Enzo Traverso (2022: 22) argues that revolt and revolution are opposing events. Revolt "is moved by tradition and despair or disillusionment" (Mayer 2000: 39), whereas revolution is driven by a vision of the future. Revolt does not seek to overthrow structures of domination, but targets specific individuals designated as scapegoats – the representatives of power. "Visceral and instantaneous" (Mayer 2000: 39), revolts lack an ideology or a utopian project. Thus, they have a limited horizon and are inherently short-lived. On the contrary, revolutions are driven by a political project; they con-

sciously aspire to change social and political reality. For Traverso, this differentiation is useful in distinguishing between a celebration of rebellion or revolt, which risks hypostasizing the "lyrical" moment of insurrection, and an interpretation of revolution, which, by contrast, aims to place the event within a process that is not only destructive, but also constructive (Traverso 2022: 22-3). In his reading, the distinction ultimately lies in the perspective of the historian who decides whether to "celebrate" or to "interpret".

A century earlier, Walter Benjamin had also emphasized the "lyrical" dimension of revolt. In his essay of 1929 "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia", he asks whether the surrealists, whom he credits with having the most radical concept of freedom since the anarchist Bakunin, have been successful "in welding this experience of freedom to the other revolutionary experience [...] – the constructive, dictatorial side of revolution? In short, have they bound revolt to revolution?" (Benjamin 2005: 215). According to Benjamin, the surrealists had tried to "win the energies of intoxication [*Rausch*] for the revolution". Of course, he continues, "an intoxicating component lives in every revolutionary act", it is the "anarchic" component of revolution; but it has to be bound to the other side of revolution. Otherwise, placing exclusive emphasis on it would mean to "subordinate the methodical and disciplinary preparation for revolution entirely to a practice oscillating between fitness exercises and celebration in advance" (Benjamin 2005: 216). To focus solely on revolt would be to simply celebrate the aesthetic component of revolution. Indeed, revolt is a moment of revolution, a moment when the affective and aesthetic

dimension is exacerbated: it is intoxication, celebration, it is visceral and lyrical.

The day after

> *We must not nourish and repeat the illusion of the first phase of the revolution [...] thinking that it is sufficient to overthrow the capitalist government and to set up another in its place in order to bring about a socialist revolution.*
>
> (Rosa Luxemburg *apud* Jesi 2014: 49)

After the battle, silence follows. After the intoxication, the hangover. In *Beziehungsweise Revolution*, Bini Adamczak (2017) recalls how, following the first years of "war communism", something happened to the people of Soviet Russia. It was not just a confrontation with the material hardships of the 1920s, nor yet the Stalinization of the country, but something peculiar to the aftermath of a revolution: a form of "post-revolutionary depression". The gloom that followed the revolution was interpreted as a need for the continual renewal of the fighting spirit, the military, warlike, heroic ethos of the wartime. In its attempts to sustain revolutionary enthusiasm, Soviet ideology fetishized revolution itself, as Rosa Luxemburg had criticized at early stage (Adamczak 2017: 25). From films, theatre, literature, photography or painting to

grandiose parades and marches and to everyday rituals, "the image of revolution is repeatedly restaged as a heroic event and at the same time the figure of the revolutionary is idealized as a disciplined, self-sacrificing and masculine subject" (Adamczak 2017: 25, my translation). Revolutionary desire crystallized into a desire for revolution, which was necessarily disappointed in the transition to post-revolutionary times. Yet, as Adamczak argues, the sadness that follows the insurrection is in fact less about the military aspect than about collectivity, solidarity, even tenderness, the ways of relating to each other, that emerge in the exceptional time of the revolt (Adamczak 2017: 37). What if the uniqueness of revolt lays not in the heroic conquest of the future, but in the affective experience of a present reality? Perhaps what makes the historical "defeats" of the Paris Commune, the Spartacist revolt and the Spanish Civil War so compelling in the left-wing imagination is not so much their failure, which allows them to retain a certain purity, untouched by the necessary compromises of a successful revolution, as this affective moment of common struggle, which stands out in memory.

