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Apocalypse Now: Walter Benjamin and the Legacy of Political Messianism

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现代启示录:本雅明与政治弥赛亚主义的遗产

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摘　要: 本雅明《暴力批判》一文于 1921 年发表时,几乎无人注意,而在共产国家崩溃后,此文在文化左派支持者中获得了典范性价值。这很大程度上是因为德里达《法律的力量:政治权威的神秘基础》一文全面依赖于它。本雅明早期努力在此文及相关文字中,以"神圣的暴力"为辩护理由,试图再次给政治神学注入活力,可惜后来的种种阐释都忽略了本雅明"神圣的暴力"概念在此过程中举足轻重的作用。在某些方面,本雅明 1921 年的文本已然成为一个重要的伦理-政治参照点,这对我们理解当下政治的窘困与混乱有何意义?这其中的许多问题所围绕的是这一核心问题:政治神学在当今的后世俗社会扮演怎样的角色?

关键词: 本雅明;　革命;　暴力;　陀思妥耶夫斯基;　《旧约》

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Title: Apocalypse Now: Walter Benjamin and the Legacy of Political Messianism

Abstract: Walter Benjamin's essay on the "Kritik der Gewalt" (Critique of Violence) has had a curious afterlife. When it first appeared in 1921, it passed almost unnoticed. However, following the collapse of communism, among proponents of the Cultural Left it acquired a canonical salience, in large measure owing to Jacques Derrida's systematic reliance on it in "The Force of Law: the Mystical Foundation of Political Authority" (1994). However, many of these later interpretations have overlooked the pivotal role that Benjamin's justification of "divine violence" played in his early attempts to revivify political theology, in "Kritik der Gewalt" and related texts. Finally, what does it tell us about the impasses and confusions of the political present that Benjamin's 1921 text has become, in certain quarters, a major ethico-political point of reference? Many of these issues revolve around the question of what role political theology might play in contemporary "post-secular" societies.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin;　Revolution;　Violence;　Dostoevsky;　Old Testament

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I would like to take as my point of departure the uncanny fascination that Benjamin's early essay, "Kritik der Gewalt," has provoked in recent years, especially since the historic collapse of communism in 1989; but, in addition, since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, which, combined with the United States'

questionable response to these events—launching two wars in the Middle East; suspending habeas corpus; the creation of a new Department of Homeland Security; the operation of "lawless" Black sites; and the juridical justification of so-called "enhanced interrogation methods" or torture in stark defiance of international law—have accorded questions of political violence renewed centrality. If we thought that, with the end of the Cold War and the consolidation of the Third Wave of democratization—in Latin America, in Eastern Europe, and South Africa—in democratic societies the issue of political violence had been rendered obsolete, we were dead wrong.

One of the upshots of this troubling historical sequence is that, in academic circles, Benjamin's 1921 essay has gained a new currency. It has been treated by many commentators—especially those trained in cultural studies and literary theory—as a type of hermeneutic skeleton key to deciphering the enigmas of contemporary politics. Not infrequently, attention to Benjamin's essay has been combined with an interest in Carl Schmitt's contemporaneous study, *Political Theology*. In this respect, Jacques Derrida's seminal essay "Force of Law: the Mystical Foundation of Political Authority" (1994), which was one of the first to highlight the elective affinities between Benjamin and Schmitt, became an indispensable touchstone of nearly all subsequent commentaries (It's worth noting that the amount of secondary literature on Derrida's text easily surpasses that on much of his later work. Numerous conferences were held on the essay, and their proceedings have been published and widely discussed.). Derrida's influential Benjamin-exegesis was followed by Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* and *States of Exception*, which use the work of Benjamin and Schmitt to explore kindred themes.

In many ways, "Force of Law" represented Derrida's first sortie, after decades of silence, in the realm of political philosophy. What Derrida lauded in Benjamin, but also in Schmitt, was his attention to the *dubious legitimacy of political foundings*. (In the mid-1980s, in a similar vein, he also investigated the questionable origins of the American Declaration of Independence.) In "Kritik der Gewalt" Benjamin had sought to expose the modern *Rechtsstaat's* dubious legitimacy by highlighting the intimate relationship between law and violence. In this respect Derrida viewed Benjamin's arguments as serviceable for his own critique of the seemingly triumphant "Washington consensus" of the post-communist era. Relying on Benjamin's arguments, he implied that political liberalism's claims to normative transparency were badly flawed and that, instead, more sinister forces lay beneath the veneer of constitutional fairness waiting to emerge in a moment of crisis.

Of course, the thematic relationship between these two emblematic period pieces of the early Weimar Republic, "Kritik der Gewalt" and *Political Theology*, is compelling. Both texts probe the relationship between law and sovereignty, between sovereignty and theology, and between law and violence. The nexus between them — they were written within a year of each other — becomes even more suggestive now that we know that Benjamin held Schmitt's theory of sovereignty in high esteem. He employed it to understand the phenomenon of monarchical absolutism during the Counterreformation period in his ill-fated *Habilitationsschrift* on *Trauerspiel*. And in 1930, Benjamin wrote Schmitt an admiring letter informing him of this fact, adding that, more recently, he had derived similar benefit from a study of Schmitt's earlier work on dictatorship (*Die Diktatur*, 1920). In a path-breaking essay on Benjamin, Jürgen Habermas remarks appositely that, "Benjamin, who uncovered the prehistoric world by way of Bachofen, knew [Alfred] Schuler, appreciated Klages, and corresponded with Carl Schmitt — this Benjamin, as a Jewish intellectual in 1920s Berlin, could still not ignore where his (and our) enemies stood" (Habermas 113).

Habermas's observation captures something essential about Benjamin's intellectual orientation that has become increasingly apparent in recent years: Frequently, Benjamin found thinkers on the

right more serviceable for his specific intellectual-political ends than figures on the political left. For, at the time, it was predominantly thinkers on the right rather than those on the left who addressed his most fundamental intellectual concerns: concerns that pertained to developing an emphatic concept of experience (*Erfahrung*), one that facilitated the "redemption" (*Rettung*) of the "fallen" natural world. Nearly all of his intellectual projects, from his earliest metaphysical essays of the 1910s to the *Passagenwerk* of the 1930s, revolve around this goal. He characterized this aim felicitously in his 1929 "Surrealism" essay, when he praised the Surrealist attempt *"to win the powers of intoxication* [*Rausch*] *for the revolution."* Thus from the standpoint of a theory of experience, Benjamin stood to learn much more from luminaries on the right such as Bachofen, Klages, and Schuler than he did from their opposite numbers on the political left. One might, therefore, treat it as something of a major intellectual sea change in Benjamin scholarship that, whereas during the 1960s and 1970s the canonical Benjamin texts were "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" and "The Author as Producer" — texts from the 1930s, when Benjamin characterized himself as a "Strategist in the Literary Struggle" — in recent decades this honor has unexpectedly shifted to "Kritik der Gewalt."

