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Prophetic Criticism and the Rhetoric of Temporality: Paul Tillich's *Kairos* Texts and Weimar Intellectual Politics

Daniel Weidner

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses Paul Tillich's changing conception of a "prophetic critique" of contemporary culture and society through the notion of a "kairos", the moment of fulfilled time. It shows how Tillich refers both to a specific notion of prophecy (developed in Max Weber's reflections on charisma) and to a concept of eschatological time (developed in Karl Barth's dialectical theology). In different texts from the 1920ies and the 1950ies, Tillich uses the idea of "kairos" for a critique of the "idols" of bourgeois culture that is both radical and urgent. However, read in their historic sequence, these texts also reveal the difficulty of upholding the urgency of such a critique over time – as a result, Tillich's notion of "kairos" becomes more and more reflexive and self critical as the possibility of prophetic critique is concerned.

KEYWORDS

Weimar Republic; prophecy; Max Weber; Karl Barth; Paul Tillich; Political Theology; Religious Socialism

In 1922, the young protestant theologian Paul Tillich published an essay entitled "Kairos" in the Journal *Die Tat* (The Action). In line with the journal's title, the essay is a "call" (*Aufruf*) to action in which Tillich describes the current cultural and spiritual climate and asks for a new awareness of the present and its position in history. He argues that it is necessary to develop a critique of the present in order to understand the contemporary moment along with history as such. This entails a radical critique of the church as well as society, a critique that would smash the "idols" of the bourgeoisie and cultural Protestantism. In a word, Tillich calls for critique to be prophetic: "This prophetic criticism, launched in the name of the unconditional (*das Unbedingte*), breaks the absolute church and the absolute society."¹

The notion of *kairos* or the "fulfilled time" is crucial for Tillich and the discourse of the Weimar Republic in general.² It inspired the Kairos Circle, a small group of Christian intellectuals including Günther Dehn, Car Mennicke, Adolf Löwe, and Alexander Rüstow, who advocated for religious socialism in the early 1920s. Tillich himself wrote no fewer than three different texts entitled "Kairos." Besides the 1922 essay, he published another essay four years later in a collection that emerged from the Kairos Circle, and

CONTACT Daniel Weidner  weidnerd@hu-berlin.de

¹Tillich. "Kairos (I)."

²See also: Christophersen. *Kairos: Protestantische Zeitdeutungskämpfe in der Weimarer Republik*. On the traditional meaning of *kairos* with a specific stress on the rhetorical dimension of the term, see also Earle, "The Rhetoric of Kairos."

finally a third text in 1958. The term *kairos* can also be applied to the epistemic, political, rhetorical, and hermeneutic revolution that took place in the interwar years. New forms of knowledge, action, speech, and reading emerge in this context, moving beyond the limits and distinctions of nineteenth-century thought. In hermeneutics, for example, the moment of reading draws attention as a moment of decision, action, or existentialist leap. Understanding is no longer conceived of as an endless movement that brings us closer and closer to the true meaning of the text, nor the continuation of an “effective history” in the sense of Hans Georg Gadamer, as in a continual tradition that reaches through time from the text’s origins to us. Instead, understanding is conceived of as an eruptive and interruptive moment with a complex temporality, in which the understanding of the past implies the understanding of the present, and vice versa; at the same time, hermeneutics takes on an anti-historicist orientation. As a formulation of such understanding, Walter Benjamin’s “now of recognizability” is similar to what Tillich presents as the *kairos*: for both, every moment might be the small gate through which the messiah will enter.

For both Tillich and Benjamin, the new, essentially temporal hermeneutics and epistemology of the moment (*Augenblick*) do not simply evolve from traditional religion, nor can they be clearly attributed to specific Christian or Jewish traditions. Rather, they are determined by the immanent tension or ambiguity between these traditions. A combination of Marxist ideas of revolution and religious ideas of the existential moment play a contributing role, along with a “Christian” (presentist) reading of the Hebrew prophets and a “Jewish” (apocalyptic) reading of the New Testament. Even more importantly, the shift in hermeneutics associated with the notion of *kairos* goes along with a fundamental change in religious epistemology that solidifies during the Weimar period, unsettling the distinctions of nineteenth-century religious thought, including the distinction between a Christianity that is inward, moral, and spiritual, and a Judaism that is quasi-political and legalistic.

Tillich’s different “Kairos” texts provide an apt starting point to work out these tensions. Paul Tillich (1886–1965) represents an intersection even in biographical terms, both between different religious traditions and between different discourses. In 1922, when writing the first “Kairos” text, he was a theologian who did not yet have a university affiliation, looking around for intellectual orientation. Alongside his prolific essayistic and academic writing, he founded the Kairos Circle that brought together protestants such himself and as Rüstow, and Jews such as Löwe. In 1925 he became a professor of religious studies in Dresden, in 1929 he moved to a chair for sociology at the University of Frankfurt, where he was nicknamed “Paul among the Jews” because of his collaboration with Max Horkheimer’s Institute for Social Research, Karl Mannheim’s institute for sociology, and Martin Buber’s Lehrhaus group. During these years, he was famous for his receptivity to various discourses; Adorno called his former teacher a “wandering antenna.”³ After his forced emigration to the United States in 1933, Tillich managed to establish himself as one of the most influential theologians of his generation. The idea of *kairos* that traveled with him resonates with diverse discourses of historical understanding and existentialist decision making, revolution and authenticity, crisis and apocalyptic rhetoric. In order to explore these resonances, I will discuss the general implications of crisis that are so

³Adorno, “Erinnerungen an Paul Tillich.”

important for Weimar thought before focusing on two specific intellectual moments, namely the interpretation of Hebrew prophecy and New Testament eschatology. Finally, I will look more closely at how Tillich conceives of the *kairos*, and how the emphatic proclamation of the fulfilled moment changes over time in the second and third versions of the “Kairos” text.

