

## Variations on Time: Reading Paolo Virno Reading Ernst Bloch

This essay discusses the concept of non-chronological time through the philosophies of Paolo Virno and Ernst Bloch, mostly focusing on Virno's Déjà vu and the End of History, originally published as Il Ricordo del Presente in 1999. In this work, Virno formulates the thesis that capitalism is the first social form that historicizes the metahistorical and non-chronological invariant that defines human life. An important element in Virno's argument is what he presents as a more radical reinterpretation of Ernst Bloch's idea of the "contemporaneity of the non-contemporary." Virno translates Bloch's notion of ungleichzeitigkeit as coexistence of potentiality and act, or labour-power and commodity. In many respects, Bloch and Virno could be aligned as thinkers of a non-chronological time of possibility in the tradition of historical materialism. However, Virno's engagement with Bloch seems to be missing central aspects of Bloch's original formula. Unlike Virno, Bloch's philosophy does not limit the non-chronological to temporal anteriority or heterogeneity but, on the contrary, Bloch's theory of time uncovers the non-linear dialectical contradictions between unfinished pasts and open-ended futures.

This essay articulates a comparative reading of philosophical works by twentieth-century German author Ernst Bloch and contemporary Italian thinker Paolo Virno. My argument mostly centres on the different ways in which these critics conceptualise a notion of time outside the order of chronology. However, a rapprochement between Bloch and Virno also reveals wider paradoxes and parallels between the German tradition of Hegelian Marxism and Italian workerist and post-workerist thought. These two strands in Marxism represent divergent variants of a materialist philosophy of time. On the one hand, the Hegelian Marxist heritage epitomised by Bloch is animated by an unorthodox, utopian and, in Cat Moir's expression, "speculative" materialism (Moir 2019). From this standpoint, the non-chronological does not represent a transcendental condition of possibility or a trans-historical faculty, but rather the immanent recombination of social realities within the secular field of uneven historical development. On the other hand, Virno's reframing of the non-chronological illuminates post-workerism's shift from modern paradigms of history to post-Fordism and the general intellect, immaterial labour, potentiality, and what Virno describes as a "blasphemous metaphysics" (Virno 2015b, 237).

Bloch's Hegelian Marxism fully belongs to twentieth-century politics: he was famously portrayed by Oskar Negt as the "German philosopher of the October Revolution" (Negt and Zipes 1975) and settled in East Germany in the 1950s after his American exile during World War II. On the other hand, critics like Steve Wright, Giuseppina Mecchia and Max Henninger (Wright 2002; Mecchia and Henninger 2007) have shown how post-workerism emerged as a political trend in Italy after the collapse of the autonomist movements and struggles of the 1960s. The sense of history that informs Virno's current thought, for this reason, cannot be detached from a perceived crisis of the Fordist model of factory work and a break from the revolutionary traditions of twentieth-century militancy.

Broadly speaking, a reappraisal of these two views can help rethink historical materialism as a challenge to the presentism of the capitalist order of things and reimagine what Jodi Dean tellingly portrays as the “communist horizon” today. Bloch’s dialectical materialism might seem tied to superseded attachments to modernity as a framework for thinking political action and transformation. However, the heretical and rebellious elements of his thought are still largely disregarded in contemporary autonomist philosophies. This essay suggests that Virno’s reinterpretation of Bloch’s idea of the non-chronological misses some aspects of Bloch that are still central to our times. Most importantly, affiliating the Hegelian Marxism of Bloch to post-workerist theory can help disentangle non-chronological time from anamnestic reductions to anteriority that impede the construction of a genuine philosophy of the future in the present.

In his book Il Ricordo del Presente (1999), translated in 2015a as Déjà vu and the End of History, Paolo Virno tackles a long-standing question in Marxist theory, which concerns the historical consciousness produced by the onset of capitalism. In this context, Virno makes some audacious claims, which gather in an important passage of the book, where he writes that capitalism “is the first fully historical form of social organisation” (Virno 2015a, 161). Against ideologies of the end of history, Virno suggests that our epoch is the first that could be properly defined historical – at the end of the twentieth century, when the original Italian was published, but even more in the first decades of the twenty-first. Virno’s thesis about the historicity of capitalism offers many points for reflection about the nature of historical time and possible readjustments to historical materialism for our century.

In Virno’s account, capitalism turns a non-chronological and metahistorical plane of potentiality into an actual historical object, the commodity. Capitalism is historical because it historicises the metahistorical and non-chronological potential of human life, which in Virno’s philosophy is utterly opposed to chronological, historical time. This process is

charted through the phenomenon of *déjà vu* and a rethinking of the commodification of labour-power. While setting the non-chronological as resistance to capital, Virno makes some passing references to an influential idea in historical materialism: German philosopher Ernst Bloch's ungleichzeitigkeit, variously translated as “non-simultaneity,” “non-contemporaneity,” “non-synchronism,” or, in Peter Osborne’s suggestive proposal, “non-sametimeliness” (Osborne 2015a). Virno’s engagement with Bloch raises some unsettled issues about the meaning of historical time and the possibility of social change in an era of global capitalism.

The philosophies of Virno and Bloch purport an extended, non-chronological Now. However, there are profound differences between these two authors and their respective views on historical materialism. Indeed, the dialectical and materialist aspects of Bloch’s formula seem to be underexposed in Virno’s emphasis on the heterogeneity rather than active combination of different times that constitute capitalist temporality. While Virno’s perspective is restricted to what Bloch would describe as the “synchronous” contradiction, non-synchronic time exceeds and complicates “the battlefield between proletariat and big business as the space of today’s decision” (Bloch 1991, 110). Furthermore, Virno’s brisk aside to Bloch’s thoughts on *déjà vu* proves the discrepancy between a concept of the non-chronological inspired by Bloch and the one developed by Virno. Virno’s reading of Bloch reveals vital aspects of this question while outlining the continued relevance of debates on non-chronological temporalities today. In the first part of this essay, I will retrace the argument between Bloch and Virno on the question of the non-chronological as metahistorical invariant. In the second part of the essay, I will expand the debate by engaging with the vexed issue of the *déjà vu*, which will fully uncover the difference between Virno’s and Bloch’s philosophies of time.