But before I pursue these admittedly fascinating questions of reception history, I would like to take another look at Benjamin's text itself, in an effort to reconstruct his intentions as well as to situate them in relationship to the question of "political theology" as he defined it: viz., in what ways might theological and political considerations productively intersect in order to redeem the historical present from its fate of unremitting decline.

"Kritik der Gewalt" was something of an intellectual turning point for Benjamin. Heretofore, he had studiously avoided questions of politics. It was a sphere of life he intentionally scorned as a realm of compromise, half-measures, and partial truths that, as such, was diametrically opposed to the "metaphysical" preoccupations of his youth. By the same token, in considering this essay, it is important to note that, as the 1920s progressed, Benjamin in no way simply *abandoned* his earlier, rather idiosyncratic theological frame of reference. Instead, increasingly, he focused on the ways in which theology, as he described it, might be reconciled with the urgent political concerns of the day. To characterize this desideratum as akin to squaring a circle would be a profound understatement.

During the 1910s, Benjamin published little. But the manuscripts he left behind richly illustrate the esoteric nature of his intellectual concerns. His rejection of neo-Kantianism, the reigning school-philosophy, could not have been more emphatic. He forcefully outlined its shortcomings and limitations in his 1918 essay, "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy," in which he accused Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* of promoting an "inferior concept of experience." By seeking to base metaphysics on the proven successes of the natural sciences, Kant had set a fateful precedent for nineteenth century philosophy, thereby paving the way for the rise of the debased mentalities of positivism and scientism. By virtue of proscribing forays into the intelligible world, Kant had succeeded in banishing or proscribing noumenal knowledge-and in Benjamin's view, only noumenal approaches harbored the prospect of elevating a fallen humanity above its fateful entrapment in the present state of things and providing it with a glimpse of salvation. In opposition to Kant's narrow-minded realism, Benjamin counterposed the supersensible experience of clairvoyants, the mentally ill, and patients with phantom limbs. He viewed all such instances as examples that transcended Kant's narrow-minded adherence to the "bounds of sense," and thus as proof that a higher conception of experience lay within humanity's grasp. But in the main, the "experiences" Benjamin has in mind are "religious experiences"; not the neatly packaged experiences of religion qua institution, but visionary experiences

that contravene and transcend Kant's timorous restriction of valid knowledge in the first *Critique* to the realm of "objects of possible experience" and what Hegel once referred to as the "prose of the world." He concludes the essay by proposing a new philosophical architectonic-again, in defiance of Kant-predicated on the necessary interrelationship between "knowledge, metaphysics and religion." Invoking Johann Georg Hamann's Kant-critique cum theory of language as his model, Benjamin rejects Kant's attribution of paradigmatic status to the natural sciences and mathematics. Instead, the goal of the coming philosophy would be to produce on the basis of the Kantian system a theory of knowledge whose highest sphere would be "religion." The more general part of this philosophy, Benjamin continues, would go by the name of "theology." In other words: if one is genuinely interested in overcoming the problem of the thing-in-itself and acceding to the homeland of noumenal knowing, the prescriptions of religion and theology are indispensable. In Benjamin's view, theological considerations are paramount insofar as it is the "language of God" alone offers the prospect of restoring the prelapsarian unity between word and thing, and thereby pointing the way toward a condition of Edenic harmony prior to the Fall. For with humanity's expulsion from Paradise, the linguistic corruptions of the tree of knowledge set in, a predicament that resulted in the epistemological separation between subject and object. In the last analysis, it was this diremption or hiatus between knower and known or word and thing that proved the stumbling of both the Kantian system as well as secular knowledge in general. It is this "fallen" condition of knowledge, exemplified by the diremptions and blind spots of modern *Erkenntnistheorie*, that Benjamin explicitly seeks to remedy in "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy." Thus in citing, as he frequently did, Karl Kraus's maxim, "Origin is the Goal," Benjamin had a theological *telos* in mind. The "Origin" in question referred to a prelapsarian condition of metaphysical linguistic plentitude, in which the language of divine names flourished, keeping at bay the uncertainties and conundrums of *Erkenntnistheorie*. Two years earlier, in what was perhaps his most important youthful metaphysical study, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," Benjamin first articulated this conception of a theologically oriented doctrine of linguistic transparency; and it would continue to play the role of a pivotal redemptory point of orientation in many of his early essays and treatises: notably, in the "Theologico-Political Fragment" (1920) and "Kritik der Gewalt." In these youthful works, Benjamin set forth his conception of the philosophy of history as "Heilsgeschichte" or the "story of salvation." He thereby embraced a theologically inspired temporality of radical rupture, which would find expression in his repeatedly stated conviction that the profane continuum of history and the Messianic time of fulfillment (*Vollendung*) proceeded in diametrically opposite directions. As he indicates in the "Theologico-Political Fragment," whereas the goal of profane history is happiness, the goal of *Heilsgeschichte*, as the name implies, is salvation or redemption. Whereas happiness is a worldly phenomenon, redemption is a higher value, insofar as it expresses and bespeaks transcendence. Redemption points toward a condition of perfection or completion which earthly happiness can only dimly approximate.

Although it is clear that Benjamin assiduously sought to supersede the limitations of Kant's theory of knowledge, he remained sufficiently indebted to the Kantian framework and its strictures to appreciate the difficulties of describing, via the "profane" concepts of the understanding (*der Verstand*), the nature of redeemed life. Of course, in this respect he also labored under the strictures of the Jewish *Bilderverbot*, or taboo against graven images. How, then, one might characterize or discern the outlines of salvation when the only means of expression at one's disposal derived from the profane concepts and categories of humanity's post-Edenic state, which, in his pivotal essay of 1916, Benjamin

derisively refers to as the "language of man." Benjamin's probing reflections on problems of language, communication, and knowledge during this period circle around this conundrum, viz., what idiom is appropriate to discussing theological truths that transcend the "bounds of sense" or what Kant referred to as "objects of possible experience." [esotericism]

Nevertheless, it is clear that Benjamin who, the following year, would complete a dissertation on *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*, had in many respects reprised the Kant-critique of the German romantics, who had insisted that, contra Kant, noumenal knowledge was eminently possible, and that art and religion were two of the main vehicles through which we might establish a meaningful relationship to the Absolute.