I

Tillich’s notion of *kairos* is symptomatic. It expresses a widespread feeling of crisis after German defeat in the First World War, which determines circumstances in the early years of the Weimar Republic to such an extent that the “crisis of the Weimar Republic” is a pleonasm, according to an historian’s *bon mot*.⁴ However, the proclamation of a “critical” situation in Germany, a situation in which a radically different future is about to emerge, has much older roots, closely related to the figure of the prophet. The radical critique of present “culture” has been popular in German discourse at least since Nietzsche’s time, and since Zarathustra, the figure associated with such critique has had a decidedly biblical outlook.⁵ The outbreak of the war led numerous intellectuals and professors to adopt this posture in a more straightforward manner, claiming that the war would lead to a rejuvenation of the true German spirit against widespread materialism and liberalism. Imitating Fichte’s famous *Addresses to the German Nation*, thinkers such as Rudolf Eucken or Paul Natorp, but also Max Scheler and Georg Simmel, made numerous attempts to stir such a national awakening, with strong prophetic overtones that drew on the tradition of German *Bildung*.⁶ By the end of the war, however, these attempts had failed, and so had traditional academic and political institutions, which were challenged by diverse efforts to build up alternative public spheres. Along with the youth movement and different radical political groups, these included a massive number of new religious movements such as Rudolf Steiner’s “anthroposophy” or the so-called “saints of inflation,” self-proclaimed leaders, prophets, and saviors who gathered a large group of followers in the 1920s.⁷

For us, today, these phenomena are both quite familiar and very strange. Generally, we are used to dealing with “Weimar Messianism,” usually related to the thought of Martin Buber, Georg Landauer, Gershom Scholem, and, above all, Walter Benjamin. However, there are others such as Ernst Bloch, Alfred Kantorowicz, or Ernst Jünger who belong to a wider stream of “radical” thinkers employing messianic or apocalyptic arguments and figures of thought.⁸ Additionally, there are thinkers such as Rudolf Steiner, or Gusto Gräser and Johann Christian Häuser, two of the most prominent religious leaders of the interwar inflation period. Habitually, we tend to distinguish the “theoretical” messianism of the first group from the more vulgar messianism of the others. But if there is one thing to learn from the history of messianism, it is precisely its force to override distinctions between noble and vulgar, between theory and practice, as well as between the different camps into which we tend to classify the intellectual field, namely left and

⁴See Graf, “Die ‘antihistoristische Revolution’ in der protestantischen Theologie der zwanziger Jahre.”

⁵See also: Weidner. “Und ihr – Ihr machtet schon einer Leier-Lied daraus.”

⁶See Lübke, “Die philosophischen Ideen von 1914.”

⁷See Linse, *Geisterseher und Wunderwirker*

⁸See Brockhoff, *Die Apokalypse in der Weimarer Republik*.

right, or religious and secular. As for the Weimar Republic, we have to face the fact that the different camps are not as far apart as we would like to think; Tillich still argued as late as the beginning of 1933 that the religious socialists should consider forming a common front with National Socialism against the bourgeois and capitalist order ... While this position appears politically naïve in retrospect, the situation was much more ambiguous for contemporaries. However, Tillich was soon compelled to think otherwise, as the National Socialist government forced the left-leaning professor out of the university and into emigration immediately after its rise to power.

Any attempt to historicize Weimar messianism seems to face an uneasy alternative: either to pick out the messianism we like – be it “noble,” “left,” “libertarian,” etc. – thereby constructing a specific tradition in isolation from its historical context,⁹ or to adopt a narrative according to which all the different messianisms – the calls to “action,” proclamations of “urgency,” and other “prophetic” statements – are simply forms of “extremism” that have abandoned the golden middle path of liberal democracy.¹⁰ It is precisely in order to avoid this alternative that I shift perspective, describing the prophetic discourses in question not so much as political projects, but rather as reflections on the conditions of politics, and as indicators that the general conditions of cultural and political discourse have undergone significant changes. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that these discourses are also political projects, in Tillich’s case the explicit attempt to ally Protestantism and socialism.

More than merely a matter of methodology, this shift in perspective has important current implications. Today, the specter of “Weimar” has reentered the scene. In Germany, Europe, and worldwide, parallels are drawn between the present political situation and the period of the Weimar Republic, when democracy collapsed from within, falling prey to what is today called “populism.” Indeed, such a parallel may help us to understand the present moment, or at least give us some orientation; however, if we accept it, the question of how we understand “Weimar” remains all the more pressing. If it is congruent with “crisis,” this may match the urgency we feel today, but it leaves open *how* we imagine this crisis. Is the crisis a Manichean battle between left and right, or between the chosen few noble messianists and all the rest? A battle that was lost by treason, by not holding fast to the ideals? At least as I see it, this seems to be the narrative that the European or German left continues to employ, by the very fact of calling itself “left,” by continuing to speak in terms of “progressive” and “regressive,” or simply by clearly distinguishing between “us” and “them,” with the latter usually constituted by a blend of neoliberal globalists and conservative, nationalistic *Heimat* lovers. Or was the crisis of Weimar a crisis of modernization, an experience of the changing conditions of social and political life under the pressure of acceleration and instability? A crisis that, at least to some extent, also dissolved the political distinctions just mentioned, so that none of us or them can form groups along the given lines? While the following reflections will not be able to answer these questions, my aim is to develop a more specific understanding of what it means to historicize Weimar thought, especially the rhetoric of crisis. Rather than simply adopting this rhetoric once more, it is necessary to carefully consider its implications in order to understand the metapolitical logic in an age of uncertainty.