### 1. First Variation: Thinking beyond Chronology

Virno's reflections on history and time revolve around his thesis that capitalism is the only economic form that has historicised the meta-historical. This is the case, however, not simply because capitalism "spells the ruin of every established tradition, fomenting the uninterrupted revolutionising of the processes of production and customs of life" (Virno 2015a, 161).

Capitalism is an economic system that leaves nothing untouched, as it engulfs every aspect of life and subjects everything to the logic of commodification. However, according to Virno, this is not the real cause that makes capitalism properly historical. In fact, there is a "more radical reason" to claim that capitalism is the first "fully historical" formation: if we call "the conditions that guarantee the history of any given event 'meta-historical,' we could say that capitalism historicises meta-history, bringing it into the prosaic ambit of events and appropriating it for itself" (161). The process of historicising the meta-historical identified by Virno concerns the historicization of human life. Capitalism is the first economic system that turns the inexhaustible living faculty or potential of human beings into an historical, worldly, and finite thing: a commodity. In this regard, he explains:

Capitalism lays its claim to meta-historical production-in-general, conferring on it the rank of an empirical phenomenon for the first time, because its peculiar historical character (that which most separates it from the previous social social systems) consists in reducing the generic production-potential to a commodity. Meta-history irrupts into ordinary history in the none-too-sublime guise of labour-power. (161-162)

Labour-power is the name of a trans-historically invariant faculty that capitalism, for the first time, turns into a commodity: the transhistorical, biological ability to produce things becomes an historical product sold and exchanged.

More widely, the historicization of labour-power under capitalism illustrates underlying terms of Virno's general theory of temporality. Throughout his book on *déjà vu*, Virno develops a philosophical discourse on time: alongside historical, experienced time, there is a non-temporal, non-chronological residue that coexists with the present and works as a sort of non-historical condition of possibility of history itself. Virno argues that history cannot be reduced to chronology and to the empty and homogeneous time of calendars. Alongside historical time there exists an excess, irreducible to the temporal order of past, present and future. In the capitalist process of historicising this meta-historical plane, the non-chronological would represent a resistance to capitalism's appropriation and commodification of everything. Virno explains this radical difference between chronological and non-chronological by making a distinction between specific acts, such as the act of walking, which take place in time, and the capacity to produce these acts, which "seems to exist before, but also during and after, any given stroll [. . .] The faculty resembles a uniform duration, a continuum that envelops and circumscribes discrete units, single realisations" (69). This continuum that seems to encompass experienced time, however, should not be seen as a sort of eternal present or a continued temporal duration, in that "the 'always' of potential does not mean that it is perennially present, but rather that it is perennially unable to coincide with actuality" (70). The capacity or potential is a sort of atemporal precondition of time, "the persistent not-now against which each hic et nunc is defined, the unmovable latency [. . .] What persists as not-now is time as a whole, all-embracing time, the entirety of time within which succession and simultaneity take place" (70). The totality of time emerges as a sort of atemporal precondition of time itself, always activated in, and yet never coinciding with, the

actual events of history. In Virno's philosophy, this sort of atemporal precondition of time, the "not-now" coexisting with any present moment, is defined as the field of non-chronological potentiality.

Virno's important reflections on language further illustrate a philosophy of time revolving around the tension between historical variables and a meta-historical invariant or faculty. As he notes in his reworking of various schools of linguistics from Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralism to Noam Chomsky's Universal Grammar in When the Word Becomes Flesh: "I am convinced that the existence of a generic faculty, separate from the myriad historical languages, clearly attests to the non-specialised character of the human animal, that is, to its innate familiarity with a dynamis, a potentiality, that can never be fully realized" (Virno 2015b, 189). For Virno, language can reveal the "irreducible, even incommensurable difference" (190) between, on the one hand, the biological, innate, and meta-historical potentiality inherent to the human animal and, on the other hand, its actualisation in historical languages and variables. The chronological, temporal dimension of historical languages is in a state of "permanent separation and interconnection" (190) with the prior, meta-historical condition of possibility embodied by the linguistic faculty as an inexhaustible reservoir of potentialities. This linguistic predisposition cannot be captured by any historical language and exceeds any historical manifestation, as Virno explains:

In a way, the linguistic faculty is a generic predisposition [. . .] It is innate but unrefined, biological but purely potential [. . .] This predisposition persists as an inalterable background even when we master a certain historical language. This potential is not an accidental gap, destined to be filled [. . .] The dynamis does not disappear when we actually utter a sentence, nor does it become an archive of predefined executions (194-195)

The linguistic faculty, from this point of view, incarnates the incommensurable alterity of a non-chronological “no longer not-now” (98) which did not take place once upon a time, but is rather constantly reactivated as the anthropogenetic quality of language, an origin that constantly repeats itself. Virno’s linguistics hence reflects his concept of non-chronological time as an anterior, meta-historical natural faculty. This philosophy of time guides Virno’s redefinition of performative speech acts as testimony of a prehistorical faculty that exceeds the chronological dimension of historical languages.

