
II. BOOK REVIEWS

Димитър Божков „История и еманципация. Клио из пасажите на модерността“, София, Университетско издателство Св. Климент Охридски,” 2022. (Dimitar Bozhkov, *History and Emancipation: Clio through the Passages of Modernity*, Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Press, 2022, 213 pp., ISBN 9789540754055)

Severina Stankeva (University of Sofia)

Dimitar Bozhkov's *History and Emancipation: Clio through the Passages of Modernity* constitutes a pioneering contribution to Bulgarian scholarship on Walter Benjamin. The book aims to show that the problem of history is key to understanding both modernity and the temporal mode of the present through the concept of emancipation as well as its political and critical aspects. The primary focus is *The Book of Passages* from *The Arcades Project* and the “critical philosophy of history”¹ that Bozhkov claims it develops. However, *History and Emancipation* surpasses its initial goal, providing a synoptic view of Benjamin's larger textual corpus and supplying a hermeneutic framework for understanding his work as a whole. Employing a procedure reminiscent of Benjamin, Bozhkov begins with earlier texts such as *Toward the Critique of Violence* and *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, tracing their development through to the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. This approach allows Bozhkov to bring what he calls the “crystal of the total event”² of Benjamin's thought into appearance, revealing

¹ Димитър Божков, *История и еманципация. Клио из пасажите на модерността* (София: Университетско издателство „Св. Климент Охридски“, 2022), 14.

² Ibid., 102.

and utilizing Benjamin's own methodology.

One of Benjamin's core ideas is that the singular phenomena of the past must be saved from oblivion. This can be achieved by examining the specific series of constellations of opposites that shape them, and which become the sources of the tensions that ultimately make a totality out of the singular. This totality is an open one; it preserves its possibilities within itself. In it, the phenomenon's future, past, and present are not visible as complete totalities, being perceived instead as exceptional and eventful moments. Grasping these moments should be the goal of a philosophy of history. As this book shows, although it doesn't explicitly state this as a program, this can also be a way of reading the history of philosophy, as it treats Benjamin's heritage and its remnants in the same way that Benjamin's ideal historian treats the debris of the past. Moreover, Bozhkov's book should be regarded as the first part of a diptych, one that opens the way and is intrinsically connected to his second book, *The Marxism in Messianism*.³ In tandem, they serve Clio well: where *History and Emancipation* is a scroll—tracing the genealogy of the concept of history in the nineteenth century and its relationship with tragedy—*Marxism in Messianism* is certainly a trumpet in its preoccupation with the event, as conceived in the Jewish messianic tradition, and its connections to Marxism.

History and Emancipation comprises five chapters. After an introduction to the cultural history of modernity, using the figure of the postponed time of the apocalypse, the second chapter plunges deep into the relationship between sovereignty and tragedy, examining the philosophical "dialogue" between Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt. The chapter shows how the relationship between politics and theology can be understood through the category of the tragic. Bozhkov examines the way in which Benjamin's engagement with the emancipatory potential of the past intersects with Schmitt's concepts of political authority and decision-making. As Bozhkov demonstrates, both thinkers view the tragic as a space for navigating the exception. Schmitt's sovereign, defined as the one who decides the state of exception, represents the ultimate figure of control, yet one whose authority is inherently tied to law and thereby to its enforcement through mythological violence. Conversely, Benjamin critiques this model, presenting a messianic alternative that rejects mythic

³ Димитър Божков, *Марксизмът в месианизма* (София: Университетско издателство „Св. Климент Охридски“, 2023).

violence and embraces redemptive potential through the concept of bare life. In Benjamin's framework, the tragic becomes a medium for thinking eschatological possibilities. Bozhkov's exploration is further enriched by his interpretation of *Trauerspiel*, which Benjamin analyzed as emblematic of baroque theology. The sovereign in the *Trauerspiel* is caught in an apocalyptic world from which divine transcendence is absent, leaving him in a state of perpetual impotence.

Bozhkov reveals how this critique resonates with Benjamin's broader epistemology, whose historical task involves arranging fragmented phenomena to uncover their redemptive potential. Benjamin's theory of knowledge is treated as a curious mix of Kant, Leibniz, and Plato. As Bozhkov shows, in order to create an epistemology composed of phenomena, concepts, and ideas, Benjamin takes from Kant the concept of experience, viewing it through a dual lens—both religious and historical. From Leibniz, he adopts the notion of the monad, while from Plato he draws the concept of the idea. Concepts are a menacing mediator for phenomena, regarded as the cause of their loss but also as enabling their transformation. For phenomena to be redeemed, they must become ideas—not lying in experience or reason, but in contemplation. The goal is for the single phenomenon to manifest itself in its totality through its characteristic constellations of opposites.

The concept of the “crystal of the total event,” introduced in the third chapter, may be regarded as the heart of Bozhkov's interpretation of Benjamin's philosophy of history. Benjamin regards historical phenomena as fractured yet total, holding within themselves the potential for redemption. The metaphor of the crystal can thus be used as a methodological tool for understanding Benjamin's historiography, which seeks to preserve the singularity of historical phenomena through specific tensional dialectics. Bozhkov's analysis of *The Arcades Project* exemplifies how this methodology operates. Figures like the *flâneur*, the prostitute, and the collector are not merely products of commodification but also embody modernity's latent utopian possibilities. These figures form constellations that resist closure, allowing for a reinterpretation of modern experience. The Parisian arcades themselves, as sites of both alienation and imagination, become central to this critique.

In chapter four, Bozhkov extends his discussion to the urban spaces of modernity, particularly the arcades, which Benjamin viewed as emblematic of the nineteenth century's mythic imagination. Bozhkov

explores their allegorical potentialities, contrasting them with the symbol's tendency to impose closure. Allegory, for Benjamin, becomes a way of confronting modernity's catastrophic dimensions while retaining the potential for redemption. Bozhkov aligns this allegorical mode with Benjamin's historiographical method, where fragments of the past are salvaged not as static facts but as dynamic images capable of illuminating the present.

The book's treatment of the image, discussed in detail in the third chapter, reinforces this theme. The historical image, as opposed to the historical concept, offers a medium for redemption by revealing the temporal layers of phenomena. These images crystallize the tensions of their epoch and encapsulate both catastrophe and possibility. Through this lens, the historian becomes a redemptive figure tasked with uncovering the hidden emancipatory potential within the fragments of the past.

History and Emancipation is both an intellectual tribute to Walter Benjamin and an original contribution to the history of philosophy, the philosophy of history, and political theology. Bozhkov's analysis of Benjamin's corpus not only clarifies the complex interplay of sovereignty, tragedy, and historical redemption, but also offers a compelling model for critical historiography. The book illuminates the transformative potential of Benjamin's methodology while situating it firmly within the broader intellectual currents of modernity. In conclusion, Dimitar Bozhkov's *History and Emancipation* offers an innovative approach and critical insights, opening new possibilities for reading and understanding the relationship between history, emancipation, and the enduring enigmas of modernity.⁴

⁴ Support for this research is provided by the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science under the National Program "Young Scientists and Postdoctoral Fellows – 2."