⁹See for example Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia*.

¹⁰See Schreiner, “Wann kommt der Retter Deutschlands?!”

II.

Paradoxically, the most important inspiration for prophetic discourse in the Weimar Republic is probably its severest critic, namely Max Weber. During World War One, he worked extensively on biblical prophecy and identified with the prophets of doom who foresaw the catastrophe of the German empire, but he was ignored by his audience.¹¹ At the same time, he was critical of the intellectual and professorial politics of his contemporaries who claimed spiritual leadership based on their academic merits. For Weber, this “professorial prophecy” (*Kathedersprophetie*) falsely mixes what is essentially different. According to Weber’s highly influential distinction, science – *Wissenschaft*, in the German sense that also comprises the humanities – rests on facts but cannot establish values, which have to be chosen by everyone individually.

In “Science as a Vocation,” a speech delivered in 1917, Weber underlines this distinction and stresses that modern man has to accept living in non-prophetic times. More than mere skepticism, his realism becomes prophetic. At the end of his speech, Weber stresses that:

for the many who today tarry for new prophets and saviors, the situation is the same as resounds in the beautiful Edomite watchman’s song of the period of exile that has been included among Isaiah’s oracles: “He calls to me out of Seir, Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night? The watchman said, the morning comes, and also the night; if you will inquire, inquire, and come again.” The people to whom this was said has enquired and tarried for more than two millennia, and we are shaken when we realize its fate. From this we want to draw the lesson that nothing is gained by yearning and tarrying alone, and we shall act differently. We shall set to work and meet the “demands of the day,” in human relations as well as in our vocation. This, however, is plain and simple, if each finds and obeys the demon who holds the fibers of his very life.¹²

There are neither prophets nor saviors nor leaders to wait for these days. Nevertheless, Weber adds pathos to his argument by referring to a prophet; he quotes Isaiah 21:11-12, the oracle against Edom, one of the many obscure passages from biblical prophecy that he offers in a rather questionable translation. Citing a prophet to warn against prophets is structurally similar to the castigation of “professorial prophecy”: as the prophet says, don’t wait for prophets; as I, the professor, tell you, don’t believe in professors. These statements would be straightforward contradictions if not for their performative nature – as in the speaking “I” and the complex figure of the “prophet” – which already implies the denunciation of false prophets. This performative rhetoric along with a complex cultural model allow Weber to express the problems of intellectual politics and political theory.

Weber’s understanding of the meaning and nature of prophecy goes back to his involvement with ancient Judaism and biblical criticism. He follows the latest trends of Old Testament critics who had begun to read the prophets politically by the end of the nineteenth century. Previously, in Romanticism and idealism, the biblical prophets were conceived of as individuals, proponents of religious progress from a legalist, political religion toward an inward, moral piety. As of the 1880s, however, Julius Wellhausen’s new

¹¹Marianne Weber reports that he was particularly moved by Jeremiah. See Weber, *Max Weber: Ein Lebensbild*. Nachdruck, 605.

¹²Weber, “Science as a Vocation (1919).”

interpretation focusing on Israel's political history had become dominant. Wellhausen stressed that it was the political catastrophe of Israel and then of Judah that had provoked prophecy as a radical call to return to an idealized, pre-monarchic, and religious past.¹³ Weber, too, reads the prophets less as religious idealists than as political demagogues and ideologues who were concerned with the actual political redemption of oppression, and who promised political rather than transcendent or spiritual salvation. Despite their concrete political aims, the prophets despised any compromise and avoided any negotiation with actual political powers, resisting the sphere of petty politics. Even though they were "objectively political and, above all, world-political demagogues and publicists, however subjectively, they were no political partisans."¹⁴ Weber relates this ethos to their social position: originating from a demilitarized warrior caste, the prophets were private individuals who lack any office but nevertheless claim to speak for the community. However, as Weber stresses repeatedly, most of the time they were neither understood nor supported by their audience, remaining isolated. It is due to this very isolation that their critique became more radical and bolder than that of other, similar ancient figures. Prophecy thus embodies a paradox that Ernst Troeltsch, friend and colleague of Max Weber, presents as an aporia of morality and politics: "Their whole world of religious ideas emerges from politics that has become so important for them. But this politics is not exactly politics, but firm faith [...] and a specific exclusion of any compromise with foreign cultures."¹⁵ While prophetic politics originates from a political situation, it ultimately transcends or even ignores that situation. It is neither pure utopianism (a form of philosophical idea), nor pure politics (an actual practice of rulership). Instead, it is anti-politics, at once acknowledging and ignoring the relevance of the political.

In Weber's account, the Hebrew prophets therefore constitute a paradigm for the type of "charismatic leadership" that plays an important role in his political typology. According to Weber, charismatic leadership is based on neither habitual traditions nor on rational procedures but on the personal virtues of the leader; based on these virtues, the leader is seen to be endowed with supernatural authority, a precarious authority that has to be performed continually in order for the audience to follow the leader. This idea of charisma is already critical toward a liberal understanding of politics, since it insists that politics cannot be reduced to rational consent alone, at least occasionally requiring an additional moment of decision, speech, and vocation.¹⁶ Moreover, the Hebrew prophets not only serve as a paradigm for charisma – and charismatic speech in particular – but they also represent the tragedy or irony of charisma, namely that its claim can be dismissed and ignored. Prophecy is therefore an ambivalent politics: it is the politics of the powerless, a politics of purity and boldness that generates its effects and endangers its consequences due to the suffering of the unheard prophet. Furthermore, radical critique ultimately helps to dissolve not only present conditions but also the basic political condition presupposed by the prophet.¹⁷ This is what actually happened in ancient Israel, when prophetic critique

¹³On Wellhausen, see Weidner, "The Political Theology of Ethical Monotheism"; Boschwitz, *Julius Wellhausen: Motive und Maßstäbe seiner Geschichtsschreibung*.

