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Theology of Revolution: In Ali Shari'ati and Walter Benjamin's Political Thought

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Abstract: In this paper, I offer a comparative analysis of the political thoughts of twentieth century Iranian revolutionary thinker and sociologist Ali Shari'ati (1933–1977) and German-Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892–1940). Despite their conspicuously independent historical-theoretical trajectories, both Shari'ati and Benjamin engaged with theology and Marxism to create theological–political conceptions of the revolution of the oppressed. Shari'ati re-interpreted and re-animated Shia history from the angle of contemporary concerns to theorize a revolution against all forms of domination. In comparison, Benjamin fused Marxism with Jewish theology in his call to seize the possibilities of past failed revolutions in the present. Both Shari'ati and Benjamin conceptualized an active messianism led by each generation, eliminating the wait for the return of a messiah. As a result, each present moment takes on a messianic potential; the present plays an essential role to both thinkers. Past was also essential to both, because theology (through remembrance) had made the past sufferings incomplete to them. Both thinkers viewed past sufferings as an integral part of present struggles for justice in the form of remembrance (or *yād* or *zeker* for Shari'ati, and *Zekher* for Benjamin). I explore the ways Shari'ati and Benjamin theorized the role of the past in the present, remembrance, and messianism to create a dialectical relation between theology and Marxism to reciprocally transform and compliment both of them.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin; Ali Shariati; messianism; theological Marxism; theology; remembrance; Shi'ism; Jewish mysticism; historical time

1. Introduction

The twentieth century Iranian revolutionary thinker and sociologist Ali Shari'ati composed his political thought in the sixties and seventies until—a year before the 1979 Revolution—he died. He was the most prominent thinker read and discussed among the 1979 revolutionaries. Abrahamian (1983, p. 466), in his book *Iran between Two Revolutions*, states that Shari'ati “is justly credited as the main intellectual, even the Fanon, of the Islamic Revolution”. Shari'ati was also nicknamed the teacher of the revolution (*mo'alleme-e enqilab*). Bayat (2017, p. 47) portrays the extensive influence of Shari'ati on Iran's society before the 1979 Revolution in his book, *Revolution without Revolutionaries*:

The anticapitalist chants [during the 1979 Revolution . . .] reflected the radical sentiments that Marxists and Shari'ati had espoused. Shari'ati's writings and lectures, taped or transcribed, had already been widely circulated even to school pupils and rural dwellers. My father, barely literate, had his own copies, and a friend's mother read whatever she found from Shari'ati. Almost every student library in colleges carried Shari'ati's multiple works.

As Bayat describes, Shari'ati had managed to engage with different sections of society—from intelligentsia to less educated populations. In the European context, the twentieth-century

German-Jewish philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin wrote many of his important works in the midst of the rise of fascism. Though Benjamin wrote *On The Concept of History* in 1940, he did not survive the political conditions and committed suicide the same year, threatened with deportation from Spain, where he had fled to escape Nazi troops advancing on France (Kraniauskas 2013, p. 148).

Kraniauskas (2013, p. 148) discusses the Eurocentrism of Benjamin's *Arcades Project* (written between 1927 and 1940), in which Benjamin focused on commodity culture in nineteenth-century European metropolis Paris, overlooking global imperialism in its fabric. Kraniauskas (2013, p. 143) argues, "There is something lacking, however, in a political geography of Benjamin's life and work—of arcades, cities and Europe—so dependent on Benjamin's own contextualization of his work, and it is the internationality of these spaces as structured by such concepts as colonialism and imperialism". Despite this oversight, Fanon et al. (2017, p. 57) argues that fascism in Europe—with which Benjamin's philosophy of history was concerned—was, in fact, the colonization of Europe by Europe. A few decades later, in the postcolonial context, Shari'ati grappled with psychosocial consequences of colonialism in Africa and Asia and, in particular, in Iran. That is to say, one of these two thinkers grappled with colonization of Europe by Europe in the thirties and forties, and the other one with European and North American econo-political domination of Iran in the sixties and seventies, in the aftermath of the 1953 British- and US-led coup in Iran. More importantly, despite their conspicuously independent historical-theoretical trajectories, both Shari'ati and Benjamin engaged with theology and Marxism to create theological-political conceptions of the revolution of the oppressed.

This comparative study of Benjamin's and Shari'ati's thought is not premised on the assumption that these thinkers produced similar thoughts in different languages and times, or that the manners in which they engaged with Marxism and theology were identical. This study rather specifically looks into the ways these two thinkers used theology in their own idiosyncratic ways to transform the Marxist conception of proletarian revolution. This study also takes into consideration that Benjamin developed his theories of history in three distinct paradigms of theological, aesthetics, and political. The focus of this study is the political paradigm theorized in "Theses on the Philosophy of History" and the *Arcades Project*. But as Mosès (2009, p. 68) has explained: "[...] the political paradigm that dominates the vision of history of The Arcades Project and Theses integrates several elements-now subordinate-of the aesthetic and theological paradigms". The theological and aesthetics paradigms have a subtle presence in the political paradigm; as a result, it is helpful to consider Benjamin's texts of the other paradigms (in particular, the theological paradigm in this case) to grasp his political theory of history. Shari'ati, on the other hand, focused on politicization and contemporization of theology, and his engagement with theology was not indirect and was not conducted through obscure allusions as Benjamin's was. Nevertheless, Shari'ati was not a conventional theological thinker either.

Shari'ati employed his particular contemporary sociological and historical readings of Shi'ism to complicate Marxism, which he otherwise found to have limitations for social transformation. His readings of Shi'ism were also informed by Marxism. As a result, it's helpful to avoid investigating his theories by rigidly subsuming them under Shia thoughts and placing them in contrast to secular ideologies, but rather to explore the intricate manners in which he transforms both Marxism and Shi'ism. Rahnema (2014, p. 297) has extensively explained the way Shari'ati deconstructed Shi'ism to create his religio-ethics of protest:

Shi'a Islam [...] possessed its own well-established rites, rituals, traditions, history, language symbols, heroes, enemies, jurists, books of reference and interpreters of what constituted Islamic and non-Islamic practices and ideas. Shari'ati's Herculean task was to gradually undermine and eventually demolish, one by one, the classical or the traditionally accepted associations between Islamic concepts, their meaning, and their practice.

Shari'ati deconstructed traditional Shi'ism to construct a universal language of resistance. The reactionary clerics were hostile towards him due to his reinterpretations of Shi'ism; they also felt threatened by him specifically considering institutionalized clergy as the partner of ruling elites and

responsible for stupefaction (*estehmar*) of the society (ibid., p. 285). The well-known cleric Morteza Motahari wrote a letter to Ruhollah Khomeini asking him to ban Shari'ati's books in the early years after the 1979 Revolution (ibid., p. 354). Shari'ati's broad view of religion blurs the distinctions between religion, ethics, ideology, and politics. The ideologization of Islam played an essential role in his political thought that he extensively discussed in his speech *Bāzgasht be Khishtan* (Return to the Self, 1967). The ideologization of Islam, as Shari'ati theorized, was, in fact, the subjects' religio-ethical responsibility to abolish domination in society. All those subjects who took responsibility towards egalitarianism were prophets similar to those of monotheistic religions. As he discussed in his speech *Mazhab alayh-e Mazhab* (Religion vs. Religion, 1970), he does not consider monotheistic religions to be related to faith or religious feelings or emotions. They are, rather, a struggle against the social order and dominant religion that legitimates the status quo (that he calls the religion of legitimation). Theology in Shari'ati's thought is political, and is used to criticize institutionalized religion, and its rigidity and complicity with the ruling elites. The goal of the revolutionary religion is the establishment of justice, and it takes, as Shari'ati (1988, p. 40) states, "the form of a movement of criticism against history and it has never been realized in a perfect form". In Shari'ati's political thought, the critical stance towards history results in particular relations to past and imaginings of near future emancipation.

In summary, the goal of Shari'ati's political theory is threefold: First, for the message of past revolutions and revolutionaries to become part of the consciousness of the present (i.e., remembrance, or *yād* or *zeker*); second, to take political action to achieve what past martyrs struggled and failed to attain, re-actualization of the past in the present (i.e., redemption and reparation); and third, to participate in active messianism by being politically prepared for each moment to be potentially the time of the revolution. In active (as opposed to passive) messianism, instead of passively awaiting the return of the messiah, at the end of the history, individual subjects actively take up the role of messiah, destabilizing unjust systems at every present moment. To participate in this messianism, each subject must reject the status quo (with act or word) while longing for a classless society and taking social responsibility towards its materialization (Shari'ati 1982). In another context, remembrance (*Zekher*), reparation, and redemption are the concepts Walter Benjamin theorized under the influence of theology. In Thesis I of "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin et al. (2019a, p. 253) suggests that in order to win the game, historical materialism must employ the service of theology as its "mastermind" while keeping its pivotal role concealed. For Benjamin, historical materialism needed theology in order to defeat a historical enemy, which, in his case, was fascism. In summary, Benjamin argued that theology can transform the conceptualization of historical time, and relation of history of the oppressed with their past and present to imagine an escape from the materialists' theoretical shortcomings.