Virno’s discussion of temporality can be situated within the line of inquiry that he started to elaborate in his early work, especially his 1986 book Convenzione e Materialismo, in which he proposed a radical reinterpretation of Walter Benjamin’s notion of “aura.” In Convenzione e Materialismo, Virno adumbrated a notion of the possible that cannot be at the same time necessary, stressing the fundamental discontinuity and heterogeneity between these two orders of being, the necessary hic and nunc and the possible (Virno 2011a, 21). In his later Essay on Negation, Virno further elaborated on the meaning of the not-now by outlining the temporal dimension of a negative notion of the possible, as he writes that the “possible is never present; it eludes calendars; it knows neither succession nor simultaneity. The duration of desistence is therefore filled by the enduring untimeliness of the possible” (Virno 2018, 240). In his book on *déjà vu*, Virno subtracts the category of potentiality from chronology and reinterprets it as inexhaustible remainder of historical occurrence. The potential is not a chronological “before” even if it retains some kind of antecedence in relation to the temporal events it makes possible. Virno explains:

The potential/act couple, within which the not-now and the ‘now’ confront one another (and not two different ‘nows’, as in the cause/effect binary) is the theatre of

both a diachrony and a concomitance. In terms of the temporal order, potential is prior to the act: it takes the form of a dateless ‘before’, the mode of existence of an indeterminate past. In terms of chronological progression, conversely, potential and act are always simultaneous: potential is not the prefiguration of the act, but its heterogeneous correlate, its incommensurable shadow. (Virno 2015a, 103)

The “incommensurable shadow” of any act, potentiality, does not precede the acts or events in which it appears in a chronological sense: potential and act take place at the same time, as Virno remarks, “labour-power and concretely executed labour, world and facts, do indeed represent a ‘before’ and a ‘after’, but a ‘before’ and ‘after’ inserted within one same point of time, bifurcating and splitting it in two” (103). Potential and act are at the same time simultaneous and non-simultaneous: they take place at the same time but can only be ordered as before and after from the standpoint of chronology. The non-chronological aperture manifests itself through fully historical events as their heterogeneous and meta-historical accursed share. Virno’s critique of philosophies of the end of history rests on his theorisation of an atemporal residue or potential, a virtuality that coexists with time and makes history irreducible to chronology.

This is a theme that Virno further explores in his Grammar of the Multitude, where he links his thoughts on the non-chronological to the contested categories of biopolitics and potentiality. In this regard, Virno notes that the “living body becomes an object to be governed not for its intrinsic value, but because it is the substratum of what really matters: labor-power as the aggregate of the most diverse human faculties (the potential for speaking, for thinking, for remembering, for acting, etc.). Life lies at the center of politics when the prize to be won is immaterial (and in itself non-present) labor-power” (Virno 2004, 84).<sup>i</sup> Virno’s concept of potentiality identifies a natural, metahistorical, biological invariant that is

irreducible to actuality. “Potential is unconditionally anterior to the act, in terms of temporal order” (Virno 2015a, 109), writes Virno: potentiality can never be actuality, even if this anteriority only emerges post-festum, surfacing through temporal sequences as their possibility and precondition. Virno’s potential (as capacity to produce that is not exhausted in the productive act) might find echoes in Agamben’s reflections on the body and inoperative work, whereby “inoperative” does not mean malfunctioning but rather something that has been “restored to possibility, opened to a new possible use” (Agamben 2015, 247). The act of making something inoperative would entail, from this point of view, a form of life eschewing the logics of production. Accordingly, in a passage of The Use of Bodies, Agamben connects the inoperative to Marx’s analysis of capital accumulation as use of working bodies. He comments:

It is certainly true that, as Marx has suggested, the forms of production of an epoch contribute in a decisive way to determine its social relationships and culture; but in relation to every form of production, it is possible to individuate a “form of inoperativity” that, while being held in close relationship with it, is not determined by it but on the contrary renders its works inoperative and permits a new use of them.

(94)

There are parallels and overlaps between Agamben’s inoperativity and Virno’s reframing of labour-power as a negative capacity that is never exhausted by its actualisation. Between the two, however, there are substantial differences too: Virno’s analysis is animated by a heterodox, post-workerist Marxist perspective distinct from Agamben’s somehow apolitical vocation. Furthermore, for Agamben “every form of production” create their form of inoperative potentiality, while for Virno, there is a qualitative leap between pre-capitalist and

capitalist forms. Capitalism's historicity would derive, according to Virno, precisely from the historicization of this metahistorical inoperativity, which is turned into the commodity par excellence.

Virno's theory of potentiality should not be detached from the tradition of Italian post-workerism and Autonomia, to which he has been one of the main contributors. Thus, as Pietro Bianchi notes, a recurrent theme in Virno's philosophy concerns the fact that contemporary capitalism turns a biological presupposition of human life into a properly historical one: "This generic a priori condition appeared alongside the post-Fordist mode of production and so it is also a historical condition. What before was only a biological pre-condition (a potentiality expressed differently in every historical phase) became, with post-Fordism, a directly (or immediately as the postworkerists like to say) historical one" (Bianchi 41). Virno's thought aims to frame this historical shift, while his reflection on negativity, potentiality, and labour-power can also be situated within the lineage of Italian readings of Marx's Grundrisse alongside Mario Tronti's 1966 milestone Workers and Capital, a book that arguably provoked a sort of "Copernican Revolution" because of its foregrounding of labour, rather than capital, as the real agency and motor of history.<sup>ii</sup> By emphasising the role of agency and labour-power, the workerist and post-workerist tradition would contest any teleological vision that posits capitalism as the highest and most "developed" end point of universal history. However, this tradition would also cast the current phase of capitalism as the latest stage in the history of the world economy: the historicization of the metahistorical is an effect of the post-Fordist, immaterial turn in capitalist production. In this way, Virno's notion of a non-contemporaneous, metahistorical invariant can only appear in a specific historical conjuncture.