The day after tomorrow

Indeed, it is from the vantage point of historicism that the revolt is judged a failure, as well-intentioned, but dangerous and harmful to the revolutionary cause (Jesi 2014: 82). From a point of view that proceeds from within the revolt, the judgment falls differently. A phenomenological investigation, which grants objec-

tivity to the revolt from within, would judge its experiences of time as highly positive. For Jesi, the distinction between revolt and revolution lies in the different experience of time. While revolution is committed to historical time, preparing and organizing for tomorrow, revolt lies at the intersection of the "day before yesterday" and the "day after tomorrow" (Jesi 2014: 139). This is why revolt is untimely. On the one hand, the past is burdened by symbols of power, of sacrifice and resignation, preventing a truly dialectical overcoming of society's internal contradictions. On the other hand, revolt gestures toward a "day after tomorrow", whose principal expression is freedom "as decisive, as the justification and guarantee of the strategy for victory" (Jesi 2014: 140). From within, revolt appears thus as a forcefield of different temporalities. All under the weight of a heavy past, it is able to evoke the epiphany of a future time, of a future victory. It is a "dazzling moment of knowledge" (Di Cesare 2020: 53). However, as Jesi (2014: 141) emphasizes, evoking the day after tomorrow doesn't mean preparing for it. If, as Rosa Luxemburg said, the hours of revolution count in world history as months and its days as years, because of the rapid development of the masses (*apud* Fröhlich 1992: 365), for Jesi it is not the same in the revolt. What is at stake is not the accelerated maturation of class consciousness, if by that we mean learning the aims and means of revolution. The negative effects of the revolt would, in any case, largely offset any possible class maturation of the defeated rebels (Jesi 2014: 141). Revolt does not contribute to the maturation of class consciousness; rather it is a hyperbole, an intensification of the "dominants of bourgeois consciousness" (Jesi 2014: 142). Remaining within the framework

of capitalist society, revolt does not dialectically transcend it, but instead heightens its bourgeois components to an extreme. However, by exacerbating the characteristic elements of bourgeois society – its pseudo-myths, its symbols of power, and the mythical time of eternal return – revolt leads to their destruction. It constitutes, as Jesi writes, "the only effective overcoming of bourgeois society, culture and spirit" (Jesi 2014: 142). The myths of death and sacrifice are thus transformed into the sacrifice and self-destruction of "the bourgeois components of the subject" (Cavalletti 2021: 16). The subject then gains access to the other, to the collective, to the time of myth beyond bourgeois society. That is why, in the last sentence of *Spartakus*, Jesi states that "Bakunin would have probably not minded being told that revolution is the refusal of the bourgeoisie while revolt is the hyperbole of the bourgeoisie", and continues writing that "he would have drawn the legitimate conclusion that revolution builds and revolt destroys" (Jesi 2014: 166).

Conclusion

In *The Time of Revolt*, Donatella Di Cesare (2020: 38) recalls the etymology of "revolt", which drives from the Latin verb "*revolvere*", meaning to "to go back". However, she adds that *revolvere* also signifies the "*volte-face*", which she understands as turning away from power, as the "interruption of authority". For her, revolt is the an-archist, nomadic, anonymous moment that undermines the logic of government, when, "in a ceaseless move-

ment, the being-together of community is rebuilt each time" (Di Cesare 2020: 23). By celebrating the aesthetic-affective component of revolt, Di Cesare seeks to rescue it from the dismissal to which it has long been subjected in the history of the revolutionary left. Jesi has a more modest purpose. His aim is neither to celebrate revolt nor to condemn it. But he shows that revolt should not be judged solely in terms of linear time. *A posteriori*, revolt can be judged as "regressive" or "progressive", depending on whether or not it contributed in the advancement of the revolution or was integrated into it. Yet, the particularity of revolt lies in the revolutionaries' experience of time: here, future pasts and past futures collide. Revolt does not overcome the "structural domination" of time, but, for a moment, it suspends the normative quality of temporality is suspended. From within the revolt, history appears as crossed by the non-contemporary of the contemporary, it reveals that standardization under a unique temporality is never complete. In this sense, revolt becomes a moment of normative insight: what is does not have to be for ever.