Of course, Benjamin's youthful antipathy to politics was hardly atypical, and in this respect, at this stage of his development, he was a classic embodiment of the Nietzschean trope of the "antipolitical German." The Social Democratic option was foreclosed to him as a result of the party's "bourgeois" epistemology (a variant of nineteenth century mechanistic materialism) and their unforgivable (in Benjamin's eyes) sin of having underwritten the carnage of 1914 by having voted for war credits. Benjamin sat out the war years in protest in Switzerland, not as a pacifist, but as a staunch opponent of this particular war. His wartime letters are consistent with his metaphysical preoccupations insofar as they rarely if ever refer to specific battles or war-related events. In this regard one might well enquire if his youthful aversion to politics impeded his later political judgment. Even when he underwent his "conversion" to Marxism in 1924, he maintains in a letter to Scholem that his decision has nothing to do with communist "politics," but instead bespeaks his attraction to the "communist idea." In other words, for Benjamin, communism represented a variant of Platonism: it had to possess a noumenal purity that guaranteed against the defilements of embodiment or this-worldliness. These seem to be the only conditions under which he could accept it.

The other valuable clue we have at our disposal concerning Benjamin's youthful meta-political leanings comes from Scholem's invaluable chronicle, *Geschichte einer Freundschaft*. While discussing his friend's various wartime interests and activities, Scholem mentions that at the time Benjamin viewed a recently published German edition of Dostoevsky's political writings to "the most important political publication of the modern age" (*die wichtigste politische Schriftum der neueren Zeit*) ("Walter Benjamin" 104). Although Scholem disdains from further characterizing Benjamin's enthusiasms in this regard, on the basis of the volume in question, it is not difficult to reconstruct the Russian novelist's political views. (It is perhaps worth noting that the editor of this edition, which was published by Piper Verlag, was none other than the conservative revolutionary publicist, Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, author of *Das dritte Reich*). One might describe Dostoevsky's political standpoint as that of an "antipolitical Russian." Having overcome his youthful socialist views, for which he was sent to prison and nearly executed, Dostoevsky scorned Western-style revolutionism as inherently nihilistic. With *The Possessed*, he produced one of the greatest literary indictments of the ethos of Western "revolutionary instrumentalism"-a critique that, in many respects, prefigured Max Weber's rejection of a *Gesinnungsethik*, or a politics of ultimate ends, in "Politics as a Vocation." By the same token, in his political views, Dostoevsky was by no means a harbinger of Weber's *Verantwortungsethik*, or a "liberal" politics of personal responsibility. Instead, his "antipolitics" gravitated toward the ethos of early Christianity, whose conception of agape or brotherly love, as embodied in the Russian soul, stood opposed to the corruptions and degradations of the reigning Western approaches to politics: liberalism, socialism, anarchism, utilitarianism, and autocracy. In this respect Dostoevsky was an avowed pan-Slavist who believed that the Russian soul-the Russian

peasant soul, in particular-contained spiritual riches that transcended the competing institutional approaches to politics that the West had to offer-approaches that exerted a spellbinding attraction among the nineteenth-century Russian intelligentsia.

Additional light may be shed on Benjamin's reverence for Dostoevsky as a political thinker (once again, according to Scholem's testimony), if one considers that one of the books that, given his metaphysical tendencies, most influenced him during this period was Georg Lukács' *Theorie des Romans*. Lukács' "historico-philosophical study of the novel form" concludes with a messianic appeal to Dostoevsky. Might Dostoevsky be, enquires Lukács, a new Homer; that is, a writer who is more of a *prophet* than a *novelist*, and whose work thus portends a revival of Totality: a restoration of the communitarian values of the epic form, in which the separations and antagonisms of bourgeois life-for Lukács, the age of Absolute Sinfulness (Fichte)-are miraculously resolved into a harmonious whole. Thus according to Lukács, "Dostoevsky belongs to a new world." Time alone will tell whether he is actually the Homer or Dante of that world, or whether he merely provides the material that "other artists will one day weave into a great unity" (XX). During this phase, "The ideal for which Lukács was the spokesman [..] was that of Slavic culture and mystical thought as an alternative to the 'worldly asceticism' and 'goal-oriented' action of the bourgeois West" (Arato XX).

One finds corroborating evidence concerning Scholem's suggestive remarks about the esteem in which Benjamin held Dostoevsky's political views in Benjamin's youthful commentary on *The Idiot*-a text that was written in 1916 and which greatly impressed Scholem. Although Benjamin's sketch was by no means a political text, it was replete with metapolitical significance. The virtues of Dostoevsky's protagonist, Prince Myshkin, are entirely other-worldly and antipolitical. He is a representative of transcendence-on-earth, an incarnation of noumenal existence trapped in the profane realm of human phenomenal life. As such, Myshkin is the embodiment of Goodness. He knows not evil. He represents pure Innocence, which is why in his essay, Benjamin, takes pains to compares his purity to that of a child. His motivations and intentions are entirely sublime, and for this reason they are also doomed to be scorned and misunderstood in the corrupt sphere of profane or creaturely life. For Benjamin, Myshkin's transcendence embodies the difficulties-one is tempted to say, the impossibility-of attempts to reconcile the values of redeemed life with those of the profane history. If "perfection" is to be genuine and not a sham, its contents and substance must be of a qualitatively different order than those of the fallen continuum of history.

After the war, Hugo Ball introduced Benjamin to fellow-émigré Ernst Bloch. Benjamin was already familiar with *Geist der Utopie*, Bloch's landmark treatise on political Messianism, and it was as a result of his momentous encounter with Bloch-both the man and his work-that Benjamin felt compelled, for the first time in his life, to actively confront political questions. He conceived this project-which remained, like so many of his other studies, unconsummated; "Kritik der Gewalt" is in essence all that has survived-as one of the fruits of his confrontation with Bloch's work.

Benjamin avowed that, apart from *Theorie des Romans*, Bloch's *Geist der Utopie* was the contemporary work that had the greatest impact on his thought during this period. On this basis of this admission and corroborating testimony, it would be tempting to draw strong comparisons between the early Messianism of Benjamin and Bloch. However, despite their marked intellectual and temperamental affinities, this temptation should be resisted.

In *Geist der Utopie*, and especially in his concluding chapter on "Karl Marx, Death, and the Apocalypse," Bloch presented a forceful vision of positive political Messianism, going so far to suggest that, in light of the cataclysm of the Great War, the advent of the Messianic era was imminent. "The