However, a post-workerist emphasis on general intellect, the commodity, and real subsumption as accomplished pathways can overshadow the continuing processes of

primitive accumulation and formal subsumption that persist when capitalism is seen as a global, uneven system beyond Europe and North America.<sup>iii</sup> Virno's distance from an historical materialist perspective focused on unevenness and the recursive nature of primitive accumulation strongly emerges from his reading of Bloch and his singular reimagining of "contemporaneity of the non-contemporary." Virno makes some passing references to the theory of ungleichzeitigkeit in his book on *déjà vu*, most prominently in an important scholium, where Virno writes:

Ernst Bloch usually meant the survival of primitive mentalities and antiquated customs even within fully developed capitalist society: such as the barter economy operating side-by-side with the International Monetary Fund [. . .] Yet it is here necessary to introduce a more radical meaning of this expression. We should understand contemporaneity of the non-contemporary to mean, first of all, the coexistence of the faculty and the execution, the "before"-potential and the "after"-act, the non-chronological past and the determinate present, which characterises each historical moment. Since the simplest cell of temporality consists of two diachronous elements, it has a hybrid – or better, anachronistic – nature. (Virno 2015a, 140-141)

Virno's critique aims to give the idea of a contemporaneity of the non-contemporary a "more radical meaning": he suggests that non-contemporaneity should not be limited to the juxtaposition of elements from different historical moments (traditional, pre-capitalist, alongside capitalist) in an uneven and non-synchronous whole. The declared radicalism of Virno's reinterpretation stems from his insistence on the appearance of potential as heterogeneous element irreducible to concrete, actual history. The juxtaposition, in other words, is not so much between two historical epochs coexisting in a single moment, but

rather a juxtaposition between act and potential, appropriated labour and labour-power, chronology and its non-temporal excess. This reinterpretation needs to be linked to Virno's wider concept of contemporaneity itself, which is profoundly different from an idea of the contemporary that could be drawn from Bloch. As Jason Read notes in his reading of Virno in the context of debates on the Anthropocene:

What contemporary capitalism puts to work is not just actualized potential, not this or that habit, but the very potential to create habit itself. As Virno stresses with respect to the "general intellect," the socialized knowledge that has become a productive force, this intellect is not the specific knowledge of the sciences or computer programming, but the very capacity to learn and create. (Read 2017, 266)

This vision entails the notion that contemporary, late twentieth-century capitalism has provoked a qualitative leap substantially different from any previous social form, which paves the way for the manifestation of a fundamental quality of historical time itself. Thus, Virno continues:

capitalism itself foments the contemporaneity of the non-contemporary. But this is not so much a matter of the coexistence of technology and ancestral superstitions, as the litany repeated throughout the decades would have it. Rather, the crucial point lies in the theatrical portrayal of the plot of act and potential, the indefinite "back then" and the dateable "now" [. . .] The historical moment is unsaturated. Incomplete, lacking. Nestling within it is an unrealised core: potential, the non-chronological "past" (Virno 2015, 141-142).

Some aspects of Virno's accent on the incompleteness and unsaturated nature of historical time certainly resonate with Ernst Bloch's own concept of history. However, by enclosing the non-chronological into the antithesis between potential and act, Virno's critique of Bloch does not sufficiently engage with a crucial dimension of Bloch's concept of ungleichzeitigkeit. Virno posits the non-chronological past as inexhaustible storage of human faculties: as living labour-power turned into commodity. However, the heuristic value of Bloch's theory of non-synchronism lies in what Bloch called the obligation to the dialectic of non-synchronism under capitalism. While Virno detaches potential from act, Bloch considers the potential as inherent quality of unfulfilled historical acts and contents, the very definite occurrence of past struggles rather than an indefinite regression to the "back then" of a metahistorical space (Virno 2011b). In Bloch, ungleichzeitigkeit indicates non-subsumed social experiences that combine, interact with, and complicate the antagonism between workers and capital. Bloch noted how non-synchronism designates elements that elude the synchronous contradiction of the capitalist present, a thought that could be applied to the situation when Bloch coined the term in the 1930s, but could retain some of its validity even today, in a global historical conjuncture that is by no means exhausted by the post-Fordist turn to general intellect and immaterial labour.

The non-chronological ungleichzeitigkeit needs to be a contradiction between unfulfilled contents, past events, tendencies and struggles that are still unsaturated: it does not entail a division between history and a transhistorical plane of potentiality. Non-synchronism reveals that the totality of capitalism is much more complex and historically diverse than what allowed by a post-workerist focus on the scenario of real subsumption and the historicization of the metahistorical. This is a concept that Bloch developed in his major work on the rise of Nazism in the 1930s, Erbschaft dieser Zeit. Bloch described non-synchronism as those elements irreducible to the "capitalist Now" (Bloch 1991, 109), as he put it:

The objectively non-contemporaneous element is that which is distant from and alien to the present; it thus embraces declining remnants and above all unrefurbished past which is not yet “resolved” in capitalist terms. The subjectively non-contemporaneous contradiction activates this objectively non-contemporaneous one, so that both contradictions meet, the rebelliously crooked one of accumulated rage and the objectively alien one of surviving being and consciousness. (108-109)

Ungleichzeitigkeit refers to the dialectical interplay of objective conditions that exceed the present of late capitalism (for example, survivals of archaic social relations), and their subjective mobilisation as political agency. The non-chronological quality of non-synchronism derives from the dialectical interlocking of these heterogeneous times into what Bloch described as a multi-layered, non-linear, and open-ended historical totality. Frederic Schwartz observes that non-synchronism derives from Marx’s theory of uneven development, whereby unevenness “can refer, as Bloch implies, to the different rates of development in the base and superstructure [. . .] or it can refer to the unevenness of economic development between societies or nations, or even between different sectors or regions within them” (Schwartz 60). Ungleichzeitigkeit involves extending the scope of class struggle to a more diverse and inclusive social fabric in which historical unevenness characterises differences between nations across the globe as well as between the working class, peasants, and impoverished middle-class, urban and rural, industrial and pre-industrial cultures (Bodei 1979, 20-35). The point of Bloch’s formula is that non-synchronism emerges from backwardness, rather than out of the most advanced sections of the present. These “backward” elements are, writes Bloch, “both contradictions of the traditional with the

capitalist Now as well as elements of the old society which are not yet dead,” as Bloch continues:

They were contradictions even in their origin, contradictions to past forms, which never did realize the intended contents [. . .] Therefore, they were already contradictions of unfulfilled intentions ab ovo [from the beginning], quarrels with the past itself: not on the spot, like the divisions of the synchronous contradictions, but through the whole of history as it were so that here contradictions even to history, namely, to uncompleted intentional contents of the past themselves join the rebellion if the occasion arises. (Bloch 1991, 32)

Bloch’s non-synchronism aims to recuperate those backward elements of society that have not been fully subsumed in the most advanced forms of exploitation of the present time. Accordingly, Bloch can be aligned with perspectives attentive to the on-going process of primitive accumulation and combined and uneven development rather than total commodification. Furthermore, Bloch’s formula does not frame the non-chronological element as ontological excess of time, an indefinite back then, or an “infinite regression,” as Virno would phrase it, which envelops the present. The non-chronological dimension in Bloch’s ungleichzeitigkeit still refers to the concrete realm of historical tendencies and processes; it is non-chronological in the sense that it disrupts the sequential and linear order of past, present and future, but it does not identify a quasi-metaphysical realm beyond empirical, worldly, concrete time.