¹⁴Weber, *Ancient Judaism*, 275. See also Otto, *Max Webers Studien des antiken Judentums*.

¹⁵Troeltsch, "Glaube und Ethos der hebräischen Propheten." my translation. On Troeltsch's interpretation of prophecy, see also Dietrich, *Cohen and Troeltsch: Ethical Monotheistic Religion and Theory of Culture*.

¹⁶See Schweitzer, *The Age of Charisma*.

¹⁷On this self-negating quality of prophecy, see Fisch, *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation*; Marks, "On Prophetic Stammering."

of the kingdom helped to destroy the state, transforming the political religion of ancient Judaism into the exilic religion of Judaism as we know it today: “it was only the boldness of prophecy which made Israel to this unique extent into a people of expectation and tarrying.”¹⁸

Returning to the conclusion of “Science as a Vocation,” we have to bear in mind this ambivalence of prophecy. For when Weber warns his audience not to yearn or tarry, he is referring to the threat that Germany might lose its political power after being defeated in the war, as did the ancient Judaic Kingdom. According to Weber, the German people were blinded by the apocalyptic rise of hopes for a renaissance of a new German nation and culture, proclaimed by professorial prophecy; this is what hindered them from considering their political interests in a rational way. To warn against such utopianism was the task of the day, a task that might even evoke another prophecy, namely Isaiah’s warning against the all too easy prophecies of salvation.

Beyond this political danger, the prophetic posture also exhibits an epistemic ambivalence that is typical of Weber, and of interwar discourse in general. As already mentioned, Weber distinguishes between facts and values, stressing that science can only claim to make judgements about facts, not about values; he tells the audience that they must decide upon values for themselves. This appeal is rather paradoxical, since Weber claims that science is unable to speak about values while making strongly value-laden comments: facts and values not only *are* different, they *ought* to be different.¹⁹ We can also see this ambivalence in another famous passage that culminates in a quote from a prophet, from the end of Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. He depicts an apocalyptic scenario of technical progress leading to an “iron cage” where individuality will no longer play any role:

No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development, entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: “Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.” But this brings us to the world of judgments of value and of faith, with which this purely historical discussion need not be burdened.²⁰

Here, too, Weber quotes a prophetic phrase and then counters it with an argument, namely that he wants to speak in purely historical terms rather than placing value. It is not Isaiah who is quoted but Nietzsche, as a voice that transgresses the limits of science and thus marks the limits of Weber’s argument: since a scientific text is not able to make claims on values, it requires a prophet to do so – a prophet whose performance has to be immediately interrupted or counteracted.

While the endings of “Science as a Vocation” and *The Protestant Ethic* are formally similar, they also stand in contrast to one another. Whereas in *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber invokes Nietzsche in order to counter liberal optimism, in “Science as a Vocation” he refers to Isaiah in order to warn against the yearning for new prophets: in other words, to warn against Nietzsche. One is tempted to argue along with Hans Blumenberg or

¹⁸Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” 156.

¹⁹See the detailed argument in Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 35–80.

²⁰Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 182. See also Weidner, “The Rhetoric of Secularization.”

Harold Bloom that only a prophet can prevail against a prophet:²¹ only Isaiah can resist Nietzsche. Never a single utterance but part of a prophetic chain, prophecy is always counterprophecy; it is highly dialectical and thus able to express the numerous paradoxes of political thought that open up when the relations between culture, politics, and religion have become ambiguous.

III.

Even more important for the Weimar discourse on *Kairos* than the reference to Hebrew prophecy is the reference to the New Testament. The very opposition between *chronos* and *kairos* refers to the Greek New Testament, which distinguishes continuous chronological time (*chronos*) from the “right time” of the “event” or “action” (*kairos*): Whereas *chronos* refers to a certain amount of time, as in a day or an hour (e.g., Acts 13:18, 27:9), *kairos* denotes an “appointed time” (Luke 1:20), a moment when time is “fulfilled” and the kingdom of God is “at hand” (Mark 1:15), or the “proper time to reap the harvest” (Galatian 6:9).²² This distinction, which appears rather complex both in the general Greek usage and in the texts of the New Testament, can be viewed with greater clarity in more specific contemporary exegetical and philosophical contexts. Stress on the urgency of the “moment” corresponds to the reevaluation of the apocalyptic in late nineteenth-century exegesis, when Johannes Weiß, William Wrede, and Albert Schweitzer had argued that the New Testament idea of salvation is not determined by ideas of moral progress or self-cultivation but by the expectation of the imminent end of the world.²³ The promised “kingdom of God” does not refer to an interior province of faith but the abrupt manifestation of the divine in the world. In terms of philosophy, existentialism and vitalism around the turn of the century highlight the difference between the “empty” time of mere chronological measurement and the existential “instant” or fulfilled “durée” of complex experiences. After the war, theologians such as Karl Barth or Rudolf Bultmann use these ideas to develop the new idiom of “dialectical theology,” which proclaims the radical difference between God and man, revelation and culture, even faith (divinely oriented, top down) and religion (human made, bottom up).²⁴ This idiom provides the immediate context for Tillich’s text and also affects the position of religious speech more generally, thereby both strengthening and complicating the possibility of prophetic gestures.

In his famous commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Barth categorically distinguishes the qualitative “instant” from quantitative time, most clearly in his commentary on Romans 13:11 (“And do this, knowing the time. Now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed”). In highly rhetorical passages, he elaborates on this “now” when “between the times – there is a ‘Moment’ that is no Moment in time,” a now that is “completely hidden, unobservable, intangible present,” but which nonetheless in every moment can become this “eternal ‘Moment’”

²¹According to Blumenberg, only a myth can counter another myth. See Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, esp. 399–402, 430–464. According to Harold Bloom, poetic speech is always determined by the attempts to repress or negate one’s precursors; see idem: *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. In Weber’s case, the final quotation not only counters Nietzsche but also Hermann Cohen, who also quotes *Isaiah* 21:11f. in a very different way; cf. Cohen, “Der Stil der Propheten.”