apocalypse is the a priori of all politics and culture" ("Geist" 433), proclams Bloch.[①] Bloch's approach to Messianism strongly differed from Benjamin's insofar as it was generously outfitted with ontological guarantees that the philosopher liberally borrowed from the spheres of theology, metaphysics, and musicology. He relied on Aristotle's doctrine of potentiality (*dynamis*) to suggest that there was rooted in all matter an ontological tendency to realize its ultimate nature or perfection (*energeia*). He believed that the "noch nicht" (not yet) of historical life pointed the way toward the *nunc stans* of mystical fulfillment. He viewed works of art as concrete anticipations of utopia-music, in particular, which, according to Bloch, insofar as it subsists in the ethereal medium of time rather than space, contains a spiritual dimension that outstrips the utopian capacities of the other arts. Like the surrealists, Bloch viewed dreams as positive adumbrations of transcendence. Correspondingly, with his notion of "dreaming-toward-the future," he sought to make dreams serviceable for the ends of social utopia. In *Geist der Utopie* Bloch observes that, with *Das Kapital*, Marx provided us with a socialist version of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. However, he goes on to remark, the socialist tradition has yet to formulate its *Critique of Practical Reason*. Bloch himself sought to provide the missing link in *Geist der Utopie* by invoking the principle of violence-"Jesus with a whip," as he calls it-in order to counteract worldly evil. To encourage passivity and withdrawal, as did Christ in the Sermon on the Mount, is merely to actively condone a greater evil. He follows up this recommendation with a terrifying metaphor. Alluding to Bolshevism, Bloch claims that "wherever [··] power can be crushed by no other means, and wherever and for so long as anything diabolical maintains its violent resistance to the [··] amulet of purity," the adequate political response must be *"the categorical imperative with revolver in hand"* (*kategorischer Imperativ mit dem Revolver in der Hand*). "There can be no image of what lies above," avows Bloch, "without first brushing up against death" ("Karl Marx" 36). Here, one's olfactory glands begin to shudder at the stench of imaginary corpses piling up in the distance. In *Thomas Munzer: Theologe der Revolution* Bloch amplified these views via a strong eschatological reading of the seventeenth-century peasant wars.

One must be careful about amalgamating the Messianic perspectives of Bloch and Benjamin, since, for Benjamin, the idea of positive Messianism was anathema. As we have seen, Bloch's Messianism is ecumenical: it is informed not only by a reading of the Kabbalah, but also by his understanding of Gnosticism as well as the key texts of Christian mysticism. Bloch's adoption of key elements of Christian eschatology ("Jesus with a whip") allowed him to provide his version of Messianism with its distinctly positive features. As Bloch observes: "The soul, the Messiah, the Apocalypse which represents the act of awakening in totality-these impart the final impulses to action and cognition, and make up the a priori of all politics and of all culture" ("Karl Marx" 72).

Conversely, Benjamin's Messianism, owing to its predominantly Jewish sources, was more inclined to respect the strictures of the *Bilderverbot*. His avowedly Messianic writings are few in number, and those that are extant often proceed in an analogical or allegorical mode. As such, Benjamin's approach to Messianism assumes the traits of negative theology; for this reason, the nature and content of redeemed life cannot become an object of positive knowledge. Instead, it can only be deduced *ex negativo*: that is, via critical or negative insight concerning the contemporary, dissolute state of things, in keeping with the maxim that the negative of a negative yields a positive.

It is certainly worthwhile to reflect for a moment on the reasons that an upsurge of Jewish secular Messianism blossomed in the German *Sprachgebiet* during this period, whereas, conversely, if one trains one's gaze West-ward, toward England, France, or the United States, analogous tendencies

are nowhere to be found. Part of the answer is relatively straightforward. The proliferation of these spiritual currents reflects a diffuse sense on the part of Central European Jewry that the dreams of assimilation–and those of liberal Judaism along with it–had failed. And since, with the rise of political anti-Semitism in Germany–Wilhelm Marr's treatise *Der Weg zum Siege des Germanenthums über das Judenthum* (The Way to Victory of Germanicism over Judaism) appeared in 1879; Treitschke's "Die Juden sind unser Unglück" ("The Jews are our misfortune!") was uttered in the same year; Leopold Stöcker's Pan-German League had made significant inroads in Wilhelmine Germany–hopes for a liberal resolution of the Jewish Question seemed increasingly dim, Central European Jews increasingly turned from politics to metapolitics. In other words, since the secular and this-worldly path to Jewish acceptance was blocked, Jews increasingly turned to questions of transcendence. In this respect the recourse to Jewish Messianism was part of a more broadly based cultural trend that one might label the "search for Jewish authenticity." Curiously, political Zionism did not figure as part of this trend, since, as a manifestation of Jewish nationalism, Zionism was an entirely secular current. But obviously, the cultural Zionism of Martin Buber, whose *Drei Reden uber Judentum* were so profoundly influential, while nominally anti-political, both reflected and catalyzed this generalized longing for transcendence. The renewed preoccupation with Jewish authenticity was, in the first instance, a response to Jewish non-acceptance; but it also reflected a disappointment with the spiritual impoverishment of liberal Judaism, which had, in essence, become a variant of civil religion. After all, what was the point of Jewish social acceptance if the price of assimilation was that one needed to relinquish one's Jewishness.

Benjamin wrote a review of *Geist der Utopie*, which, unfortunately, has not survived. However, on the basis of his letters to Scholem and other documents, we can reconstruct his main criticisms. Above all, he took exception to the intellectual hubris involved in Bloch's trying to furnish concrete guarantees concerning the impending advent of political Messianism. In Benjamin's view, Bloch, in seeking to blend phenomenal and noumenal knowledge, had crossed a line that was fundamentally forbidden to profane cognition. Benjamin reservations emerge clearly in the "Theologico-Political Fragment," in which he censures Bloch's open flirtation in *Geist der Utopie* with the heresies of theocracy. (In Scholem's view, the "Fragment," which dates from 1920, represents a preliminary sketch for Benjamin's lost review.) For Benjamin, Bloch's misstep in *Geist der Utopie* was to have impermissibly fused politics and theology–the sacred and the profane–spheres that, in his view, represent parallel lines that never intersect. It is for this reason that Benjamin continually insists that the continuum of history and that of Messianic time proceed in opposite directions. If they are somehow related, that relationship can never be causal, but only oblique and indirect–so keen is the tension between them. The transition from the realm of the profane to the Messianic age can never be organic. Instead, at issue is a temporal semantics of radical rupture and extreme discontinuity. In the tradition of Jewish mysticism, this semantics manifested itself via the metaphor of the "birth pangs" of the messianic era.

In Jewish history the Messianic idea played a distinctly functional role, insofar as, in times of acute distress, it held out the prospect that the Messiah's arrival might nevertheless be imminent. In fact, the Messianic idea's sociological and doctrinal plausibility resided in the fact that it intimated a vague, yet for that reason all the more seductive, correlation between historical decline and imminent regeneration. The key to that correlation lay in the aforementioned metaphor of the "birth pangs" of the Messianic era, which suggested a necessary, albeit oblique, relation between catastrophe and redemption. The theological subtext of this ideational cluster was that times of acute

historical strife presented no compelling reason to *abandon* one's religious loyalties and convictions. On the contrary, the "birth pangs" metaphor offered all the more reason to redouble one's loyalties, since the Messiah's arrival might be just around the corner. Or, as Benjamin put it in the "Theses on the Philosophy of History": "Every instant is the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter" (264) Thus according to the esoteric hermeneutics of Jewish mysticism, manifestations of decline were viewed as portents of redemption.