Benjamin, in *The Arcades Project*, likened the relation of his work to theology to that between blotting pad and ink, suggesting that theology has saturated his thought (Benjamin 2003b, p. 471). Moreover, Marx Horkheimer in a letter mentioned to Benjamin that the past sufferings have occurred and are completed, and challenged Benjamin's assumption of the incompleteness of history, contended that it requires believing in the last day of judgement. Benjamin's response to the letter was that history cannot be conceptualized in a positivistic way as it is related to remembrance; he (ibid.) explained that his philosophy of history, "forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted us to try to write it with immediately theological concepts". Despite all these explicit references to the presence of theology in Benjamin's thought, his philosophy cannot be categorized conventionally as either theological or secular. As Dickinson and Stéphane (2016, p. 4) explain, Benjamin "was concerned with developing a counternarrative that was not yet afraid to cross the boundaries between the theological and the atheological, subverting and distorting the more traditional forms of religious belief and practice that saturated the Western world". This theological space, that is not quite theological, in which the rigid distinctions between theological and atheological were blurred, provided Benjamin's thought with flexible terminologies and imaginings to theorize critiques of positivist conceptions of history and historical time.

Benjamin, in his “Theological-Political Fragment” (published in 1921), states, “Only the Messiah himself consummates all history, in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates its relation to the Messianic (Benjamin and Jennings 2006, p. 305)”. The first and foremost conclusion is that there is a Messiah, as Taubes (2004) puts it, “No shmontses like ‘the messianic,’ ‘the political,’ no neutralization, but the Messiah”. The question however, is whether subjects participate in this messianist conception of history by their redemptive acts, or messiah is the sole redeemer. Jacobson (2003, p. 25), in *Metaphysics of the Profane*, explains that these two positions “[...] remain largely unresolved in his [Benjamin’s] thought”. Both these positions exist in Benjamin’s “Theological-Political Fragment” and his later works. In *Thesis II* of ‘Theses on the Concept of History’, Benjamin et al. (2019a, p. 254) states that each generation has a weak messianic power. This messianic power endows each generation with responsibility towards the past. In Benjamin’s philosophy, messianism is not one single concept, and changes its form in his different reflections. Butler (2012, p. 70), in *Parting Ways*, states, “In ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ he [Benjamin] allies the messianic with the struggle to save the history of the oppressed from an imposed oblivion”. Messianism in Benjamin’s philosophy of history introduces a new mode of historiography that narrates the past, not as it really occurred, but rather from the demands of the present. As a result of this conception, history is not made of homogeneous continuous time, it is constructed of ruptured discontinuous present times or now-times. The historiography that is not charged with now-time is the story of victors, while the history that is charged by the demands of the now-time reveals the stories of the forgotten of the history. At the heart of now-time, there is the hope that the Messiah might enter at any moment, without delaying his arrival to the last day of judgement.

The messianism of both Shari’ati and Benjamin is not without messiah. However, the point of an actual messiah for Shari’ati is for us to know that there has continuously existed a struggle for justice in the history, starting from Abrahamic prophets to Shia Messiah. Shari’ati gives a much greater weight to the role played by individuals than messiah. In both Shari’ati’s and Benjamin’s thought, the collective of people across different generations play a role in messianism. What distinguishes the political thoughts of both Benjamin and Shari’ati from their peers is the messianic and prophetic power their theories assign to each subject and generation, along with the importance of remembrance and reparation of the suffering of all those who struggled for justice in the past. In other words, the messianic power each generation possesses gives them responsibility towards both past and present.

My justification for this comparative analysis between two seemingly unrelated thinkers is as follows: Both Shari’ati and Benjamin conceptualized an active messianism led by each generation, eliminating the wait for the return of a messiah. As a result, each present moment takes on a messianic potential; the present plays an essential role to both thinkers. Shari’ati had two reasons (other than the active messianism) to focus on the present. First, he was concerned with the conundrum of cultural alienation, arguing that alienated subjects had lost touch with their social reality. To achieve de-alienation, he argued, in his speech “Return to the Self” (1967), that subjects needed to strengthen their awareness of their present sociohistorical reality. Second, he equated religious ethics being politically responsible and abolishing domination in the present moment. Shari’ati’s theories mostly engage with the present moment to imagine social transformation. For Shari’ati, the future resides, rather, at the heart of the present in the form of a messianic longing for a more egalitarian future that is not far from the present. In his speech “Return to the Self”, whereby he theorized practicing the revolutionary religion as the ethical way of being in the world, he explains that the revolutionary energy that exists in the present quotidian is the most reliable force for transformation:

This ‘Return to the Self’ is not a return to the past. But rather, this return is a return to the current existing consciousness and self of the society that intellectuals of our time can extract and break it apart like a matter or a source of energy so that it becomes revitalized and mobile [...] this self is already present in our cosmos [...] but the self-hatred has caused us to ignore it. (Shari’ati 1967)

According to Shari'ati, there were utopian impulses in the quotidian, and the quotidian was not completely occupied by alienation and passivity. This energy in the present must not be dismissed by a colonial inferiority complex; it must be revitalized. This revitalization (of the energy in the present) can be obtained through remembering the traditions of past hopes and past failed revolutions, and being part of an active messianism. Similarly, Benjamin theorizes messianism as the expectation for the messiah to arrive at each present moment. In *Thesis B*, Benjamin et al. (2019a, p. 264) states, "For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter". Thus, it is not for us to wait for the future revolution at the end of time, it is to "detect what at each moment shows the 'revolutionary energy' of the new" (Mosès 2009, p. 109). Benjamin's notion of remembrance relates to, as Mosès (2009, p. 109) states, a "Jewish category of 're-remembering' (*Zekher*), which does not denote the perseveration in memory of events of the past, but their re-actualization in the present experience". As a result, even remembering the past is oriented towards the present. As a result, the past was also essential to both because theology (through remembrance) had made the past sufferings incomplete to them. Both thinkers viewed past sufferings as an integral part of present struggles for justice in the form of remembrance (or *yād* or *zeker* for Shari'ati, and *Zekher* for Benjamin). For Benjamin, remembrance leads to a constellation of past and the present. For Shari'ati, it indicates the necessity of contemporary subjects' identification with martyrs and the messengers of past revolutions. Benjamin's "angel of history" looks towards the past, wishing he could go back to awaken the dead and make what is destroyed whole. What he sees in the past, Benjamin states in *Thesis IX*, is "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet" (Benjamin et al. 2019a, p. 257). The angel however, has his back facing the future, and is reluctantly pushed by the winds of progress. Redemption in the present is dependent on redemption for past generations; the present objectives of the revolution cannot be met without obtaining the goals of past failed revolutions of the oppressed. Hence, redemption is incomplete without reparation. Benjamin's angel of history wants to awaken the dead, though for Shari'ati, the martyrs *were* the awake. A testimony to all historical injustices, the martyrs were the seeing eyes. They were waiting for the oppressed to rise and heal their wounds and plant the dreams of the present on their crushed hopes. The dead revolutionaries of past generations are represented by the third Shia Imam, the martyred Hossein, who is witness to the catastrophes of history. Every subject dreaming of liberation from domination can identify with him and re-actualize his past struggle. Moreover, Shari'ati, in his relationship to Islam's past, practices Benjamin's theories; he re-interprets and re-animates Shia history from the angle of contemporary concerns, and his approach towards history is never a reconstitution of the way the past was understood by its contemporaries.

Shari'ati's political thought is correctly subsumed under the postcolonial category. It is essential, in developing a deeper grasp of his corpus, to consider the influences of anticolonial thinkers, such as Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire, on his work. During Shari'ati's studies in France (1959–1964), he became acquainted with the Parisian network of the Algerian National Liberation Front and let them use his room for gatherings, closely studying the anticolonial thought of the time, which was later qualified as Third-Worldist (Shari'ati 2020, p. 667). For example, Shari'ati's conception of cultural alienation, central to his thought, was substantially influenced by Fanon's writings on the topic. At the same time, it is important not to overlook the links between both Shari'ati and Fanon's thought to European philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. However, the active messianism and theology included in Shari'ati's theories distinguished Shari'ati's thought from Fanon and other anticolonial thinkers. Byrd and Miri (2020, p. 73) explains the distinction between Fanon's materialist non-messianic thinking with that of revolutionary messianic thinkers such as Benjamin:

Unlike other revolutionary thinkers, such as Walter Benjamin, there is no sense of redemptive messianism in Fanon's understanding in his emancipatory project. [. . .] With the weight of the present and the future in front of him, the dead of the past are not his immediate concern; the living—the now-and-still-wretched of the earth—is his primary concern.

As Byrd explains, the temporal axes in Fanon's theorization of historical time are present and future; to active messianic thinkers such as Shari'ati and Benjamin, the temporal axes of greatest significance are past and present. Limiting the study of Shari'ati's work to the scrutinization of its anti-colonial components and comparison of his thought with non-messianic anti-colonial thinkers does not allow for sufficient exploration of the role of theology in his oeuvre. As such, this study focuses on theology in Shari'ati's political thought in comparison to another messianic thinker: Benjamin.

