

MESSIANISM AND MARXISM:
WALTER BENJAMIN AND ERNST BLOCH'S
DIALECTICAL THEORIES OF SECULARIZATION

WARREN S. GOLDSTEIN

*"Messianism is the red secret of every revolutionary . . ."*¹
— Ernst Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*

Among 20th century intellectuals, Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch are unique in the problem they present us: they mixed in their writings Judeo-Christian Messianism and Marxism. Both Benjamin and Bloch believed that Marxism is a secularization of Judeo-Christian Messianism. Benjamin wrote: "Marx has secularized the messianic time in the conception of the classless society."² However, Benjamin and Bloch's conception of secularization is not unilinear; it does not develop in a one-way direction from the sacred to the profane. Rather, their theories of secularization are dialectical; they view the sacred and the profane as having a contradictory relation in which there is a dynamic tension between the sacred and the profane. The central argument of this article is that Benjamin and Bloch's dialectical theories of secularization explain their mixture of Messianism and Marxism.

One of the debates that has taken place over Benjamin is on the compatibility of Messianism and Marxism. Jürgen Habermas, Rolf Tiedemann, Richard Wolin and Stephen Eric Bronner argue that Messianism and Marxism are incompatible while Irving Wohlfarth, Michael Löwy and Susan Buck-Morss argue that they are complementary. According to Rolf Tiedemann in "Historical Materialism or Political Messianism," when Benjamin used theological or mystical concepts, they have "a materialistic intent." He argues that Benjamin sought to "unite the irreconcilable."³ Grounding himself on the Tiedemann essay, Stephen Eric Bronner argues that Benjamin's attempt to fuse theology and historical materialism into a messianic materialism is not only questionable but contradictory.⁴ Habermas believes that Messianism and Marxism are incompatible and the attempt to synthesize them is doomed to failure. "This attempt must fail, because the anarchistic conception of 'now times' that intermittently break through fate from above as it were, cannot simply be inserted into the materialistic theory of social develop-