Scholem aptly discerned the attitudinal dilemmas and inconsistencies posed by this standpoint when he observed critically that rigid adherence to the Messianic idea translated into "a life lived in deferment, in which nothing can be done definitively, and in which nothing can be irrevocably accomplished" ("The Messianic" 35). Instead, a rigid adherence to the Messianic perspective condemned adherents to indefinite waiting, until, for whatever indiscernible or mysterious reasons, the Messiah, at long last, decide to appear. On numerous occasions, in letters and published texts, Benjamin professed his profound affinities with Kabbalistic interpretive modes, claiming that, "A philosophy of experience that does not include the possibility of soothsaying from coffee grounds cannot be a true philosophy" ("Letter to Scholem" *Briefe*, 237).

However, Scholem's reservations about the standpoint of Jewish secular Messianic addresses a profound concern. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Hannah Arendt, in a slightly different register, raised an analogous issue when she spoke critically of the historically self-crippling "apoliticism of the Jewish people." Often, the corollary of apoliticism is a loss or curtailment of worldliness-or, to employ one of Arendt's favored concepts, a loss of "publicness." Thus in keeping with the skeptical views expressed by Arendt and Scholem, one might enquire whether the recourse to political Messianism on the part of Benjamin, Bloch, and others was both a logical outgrowth of their earlier staunch antipoliticism as well as a mechanism of perpetuating or prolonging that antipoliticism. Was it not-to reprise the Benjamin maxim just cited-in essence, an intricate attempt at political soothsaying from coffee grounds? Was their imaginative recourse to political theology a strategy of political avoidance-a modality of escape, via the fanciful pathways of "metapolitics," in order to compensate for the disappointments and deficiencies of contemporary politics? But was it not, therefore, also a way of preempting the prospect of a meaningful *inner-worldly politics*, which, by definition, could never measure up to the sublimity of political Messianism's effusive promises of redemption. In sum, was not the revitalization of Jewish secular Messianism in many respects *a strategy of political avoidance*, very much in keeping with the spirit and practice of central European Jewry's historical apoliticism?

Benjamin offers another indispensable clue concerning the maturation of his political views when, in a January 1920 letter to Scholem, he mentions that he considered Jewish philosopher Erich Unger's treatise on *Politics and Metaphysics* "the most important political writing of this time" (237).

During the 1910s Unger was part of the Berlin-based New Club, led by the charismatic Oskar Goldberg (during the late 1920s, Unger founded the "Philosophical Club"). Goldberg's most important work, *The Actuality of the Hebrews* (Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer) appeared in 1925. Prior to that, he had published very little. Goldberg had a limited but highly loyal influential following. In his *Joseph* tetralogy, Thomas Mann relied extensively on Goldberg's understanding of the role of Jewish prophecy. However, in *Dr. Faustus*, Goldberg became a target of satire, serving as the model for Breisacher, a "poly-historian" and bombastic, self-hating Jew, who detested political liberalism and understood "Culture" as a saga of irretrievable decline (*Untergang*). For Mann, Breisacher-Goldberg was the prototypical German *Kulturmensch*, whose hatred of modernity and archaic longings (in

the novel, Breisacher's watchword is: "Back to cult!") make him easy fodder for Europe's burgeoning fascist movements. Indeed, in *Wirklichkeit der Hebräer*, Goldberg dismisses the totality of post-Biblical Jewish history as a fateful departure from the Judaism's pristine origins. As an antidote he recommends a rigorous return to the values of the Pentateuch and the ritual practices of ancient Judaism. Benjamin once mocked Goldberg and his coterie of admirers as "Magic Jews."

Unger was Goldberg's leading disciple, and it was left to him to translate the master's esoteric doctrine of myth and prophecy into the exoteric language of classical German philosophy. Benjamin held Unger in high esteem, and upon his return to Berlin from his wartime exile in Switzerland, regularly attended Unger's private lectures, which had a profound impact on his political thinking.

Part I of *Politics and Metaphysics* addresses what Unger elusively refers to as the psycho-physical problem. With this theme, Unger addressed the question of how Ideas, qua intelligible truths, could be realized in the imperfect sphere of material life. Translated to the political sphere, the psycho-physical problem enquired how politics could surmount its current degraded state and accede to the plane of metaphysical truth. [the mind-body dualism as conceived by Descartes must be overcome.] This was Unger's way of insinuating that metaphysics must be rescued from the noumenal sphere, where Kant had essentially left it, and effectively realized. In this respect, Unger reprised one of the central dilemmas of German Idealism, one that preoccupied Kant's illustrious successors: how might Spirit must become actual?

However, it was the second part of Unger's study that proved more controversial. It was in Part II that he explicitly sought to resolve the philosophical dichotomies and diremptions that he had formulated in Part I concerning the psycho-physical problem. Relying on the framework that Goldberg had established in *Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer*, the solution he proposed was the idea of *a metaphysical people*. And, of course, the metaphysical people he had in mind were the ancient Jews. Thereby Unger sought to transpose what for Kant had been an ontological problem — the metaphysical hiatus between the phenomenal and noumenal spheres — to the plane of history or *Heilsgeschichte* (the history of salvation).

Thus according to Unger, the psycho-physical problem was less of an epistemological dilemma than it was a problem of the history of religion. Following Goldberg, Unger proposed that its solution lay in the reactivation of the Messianic promise of Jewish monotheism. More specifically, what was needed were new leaders: *modern prophets* who could make questions of historical deliverance relevant again in the political present. In this way, Unger's notion of a "metaphysical people" fused with the concept of genius as articulated in many of the key texts of German romanticism. According to Unger, one of the defining traits of such prophetic types was a capacity for superior sensory experience that managed to combine natural and supernatural attributes. When in the "Program of the Coming Philosophy" Benjamin speaks of his quest for a superior concept of experience, it is the experiential attributes described by Unger that he has in mind. Unger held that what counted at the individual level as transcendent sensory experiences found their equivalent at the level of the historical collectivity in the miracles recounted by the Old Testament. In its emphasis on the pivotal role played by a metaphysical people or *Volk*, Unger's ideas coincided with then-prevalent doctrines of nationalism.

In *Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer*, Goldberg described this prophetic-redemptory schema as a "mythology," which he defined as the "concrete science of a metaphysical people-becoming-reality" ("die Wissenschaft eines metaphysischen Volk-swirklichkeitsystem und seiner Herstellung") (273). In the schema proposed by Goldberg and Unger, prophets or saints played a key role, since by virtue of their higher psycho-physical capacities, they functioned as embodiments of the people and its

appointed historical destiny. (Here, we are only one step removed from the leadership-principle that was so widespread among the German Youth Movement.) One might say that Goldberg's and Unger's doctrines presented an amalgam of Herder, Friedrich Schlegel, and Martin Buber: the Jews as the Chosen People, led by prophets who were the embodiments of genius. Nevertheless, both Unger and Goldberg insisted that, in order to count as a politically viable model, the state-founding attributes of ancient Judaism must not be restricted to Israel alone, but must be capable of being applied to other peoples.