2. The Theology for Benjamin and Shari'ati

Both Benjamin and Shari'ati's thinking was infused with a sense of loss and poverty; humanity had lost something and been impoverished while transitioning into the twentieth century. To Benjamin, some such losses included communicability and transmissibility of experience, resulting in the decline of the tradition of storytelling. Benjamin et al. (2019b, p. 92) expounds:

[T]he art of storytelling is dying out. Encounters with people who know how to tell a story properly are becoming ever rarer. And ever more frequently an awkward silence spreads through a group when someone expresses the wish to hear a story. It's as if a capacity we had considered inalienable, the most reliable of all our capacities, has been taken from us: the ability to share experiences.

Humanity was too swamped in the modern day's vastness of information and technological advancement—too shocked with the rapidity of change to be able to communicate its experiences. Thus, the oral tradition of storytelling died. What Benjamin asks is: Could theology restore the storyteller?

Materialists believed in deterministic narrations of history, in the movement of history towards progress, and the inevitable defeat of the ruling elites. To Benjamin, however, the triumph of the oppressed was not guaranteed and did not have to be postponed to an unknown future. The oppressor, always victorious in history, could still win again. Moreover, they could narrate and rewrite history from their vantage point, erase any trace of the struggles of the nameless losers of history, and defeat even the martyrs of past failed revolutions (by erasing them too from historical memories). Historical materialism, according to Benjamin, with the help of theology, could move away from its understanding of history as a straight line of progress. Consequently, in his conception of a nonlinear and non-deterministic narration of history, the struggle against the historical enemy would not necessarily result in an inevitable win through the accumulation of revolutionary gains. In the non-positivistic understanding of historical time, the past no longer needs to be reconstituted as objective facts conceived of as "it really was". Rather, to Benjamin, history must be conceptualized as the perpetual (re-)interpretation of lived experiences based on concerns of the present moment. This relation to the past is similar to the way storytellers have narrated past experiences and turned individual stories to collective wisdom. The revolution to which Benjamin, with the help of theology, ushered his readers was, as Mosès (2009, p. 105) explains, an act of "[...] transposing the experience of lived time from the personal sphere to the historical sphere, deformatizing historical time [...]". It must be noted that it was the storyteller who turned people's personal experiences into a collective wisdom. Thus, theology, if used as the mastermind of historical materialism, could restore the tradition of storytelling that was lost amidst the data and information of the modern era. Benjamin explains (Benjamin et al. 2019b, p. 110) the significance of the storyteller in our relationship to the past as follows: "A story does not aim to convey an event per se, which is the purpose of information; rather, it embeds the event in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening". The storyteller does not recount the past as data and facts, they interpret the past as an individual experience in conjunction with the collective past of the community. The political meaning of the event recounted by the storyteller is prioritized over its historical value—the event is significant because of the wisdom that it carries and conveys. The storyteller brings the past event out of its temporal chamber and makes it present by re-interpreting it from the vantage of present. To Benjamin, the reason theology (in this case Jewish mysticism) can restore the lost figure of the storyteller is that the storyteller's mode

of relating to the past is similar to the liturgical nature of Jewish historical memory. As Spiegel (2002, p. 152) explains,

In liturgical commemoration, as in poetic oral recitation, the fundamental goal is, precisely, to revivify the past and make it live in the present, to fuse past and present, chanter and hearer, priest and observer, into a single collective entity. The written text, when it represents a transcription of a once-live recital, commemorates both the past which is sung about and the performance itself. History, in the sense that we understand it to consist of unique events unfolding within an irreversible linear time, is absorbed into cyclical, liturgical memory.

As Spiegel explains, in Jewish liturgical historical memory, past events are re-experienced through their liturgical commemoration in the present, fusing past and present. Benjamin et al. (2019a, p. 264) explains, “We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however”. Thus, the future is prohibited from being determinedly predicted. There is no room for passivity, as the future is not determined. The past becomes perpetually (re-)interpreted from the vantage of each new moment. All of the past’s unmaterialized potential, all those possibilities that could have happened and did not, join the present consciousness. In every moment, the past coexists with the present, while the future is only experienced as anticipation in the present. Benjamin continues, “For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter”. As a result, every present moment has narrow revolutionary potential. The arrival of the messiah is not relegated to a far-off future; the messiah might enter at any present moment. Thus, Benjamin’s fusion of historical materialism and Jewish mysticism brings together history and memory, the greatest significance of which is the revivification of the past in each present moment. Benjamin (2003b, p. 471) in *The Arcades Project* explains,

[...] history is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance <Eingedenken>. What science has ‘determined,’ remembrance can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete.

This reversibility of the past (through its remembrance) in each present moment is the intervention of theology. In addition, due to this reversibility, remembrance is different from simply commemorating the past, as the past in remembrance can be transformed, turning the incomplete happiness into the complete, and complete suffering into the incomplete, and adopting new interpretations based on the concerns of the present time. That is to say the suffering of those who were oppressed in the past and are dead now can be turned into incomplete by remembering their pain in relation to the present struggles, and by attempting to obtain their revolutionary goals. If the past can perpetually be (re-)interpreted in each present moment, therefore, past injustices can be reanimated in the present, and justice for past sufferings can be sought in each present moment as they are remembered.

In the Iranian context, for Shari’ati, the losses experienced by modern humanity were social responsibility and subjects’ relationship to the concrete realities of the postcolonial society. Shari’ati argued that people, in particular intellectuals, were dealing with a sense of displacement, as they were living in Iran, but imagined and perceived their location as a European metropolis, limiting their concerns to those of European thinkers. Moreover, as a result of a loss of touch with sociohistorical realities, communication between intellectuals and society at large was also lost. A subject who is not fully aware of the pain of their society is incapable of taking responsibility towards healing its wounds. According to Shari’ati, therefore, self-realization (awareness of sociohistorical particularities) is the prerequisite for political consciousness without which it is impossible to take social responsibility towards the pain of the society’s margins.

Shari’ati’s fusion of Shi’ism and Marxism was theoretically executed in response to the cleric class participating in a form of religion of legitimation that had become part of the oppressive establishment without familiarizing itself with contemporary sociopolitical issues, and also to scientific Marxism.

To Shari'ati, theology without Marxism was complicit with the social order, and Shi'ism was needed in order to move beyond the limitations of positivist Marxism and to articulate political experiences and narrations of resistance in a language that was accessible to Iran's society at large. Though the purpose of these specifics was to create a universal language of resistance, Shi'ism provided a language for resistance that was already available, through religious rituals and beliefs, to Iranian society. Shari'ati viewed positivism as estranging intellectuals from their own society, imagining that all societies are organized by the same rules and forces and, as a result, assuming they do not have to deal with the specifics of their social history. Positivism was, in other words, an alienating force, in particular in the postcolonial context. To Shari'ati, Shi'ism had an explosive energy, and if re-interpreted and fused with contemporary Marxist conceptions of history and human struggle, could have the potential to reform social ideals and create religio-ethical values in all different social layers, working towards the abolition of domination in the society and the formation of socially responsible subjects. Thus, Benjamin's issue with positivist Marxism was the linear and evolutionary conception of historical time, and Shari'ati's was the estrangement from sociohistorical concrete realities it engendered.

Fanon (2020, p. 669), in a letter to Shari'ati, expressed his intellectual skepticism towards employment of religion for the de-alienation of postcolonial society, worrying about sectarianism and withdrawal of the nation to its past and to itself, instead of towards a new future and the formation of an inclusive universalism. In response to Fanon, Shari'ati argued that the joining of postcolonial societies with liberal humanism without ensuring their sociohistorical awareness and anticolonial self-realization first would lead to Eurocentric monoculturalism. Moreover, the goal of theology in Shari'ati was to create a new humanism, with egalitarianism at the center of its religio-political ethics, where every subject finds themselves responsible for the suffering of the oppressed. In this sense, theology forms the revolutionary ethic in Shari'ati's political thought: A social responsibility towards the formation of an ideal society free from domination, and a repudiation of the status quo in imagination, act, and speech. In this ethic, there is no withdrawal of the society into itself and its past, as the focus is placed on the present. The past is always interpreted and re-interpreted from the vantage of present. Therefore, the past is invoked each time resistance towards domination is performed in the present, but it is the present social condition that determines the meaning that the past takes on in that moment. People in this imagined ideal society understand themselves as part of the same community, unified by their participation in the revolution of the oppressed (i.e., their social responsibility towards the most marginalized members and their imagining of the abolition of all forms of domination in every present moment). Their community is not formed based on any sectarian or national values, nor on the rehabilitation of perceived past racial or national glories. Through the formation of this new humanism of dominated communities, the Eurocentric universality model is transfigured and becomes more inclusive of non-Western historical experiences. In this new universality, different cultures mutually enrich each other.