## 2. Second Variation: The Future of Déjà vu

The difference between a concept of non-chronological time inspired by Bloch and one inspired by Virno appears in full view around the theme of the *déjà vu*. In his book on memory, Virno describes as “too generic and rhapsodic” (Virno 2015, 10) Bloch’s short piece on the topic, based on a conversation with Walter Benjamin in Capri in 1924. Virno explores the political and historical significance to the phenomenon of the *déjà vu*. He draws on Henri Bergson’s influential theory of “false recognition,” in which the illusory perception of an experienced past takes over the consciousness of the present. As he writes, “here we have an only apparent repetition, one that is entirely illusory. We believe that we have already experienced (or seen, heard, done, etc.) something that is, in fact, happening for the first time at this very moment” (7). The mechanism at the heart of the *déjà vu*, according to Virno, concerns the perception of the present as if it were the repetition of a past event. In this occurrence, past and present are conflated, and the subject is unable to recognise the uniqueness and novelty of what is happening around them. For this reason, the *déjà vu* can be deeply problematic, as it involves unduly extending the realm of memory and turning the present into the mere re-enactment of an illusory past. Virno exposes the “state of mind correlated to *déjà vu*,” by equating it to the idea of watching oneself live, “apathy, fatalism, and indifference to a future that seems prescribed even down to the last detail” (8). *Déjà vu* would hence entail giving up on action: “the present is dressed in the clothes of an irrevocable past [. . .] It is impossible to change something that has taken on the appearances of memory” (8). The illusory repetition of the past triggered by the *déjà vu* creates the illusion that the present is, in a way, already past and for this reason cannot be changed.

In the context of the *déjà vu*, writes Virno, “the virtual is simultaneous to the actual because memory is simultaneous to perception” (17). The *déjà vu* operates a collapse of the virtual and the actual, the past and the present, “in one and the same event we have the

paradoxical coexistence of the real and the possible. This event simultaneously seems actual and potential” (14). This collapse of actual and potential cancels out the non-chronological residue, “false recognition” supplants transformative action. Virno continues:

Déjà vu arises when the past-form, applied to the present, is exchanged for a past-content, which the present will repeat with obsessive loyalty – that is to say, when the possible-present is exchanged for a real-past [. . .] “False recognition” protects from the burden of the possible, so to speak, the very thing that “the memory of the present” signals. (18-19)

While déjà vu per se need not be necessarily fatalist and ideological, the kind of misrecognition it can lead to has the potential to turn into reinforcement of the status quo by obscuring the radical novelty of the present in the guise of a reiterated past. Virno’s thoughts on déjà vu mirror his casting of capitalism as historicization of the metahistorical: capitalism and déjà vu follow a similar logic by collapsing the virtual into the actual and by reifying the inoperative potential of the virtual. In a way, capitalism and déjà vu turn non-chronological potential into a chronological act by concealing the non-coincidence of the present with itself. Déjà vu would illustrate this logic of exchange between actual and potential, erasing any prospect of change. The knot of this transformation concerns the mistaking of something that is formal, possible, and virtual as if it were a concrete historical experience: faculty becomes commodity.

Virno’s references to Henri Bergson in his theory of déjà vu can illuminate the wider influence of the vitalist tradition of French philosophy, ranging from Bergson to Gilles Deleuze, on Italian post-workerist thought. From this point of view, Virno’s comments on the déjà vu as conflation of real and virtual resonate with Gilles Deleuze’s reading of Bergson, as

Deleuze posited it in various works such as his major treatise Difference and Repetition. In his reworking of Bergson's Matter and Memory, Deleuze aligns the virtual with a pure past, understood as a time that was never present, but rather a pastness reproduced as other of the present, as Deleuze notes:

The virtual object is not a former present, since the quality of the present and the modality of its passing here affect exclusively the series of the real as this is constituted by active synthesis. However, the pure past [. . .] does qualify the virtual object; that is, the past as contemporaneous with its own present, as pre-existing the passing present and as that which causes the present to pass. Virtual objects are shreds of pure past.  
(Deleuze 1998, 101)

The influence of French vitalism on Virno's materialism reveals important differences from the dialectical, Hegelian Marxism of Bloch, and the way Virno and Bloch draw on divergent traditions of thought in their theories of non-chronological time, memory, and the future. In Virno's theory, the only possibility of keeping the future alive lies in defying the collapse of form and content, or act and potential, which the déjà vu effects in its conflation of past and present. The heterogeneity between these two temporal poles – the chronological and the non-chronological, the historical and the metahistorical – should rather be kept visible and open. The darkness of the now should not be fully illuminated in the act. Virno's passing reference to Bloch's "rhapsodic" theory of the déjà vu takes place within an argument aimed at rescuing possibility within history and the potential in the present. While this concept of history could be aligned with Bloch's emphasis on the reclamations of possible futures in the past, Bloch's conversation on the déjà vu can reveal important aspects that could complement, challenge, and extend Virno's reflections. While déjà vu does entail an illusory

experience of the present as if it had already happened – hence it can assume the form of an experience of the present as past – this aspect by no means exhausts the significance of the déjà vu for historical materialism. Most importantly, it does not imply that déjà vu must necessarily express political apathy, fatalism, and blind submission to all that is the case.