A number of Goldberg's ideas were originally formulated in his first published work, the speculative and fanciful *Five Books of Moses as a Counting House* (Die funf Bücher Mosis als Zahlungsgeb? ude). Goldberg identified personally with the prophets and thus was no stranger to delusions of grandeur. According to Martin Buber, during World War I, Goldberg conceived a secret plan to tip the balance of forces in Germany's favor. The German foreign office would send him to India to fraternize with various bodhisattvas and mahatmas. An enlightened Goldberg would then return to Germany, and, by virtue of his newly acquired spiritual insight, would assist in turning the tide of war in Germany's favor (33).

By no means did Benjamin take over the ideas of Goldberg and Unger wholesale. Nevertheless, the impact their framework had on his political conceptions was considerable. It was from their doctrines that he appropriated the fraught idea that profane history in its entirety must be conceived as a history of catastrophe. For obvious reasons, from a political point of view this notion is self-defeating, since it rules out in advance the prospect of immanent, incremental political betterment. That it also mandates a harsh rejection of a political liberalism, constitutionalism, and a politics of reason goes without saying. Democracy, moreover, as the sphere of "compromise" and "interests," is inherently corrupt. Given this exceedingly harsh characterization, is it any wonder that, in "Kritik der Gewalt," Benjamin has recourse to "divine violence" as the deus ex machina that will to sweep the old order away with one mighty and definitive blow.

In a manner that is disconcerting, Benjamin's meditations of philosophy of history dovetail with the mentality of *Kulturpessimus* that prevailed among the left-Nietzschean milieu of the Berlin Neuer Klub during the 1910s. (By the same token, he rejected the left-Nietzschean "activism" of Kurt Hiller's *Die Aktion*. Although he sympathized with Hiller's ardent rejection of a sober "politics of reason," he felt that the Activists' embrace of a Nietzschean "body politics" remained theologically impoverished. As such, to its discredit, Activism remained immersed in the profane, at too great a remove from the redemptory concerns that preoccupied Benjamin during this period. [In "Kritik der Gewalt," he explicitly criticizes Hiller's [in Benjamin's opinion] "base" defense of mere "existence" in opposition to the higher demands of "justice," which are Benjamin's primary focus and which alone vindicate his efforts to transpose a Messianic framework involving the idea of the Last Judgment) Of course, the reverse side of catastrophism is apocalypticism. Since the Messianic standpoint systematically mistrusts all manifestations of political gradualism, change must of necessity be sweeping, dramatic, and abrupt. It must assume the form of an absolute rupture or wholesale breach.

According to this perspective, the key to reviving politics is a reactivation of the psycho-physiological dimension in which religious intentionality and a disclosure of divine reality play a pivotal role. As Unger states in a contemporaneous essay on "Die staatlose Bildung eines judischen Volkes" (1922): "To drive spirit on for the sake of what is bodily: to cultivate spirit more deeply, *gewandter*, more subtly and abstractly-so that, in the end it proves adequate to corporality and its problems, out of love of the material [- to be spiritual -] to be deeply attuned to this tension,

herein perhaps lies the power and definition of Judaism." One can detect the influence of the Goldberg-Unger perspective in Benjamin's celebration of "pure" or "divine" violence (*reine* or *g? ttliche Gewalt*) in "Kritik der Gewalt." But there are additional elements of the *Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer* standpoint that Benjamin incorporates into his political and metapolitical writings: in particular, the fascination with Oriental tribal ritual and custom, which Goldberg and Unger perceived as producing a "spiritual innervation of the social body" and thus as remedy for the psycho-physical problem. It is in moments of ritual ecstasy that the social body becomes suffused with the holy. "In a hierarchically structured community dominated by individuals with such a heightened sensibility and power, politics would to a large extent coincide with ritual practice [...] This could result in a concentration of the unconscious 'life force' that would conform to those 'realizations' of the totemistic, national or tribal gods of descent [...] described in the Pentateuch" (77). Although the Oriental-ritualistic strand plays a muted role in "Kritik der Gewalt," it surfaces prominently in one of Benjamin's pivotal works of the 1920s: the "Surrealism" essay, whose methodological relevance for the Arcades Project it would be difficult to overestimate. Here, Benjamin celebrates the virtues of "profane illumination," speaks glowingly of the pulsating "body of the collective," and memorably defines Surrealism's raison d'être as the effort to "win the energies of intoxication [*Rausch*] for the Revolution." The foregoing manifestations of communal "effervescence" (to employ Durkheim's felicitous term) derive directly from the "psychophysical problem" as Unger formulated it in *Politik und Metaphysik*.

As we learn from Scholem's testimony, the other political thinker whom, following the Great War, Benjamin felt compelled to confront in order to formulate his own political views was the renegade French Marxist Georges Sorel. As Scholem remarks, "Upon my last visit to Bern [in 1919] [Benjamin], as a pendant to his conversations with [Hugo] Ball and [Ernst] Bloch, had begun to read Georges Sorel's *Refléxions sur la violence* [...] The [necessity of a] confrontation with Sorel had concerned him for a long time" ("Geschichte" 109-10, 199). Scholem adds that this period was a veritable turning point for Benjamin, and that in "Kritik der Gewalt," and in the confrontation with Sorel that lay at its heart, were compressed all of the animating ideas about "myth, religion, law, and politics" that preoccupied Benjamin during this period.

There is no doubt that Sorel's influence on Benjamin was profound. However, what cannot help strike the reader of Benjamin's essay is that his employment of Sorel is strangely muted. Certainly, the publication of Sorel's *Reflections on Violence* (1906-08) had set the stage for more theoretically informed discussions concerning the role of violence in the European socialist movement. In *Class Struggles in France*, Marx had referred to revolution as the "locomotive of history" (qtd. in W. Scheuerman and H. Rosa 119). Yet at the time, social democracy had become extremely adept at playing the parliamentary game, to the point where, just prior to the war, it had become the leading vote getter in Wilhelmine Germany. Sorel was probably more influenced by Nietzsche than by Marx. He had imbibed Nietzsche's voluntarism, his vitalism, his celebration of "will." He had also taken to heart Nietzsche's criticisms, in the *Genealogy of Morals*, of bourgeois society's progressive sublimation of social cruelty. Sorel's glorification of what he called the "morality of the producers" — his attempts to view the proletariat as a new warrior class — was a riposte to what he perceived as the working class's progressive embourgeoisification under the tutelage of parliamentary socialism. Sorel's idiosyncratic attempt to formulate an "ethical" socialism stood in stark, one might even say, refreshing contrast to what in the early years of the twentieth century passed for orthodox Marxism

These developments impelled Sorel to rethink

Marxism from the ground up and to reposition it as the diametrical opposite of everything that bourgeois society stood for. Along the way, Sorel had absorbed the insight that Nietzsche's critique of bourgeois society was moral radical than that of Marx, who, in the *Communist Manifesto* and elsewhere, was smitten with the worldview of nineteenth-century scientism cum materialism, and who had also fully embraced the ideology of "production." Thus in *Reflections*, Sorel makes a point of lauding "with what force Nietzsche praised the values constructed by the *masters*, by a superior class of warriors who, in their expeditions, enjoying to the full freedom from all social constraint, return to the simplicity of mind of a wild beast, become once more triumphant monsters who continually bring to mind 'the superb blond beast, prowling in search of prey and bloodshed' in whom 'a basis of hidden bestiality needs from time to time an outlet" (231).