Shari'ati, in his speech "*Mazhab alayh-e Mazhab*" ("Religion vs. Religion," 1970), defines *din-e enghelābi* (revolutionary religion) as a religion that does not stand indifferent towards the existing social order and, instead of being "the opiate of the masses," destroys domination in society. The revolutionary religion is, in fact, in opposition to the religion of legitimation, which always justifies the status quo. In Shari'ati's political thought, to be ethical is to be part of revolutionary religion. To Shari'ati, even the goals of the prophets of monolithic religions do not represent faith so much as the struggle towards the formation of a classless society (utopia). Thus, Shari'ati offers a Marxist and revolutionary narration of the history of religion. Shari'ati (1988, p. 31) expounds, "Did Moses not rebel before three symbols? Korah, the greatest capitalist of his time. Balaam, the greatest priest of that deviated religion of multitheism. And the Pharaoh, the greatest symbol of political power of his time. Did he not arise against the status quo?" As a result, every subject that stands against various forms of domination is a prophet. Theology for Shari'ati, therefore, is essential in changing social ideals and equating religious ethics with social responsibility towards abolition of all forms of domination. As a result,

religious duties are no longer related to faith, but rather must be employed towards the revolution of the oppressed.

For this work, Shari'ati became an alienated figure, prompting protest from clerics and Marxist intellectuals alike. The former deemed Shari'ati a heretic for his contemporization and "secularization" of Islamic history and philosophy, and for what they called Shari'ati's instrumentalization of Islam to propagate his revolutionary Marxist ideas. The latter objected to his religiosity, fearing that his work would lead to the popularization of Islamic thought. He was perceived either as an Islamist who Islamized Marxism, or as a Marxist who made Islamism Marxist. As [Abrahamian \(1983, p. 467\)](#) explains:

Some, struck by his anti-imperialist and anticapitalist outlook, labeled him an Islamic Marxist. Others, impressed by his devotion to the Islamic world, praised him as the Muslim answer to Marx. Shari'ati, however, viewed himself as neither a Muslim Marxist nor an anti-Marxist Muslim, but rather a radical theorist who found his inspiration in Shi'ism and his tools of political analysis in Western Social science—especially in Marxism.

Echoing Abrahamian's take, I suggest we examine the ways in which Shari'ati's theories give new complex dimensions to Marxist and anti-colonial thought—as well as to Shi'ism—and transform them. Shari'ati's ideas are the result of an inseparable fusion of Marxism, anti-colonialism, and Shi'ism. Theology in Shari'ati's oeuvre shapes a language for perpetual resistance, critiques injustice, and sees history and the present world afresh; his political–theological theories are critical of traditional religion's rigidity and its conformity to status quo. This is why clerics were against his work.

For both Benjamin and Shari'ati, theology is not employed to reflect on purely theological concerns, but rather in service of the revolution of the oppressed. For Shari'ati, theology had become complicit with the status quo and was in need of anti-colonial and Marxist revitalization and reinterpretation, but similar to Benjamin, he also views Marxism alone as too orthodox; it requires religion for a more dynamic understanding of history and social transformation. Ultimately, for both Shari'ati and Benjamin, theology and Marxism are in dialectical relation, as they reciprocally transform and complement each other.

3. Active Messianism

In 'Kasi ke mesl-e hich kas nist'—a poem by the twentieth-century Iranian poet [Farrokhzad et al. \(2010, p. 45\)](#)—the narrator, who is a young girl, delineates her dream for the coming of the Shia twelfth Imam (the Shia messiah), who will bring absolute peace and justice. The narrator feels incapable of achieving her desire (i.e., having the Shia messiah come to re-establish an egalitarian society). Thus, she feels insignificant. Being aware of her own limitations and that of the people around her—including those from the Slaughterhouse District, the most oppressed people in society—her desire for the messiah's return and the total transformation of society turns into longing. Thus, the desire for paradise on earth turns into a longing for a world in which there are no obstacles to universal emancipation. As a result, new desires to remove unjust obstacles are formed. In Farrokhzad's poem, these obstacles to the desired paradise are removed once inequalities are eliminated—that is, the bread and Pepsi are shared, and tickets to the cinema and admittance to the hospital are equally divided. *Entezār* (longing) for the return of the twelfth Shia Imam, as Farrokhzad poetically illustrates, is, in general, to repudiate the status quo, to long for the total revolution, and to dream of the ideal society.

Shari'ati, in his 1971 speech "Entezār Mazhab-e Eterāz" ("Longing: The Religion of Protest"), argues that those who long protest against the conditions of their time. However, according to Shari'ati, it is inadequate to merely long for the messiah in passivity; each subject must act as a messiah on the path towards justice. However, even to long for social utopia in passivity is better than having nothing to long for. To indicate the meaninglessness of contemporary life without longing, [Shari'ati \(1971a\)](#) protests, "In the current consumerist society all that people long for is the coming of a bus". Moreover, Shari'ati argues that there are two kinds of longing: Waiting for the messiah to appear to end all injustices with total resignation to the status quo (which he calls "negative longing"), and living in

a constant state of revolt and challenging the sociopolitical order (which he calls “positive longing,” which he considers the effective form). He adds that negative longing still says “no” to the status quo; those who long for a better future express dissatisfaction with the way things are. Thus, negative longing, though passive, still protests the current conditions and refuses to conform to the sociopolitical order. Longing and protestation are interconnected as “he who does not protest does not long and he who longs is challenging” (quoted in [Rahnema 2014](#), p. 283).

In the political thought of both Benjamin and Shari’ati, history is not defined based on the last day of judgement—each generation must act as messiah with a particular responsibility towards the past and present. For Shari’ati, each person must act, not only as messiah, but also as the prophet of monotheistic religions towards the abolition of all forms of domination. In this way, Shari’ati transforms Islamic religiosity into an active and modern messianism. In Shari’ati’s interpretation, longing is no longer defined by the twelfth Imam and his return. Rather, it is dependent upon individuals protesting and challenging the status quo. He supports this stance by referring to another verse by Forough Farrokhzad: “Remember the flight, the bird is mortal” ([Rahnema 2014](#), p. 283). Thus, it is not about the messiah. Instead, this new messianism must be remembered. In Shari’ati’s political thought, subjects do not act in fulfillment of their religious duty towards demiurge, they do not act in hope of paradise after death, they are supposed to act towards the materialization of a classless society in its ultimate worldly manner. They themselves play the role of demiurge. Each subject is responsible for the materialization of justice, the collective—the people—are the hands that care for themselves; there is no hand coming out of nowhere to act on behalf of the oppressed.

Shari’ati destabilizes any neat distinction between religious and secular discourse by allocating potential to each subject to participate in messianic acts. [Bielik-Robson \(2018, p. 135\)](#) argues that modern messianism blurs any neat distinction between religious and secular “because it endorses modernity as an epoch possessing its own unique religious characteristics, where men and women—instead of passively waiting for the Messiah or expecting providential care from God—become themselves the agents of the messianic transformation of the world”. Each subject has to perpetually politically prepare themselves for each moment being the time of dismantling of all unjust systems of domination. Thus, the longing for the messiah is the religion of protest, according to Shari’ati ([Rahnema 2014](#), p. 283), standing against the social order. Not only does this religion not exonerate people from responsibility, but it makes them responsible without any postponement to the future.

[Benjamin et al. \(2019a, p. 264\)](#) writes that “every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter”. In other words, there is no progress towards a particular time of a revolution in the far future—every moment could potentially be the moment of the revolution. Benjamin, in Thesis II of “Theses on the Concept of History” ([Benjamin et al. 2019a, p. 254](#)), states: “Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim”. Or, as [Jacob Taubes \(Dickinson and Stéphane 2016, p. 186\)](#) explains in *Walter Benjamin and Theology*, “Redemption does not mean a final revolution at the end of history. Here the messianic is distributed across history and the generations”. Each generation possesses a weak messianic power—i.e., a limited possibility of progressing towards the realization of paradise on earth. To both Shari’ati and Benjamin, the salvation of humanity lies in the hands of the most neglected subjects—similar to Marx’s proletarian revolution. It also relies on the discovery, in the present time, of the fleeting traces of oppressed peoples’ past. Thus, those past moments in which the neglected of history witnessed sparks of hope become the source of hope in the present. Indeed, this prominence of the past in the present distinguishes the political thought of both Benjamin and Shari’ati from Marx. [Benjamin \(2003a, p. 401\)](#), in Thesis XIVIIa of “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History’,” criticized Social Democrats for being future oriented and for quietly awaiting the arrival of the right moment in the future for the revolution: “In the idea of classless society, Marx secularized the idea of messianic time. And that was a good thing. It was only when the Social Democrats elevated this idea to an ‘ideal’ that the trouble began”. In other words, to Benjamin, Social Democrats’ approach

was a secularized form of passive messianism, awaiting for the revolution to occur, similar to what Shari'ati called negative longing.