²²See for example Sipiora, “The Rhetoric of Time and Timing in the New Testament.”

²³See Koch, *Ratlos vor der Apokalypitik*.

²⁴See Ruschke, *Entstehung und Ausführung der Diastasen-theologie in Karl Barths zweitem Römerbrief*.

that “can be compared with no moment in time.”²⁵ It is the “midst” of time but also the “boundary of time,” and the “time of recollection”²⁶ – but not yet, since it still has to become that moment. For Barth, it is not the Parousia (the second coming of Christ) that is delayed, as Albert Schweitzer famously claimed, but our awakening. If we were to awaken, we would remember, and we would perform the step from unqualified into qualified time. Here already, the *kairos* oscillates between past, present, and future, with epistemic qualities related to our very awareness of truth.

This epistemic moment as well as the prophetic nature of *kairos* become even more explicit in Barth’s *The Word of God and the Task of Theology* from 1922. This text can be read as an answer to Weber’s “Science as a Vocation,” addressing both the “vocation” of theology and its “scientific” – that is, epistemological – nature.²⁷ Like Weber, Barth speaks to fellow professionals and describes the current crisis of all institutions, including the church. Barth describes this crisis with a wide range of catastrophic – some might say expressionist – metaphors of destruction, abyss, explosion, and attack, obviously related in no small part to the experience of the war. In the end, however, Barth insists that the hardship of theology is not based in the crisis of culture but in the very task of theology – that is, to speak of God, not of culture or ethics.

To speak of God would mean to speak that Word which can only come from God himself: the Word, *God becomes man*. We can say these three words, but it does not mean we have spoken the Word of God that contains the *truth*. Our theological task is to say that *God becomes human* and to say it as the Word of *God*, as *God* would say it.²⁸

To truly speak of God would mean to speak the Word of God, to speak in the name of God. Quoting Jeremiah 1:6 (“Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak”), Barth stresses that the task is actually an impossible one, given the abyssal difference between God and man; the German *Aufgabe* also means “giving up.” Reliteralizing Weber’s metaphor of the profession as a “vocation,” Barth refers to the most straightforward sense of the word: the vocation of being a messenger. This vocation not only legitimizes the prophet or the theologian, but also calls him into question in a radical way: the theologian’s call, the word of God that he is to repeat, simultaneously authorizes his word and empties it of all definite authority. The ambivalence of the figure of the prophet, which Weber had described in historical terms, is thus reformulated as an essential trait of the theologian’s speech. It is constituted by a radical truth claim but also by the knowledge that every attempt to realize this claim, to represent truth in speech, must become a paradox. However, this need not be purely negative or immobilizing:

The true dialectician knows that this center is incomprehensible and invisible. He will let himself get carried away into direct communication as seldom as possible, for he knows that every direct communication *about* it, be it positive or negative, is not communication *about it*, but dogmatism or criticism. On this thin ridge, one can only walk, if you stand still, you will fall to the left or to the right.²⁹

²⁵Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (1922), 497f.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 499f.

²⁷On the range of reactions to Weber, see Ringer, *Die Gelehrten: Der Niedergang der deutschen Mandarine 1890–1933*, esp. 315ff. For the context of the speech, see Busch, *Karl Barths Lebenslauf*, 152ff.

²⁸Barth, *The Word of God and Theology*, 185; the original title stresses the “Task” (*Aufgabe*) of theology.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 190f.

The abyss between the human word and the word of God is not an abyss that one can speak about, it is an abyss of speaking: it appears in the act of speaking of God, and it appears only as long as one continues to speak. In the Nietzschean image of the tightrope walker, the impossibility of a logical “solution” is supplemented by verbal and gestic action, stressing the highly rhetorical language that characterizes dialectical theology.³⁰

It is through this rhetoric that theological language also regains political meaning. Barth’s dialectic does not lead away from political questions, as a negative theology would do; instead, it allows him to apply theological vocabulary to political realities precisely by maintaining awareness of the difference between politics and theology, an attitude that led him close to socialism and later to a decided opposition against National Socialism. In the last part of Barth’s commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, he once again stresses the difference between Christian salvation and any political project: “Whenever men claim to be able to see the Kingdom of God as a growing organism [...] what they see is not the Kingdom of God, but the Tower of Babel.”³¹ Here, we see how Barth’s radical theology fuels an iconoclastic approach to politics, while insisting that no human undertaking can escape the paradoxes of politics. The radical distinction between man and God, like the radical distinction between facts and values in Weber’s argument, thus calls into question what Barth calls the ethical “positions,” namely state, law, and society. Moreover, even what Barth calls the “negative position,” namely revolution, is problematic in itself. Despite his revolutionary rhetoric, Barth insists on a neither-nor attitude toward any political standpoint, including that of revolution. Paradoxically, he even argues that “the revolutionary titan is far more godless, far more dangerous, than his reactionary counterpart – because he is so much nearer to the truth.”³² For even the revolutionary does not escape the human hubris of negation. His attempt to erect a new order fails; he, too, mixes heaven and earth, falling prey to the prophetic irony that is always the counterpart of radical critique.