Benjamin also clearly embraced Sorel's impassioned critique of progress. In fact, among his meticulously kept list of books read, Sorel's 1908 work, *The Illusions of Progress*, figured prominently. Sorel held that the doctrine of progress was one of the linchpins of the reigning bourgeois ideology, and, as such, had gone a long way toward ensuring class collaboration and working class passivity. Sorel's indictment of progress dovetailed with Benjamin's "negative philosophy history"-that is, his view of secular history as series of never-ending catastrophes. In this respect, Sorel's views harmonized with Benjamin's mentality of acute *Kulturpessimismus*. As counter-concept or antidote to progress, both thinkers adopted a temporal semantics of radical rupture. Whereas Benjamin's sources were largely derived from Kabbalistic doctrines, which he could not read in the original and, hence, could only encounter second hand, Sorel's were distinctly more eclectic. Hence, the French anarcho-syndicalist reached back to the Homeric epics, the Roman Republic, the Napoleonic campaigns, as well as the more contemporary vitalist doctrines of Nietzsche and Henri Bergson. On the basis of these variegated historical instances, Sorel quixotically sought to transpose an ethos of heroism and martial valor from ancient to modern times. [Apocalpytics; renunciation of gradualism]

A contemporary reader of Sorel's *Reflections* cannot help but be struck by its non-sanguinary character, despite its provocative theme. By the same token, in a manner consistent with his enthusiasm for heroism and warrior virtues, in his characterizations of class struggle, Sorel is prone to the profligate employment of martial metaphors.

Admittedly, Sorel's narrative, to its detriment, often loses itself amid the arcana of contemporary French politics. Nevertheless, one cannot help but feel that there is a slight disjunction between the book's sensational reputation and the letter of the text. Undoubtedly, one of the reasons that, in *Reflections*, Sorel soft-pedaled the emphasis on violence had to do with the poisonous legacy of French Jacobinism. Among anarchists, the Jacobin dictatorship represented state repression in its most savage and detestable form. This was a specter that anarchists and like-minded apostles of violence could not pass over in silence. Hence, for thinkers such as Proudhon and Sorel, it was important to demonstrate that violence could be employed toward ends other than those of political tyranny. By the same token, given the blood-soaked landscape of post-revolutionary French politics-from the Jacobin dictatorship's Revolutionary Tribunals, to the "June Days" of the Revolution of 1848, to the violent suppression of the Paris Commune-it was clear that, among a wider public, Sorel's prescriptions would ultimately be a hard sell.

For this reason, Sorel's followers on the French left were relatively few in number. Devoid of left-wing disciples, circa 1910, he made common cause with Charles Maurras and the *Action Fran?aise* crowd, frequenting their meetings and publishing in their journal *Cahiers Proudhon*. In this respect it is sobering to note that, in 1924, one of Sorel's most influential French followers, the Maurrasien Georges Valois, became the founder

France's first fascist party, the Faisceau. Though its fortunes were short-lived, the Faisceau was an important precursor of the extreme-right political movements of the 1930s-Croix de feu, le Parti Populaire français, la Cagoule-whose visceral anti-republicanism succeeded in undermining the foundations of the embattled Third Republic. This does not mean that Sorel's doctrines themselves were "fascist." But it does suggest that his unique fusion of vitalism, anti-intellectualism, and myth possessed more in common with the orientation of the anti-parliamentary right than it did with the left. (As a pendant to the preceding discussion, it is worth pointing out that, during the 1920s, Benjamin himself was an *Action Française* subscriber. Moreover, in 1926, in his capacity as a journalist for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, he had no hesitations about according Valois the honor of an interview.)

General strikes-proletarian general strikes, included-are not inherently violent, although it would be misleading to deny that acts of violence are one of their frequent corollary. (One of the major inspirations for Sorel's turn from socialism to anarcho-syndicalism was a series of strikes organized by the CGT during the 1890s, episodes that were often accompanied by acts of violence.) By circumventing parties and trade unions, the general strikes preserve their anarchistic dimension; thereby, they also seek to guarantee working class autonomy. By the same token, although they intend, through a process of political contagion, to bring politics-as-usual to a standstill, they do not aim at a seizure of political power, and, as such, are distinctly opposed to the *mentalité* of *coup d'étatisme* or *Blanquisme*. One might even go so far as to say that, viewed historically, participants in general strikes are just as often the *victims of state repression* than they are perpetrators of violence in their own right. (In *Reflections*, for example, one of Sorel's historical points of reference was the Russian Revolution of 1905, which was precipitated by the general strike on the part the Petrograd Soviet and the infamous "Bloody Sunday" Massacre of January 22, in which as many as 1,000 peaceful demonstrators were killed or wounded.)

Nevertheless, throughout his infamous treatise Sorel's celebration of the life-enhancing and regenerative capacities of revolutionary violence is unmistakable. He openly praises proletarian violence, in contrast to parliamentary methods, for its capacity to "terrorize greedy politicians" into submission. "It is to *violence*," proclaims Sorel unreservedly, "that socialism owes those high ethical ideals by means of which it brings salvation to the modern world" (251). Sorel presented a unique, yet far from unrepresentative, conception of a martially inflected, "ethical socialism," whose attractions for Benjamin-at this point, a self-proclaimed "theocratic-anarchist"-were palpable and enduring (*Geschichte* 110).

Indeed, for quite some time, Benjamin would remain fascinated by the ideal of *the salvific capacities of revolutionary violence*, as suggested by the passage from Sorel just cited. This was true insofar as, for Benjamin, Sorel's program offered an approach capable of fusing his two foremost theoretical concerns of the postwar period: (1) on the one hand, his fascination with the phenomenon of revolutionary violence, an attraction that was fueled by his resolute anti-parliamentary attitudes and convictions; (2) his longstanding interest in questions of political theology and the redemptive capacities of Jewish monotheism as transposed to a profane setting.