Derrida (2002, p. 248), in *Marx and Sons*, distinguishes messianism from utopianism because the former “refers, in every here-now, to the coming of an eminently real, concrete event [. . .]”. Both Benjamin and Shari'ati are messianic thinkers (while in Shari'ati's thought, there simultaneously exists utopian). This means that in every moment, subjects must act as a messiah to bring justice to their generation and all the martyrs of the past. As Derrida explains, “messianicity mandates that we interrupt the ordinary course of things, time and history here-now [. . .]”. Every moment can potentially interrupt the course of history and can open a door to the coming of the messiah (according to Benjamin). Every moment has the potential for Hossein to conduct his revolution (for Shari'ati). However, the difference is that Shari'ati leaves room for the possibility of subjects who cannot participate in revolutionary acts or speech to experience utopianism. In their case, imagining utopia, as a negative (or passive) longing, is still considered more fruitful than not having any utopian horizon upon which to criticize the present conditions.

4. The Contemporaneity of the Past for Walter Benjamin

Jacob Taubes (Dickinson and Stéphane 2016, p. 184) in his lecture notes on Benjamin's philosophy of history explains, “Theology is for Benjamin messianism/the Messiah. It seems to be implausible, a dream, a myth. Historical materialism would have to enter into a pact with it”. Thus, theology for Benjamin plays a dream-like role, and historical materialism plays the role of being awake; the truth materializes at the time of awakening from a dream, the moment of dialectics between dream and awakening. In other words, we reach the truth by investigating the dialectics between theology and historical materialism. To Benjamin, theology, similar to intoxication and dream, interrupts the perception of linearity of time and history. Benjamin, throughout his oeuvre, is interested in interruptions of continuities of time, that is the reason dream (in the case of his work on Marcel Proust) and intoxication (in the case of his work on surrealism) are important states to him—in both of which an experience is detached from the movement of time. At the time of awakening or returning to sobriety, the truth fleetingly becomes evident in what Benjamin calls a moment of profane illumination. Benjamin (1999, p. 208), in “Surrealism”, expounds, “In the world's structure, dream loosens individuality like a bad tooth. This loosening of the self by intoxication is, at the same time, precisely the fruitful, living experience that allowed these people to step outside the charmed space of intoxication”. Thus, the loosening of the self results in further integration of the subject into the world, the result of which is “mundane profane illumination” (an insight into the conditions of the world) upon returning to outside of the space of dreaming or intoxication. However, what is special about this moment of awakening or returning to sobriety? Mosès (2009, p. 103), in *The Angel of History*, explains that the moment of awakening is a dialectic overturning and metamorphosis of awareness—at the moment of awakening or sobering up, what is perceived as a drunk hallucination or dream transforms into reality, and what had seemed to be reality, in retrospect, is revealed to have been drunk illusions or dreams.

The Benjamin scholar Andrew Benjamin argues that theology in Benjamin's oeuvre “is not straightforward Judeo-Christian theology, but rather a theology of the missed or distorted—hunchbacked—possibilities [. . .]”. It is a theology of the missed, oriented towards the past—whose survival is under threat, lest we forget it. Moreover, it is oriented towards all that had the possibility to happen, but it did not—all the failed revolutions and their crushed hopes and dreams—to the past not as an accumulation of objective facts, but as narratives imagined and re-interpreted through the prism of the present. The ghost of the past is left in ruins, but the past has left its smell and taste—its trace—on the present as well. The past comes back in the form of re-experiencing in the present moment. If the historical trace of that re-experience is not recognized, it will be relegated back to the land of the dead and destroyed. Benjamin calls this form of relation

to the past “concrete history”; it is a history that is captured and re-experienced in the here and now, as opposed to remembering the past as it had happened then and there.

Benjamin (2003b, p. 389), in *The Arcades Project*, says, “The new, dialectical method of doing history presents itself as the art of experiencing the present as waking world, a world to which that dream we name the past refers in truth”. If the past, therefore, is the state of dreaming, and the present is the state of being awake, the profane illumination occurs in a dialectical relationship between the two states. The dream, that is the past, is remembered at the time of awakening, when the threshold between sleep and dream is fragile. Benjamin (2003b, p. 462) explains, “the image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation”. The dialectical image, as concrete history, emerges from the constellation of what has been and the now. In that constellation, what has been (the past, the dream) can be remembered (at the time of awakening, the present) from a certain angle that was not perceived at the time of occurrence (during the dream-time).

It is helpful here to consider Benjamin’s writing on Marcel Proust, as this form of remembrance includes aspects of both Proustian voluntary and involuntary memory. The involuntary memory is a memory of the past that comes and haunts the present—it interrupts the flow of continuous time. Involuntary memory is the type of remembering that often occurs in *In Search Of Lost Times*, the book on which Benjamin wrote the essay “The Image of Proust” (1929). Proust’s remembrance of the past does not occur in a state of contemplation. Rather, the past repeats itself in a dream-like experience, thereby momentarily inhabiting the present. For example, as Proust drinks tea with little cakes (*petites madeleines*), the bodily experience fills him with the joy of remembering an unknown past. In this example, there is a “not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been” as Benjamin (2003b, p. 907) says; the mind has to work its way toward bringing the memory to consciousness. As Proust attempts to repeat the experience to achieve more joy, however, the magic fades away, and eventually he no longer feels it. The past that had haunted the present fleets away. As Benjamin et al. (2005, p. 244) explains, “Proust’s method is actualization, not reflection”. In other words, the past accidentally actualizes itself—a memory from the past comes to the surface to be sensed—but it takes a while for the memory to fully come to consciousness. A memory that would otherwise be left in the darkness of past time bubbles up to inhabit the present. This actualization of the past comes with happiness and redemption, an inherent happiness over something from the past surviving even though there was a risk of its absolute annihilation. However, the memory of the past only becomes conscious once the state of daydreaming transitions to awakening. According to Benjamin, the same way that Proust interrupted the continuity of narration to enjoy the survival of past memories, the continuity of historical narration must be interrupted for political remembrance of the past. However, remembering the past is not only done through involuntary memory, Benjamin (2003a, p. 316) explains in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”:

Where there is experience [*Erfahrung*] in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine in the memory [*Gedächtnis*] with material from the collective past. Rituals, with their ceremonies and their festivals (probably nowhere recalled in Proust’s work), kept producing the amalgamation of these two elements of memory [voluntary and involuntary memory] over and over again.

As a result, remembrance includes both voluntary and involuntary memory and is not entirely accidental (as with involuntary memories in Proust’s work), as individual memory is inseparable from the collective past. Likewise, remembrance is not identical to voluntary memory as remembrance transforms the past, as opposed to merely recalling it. Remembrance of the past thus makes a constellation of past and present—a new phenomenon altogether—and transforms past injustices into an incomplete affair. In Thesis XIV of “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin et al. (2019a, p. 261) says, “History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]”. The historicist narrates historical time as a continuous line of events. To Benjamin, however, that is the history that belongs to the victors. The now-time, on the

other hand, is ruptured, while the past is imagined from its prism. It is the reincarnation of past in the present, or now-time, that disrupts the continuous narration of history. Every historic moment in the present has revolutionary potential. It is important for each moment to find the memories of the past that have haunted it; once these past memories are revealed, the past surviving through remembrance, a chamber to the past that was formerly locked and kept in the dark opens up. Benjamin et al. (2019a, p. 260) explains,

For the revolutionary thinker, the peculiar revolutionary chance offered by every historical moment gets its warrant from the political situation. But it is equally grounded, for this thinker, in the right of entry which the historical moment enjoys vis-a-vis a quite distinct chamber of the past, one which up to that point has been closed and locked. The entrance into this chamber coincides in a strict sense with political action, and it is by means of such entry that political action, however destructive, reveals itself as messianic.

Past events are locked in chambers kept in dark hallways of history. Political action, which is destructive to the existing social order, has the messianic power to interrupt the course of history and provide an entrance into those formerly locked chambers of the past. Locked chambers contain missed revolutionary possibilities for egalitarianism that existed for the past oppressed. Remembrance of the past, however, is not sufficient as the limited messianic power of the present generation is to achieve the goals of past failed revolutions (reparation), and happiness in the present (which is related to redemption, for Benjamin) is only possible through endowing happiness to those who suffered in the past by obtaining their failed revolution's goals.

Similarly, the history of the oppressed has a subversive attitude towards the past social order. However, remembering the past can turn into a conventional ritual and heritage accepted simultaneously by ruling elites and oppressed. In the Thesis VI of "Thesis on The Philosophy of History," Benjamin et al. (2019a, p. 255) explains, "The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it". Hence, the point is not only to remember the past (as in a Proustian restoration of the past), or to preserve the past as a collective heritage. The point is to remember the historic struggles of the oppressed through the lens of political awareness informed by conditions of the present moment. Benjamin's revolutionary thought, therefore, resides in the convergence of the past struggles of the oppressed with today's struggle for egalitarianism, saving remembrance from the danger of conformism.