In his 1924 exchange with Walter Benjamin, Bloch proposes a reversal of the relationship between déjà vu and memory. Against the determinism and fatalism stressed by Virno, Bloch and Benjamin emphasise the fact that the déjà vu entails a sense of surprise and the eruption of the unexpected. Déjà vu cannot be thought of without the element of shock: “even in its inauthentic form, déjà vu occurs as something unexpected, in a place and situation that could not have been foreseen” (Bloch 1998, 201). As they consider different possible origins of the experience of déjà vu, Bloch and Benjamin stress this element of surprise and shock as a key quality of the phenomenon, as they write:

The moment of revelation, with its reawakening of the immediate orientational act itself, always packs a devastating punch. In itself, déjà vu remains an indifferent disruption of intentionality, tantamount to awakening with a shock to all the past disruptions of this kind, all the aborted beginnings of our life in general. (203)

Instead of stressing the Bergsonian element of “false recognition” or the improper projection of the realm of memory into the present, Bloch approaches the déjà vu from the point of view of its effect on the present itself. A key point suggested in the passage quoted above radically differs from Virno’s insistence on the shift from potential and form to content and reality. The shock of the déjà vu, Bloch and Benjamin observe, derives precisely from the real content it awakens; it is neither an ever-present faculty, nor a non-chronological side of the

present, but precisely those “aborted beginnings of our life” that make a *déjà vu* the glimpse of an historical and temporal dimension radically opposed to apathy and fatalism.

Bloch and Benjamin, however, stretch their theory of the *déjà vu* much further, as they reverse the relationship between *déjà vu*, memory, and the future. In a truly Blochean moment of the essay, the illusory re-enactment of the past is reinterpreted as an uncanny experience of a future that has not yet taken place, an anticipatory consciousness of the future, as the record of the conversation between Bloch and Benjamin goes on:

This confounding feeling of familiarity radiates not only throughout the totality of space, but also throughout time, including the future. It extends beyond the already unfolded particulars of the present instant to encompass, incomprehensibly enough, even the particulars of the next arriving instant. As a result, in *déjà vu* one has the impression of knowing exactly what will happen in the next instant. (204)

The “aborted beginnings of our life” re-experienced in *déjà vu* suggest the presence of a future that is about to take place. Even if the *déjà vu* is torn between the orientation towards a reactivated past and this anticipation of the future, the shock effect does not derive so much from remembrance, but rather from the fact that the *déjà vu* creates the illusion of knowing what will happen in the next instant. The uncanny quality does not derive from the repetition of the past but from a bewildering anticipatory knowledge of the incoming future. The shock of the *déjà vu* can spring from the fact that “we seem to be moved not only by an incomplete intention, but also by a very abbreviated portion of the objective world that has not yet been realised” (205). While the *déjà vu* does not cease to present the return to the past as the decisive factor, the disturbing element of the *déjà vu* stems from this tension between past and future, the apparition of an “unfulfilled potential” (Kelleher 17).<sup>iv</sup> This is an aspect also

noted by Remo Bodei in his study on the *déjà vu*, where he notes the uncanny dimension of the phenomenon as revealing the presence of a stranger in the most intimate part of the self (Bodei 2012, 10). The temporal estrangement that qualifies the experience of *déjà vu* needs to be seen not so much as counterpart of repression of the past but rather as a work of anticipation, as Stefano Micali notes in his phenomenological study of the term: “the point is here not the familiarity of the present as though it were past or indeterminate in temporal terms, but rather familiarity with the imminent future – with what comes next and must actually remain unpredictable, with what necessarily surprises us” (Micali 164). The *déjà vu* should not be submerged into the mechanism described by Bloch as the “spell of anamnesis” (Bloch 1962, 473), whereby the opposition between necessity and possibility excludes the dimension of the future by restricting potentiality to what has already been. Rather, *déjà vu* should be seen as a particular case of anticipatory consciousness, a projection of the non-chronological as not-yet.

In the conversation between Bloch and Benjamin, *déjà vu* does not imply a collapse of actual and potential, or impediment of the future by turning the subject into a spectator of their own life, as Virno suggests. On the contrary, Bloch and Benjamin note that the element of shock derives from the “sudden return to the self that does not always turn out as intended” (Bloch 1998, 205). An insistence of repetition, fatalism, and the dominance of the past would imply a fixation of the subject into an inescapable situation and entrapment into identity as repetition. But the radical potential of the *déjà vu* emerges from the othering of *déjà vu*, which Bloch and Benjamin explain by recourse to a fairy tale, Tieck’s Story of Fair-Haired Eckbert. This fairy tale centres on the main character Berta, a young child who lives with an old woman and tends her animals. One day, Berta decides to abandon the old woman, and starts a new life in the city. She robs the woman and abandons the animals, in particular her little dog. Years later, Berta tells her story to a knight, a friend of her husband’s. While she

does not mention the little dog to him, mysteriously the knight seems to know the little dog's name. According to Bloch and Benjamin, the story does not seem to be able to move forward from this interrupted moment of strange and uncanny recognition. In Bloch's postscript to this short text, an important conclusion to be drawn from the fairy tale concerns the exchange of persons that take place in the event. The feeling of shock is caused by the fact that the knight seems to be able to remember the memory of someone else. As Bloch concludes:

The shock is all the more poetically visible since its locus is not only experienced by her, but is witnessed by another from without [. . .] next to this, in that moment of awareness – which leads to much more than just a confusing, backward *déjà vu* – there is another, brighter shock that comes not from forgetting, but from anticipation; it is manifested bodily as a shiver. (208)