For Barth, the true dialectical position combines radical critique and radical suspension of judgement. This combination is expressed by the composite term “non-revolution,” which Barth develops in a reading of Romans 13:1, the stumbling block of all Pauline political theology (“Let every man be in subjection to the existing ruling powers. For there is no power but of God”).³³ Barth reads the “hypotassein” – usually translated as “to obey” – as a passive “to be subject” or even “to subject oneself.” In ethical terms, he stresses that this is a negative concept: to subject oneself does not mean to act, it means “to withdraw and make way, [...] to have no resentment, and not to overthrow.”³⁴ Accordingly, the second half of the verse – “There is no power but of God” – is interpreted not as a justification of the existing order but as a relativity of all powers in relation to God, and not as in “every power is of God” but as in “there is no power apart from God.” Thus, neither any existing power nor any revolution may claim to be “true” power, and the task of true theology consists in the basic plea against any conflation of the realms. Quoting Isaiah 55:8, one of his favorite passages (“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord.”), Barth conceives this distinction between “all powers” and “true

³⁰On the role of rhetoric, see Webb, *Refiguring Theology*.

³¹Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 432.

³²Ibid., 478.

³³Ibid., 481, 484.

³⁴Ibid., 481.

power” as the fundamental political gesture: “Politics becomes possible only when it is seen to be essentially a game; that is to say when we are unable to speak of absolute political right, when the note of ‘absoluteness’ has vanished from both thesis and antithesis.”³⁵ The moment of prophetic critique thus opens up a political realm. In Weber’s argument, this opening comes through an appeal to the individual’s decision, and in Barth’s commentary, it comes through the smashing of the idols of a sacralized state or revolution that does not simply fall back into liberalism or relativism.

IV.

Like Weber and Barth, Paul Tillich experienced World War One as a deep crisis of the existing order, but for him it also raised hopes for a future society that would combine Christian existentialist morals with socialist politics and thus be able to overcome nationalism, capitalism, and materialism.³⁶ The two “Kairos” texts that Tillich wrote during the 1920s represent and reflect this moment of crisis and hope, revealing the potential as well as the paradoxes of prophetic speech in the context of Weimar Germany.

The first “Kairos” text from 1922 belongs to Tillich’s utopian phase of religious socialism. As quoted above, it presents itself as an *Aufruf*, a call to enter into the very moment of change. This radical present has to be distinguished from the abstract, linear time of *chronos*, for the moment of the *kairos* is “en charis,” in the charismatic instant of the fullness of time; in other words, it is always loaded with tensions, possibilities, and impossibilities. Tillich describes the crucial distinction between *chronos* and *kairos* in terms of history and culture. According to Tillich, historical consciousness first emerged in the Semitic and Persian world, and unfolded in occidental Christianity; today, it is confronted by mechanical and mathematical explanations of the world by science. Other interpretations of history include the religious “absolutist” conception of history as a struggle between good and evil that can be revolutionary (if the final outcome of that struggle is still open) or conservative (if the decisive event has already happened), as well as more relativistic conceptions of history as historicist (every age is tragic) or progressivist (where the ultimate outcome is watered down into gradual development). For Tillich, however, these interpretations have to be overcome by an “openness toward the unconditional” (*das Unbedingte*), which undermines all other positions: “The unconditional cannot be identified with any given reality, whether past or future; there is no absolute church, there is no absolute kingdom of reason and justice in history.”³⁷ Conceived of as absolute, “church” or “society” become “idol[s]”: “antidivine” realities against which the critique that he characterizes as “prophetic” must be unleashed: “This prophetic criticism, launched in the name of the unconditional, breaks the absolute church and the absolute society.”³⁸ Tillich follows the lines of a Barthian dialectic in which every moment becomes a moment of judgement and decision. Moreover, he makes his criticism socially concrete by referring to the prophet who grasps the right moment to interfere, and who is in a position to undercut all claims to ultimate meaning.

³⁵Ibid., 489, translation modified.

³⁶For biographical background, see Pauck and Pauck, *Paul Tillich I: Leben. Sein Leben und Denken*, 78ff.

³⁷Tillich, “Kairos (I),” 37.

³⁸Ibid., 38.

In Tillich's text, this line of argument is supplemented by a second, more material argument along the lines of a theology of culture. According to this argument, cultures are centered around values that have an essentially religious character. They usually develop from a "theonomous" stage with an integrated system of values that is based on a transcendent highest value, namely God, toward "autonomous" spheres that tend to be grounded in themselves. Whereas "theonomy" represents substance, "autonomy" is a dynamic principle that continues to break free but is not able to achieve "depth" and thus leads into entropy:

Autonomy is able to live as long as it can draw from the religious tradition of the past, from the remnants of a lost theonomy. But more and more it loses this spiritual foundation. It becomes emptier, more formalistic, or more factual and is driven toward skepticism and cynicism, toward the loss of meaning and purpose.³⁹

It is this cultural situation – framed by a typical narrative of disenchantment and nihilism – that calls for the *kairos*, now characterized as the "coming [literally irrupting, *Hereinbrechen*] of a new theonomy on the soil of a secularized and emptied autonomous culture."⁴⁰ Again, the *kairos* is figured as an interrupting moment, oriented away from the idolatrous past that it ends, and toward a new future that it founds; the prophet here is thus less of a critic than a teacher, if not a leader.

The conceptual frames that Tillich employs – history and culture, instant and crisis, critic and leader – are very similar in structure. These frames are held together by an additional device: the strong performative dimension of the text, which not only speaks about the *kairos* but actually *proclaims* that we are in a moment of *kairos*, undoing all potential skepticism.