5. The Past in Shari'ati's Political Thought

In comparison, Shari'ati theorizes his concept of history with reference to historical determinism. As Rahnama (2014, p. 198) explains, "Labeling [Shari'ati's theory] 'historical determinism,' Shari'ati stated the victory of the oppressed of the world and the founding of a 'classless society' as God's irrefutable will". Despite this, however, Shari'ati's treatment of history is not deterministic; history, in his corpus, does not move forward in the linear path of progress. According to Shari'ati, almost contrary to his historical determinism (based on which history progresses towards the victory of the oppressed), history is the movement of ongoing disasters and the need for revolutionary actions to accumulate while past victims—the martyrs—with unhealed wounds look into the eyes of the present oppressed, waiting for their message to be heard, their stories to be invoked, and their revolutions' goals to be achieved. Shari'ati (1983, p. 15) in his book *Kavir* (written in 1968) formulates history as his main nemesis, the podium of ruling elites, and the suffocation of the downtrodden and their dreams:

It's as if history has killed my father, even worse than this, history has killed all my ancestors, all the talents and creative powers, all the dreams and beloved ones, all the great figures and ancestors of mine and yours, all of them have been slaughtered and suffocated by history.

Listen to the history, why cannot we hear the voices of the downtrodden? When I listen to history I can only hear the voices of kings, rulers, their poets, and those who expressed affection to them. What an irony that I have to deal with history days and nights despite all that animosity that exists between us.

In Shari'ati's view, history has suffocated the voices of the oppressed, but those voices need to become part of the present consciousness because there is a subversive component in the past of the oppressed that needs to be rehabilitated. The utopian possibilities of past moments may have failed, but their traces are left in the present. Benjamin (2003a, p. 390) also asked, "Doesn't a breath of the air that pervaded earlier days caress us as well? In the voices we hear, isn't there an echo of now silent ones?" For Benjamin as well, therefore, the past is not gone; the past voices are echoing but cannot be heard; they have become silent. At the same time, both Shari'ati and Benjamin are against the mere commemoration of the past. Their solution, rather, is to reanimate it in the present. In other words, today's political conditions create links to certain moments in the history of missed and failed revolutions, and our task is to give meaning to those past moments from the vantage of our present concerns and rehabilitate them in our actions and narrations. For both thinkers, righting the wrongs in the here and now somehow rights the wrong of the then and there as well, and achieving past revolutionaries' goals today brings redemption to their suffering. The responsibility of the present generation to the preceding ones, therefore, is to remember and actualize their past struggles in our present.

For Shari'ati, remembering the past specifically means re-performing it. Re-performing the past, in this context, means to identify oneself with archetypes of resistance and to assume these archetypal historical roles in contemporary scenarios. This requires us to articulate the experiences of the present in relation to the history of the failed revolutions of the oppressed (*mazlums*) and their thwarted hopes. Shari'ati theorized that to be socially responsible (which, to him, is the same as being religiously ethical) requires engagement in *yād* or *zeker* (remembrance) of the alternative history of the oppressed. This is the reason that *zākerin* or *yādāvarān* (reminders) have an essential role in Shi'ism, as Shari'ati discusses in *Naghsh-e Enghelābi-e Yād va Yādāvarān* (Shari'ati 1984). In Shi'ism, the past is remembered through collective rituals such as the recital commemoration of Karbala (i.e., the martyrdom of the third Shia Imam Hossein and his family). In the case of *ta'zieh* (the passion plays of Karbala tragedy), the past is not only remembered and recounted but reenacted. However, *ta'zieh*, as Said Arjomand (1984, p. 241) explains, was not always revolutionary:

[...] the spread of *ta'zieh* enhanced the political domination of the monarchy and the patrons among the nobility who controlled this branch of religious activity. This is especially so in that poems in praise of the shah preceded the beginning of *sinehzani* (beating of the chest) during the ceremonies. Furthermore, because of its tremendous cathartic effect on the spectators, the ceremonies acted as channels of discharge of potentially rebellious energy and thus aided the domestication of the masses.

Here, Shari'ati argues that from the Safavid era onward, the ruling elites officialized *yād* and *yādāvarān*. As a result, *yād* and *yādāvarān* turned into a tool for the government. As a result, as Shari'ati explains, to restore the subversive dimension to remembrance, it is necessary for knowledge and analysis of the events as well as their relationship to present social conditions to accompany their remembrance. Thus, to perform the past, Shari'ati re-interprets Islamic history to create archetypes of resistance. Each subject, to properly remember the past oppressed revolutionaries, must identify with and re-perform the roles of those archetypes in the present.

In this perpetual revolution, several Islamic figures play an essential role in Shari'ati's theology of revolution, some of whom I discuss in this essay, such as the third Shia Imam Hossein, his sister Zaynab, and the twelfth Imam, who is the Shia Messiah. Hossein and Zaynab play the most essential role in Shari'ati's oeuvre. Hossein and his revolt epitomized the martyred ancestors and past revolutions of

the oppressed against injustice. Nikki Keddie, in her book *Iran and The Muslim World* (Keddie 1999, p. 155), explains the role of Imam Hossein in Shia cultural imagination as follows:

Imam Husain [an alternative spelling of Hossein], chose to fight the Umayyads with a small band of followers, and was slaughtered along with most of them. His death provided the archetypal martyrdom for Shi'is, and is still the paradigm of suffering martyrdom and/or resistance to tyranny, particularly in what later became the dominant, Twelver, branch of Shi'ism.

Then, after Hossein's martyrdom in Karbala on the Day of Ashura during the reign of the second Umayyad caliph Yazid, his sister Zaynab gave a speech to articulate the injustice that was brought to her family. Hers was not only a eulogy, it was a testimony to injustice; Zaynab thus symbolizes the historical truth, and the utterance of the word against injustice, through which the social awareness of society will be raised. In other words, Hossein represents the revolutionary act, and Zaynab represents the revolutionary speech. Lastly, the twelfth Shia Imam—the Shia messiah—also represents the longing for total revolution, saying no—in act or imagination—to the status quo.

In Shari'ati's political thought, each politically conscious subject, in order to avoid conformism to the idols of the religion of legitimation (or the status quo), must identify with and act as Hossein (i.e., participate in the revolutionary act) or Zaynab (i.e., be a witness to the struggle and raise social awareness), participate in messianic action for the materialization of classless society, or at the very least be critical of the present by imagining, dreaming, and longing for the utopian transformation of society. These archetypal self-identifications are, in fact, the subjects' religio-ethical responsibility. Shari'ati brought these figures from "heaven" to earth. Every subject thus had the potential to act and speak as Hossein, the messiah, and Zaynab. Anyone who acted towards obliteration of domination in society was a prophet. This was heresy to most clerics of the time, and they considered Shari'ati the most dangerous threat against Islam.

Zaynab is a woman and Hossein is a man, yet Shari'ati does not gender speech or act by characterizing Zaynab as a woman, or Hossein as a man. Diane D'Souza, in the book *Partners of Zaynab*, explains that Islamic thinkers often consider the role of women in Karbala to be peripheral, "When we frame the story of Karbala as a tale of martyrdom—defining bravery as the choice to give one's life on the battlefield—women automatically fall on the periphery" (D'Souza 2014, p. 35). However, Zaynab does not have a peripheral role in Shari'ati's interpretation of Karbala. Shari'ati portrays Zaynab as the messenger of Hossein's revolution, without whom Hossein's revolution could be lost in the darkness of history. He also does relate Zaynab to women's cause, positioning her as an archetype of liberation from both backward traditions and deceptions of modern capitalism. In his *Niayesh* ("Prayers") he (Shari'ati 1985, p. 63) poetically speaks with Zaynab:

The women of our nations need you, the women to whom your name brings pain and sets their hearts on fire; more than any time before, "ignorance" is softly enslaving them and oppressing them anew, and is estranging them from themselves and from you, make them revolt against the rotted traditions and new lousy invitations, against objectifying forces of old prejudices and new entertainments, make them revolt with the force of your screams that you shouted on the city of injustice and terror, and shook the pillars of the castle of power and oppression. So that they revolt inside themselves, and tear up the spiderweb of deception, [. . .] and free themselves from the shrines of old slavery and new crude markets.

Shari'ati poetically illustrates a link between pain and political awareness; Zaynab's life story brings pain to her audience due to the sufferings that were inflicted upon her and her family, and the fire of the pain (that the audience feels) purifies hearts through which the observance of truth becomes facilitated. Here, the audience connects Zaynab's pain to present social injustices. As a result, the pain that the audience feels raises social awareness against the injustice to which the oppressed have historically been exposed. However, why does estrangement from Zaynab result in estrangement

from the self for Shari'ati? In answer, the self here is one that is politically committed to abolition of all forms of domination, and Zaynab represents utterance of truth for raising social awareness and responsibility towards the suffering of the oppressed. This is why estrangement from the politically committed self accompanies estrangement from Zaynab, i.e., the utterance of truth. In Shari'ati's view, women cannot flourish to their full potential as long as they live under the traditional cultural norms. However, he is equally critical of the modern replacements, i.e., being consumeristic, entertaining, and market-oriented. He argues that obtaining political consciousness and social responsibility instead of following old ways or new modern consumerism is the path to women's freedom. The equation of modern pleasures with superficiality and a lack of political consciousness is a limitation in Shari'ati's political thought, a view he shared with his contemporaneous Marxist thinkers. Both men and women in postcolonial society, in Shari'ati's political thought, move from a dehumanized state of cultural alienation towards self-realization once they come in touch with their social history (from which they are estranged) and begin to imagine, act, or talk towards the transformation of their society towards egalitarianism. Shari'ati, in his theorization of alienation, disregards the role of gender, and implies alienation affects all in similar ways. For subjects of all genders, the salvation of humanity lies in obtaining political consciousness and taking sociopolitical responsibility for the pain of the most marginalized members of society.