Rather than repetition of the past, the shock of the *déjà vu* derives from an action that has not been performed: Berta's escape from the old woman should also have included the dog, which instead she left behind. The *déjà vu* of the knight occurs precisely because of this omission: in other words, *déjà vu* does not concern so much that aspect of the past that did happen, but rather what could have happened and did not. The *déjà vu* comes from the future, in this sense, because it concerns a possible, unrealised alternative to the past reality it reproduces. From this point of view, the *déjà vu* does not obscure generic human potential or capacity, but a concrete act that did not happen: the power of Bloch's reflections on the *déjà vu* is that they do refer to a concrete content, to a reality, but a reality that did not take place. As Remo Bodei writes in an essay on this conversation between Bloch and Benjamin, *déjà vu* embodies a sort of extra-territorial dimension that prevents it from being fully contained by the past. Rather, *déjà vu* expresses a desire as if it were fulfilled and a redemptive time rather

than a simple conflation of past and present (Bodei 1991, 167). From this point of view, the *déjà vu* should not be thought of as a particular case of anamnesis, but rather anticipation. In his remarks on the exchange between Bloch and Benjamin on the topic, David Kaufmann finely links the concept of *déjà vu* to Bloch's ungleichzeitigkeit:

What has been “seen” before is not the point: one recovers an interrupted intention, an orientation to and in the world. The eerie sensation of shock [. . .]is quite real and quite accurate, but it registers an orientation that has been forgotten or repressed. . .

The scary revenant in the uncanny present is not the infinite repetition of the past – is rather a reminder of what one had meant to do for the future (Kaufmann 36).

The tension at the heart of the *déjà vu*, the non-synchronous element of Not Yet it discloses, does not stem from the repetition of the past or the impediment of the future. Rather, the untimely nature of *déjà vu* encompasses a possible future that could have happened. It would not be a *déjà vu* without the sense of shock that it creates, a sense of re-experiencing some concrete occurrence that however did not really happen in the original moment.

The *déjà vu* is a deferred action coming from the future; it expresses the unfinishedness and openness of historical time. The *déjà vu*, from this point of view, would express what Bloch defined as the Not Yet: a temporal dimension of anticipation that is not reducible to a human faculty or a simple not-now, precisely because it is a fully historical, fully temporal category that indicates the element of futurity being transmitted in concrete history. Peter Thompson notes that Bloch's central concept of the Not Yet, which lies at the heart of Bloch's rethinking of possibility, indicates a situation in which “everything is also always already present as potential. Bloch reaches back to Aristotle and takes up the idea of *entelechy* to point out that history has not come to an end and that the immanent potentiality

in it is still very much at work in creating an open future” (Thompson 53). While Virno would restrict such “immanent potentiality” to the prehistorical past of the not-now, Bloch identifies the disjointedness of the present with the threshold of the Not Yet.

In this regard, Wayne Hudson remarks that the category of the Not Yet “may refer to something not actual now, but it may also apply to a future determination of something that is partially actual now” (Hudson 19). Not Yet can imply “that something expected or envisaged in the past has failed to eventuate” (20) or it can indicate something expected in the future; not yet can also be “still not.” This ambiguity, however, disrupts the chronological order of before and after, as it envisages a radical openness and incompleteness of history: the future encapsulated in the Not Yet is an aperture that goes beyond the non-chronological as projected past. As Peter Thompson remarks, “Bloch maintains that the search for the something missing is what drives us, but when we find our way to it, we arrive where we have never yet been, namely, a home that we remember but that has not yet emerged” (Thompson 51). The Not Yet, as Bloch explored the concept in the first volume of his trilogy The Principle of Hope, does not assume a radical separation between the actual and the potential, but rather their dialectical interlocking, as Bloch wrote:

possible is everything that is only partially conditioned, that has not yet been fully or conclusively determined [. . .] really possible is everything whose conditions in the sphere of the object itself are not yet fully assembled [. . .] Mobile, changing, changeable Being, presenting itself as dialectical-material, has this unclosed capability of becoming (Bloch 1986, 196)

The possible of the Not Yet indicates an aspect of objective reality that is only partially completed, a process of becoming that opens history to unfinishedness and transformation.

As site of real possibility, déjà vu points to a meaning of the non-chronological that should not be seen as an anteriority that makes the present possible, but rather a possible future that never happened, a force that stretches the present towards an undetermined temporality open on all sides. This is the open temporality of defeated human aspirations, struggles, desires, and anticipations, but still charged with the potential to be turned into reality. This is not simply the matter of recovering potentiality as temporal heterogeneity, but, in fact, it is the concrete utopia of a world free from domination, the utopia of what Bloch, following Marx, described as the dignity of the “upright carriage” and the “dream of a thing.” Bloch’s critique is directed against the reduction of the non-chronological to an antecedent, pre-historical nature retrievable exclusively as prior phase of a sequence, as if the recovery of potentiality could only go backwards in time. Bloch strongly criticised the prejudice of thinking the non-chronological as pure past in his late introduction to philosophy in Tübingen, published in 1963 and translated as A Philosophy of the Future, where he writes that a rigid opposition between a natural and an historical time “presupposes that the time of so-called dead things must lie exclusively before human time,” as Bloch continues:

[L]ike that which occurs within it, natural time must be pure past, having no more specific novelty concealed within itself [. . .] a cultural-historical effect always blocks off the natural-historical prius, allowing it re-entry only as a prius that is past: that is, as an exhausted mechanical uterus that might at most now idle on without function. Therefore a specific or —better— a positive future still appropriate to human history is no longer part of the natural transmission of matter. (Bloch 1970, 134-135)

Natural, deep time would not be, according to Bloch, a time past, but rather a non-chronological, non-linear temporality that embodies an element of the future irreducible to

human time. This is a crucial point to consider in relation to Bloch's rethinking of political praxis which, as Jan Rehman writes in a recent essay, "needs to be deepened so that it includes our natural roots in the past and present and places the orientation towards sustainable human-nature relationships in the center of the humanum" (Rehman 83). However, Bloch's argument against anamnestic thought is not limited to the distinction between natural and human time, as he extends this point to a reflection on historical time itself. In contrast to the reduction of the non-chronological to pure past and temporal heterogeneity – a sheer opposition between dead and living, potential and act, or natural and historical times – Bloch advocates a different idea of real possibility as material, objective component of the historical tendency. Bloch casts entelechy as the movement of matter itself, thus projecting the possibility of the future into the unblocked apertures of chronological time. Instead of anteriority, condition of possibility or simple past, the non-chronological would emerge, through Bloch, in its genuine dimension of futurity<sup>v</sup>. This has important political implications: time emerges, non-chronologically, as the site of a still living, incomplete, and real possibility of revolution and a tradition of struggle that is not exhausted by the order of past, present, and future. A truly historical materialist perspective needs to start by recuperating this opening of the future in the past.