Is it possible that the message of the *kairos* is an error? The answer is not difficult to give. The message is always an error for it sees something immediately imminent which, considered in its ideal aspect, will never become a reality and which, considered in its real aspect, will be fulfilled only in long periods of time. And yet the message of the *kairos* is never an error; for the *kairos* is proclaimed as a prophetic message, it is already present; it is impossible for it to be proclaimed in power without its having been grasped by those who proclaim it.⁴¹

Thus, the announcement of the *kairos* already constitutes a moment of *kairos*. In the performative gesture of the text, different moments of prophetic speech coincide – the political, the epistemic, the rhetorical. This gesture, however, radically changes its meaning over time. Like every utopian energy, it is difficult to uphold for very long, and every performative gesture becomes strange, unfamiliar, and odd when frozen. We can observe this in Tillich's later writings.

Four years later, in 1926, Tillich wrote a second text entitled "Kairos," which claims to analyze the spiritual climate of the times. In general, he repeats his argument from the first text and reiterates the fundamental distinction between *chronos* and *kairos*, the latter denoting "fulfilled time," "fullness of time," and the concrete historical moment. Prophecy remains crucial: "To conceive of time as *kairos* means to conceive of it as responsibility that cannot be avoided, to conceive of it in the spirit of prophecy."⁴² This spirit, Tillich

³⁹Ibid., 46.

⁴⁰Ibid., 47.

⁴¹Ibid., 51.

⁴²Tillich, "Kairos II," 81, my translation.

highlights, was never limited to the church; it is also present in thinkers as different as Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and Stefan George, all of whom fought against capitalism, imperialism, and bourgeois narrowness. However, the framework of the argument is altered or qualified in important ways to account for the irony of failed prophecy and the emergence of more complex rhetorical modes.

In the first place, the very repetition of the proclamation of *kairos* poses a problem, all the more so since the historical situation of the Weimar Republic had changed. The radical crisis of 1923 – inflation and different attempts at a coup d'état – had been replaced by a new stability that was obviously anything but the fulfillment of utopian hopes. On the last page of his essay, after again discussing the *kairos* over twenty pages, Tillich asks in a self-critical mode:

But when we now look at the reality of our day, don't we have to say: It is as if a hoarfrost has fallen on all the things that are spoken of here, be it the youth movement or philosophy of life, be it expressionism or religious socialism? Wasn't everything romanticism, intoxication, utopia?⁴³

Here, the prophetic pose not only changes the expectation of the future and the conception of the present, but also the memory of the past. It reflects disappointment that the expected revolution did not take place, following the general trend of the Weimar years from expressionism to New Objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*), or toward a new realism that is now opposed to mere utopianism: "That which was not reality, what we were doing and thinking, is being burned. A realism, hard and brutal, emerges."⁴⁴ "Faithful realism" (*Gläubiger Realismus*) will be Tillich's new slogan for the coming years, a term that willfully joins opposites, as "religious socialism" had already done. More specifically, Tillich highlights that romantic utopianism did not comprehend the strength of the forces of resistance, the "demonic power of bourgeois society"⁴⁵ that proved too strong to be overcome by the mere call to action, awareness, and critique. Also in 1926, Tillich wrote an essay on "The Demonic," arguably his most original work, developing the critique of idolatry even further: idols are not merely hollow statues, they achieve their own substance and inner life, and fighting with them affects even their opponent. This is very close to the idea of a bewitched second nature.⁴⁶

Thus, the role of the object of criticism is revised in the second "Kairos" text, and the theological framework is displaced as well. This displacement is particularly interesting for us, since Tillich now problematizes precisely the proclamatory gesture that is characteristic of prophetic rhetoric. True, the *kairos* presupposes a prophetic position, but who is actually able to occupy this position, or take up this standpoint? Three years earlier, in 1923, Tillich had famously initiated a controversy over the nature of the paradox; in a review of Barth's commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, he praised Barth's achievements but also questioned the latter's sole emphasis on the difference between the human and the divine.⁴⁷ According to Tillich, dialectical theology would have to move from the critical paradox toward a more positive paradox, a suggestion Barth vigorously reputed as a

⁴³Ibid., 89.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Tillich, "The Demonic: A Study in the Interpretation of History." See also Yip, *Capitalism as a Religion?*

⁴⁷See Tillich, "Kritisches und positives Paradox. Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Karl Barth und Friedrich Gogarten."

revival of liberalism that he claimed to have left behind. The second “Kairos” text reflects this controversy, arguing that the pure radicality of negation – or the claimed purity of the “unconditioned” – cannot in itself constitute a specific position. Dialectical theology might reject any attempt to become a fixed standpoint, but it cannot escape the “law of all prophecy” that a radical gesture ironically becomes nothing more than a gesture:

It holds fast to its abstract “no” against time, it does not become concretely critical of time. Particularly obvious is that – different from former prophets as the primal Christians, Luther, Marx, and Nietzsche – it does not have a symbol for the demonic forces of our time. Since its “no” remains abstract, it does not know a concrete “no.”⁴⁸

Here, insistence on radicalism is revealed as a problematic position, a position that can also be criticized in a more concrete analysis of society, for example, with the argument that dialectical theology remains individualistic and in this respect totally bound to the bourgeois society against which it gestures.

The theology of culture is displaced as well. Tillich still insists that the conscience of *kairos* is revealed when the epoch has stabilized itself in an autonomous culture. It is precisely when culture has forgotten the “prophetic shattering on which it rests”⁴⁹ that the prophetic spirit manifests itself. However, the prophetic principle that brings about a new epoch is now flanked by the “priestly” principle, characterized as motherly, caring, less irruptive than continuous, less destructive than constructive, more ritualistic or “sacramental” than critical – in short, a Catholic principle.⁵⁰ Introducing this priestly principle is a modest self-criticism for Tillich: he no longer conceives of Protestantism and the smashing of the idols as the only active force in history, recognizing that iconoclasm alone will not be able to supersede the demonics of bourgeois society without priestly substance. Protestantism was once a victory over the priestly, but it still has to realize itself as priestly or it will become abstract. In this construction, the prophetic is no longer a pure and simple principle; it has its own history with its own tragedy, in which its purity becomes its problem. From this point on, Tillich is constantly engaged with the crisis of Protestantism.