In Shari'ati's thought, the ethical act is to re-enact and re-experience the past in every moment in the present as Hossein, Zaynab, or Messiah. Similar to acting in *ta'zieh*, where the actor plays the role of one of the figures of Karbala, subjects must act as Hossein or Zaynab, for which they need to find the parallels between their social conditions and those of Hossein and Zaynab. Shari'ati (1982, p. 21) states:

Tonight, I observed what happened to Hossein in Karbala (and the world witnessed) is similar to this current vast pain and catastrophic destiny from which I am moaning. Similarity? Yes, the similarity that exists between a caricature and absolute truth, the similarity that exists between the acting of villagers in *ta'zieh* and the Karbala event itself, and the similarity that exists between God and human.

The truth of Hossein's story reveals itself to Shari'ati from the time he moans out of pain. A pain that Shari'ati found to be similar to the one Hossein had felt in Karbala, but this similarity was of the type that exists between acting in *ta'zieh* and experiencing Karbala itself. In other words, Karbala is the original, and the present is a performance of the original. However, the relationship between past and present is not always that of original versus copy to Shari'ati. Writing about the Karbala event in the solitude of his home in Mashhad, on the night of commemoration of Ashura in the year 1970, Shari'ati (*ibid.*, p. 22) expresses that he was feeling pain to the point of intoxication:

In these strange moments, I am feeling completely rapturous; and pain, as soon as, reaches the absolute ultimate point, turns into an intoxicating and illuminating force, and gives one a sense of tranquility. It is the small pains that crush you and make you feel poorly, but this pain has left me in an ecstatic dreamy state, as if it is not me anymore.

Then, as he was feeling ecstatic and rapturous as we see above, in a Proustian moment, he feels haunted by the past and sees an image: "How strange! The Karbala scene all of a sudden appeared right in front of my eyes, and expanded itself to cover the whole earth, Hossein in line with his seventy-two warriors in his revolution extended from the beginning of history, the creation of Adam, to the end". Shari'ati reports to his readers that, once awakened from the rapturous world, in a moment of illumination due to the ecstasy of pain, the truth was exhibited to him. This truth was that Karbala is everywhere, the whole earth, and that Ashura begins from the creation of mankind and lasts to the end of history. In other words, history is a continuous revolution of the oppressed, and politically conscious subjects must either play the revolutionary role of Hossein or play the role of Zaynab and be the messenger of the revolution.

Remembrance of revolutionary figures (who symbolize the struggle for the abolition of dominance in society) creates a different conception of history. It is not the historiography of the victors whose “success” in conquest accumulates towards a gradual improvement of the world. It is a historiography of interminable defeats. For Shari’ati (1981, p. 25), “Every Revolution has two visages: blood and message”. Shari’ati’s historiography, therefore, aims to convey the message of past revolutions through remembrance, but the past is not simply remembered as past; for instance, he does not invoke Hossein and his revolution as a past figure and event belonging to history and finished. As long as the injustices battled by Hossein exist, every place on earth is the location of his battle and martyrdom, and every day is the day of his revolution.

It is however not sufficient to only remember Hossein’s revolution. Shari’ati states, “The martyrs have said what they had to say and they addressed us deaf ones. [. . .] Today the martyrs have left their message with their blood. They sit upon the floor opposite us, inviting the seated of history to arise” (Ibid, p. 15). For Shari’ati, the martyrs—i.e., the past generations—eagerly wait for the current generation to revolt to achieve the objectives of their failed revolutions. Thus, remembrance and the contemplation of past injustices are not enough. Political action that atones for past griefs is necessary.

6. History through the Slave Ancestors

To Marx, the dead must be buried by the dead. In other words, the past is over. As Marx (Elster 1986, p. 279) states, “In order to arrive at its own content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead”. For both Benjamin and Shari’ati, however, the past is always superimposed on the present. For Shari’ati, Hossein is not merely waiting for the oppressed of the world to remember him and his struggle, but to conduct political acts and achieve the social utopia for which he fought. The martyred, for Shari’ati, are not dead and buried; they are witnesses providing testimonies of the injustices that the oppressed bear. An “authentic” moment of political resistance thus fights both the present and past struggles of the oppressed. Buck-Morss (1981), in her essay “Walter Benjamin—Revolutionary Writer (II),” explains,

But only the exploited classes experienced the superimposition of the past on the present in a way which motivated revolutionary action, that is, with anger. For them, the arcades provided ‘the image of enslaved ancestors,’ who had produced the world in its material form but did not own it, and whose cultural inheritance had been usurped by the ruling class.

This superimposition of the past on the present, for the oppressed, results in an accumulation of rage towards historical injustice. Upon visiting the Egyptian Pyramids, Shari’ati noticed the graves of the slaves next to the grandiosity of the civilization represented in the pyramids; he wrote a letter to these slaves as a result, published in his book *Āri, In Chenin Bood, Barādar!* (Yes, That is How It Was, Brother!, 1971). The tourist guide informs Shari’ati that the slaves are buried next to the pyramids for their souls to safeguard the soul of the pharaohs. As he (Shari’ati 1971b, p. 2) explains:

I told the tourist guide that I no longer needed him. I sat next to the slaves’ catacombs and felt strong kindred ties to them. I realized that I and the slaves are from one race. It is true that I come from a far country and these are all from a different history and race, but these despicable and fanatic divisions are here to separate humanity, to make us strangers to one another, [. . .] from besides the graves of the slaves. I looked at the pyramids and realized that I feel no closeness to the grandiosity of the pyramids. Worse, I realized that I feel rage towards it, and then I realized that all the magnificent heritage of the world throughout history that have formed civilizations are all built on the bones of my [slave] brothers.

To Shari’ati, therefore, the consciousness that seeks justice looks at the slave ancestors and its rage towards present oppression builds itself on the slave ancestors’ rage. That is the reason that, to both Benjamin and Shari’ati, the past is remembered through its relationship with the present social conditions. Benjamin et al. (2019a, p. 259) states,

The Social Democrats preferred to cast the working class in the role of a redeemer of future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This indoctrination made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than by the ideal of liberated grandchildren.

In contrast to Marx's notion of letting the dead bury the dead, therefore, both Benjamin and Shari'ati's approach towards history is to interpret and narrate the present resistance through the lens of past struggles. Though the slave ancestors were buried in countless groups for their souls to safeguard the souls of the pharaohs, their proper burial is only possible when the structures of domination that oppressed them are dismantled in the present. This is the same approach that finds all of space and time to be Karbala and Ashura until the materialization of social utopia.

Walter Benjamin, in Thesis II of "Theses on the Concept of History" (Benjamin et al. 2019a, p. 254) states: "Such a claim [the claim of the past generations over present] cannot be settled cheaply". The past is incomplete, and past sufferings are not over, given that they still have a claim over future generations (according to Benjamin's ethical philosophy of history). Redemption in the present is dependent on redemption of the past oppressed people. In other words, it is impossible to reach fulfilment in the present time without reparation for the past sufferings. The past generations who suffered are entitled to justice and their revolutionary objectives. The reparation for the past sufferings can only be achieved through remembrance of the past and its utopian aspirations, and the materializing of past utopian objectives.

Shari'ati, by identifying Hossein as a witness on behalf of all the oppressed in the trial of history, re-narrates Islamic history with Hossein at its center, turning his audiences into spectators of historic traumas that, according to Shari'ati, are still ongoing. Martyrs invite the present generations to arise as (a) what happened in the past is not finished; (b) remembering the past martyrs and the contemplation of past injustices is necessary, but not sufficient—political action must be accompanied; (c) the martyrs are not in peace, they are watching us, as their enemy (the ongoing system of domination) is still powerful and, if the enemy is victorious again, even the memory of their stories will be annihilated as the oppressor writes history from their vantage. The past is thus incomplete in terms of the past demands of the failed revolutions that have never materialized. We atone for past griefs by remembering them and attempting to attain their dreams.