Nor was Sorel a total stranger to considerations of political theology. In fact, given the syncretic nature of Sorel's approach, he found religious movements and traditions highly serviceable as an antidote to the regnant materialism, whose determinist framework tended to suppress the heroism and the sovereign ethical considerations that Sorel prized. Thus in *Reflections*, Sorel openly praises the practitioners of early Christianity for stubbornly maintaining their credo in the face of extreme historical adversity and the logical implausibility of the Second Coming. In their darkest

hour, the only thing that sustained them was the "apocalyptic myth": As Sorel remarks: "The first Christians expected the return of Christ and the total ruin of the pagan world, with the inauguration of the kingdom of saints, at the end of the first generation. The catastrophe did not come to pass, but Christian thought profited so greatly from the apocalyptic myth that certain contemporary scholars maintain that the whole preaching of Christ referred solely to this one point" (115). Similarly, Sorel lauded the Protestant Reformation for acting on the basis of an ethics of conviction-a *Gesinnungsethik* (as with Luther's famous declaration at Wittenberg, "Hier stehe ich, ich kann nicht anders")-as an indictment of widespread ecclesiastical corruption. In Sorel's view, Luther's defiant stance represented a classical instance of ethical considerations trumping material interests.

Benjamin also sympathized with Sorel's approach to questions of epistemology and temporality. For Sorel, the proletarian general strike, far from being a linear or evolutionary development, had the structure of a miracle or an epiphany. It heralded the prospect of a cognitive and existential break with the system of modern industrialism and all its values. It remained a powerful idea precisely insofar as was a *myth*. Therein lay its superiority over the debased and conformist worldview of scientific socialism. For according to Sorel, whereas the truths of reason are open to logical refutation, myths, insofar as they are matters of unquestioned belief, are not. It is in this sense that Sorel describes the general strike as "the *myth* in which socialism is wholly comprised, i. e. a body of images capable of evoking instinctively all the sentiments which correspond to the different manifestations of the war undertaken by socialism against modern society" (118). The general strike's appeal lies, above all, in its *non-cognitive character*. As Sorel stresses repeatedly, it gains its power by appealing not to the proletariat's rational side but instead to its *instinctual and intuitive faculties*. Under the influence of Henri Bergson's doctrines about memory and duration (*la durée*), Sorel's theory of the general strike took pains to develop what might be called an alternative epistemology-which is, undoubtedly, one of the reasons it appealed so strongly to Benjamin.

In "Kritik der Gewalt" Benjamin, surveying the forlorn landscape of contemporary politics, acknowledges the unique capacity of the proletarian general strike to disrupt the sway of conventional legality and the state-sponsored violence that is perennially lurking in the wings, waiting to lash out. One of Benjamin's key distinctions, one that he takes over from Sorel, concerns the qualitative difference between run-of-the-mill, trade union strikes vis-à-vis the proletarian general strike. He dismisses the former, as does Sorel, insofar as they remain part and parcel of the predominant legal order. In a strict sense, they are expressions of what Benjamin disparages as "law-preserving violence." Hence, Benjamin classifies them as manifestations of state-sanctioned violence, insofar as their actions are non-transgressive and fall within the boundaries of the reigning legal system. As such, their function and purpose is to *strengthen* the current juridico-political order rather than to genuinely oppose it.

Similarly whereas the "political general strike"-which, in Benjamin's view, is a method that the political status quo employs for purposes of self-preservation-is "law-maintaining," he defines the proletarian general strike as "anarchic," insofar as it aims at the outright *elimination* rather than the *preservation* of the bourgeois state. (Here, Benjamin seeks to update or actualize Sorel's analysis by invoking events in contemporary German history. In 1920, Wilhelm Kapp, a disaffected civil servant with strong ties to the Wehrmacht, attempted a coup d'état against Germany's recently installed Social Democratic government. Led by Friedrich Ebert, the government was able to save itself by fleeing the German capital, effectively going on strike.) He cites Sorel to buttress these claims: "With the general strike all these fine things disappear; the revolution appears as a revolt, pure and simple, and

no place is reserved for sociologists, for fashionable people who are in favour of social reforms, and for Intellectuals who have embraced the profession of thinking for the proletariat' (Sorel 171)." "Against this deep, moral, and genuinely revolutionary conception," Benjamin continues in support of Sorel, "no objection can stand that seeks, on grounds of its possibly catastrophic consequences, to brand such a general strike as violent" ("Critique" 292).

But on what basis can Benjamin, while, on the one hand, acknowledging the proletarian general strike's "possibly catastrophic consequences," deny that its destruction of the state might count as a "violent"?

Benjamin insists that state-violence is inherently corrupt insofar as it employs violence instrumentally, legitimating its employment of violence on the basis of the ends it seeks to achieve, viz., the preservation of the political status quo. Conversely, he rather cryptically characterizes the proletarian general strike as a violence of "pure means." Since its "means" are "pure"-a designation that Benjamin merely assumes but never explains-he feels justified in describing it as "nonviolent." Thus even though it aims at the destruction of the existing political order, and even though its consequences may be "catastrophic," Benjamin has no qualms about characterizing the proletarian general strike as "nonviolent."

As one can readily see, as a violence of "pure means," the violence Benjamin is describing has certain distinctly supernatural, unearthly qualities and attributes. In this respect it is a *redemptory* or *noumenal* violence, the violence of an exterminating angel, one might say. Indeed, Benjamin at one point refers to this type of violence as "annihilating" (*vernichtend* 297), demonstrating that he does not shy away in the least from acknowledging the ultimate, "catastrophic" consequences of such violence.

The debacle of the Great War and the encounter with Bloch book challenged Benjamin to finally set forth his own views on politics in a projected three-part study he describes in a December 1920 letter to Scholem. The second part, "True Politics" ("die wahre Politik") was divided into two subsections: "Deconstruction of Violence" ("Abbau der Gewalt") and "Teleology without End" ("Teleologie ohne Endzweck"). In all likelihood "Kritik der Gewalt," the only part that has survived, corresponds to Benjamin's ideas for "Deconstruction of Violence."

Notes

① In his seminal essay on the "Messianic Idea in Judaism," Scholem felicitously captures the intimate relationship between catastrophe and redemption in Jewish Messianic thought, remarking that "It is precisely the lack of transition between history and the redemption which is always stressed by the prophets and apocalyptists. The Bible and the apocalyptic writers know of no progress in history leading to the redemption. Redemption is not the product of immanent developments such as we find it in modern Western reinterpretations of Messianism since the Enlightenment where, secularized as the belief in progress, Messianism still displayed unbroken and immense vigor. It is rather transcendence breaking in upon history, an intrusion in which history itself perishes, transformed in its ruin because it is struck by a beam of light shining into it from an outside source.... The apocalyptists have always cherished a pessimistic view of the world. Their optimism, their hope, is not directed to what history will bring forth, but to that which will arise in its ruin, free at last and undisguised." Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 3-4.

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