As Peter Osborne observes in his review of Virno's book on déjà vu, "for Virno, time is temporalized not by the future, but by 'potential as past'[. . .] the future exists only as the ongoing genesis of the present, in the relation between present and non-chronological past. There is no futurity" (Osborne 2015b, 46). In contrast to this turn towards faculty and potential, Bloch proposes a completely different way of rethinking historical materialism and the utopian dimension of historical time irreducible to either chronological order or transcendental presupposition. The utopian element, in Bloch's philosophy, does not appear as a surplus beyond time. As Bloch put it in an important passage of The Principle of Hope,

“utopias have their timetable” (Bloch 1986, 479): the profound meaning of this expression is that the utopian invariant that persists across generations and historical periods cannot be imagined as a sort of abstract “faculty” beyond time. Each epoch redefines an historically specific utopian dimension on the concrete plane of struggle. Virno and Bloch could be seen as inheritors of what Alberto Toscano thought-provokingly portrays as the “subjective metahistory of a utopian kernel whose drive and directionality – despite all of the changes in instruments, organisations and motivating ideologies – remains invariant from the Taborites to the Bolsheviks” (Toscano 152). In this regard, the two thinkers can be situated in a wider intellectual tradition of critics and militants aiming to reconstruct and recuperate a transhistorical undercurrent of resistance to oppression and exploitation, even though the specific content of this transhistorical element varies between them. Virno does not renounce the perspective of anteriority and antecedence in his definition of the non-chronological, even if this anteriority only operates as the mark of the reinsertion of the temporal excess into chronology. This means that for Virno, the non-chronological is a potential not-now, heterogeneous from and antecedent to the present. Bloch, on the contrary, extends the present in many directions, casting the non-chronological as Not Yet rather than not-now. The true revolutionary invariant, for Bloch, still comes from those “aborted beginnings of our life” that anticipated a future that did not take place at the time and, precisely for this reason, remain an open possibility in the unfolding of the present.

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<sup>i</sup> Virno's engagement with biopolitics and potentiality could seemingly resonate with Giorgio Agamben's theory. Virno has been very critical of Agamben, describing him as a "a thinker with no political vocation" who transformed the concept of the biopolitical into "an ontological category with value already since the archaic Roman right," rather than realising that "the biopolitical is only an effect derived from the concept of labor-power" (Virno 2002). These remarks demonstrate the wider tendency in contemporary Italian philosophy, thoughtfully analysed by Lorenzo Chiesa and Alberto Toscano, to separate a "strong" and a "weak" thought, often leading to short-circuits "between the political, the metaphysical, the cultural, and even the personally anecdotal" (Chiesa and Toscano 3). Indeed, a trenchant opposition should not obscure common threads and preoccupations, and even the influence that Agamben had on Virno's early work: in his important essay on potentiality, Agamben draws on Aristotle to define a concept of potentiality through which, contrary to "the traditional idea of potentiality that is annulled in actuality [. . .] we are confronted with a potentiality that conserves itself and saves itself in actuality" (Agamben 2000, 184). Unlike Agamben, however, Virno challenges the Aristotelian reversal of potential and act.

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<sup>ii</sup> In Workers and Capital, Tronti noted that “the class relation sees the initiative in struggle on the working-class side as the initial point in the process, the permanent motor of this process, the absolute negation of capital as such and at the same time the dynamic articulation of the capitalist interest.” (218-219). The emphasis on labour-power as permanent motor of history and negation of capital has become an important leitmotiv in post-workerist critique. Virno can be interpreted as expanding on this theme as the antithesis between potential and act, non-chronological and chronological time.

<sup>iii</sup> Jason Read observes that while “primitive accumulation reveals the violent operations necessary to constitute a laboring subject [. . .] the analysis of the commodity form takes this condition as an already accomplished fact [. . .] It is the difference between the capitalist mode of production viewed as completed, on the one hand, and the problem of the formation of the capitalist mode of production, on the other hand” (Read 2003, 34). Primitive accumulation is not something that belongs to the past but rather, in many ways, a constitutive part of the present. As Sandro Mezzadra notes in an essay on the topic: “whatever happened for the first time at the origin of the history of capitalism must logically repeat itself every day: this apparent paradox prevents us from seeing the historical time of the capitalist mode of production as merely linear and progressive” (Mezzadra 305).

<sup>iv</sup> In his account of childhood in Berlin, Walter Benjamin described the experience of shock as the counterpart of déjà vu. As Peter Szondi notes, in contrast to a Proustian use of déjà vu as a tool to retrieve and to relive the experiences of childhood (Szondi 500), Benjamin links déjà vu to those moments of the past that anticipated a future, which already sensed the presence of the future in the past, perceived as “a stranger that was on the premises” (Benjamin 127).

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<sup>v</sup> Thus, Bloch and Virno differ on the question of natural, prehistoric, and non-human temporalities. Despite Virno's remark that the natural-historical invariant "takes place in the flow of time" (Virno 2009, 94), his concept of non-chronological time cannot be detached from a retrospective gaze positing the metahistorical in the past. As Michael Lewis notes, it could be asked whether the natural-historical indicates that "there will always have been a human nature, a kind of Platonic idea," or "is the very essence (for what else is a transcendental 'invariant'?) itself something that has emerged over time, at and as the very origin of history, as it breaks away from 'prehistory'?" (Lewis 140).