7. Khosrow Golsorkhi and the Real State of Emergency

Benjamin et al. (2019a, p. 257), in Thesis VIII of "Thesis of Philosophy of History" explains, "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that accords with this insight". Here, Benjamin criticizes the conception of history in which fascism—or more generally, the violence of ruling elites—is treated not as the rule but the exception. The state of emergency is the ruling elites' violence that the oppressed are exposed to and whether it is perceived as a norm. Benjamin distinguishes it from the real state of emergency, i.e., the revolution of the oppressed, that interrupts history. He argues that winning against the historical enemy requires a "real state of emergency" or an interruption in the flow of the time. In the Iranian context, Shari'ati (1981, p. 25) states, "In history's everlasting battlefield, in the eternity of time, and in all places upon the earth: 'All scenes are Karbala, All months are Muharram, All days are Ashura.'" Here, Shari'ati argues that every time and place in the world or in history is where (Karbala) and when (Ashura) Hossein stood against injustice. Thus, if every place and time is Karbala and Ashura, then the state of emergency for the oppressed is always present, and the task—the only way to be ethical—is to take responsibility for turning that situation into a site of resistance. Indeed, Shari'ati theorizes Ashura and Karbala as the ultimate moment of resistance, utilizing both word and action. As a result, Hossein and Zaynab turn a state of emergency created by the ruling elites into what Benjamin would call a "real state of emergency". Shari'ati's reinterpretation of Hossein and Zaynab as archetypes of resistance that must be actualized and performed turns the

real state of emergency (conducted by the oppressed) into perpetual, ethical norms of conduct until the formation of classless society.

Shari'ati's political thoughts were influential on the political approaches and gestures of the 1979 revolutionaries. The self-defense of the revolutionary hero, Marxist poet, and journalist Khosrow Golsorkhi, in a military court, five years prior to the 1979 Revolution (occurring around the same time that Shari'ati gave his speeches), is an emblem of the efficacy of Shari'ati's political thought in Iran at the time. Golsorkhi and several others were accused of plotting to take the royal family hostage. Golsorkhi, in his defense, makes clear that he identifies himself with Hossein and the military court with the governors of Yazid (who slaughtered Hossein). On this point, [Vahabzadeh \(2010, p. 219\)](#) explains:

Golsorkhi's bold defense statements shook the country as he openly attacked the regime and defended both Marxism and revolutionary Islam. 'As a Marxist-Leninist, I first found social justice in the School of Islam and then arrived at socialism,' he declared. 'I do not haggle for my life here, for I am the child of a courageous and militant people' [...]

Golsorkhi turns the court into an emblem of the larger battle between oppressed and oppressors throughout history. Golsorkhi knew that he was steps away from execution, yet instead of recanting or even defending himself, he restores the subversive dimension of the history of Karbala and Ashura and reanimates them. Moreover, he saves them from being claimed and used as a tool by the ruling elites by tying them to the struggle of the oppressed of the time. The past contains revolutionary potentials, but if these potentials are not remembered and actualized by the oppressed, the ruling elites may subsume them into conformism.

The moment of saving the past, for Benjamin, is the moment of danger. [Benjamin et al. \(2019a, p. 255\)](#) says, "To articulate the past historically [...] means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger". If the past is not saved at the moment of danger then the past becomes irretrievable. Benjamin explains that the reality of the past becomes "authentically" evident to the oppressed at moments of danger since, during these moments, the historiography focuses on the defeats over the conquests. As a result, those presently in danger, to historicize the current catastrophe, must create a constellation of their current social conditions and past stories of defeat through memory. To Shari'ati, this moment of danger is always now; everywhere is Karbala and every time is Ashura. Every historicization, in Shari'ati's political thought, begins with defeats and moments of danger due to the centrality of Karbala and Hossein's revolution.

8. The Revolutionary Violence as a Sign, Not as a Means to an Ends

Shari'ati was deeply skeptical of any religious or political promise of afterlife paradise, arguing such a promise is reactionary clergy's and ruling elites' naturalization of the status quo. According to him, it is only the religion of legitimation that promises paradise in the afterlife. For Shari'ati, the paradise was supposed to materialize on earth. The classless utopia was not to be materialized in the afterlife, it was the future to which the society had to aspire and it was used to perpetually produce critiques of the existing social order. As a result, the subjects' identification with Hossein, for Shari'ati, was not a means to reach the end goal of paradise in the afterlife. Hossein's martyrdom serves no means; it is not a means to punish or retaliate against power either. Hossein's martyrdom is merely a sign that the world is ethically uninhabitable. Additionally, Hossein is *mazlum* (innocent), as he was helplessly wronged by the power. Hence, there is an ethical measurement for whom can play the role of Hossein, the candidate must be judged as *mazlum* (helpless and innocent) in the community's consciousness. Therefore, the revolutionary violence in this context differs from the Islamist suicide bombers' violence, which is a means to the paradise end and/or retaliation against certain entities and governments.

Shari'ati narrated that Adam and Eve were only angels before their rebellion, and they became human after they rebelled against heaven and god's will, and the apple was in fact their enlightenment obtained through their subversive act ([Shari'ati 1973](#)). As a result, the emancipation of humanity from

the paradise of unawareness, in Shari'ati's thought, requires rebellion and social consciousness, and pain accompanies this whole process of subjects becoming conscious. This rebellion is not conducted in the name of God (contrary to Islamist suicide bomber's violence, which is carried out on behalf of God), the subjects are not the representative of God, they (similar to Adam and Eve) are rather on their own alone in the world, but their act somehow fulfills God's creation as well. In other words, in Shari'ati's narration of Hossein's martyrdom, Hossein is not acting on behalf of God, he is not the representative of any higher force, he is helplessly alone in the world. The subjects who re-perform Hossein's revolution throughout history, rupture the division between profane and divine through their rebellion. For Benjamin, only Messiah ruptures the separate spheres of divine and profane, but human activity which belongs to profane can reach divine. As Benjamin explains in the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, through sacrificing the flesh, the tragic hero immortalizes their body by turning it into a message. Benjamin and Eiland (2019, p. 103) states, "In the presence of the suffering hero, the community learns reverential gratitude for the word the hero's death has conferred on it". The death of the tragic hero turns into a message that lasts forever through the community's remembrance. Jacobson (2003, p. 7), in *Metaphysics of the Profane*, explains, "Benjamin seeks to define a dimension of human activity capable of reaching the divine in representative form. This largely unintentional activity requires the kind of devotion he discovers in the hero of tragic drama". The tragic hero reaches the divine by immortalizing the flesh exactly through its extinction. To Shari'ati, once we rebel and become conscious subjects, we also blur the distinctions between profane and divine, we become identical to Hossein and messiah, and through the message we become immortal.

Shari'ati revisited his ideas of martyrdom after a period of his imprisonment and after he lost several of his students. He argued that the movement was not mature enough to focus on action, and it still had to develop itself in terms of theoretical foundation and critical outlook. Rahnema (2014, p. 357) explains, "This stage was therefore in urgent need of appropriate intellectual 'nutrition', which in turn could only be provided through reflection. Neglecting the task of ideological development, Shari'ati argued, exposed the nascent ideology to 'frightful and catastrophic consequences' [...]". Despite Shari'ati's revisions, the binary of Hossein and the tyrant remained essential in the movement that led to the 1979 Revolution, the binary resulted in the culmination of rage against the establishment; however, it left a limited space for considering reform or assessing the state to which the society and establishment were transitioning.

9. Conclusions

In this comparative analysis, I have shed light on the particular ways Shari'ati engages with Shia theology and interpretation of Islamic history in his theorization of an anticolonial, anti-domination revolution of the oppressed of society. This was drawn out through comparison with Benjamin, whose Marxism was "re-fused" with Jewish theology to seize the possibilities of past failed revolutions in the present.

Commemoration of past events plays an essential role in both Shi'ism and Judaism. Both Shari'ati and Benjamin turned a religious ritual to ethico-political of the revolution and incorporated a politicized form of commemoration in their theories, remembering the past, however, was not sufficient if it was not accompanied with political analysis from the angle of the present time demands. For Benjamin, in every present time there is a link to a past event (related to the history of the oppressed) that is in the dark, remembering that past event in the present is to reanimate it and create a constellation of that past and present. For Shari'ati, the subjects who remember the past must themselves be the agents of social transformation. The past must be reenacted in the present in the form of a passion play, where subjects re-perform the roles of past revolutionaries in their present-day scenarios while considering their connection to the past; subjects also play the role of monotheistic prophets or messiah once they oppose domination in society. Shari'ati transformed Islamic religiosity into an active and modern messianism.

If Hossein's revolt was his fate, subjects who (re-)performed Hossein's resistance, in Shari'ati's interpretation, were revolting (to move away from fate) to take control over theirs and society's destiny and to gain freedom from fatalism. In Shari'ati's interpretation, religion no longer consisted of rituals and myth, as the revolutionary religion was supposed to be practiced as ethico-political responsibility towards the formation of egalitarianism and re-performance of Hossein's revolt and Zainab's role in truth telling. To be religious was no longer about following the orders of God, it was about becoming conscious subjects in the process of rebelling against the social order. In Shari'ati's modernization of Shi'ism, theology becomes as worldly as possible, and subjects are given the ultimate responsibility, to be socially aware as their religious duty, and to rebel for their redeemed humanity to shape. Shari'ati's re-interpretation and re-narration of Shia history effectively transformed his theories to society by creating archetypes of resistance and ethico-political values and ideals. Benjamin created a critical and creative space for the history of what is failed, missed, or destroyed to have a chance to be reversed in the present through remembrance of past, to plant the present time demands and dreams on the past generations' unmaterialized objectives and hopes.

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