Received on 21/04/2024
Approved on 17/09/2024

References

ADAM, B. *Timewatch: The Social Analysis of Time.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995.

ADAMCZAK, B. *Beziehungsweise Revolution. 1917, 1968 und kommende.* Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2017.

BENJAMIN, W. "On the Concept of History". In: M. W. Jennings et al. (eds.). *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings 4 (1938-1940)*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 398-401.

_____. "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia". In: M. W. Jennings et al. (eds.). *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings 2.1 (1927-1930)*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005, p. 207-221.

_____. *Arcades Project*. Trans. H. Eiland & K. McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

BLOCH, E. *Heritage of our Time*. Trans. N. & S. Plaice, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991 [1934].

BROWN, W. "Resisting Left Melancholy". In: *Boundary*, 2, 26(3), 1999, p. 19-27.

BUCK-MORSS, S. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991.

CASSIRER, E. *The Myth of the State*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946.

CAVALLETTI, A. "Introduction". In: F. Jesi, *Spartakus: The Symbology of Revolt*. Trans. A. Toscano. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2014.

_____. "Introduction". In: F. Jesi, *Time and Festivity. Essays on Myth and Literature*. Trans. Cristina Viti. Kolkata: Seagull, 2021.

DI CESARE, D. *Il tempo della rivolta*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2020.

FABIAN, J. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014 [1983].

FRÖHLICH, P. *Rosa Luxemburg. Gedanken und Tat.* Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1992 [1940].

GIETINGER, K. *1918. Der verpasste Frühling des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Hamburg: Nautilus, 2018.s

GOODY, J. *The Theft of History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

HAFFNER, S. *Failure of a Revolution: Germany 1918-19*. Trans. G. Rapp. Library Press, 1986 [1969].

HARTOG, F. *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*. Trans. S. Brown, Columbia University Press, 2016.

HOBSBAWM, E. J. *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries*. New York: Norton, 1965.

JESI, F. *Spartakus: The Symbology of Revolt*. Trans. A. Toscano. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2014.

_____. *Time and Festivity. Essays on Myth and Literature*. Trans. Cristina Viti. Kolkata: Seagull, 2021.

_____. *Mito*. Macerata: Quodlibet, 2024 [1973].

KERÉNYI, K. "Myth and Technique". Trans. H. Kaal. *Diogenes*, 13(49), 1965, p. 24-39.

KOSELLECK, R. *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Trans. K. Tribe. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004 [1979].

MARTINEAU, J. "Du rapport au temps contemporain: l'accélération de l'histoire et le présentisme, entre historicité et temporalité. Note critique sur *L'accélération de l'histoire. Des Lumières à l'Anthropocène* de Christophe Bouton". *Philosophiques*, 1 (50), 2023, p. 175-189.

MINELLI, S. "Mito, utopia e propaganda: Linguaggio di verità o tecniche di manipolazione?". *Thomas Project. A border journal for utopian thoughts*, 3, 2020, p. 32-47.

POSTONE, M. *Time, Labor and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009 [1993].

SCHIAVONI G. "Bibliografia degli scritti di Furio Jesi". In: M. Ferruccio, G. Schiavoni (eds.). *Risalire il Nilo: Mito fiaba allegoria*. Palermo: Sellerio, 1983.

SOREL, G. *Reflections on Violence*. Trans. J. Jennings. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

TABACCHINI, M. "Lo scacco mitologico della rivolta. Soggezione ai simboli e fatalità del sacrificio nello Spartakus di Furio Jesi". In: K. *Revue trans-européenne de philosophie et arts*, 3(2), 2019, p.78-93.

THOMPSON, E.P. "Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism", *Past and Present*, 38, 1967, p. 56-97.

TOMBA, M. *Insurgent Universality: An Alternative Legacy of Modernity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2019.

TRAVERSO, E. *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2016.

_____. "German Revolution". In: M. Löwy (ed.). *Revolutions*. Trans. T. Chretien. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020.

_____. *Revolution. Une histoire culturelle*. Paris: La Découverte, 2022.