Thus, the changes between the two texts reveal the prophetic discourse and the idea of the *kairos* as “shifters” in both a discursive and temporal sense. The prophetic moment connects different discourses of religion, socialism, and cultural criticism, driven by a philosophical dialectic between existence and essence and a theological dialectic between the mundane and the transcendent, or the conditioned and the unconditioned. It is part of a prophetic temporality; it employs the prophetic gesture to speak the truth, but it also reflects the problem of repetition implied by the fact that the messenger is already repeating the message and may have to repeat it once more. This repetition renders the proclamation increasingly complex and “weak,” in that the pure presentism is transformed into a memory and the pure alternative into a multifaceted image. What is figured as a charismatic process of breakthrough, reversal, and awakening thus retains its qualitative temporality; however, it loses the simplistic either-or of idolatry and truth.

⁴⁸Tillich, “Kairos II,” 80.

⁴⁹Ibid., 83.

⁵⁰Ibid., 84ff.

V.

Like so many other German left-wing intellectuals, Tillich had to emigrate immediately after the rise to power of the National Socialists in 1933. He first received a visiting position and then a permanent position at the Union Theological Seminary in New York, and during the next decades he became one of the most influential American Protestant theologians. Unlike other emigrants who hardly found an audience in the US and decided to go back to Europe after the war, Tillich managed to reformulate the radical, idiosyncratic ideas of his youth within the very different context of his host country. Among these ideas was the idea of *kairos*.

Tillich returns to *kairos* in an encyclopedia entry from 1958, and this third text reveals how the specific temporality of *kairos* is once again transformed as time passes. “Fulfilled time” is now associated with the English “timing,” a word that other languages lack, and the tone of Tillich’s writing is tuned down to Anglo-Saxon modesty. Again, he sketches a prophetic tradition of those who saw time as being fulfilled: prophets, great reformers, and religious socialists whom he situates between the Lutheran and socialist traditions. In Lutheranism, Jesus Christ is the only *kairos*; critique is often limited to theological questions and not directed against the demonic powers of the present. By contrast, Socialism is too optimistic and does not conceive of its enemies as real powers. Religious socialism, as a third position, is faithful realism, allowing critique but lacking enthusiasm: it

did not believe that this is the central *kairos* and the Kingdom of God is imminent. It knew that the demonic forces in history (the structures of destruction) can be attacked and partly conquered, but they can never be eliminated. There are *kairoi*, but there is no utopian fulfillment.⁵¹

The *kairos* is still present and still described in categories similar to those used in the earlier texts. However, the performative dimension is weak. Tillich still stresses that the *kairos* exists in a “prophetic interpretation” of history that seeks to identify “the signs of the time” and to understand “universal history.”⁵² But the text looks towards the past and abstains from addressing what will come next. Perhaps the genre of an encyclopedia article is too descriptive, or perhaps history has forced Tillich to realize that former *kairoi* have passed irrevocably.

This third “Kairos” text continues the work of revision and rereading that the second text began. But it also reflects the more general question already raised above, namely the question of how to historicize “crisis.” If one makes constant reference to crisis and the moment of decision, what happens after this moment comes and goes and nothing takes place? Does this transform prophecy into apocalypticism, gnosticism, or another form of sectarianism? This would mean holding true to past promises but heightening their stakes, insisting that the decisive moment has indeed already taken place but its effects are not yet totally visible, or not visible to everyone. Or does prophecy gain the capacity to recognize failure, to conceive of loss, to mourn? Might it be transformed into what Klaus Briegleb, analyzing the late poetry of Heinrich Heine after the failed revolution of 1848, characterized as a “poetics of the defeated”?⁵³ For only if prophetic speech

⁵¹Tillich, “Kairos (III).”

⁵²Ibid., 197.

⁵³Briegleb, *Opfer Heine: Versuch über die Schriftzüge der Revolution*, 127.

is neither focused on the future nor stubbornly engaged in past battles and lost causes might it truly allow us to understand the present and how to act in it.

In succession, the three “Kairos” texts show how Tillich employs the idea of a different temporality and a temporality of difference in order to rethink the relation of religion and politics and to reassess a situation of crisis. As Weber’s reading of the Hebrew prophets and Barth’s interpretation of the New Testament reveal, diverse and complex discourses echo in the idea of *kairos*, allowing for the formulation of new ideas of intellectual politics. The three different versions of Tillich’s texts reflect the idea’s capacity to adapt to different circumstances: *kairos* can connote both idealism and realism; it can highlight spiritual as well as very material needs; it can be connected to the prophetic as well as the priestly. The sequence of the texts also allows us to explore the strong rhetorical and performative dimension of the idea, which is fundamental to its relevance in the context of the Weimar Republic. More than simply a descriptive category, *kairos* constitutes a strong appellative moment that is essential for the politics it engenders. Even though its rhetoric of urgency runs the risk of lapsing into disappointment, its gesture is complex enough to integrate an awareness of that risk, as Tillich’s later texts show. At least potentially, the rhetoric of *kairos* can thus lead to a self-critique that does not spiral into abstraction, sustaining vehemence without forgetting its own limitations.

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Notes on contributor

Daniel Weidner, Professor for the Study of Culture and Religion at the Humboldt-Universität Berlin and Associate Director of the Leibniz-Zentrum for Literatur- und Kulturforschung. He has been Visiting Professor in Stanford, Giessen, Basel, Chicago, Zürich, and Yale. His main areas of research are the interrelation of religion and literature, theories of secularization, the history of philology and literary theory, and German-Jewish Literature.

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