

Spectres of anarchy

Walter Benjamin and the Red Army Faction, Part Three

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There is an excellent passage in *Nadja* on the ‘enchanting days spent looting Paris under the sign of Sacco and Vanzetti’ and Breton adds the assurance that in those days the Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle [Boulevard of Good Tidings] fulfilled the strategic promise of revolt that its name had always held.¹

‘The Right to the Use of Force’

Benjamin’s critique of violence cannot be separated from its religious inspiration. Not merely does it open up a space of thinking unavailable to the profane discourse of his time; it also enables him to conceive of a ‘radical politics that is “just” and, precisely for this reason, wants to be nothing but politics’.² Conversely, and by the same token, this points to a notion of justice modelled on the Jewish God. Radical profanity in the spirit of theology: this seeming paradox is, we saw, the crux of the ‘Theologico-Political Fragment’. In acknowledging the autonomy of the profane order – and thus presumably the ‘legitimacy of modernity’ (Blumenberg) – it rejects any form of political theocracy³ and obviates any attempt to (re)theologize the profane. Aside from the Protestant ethic analysed by Weber, there is perhaps no greater immunity to false idols, including those of the capitalist market, than the one afforded by an old religion. All the more so if, as here, it propels a radically ‘profane order of the profane’ on its way.

Seen in this light, the modern state would be the ‘new idol’⁴ that Zarathustra calls it – a hybrid between myth and demythologization. A rough draft for a review article from the same period, ‘The Right to the Use of Force’ (*Das Recht zur Gewaltanwendung*), suggests as much.⁵ It is irrelevant, Benjamin there writes, ‘whether the state imposes itself [*sich einsetzt*] as the supreme legal institution [*Rechtsinstitut*] by its own authority [*Machtvollkommenheit*] or by an alien one’⁶ – that is, as a secular or a religious theocracy. In either case, it needs to be dissolved into a politics that is ‘nothing but politics’.

Benjamin’s draft enumerates four critical options: (A) to deny both the state and the individual the right to use force; (B) to recognize unconditionally the right of both to do so; (C) to grant it to the state alone; (D) to grant it only to the individual. To sum up an already summary argument: Benjamin maintains that (A) – termed ‘ethical anarchism’ by the author under review – is valid for morality (though not for the reasons usually given), but not for politics; that (B) is intrinsically contradictory and effectively leads to (C), which would be defensible only if the state and its laws coincided with the ethical order; and that, since there is (contrary to C) a contradiction in principle between the state and ethical life and (contrary to A) none in principle between force and the ethical order, (D) remains the only logical possibility. It is its apparent material impossibility that prompts the author under review to reject it out of hand.⁷ But a ‘word against the law’, the ‘Critique of Violence’ claims, is not necessarily spoken into the wind.

All power to the individual: this is an at once terrifying and liberating *Entsetzung* of the monopoly on violence so jealously guarded by the modern state. Not to be subjected to it is presumably not to be a subject or individual in any accepted sense. Nor can the right (*Recht*) to use force in order to dismantle the law (*Recht*) be a legal one; it is perhaps no ‘right’ at all. Benjamin nevertheless continues to call it that:

An exposition of this standpoint is one of the tasks of my moral philosophy, and in that regard the term ‘anarchism’ may very well be used to describe a theory that denies a moral right not to force [*Gewalt*] as such but merely to every human institution, community or individuality that assigns itself a monopoly over it or in any way claims that right for itself, even if only in general and in principle, instead of revering it in a particular case as a gift of divine power, as *perfect power* [*Machtvollkommenheit*].⁸

Correlatively, the state, in its self-positing sovereignty (*Machtvollkommenheit*), is implicitly identified here with self-idolatry. In another early sketch, the just distribution of the power it monopolises is equated with the abolition of private property.⁹

It is both possible and necessary, Benjamin concludes, to come to a universally valid decision about the right to apply force, ‘because the truth about morality does not stop at the chimera of moral freedom’. A ‘truly *subjective*’ decision for or against its use cannot be made in the abstract, being conceivable only in the light of ‘the particular goals of one’s wishes [*des Wunsches*]’.¹⁰ Whatever this might mean *in concreto*, the general thrust is clear. The telos of a politics that is nothing but politics is, in the words of the ‘Theologico-Political Fragment’, a ‘striving for happiness on the part of a free humanity’ – one which announces the ‘quietest approach’ of the Messianic Kingdom.¹¹ In this sense, the ‘dynamics’ of the ‘profane order of the profane’¹² would be ‘divinely commanded’.¹³ Its political ‘method’ – ‘nihilism’ – is destined to bring down the pillars of profane theocracy, alias bourgeois democracy: the state, the rule of law and doubtless also the social contract.

Benjamin did not explicitly return to the problems explored in this early draft, which belongs to his most extreme probings of the subject. Several years later, however, he claimed to see no reason to be ‘ashamed of’ or to “‘forswear”” his “‘early”” anarchism’. Anarchist methods, he went on, were admittedly useless; but communist – indeed, all political – ‘goals’ were meaningless and non-existent.¹⁴ His programme for a coming politics thus remained a ‘teleology without final goal’: an unconditional break with the millennial past, followed, presumably, by whatever the ensuing ‘union of free men’ (Marx) would then decide. To the last, he considered the winning combination to be a properly communist implementation of this anarchist project. Like the theological dwarf who may no longer show himself in public, his anarchism disappeared from view and entered into a secret pact with historical materialism. The latter was to be prevented by this anarcho-crypto-theology from becoming a set of false, quasi-religious dogmas that would sooner or later be forsworn (e.g. Aron’s ‘opium of the intellectuals’), or a state religion, or whatever else a Turkish puppet with a hookah in his mouth might stand for.

The state of emergency

Let him [the Messiah] come, but let me not see him. (Sanhedrin 98b)

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ [*Ausnahmezustand*] in which

we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that accords with this insight. Then we will clearly see that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against fascism. One reason why fascism has a chance is that, in the name of progress, its opponents treat it as a historical norm. The amazement that the things we are experiencing are ‘still’ possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. It is *not* the beginning of knowledge – unless it be the knowledge that the view of history from which such amazement arises is untenable.¹⁵

It is not surprising that the leaders of the RAF should have cited this Thesis in their long ‘Declaration’ at the start of the Stammheim trial. Its inversion of the relation between rule and exception with respect to the *ultima ratio* of state power – the declaration of the state of emergency – ultimately denies the legitimacy of the rule of law. The leaders of the RAF set out in turn to subvert the authority of the court with every means at their disposal.

‘Where thinking suddenly halts in a constellation saturated with tensions, it gives it a shock, by which thinking crystallizes into a monad.’¹⁶ This sentence from the Seventeenth Thesis describes Benjamin’s own strategy of positioning himself in a no-man’s-land between various fronts. His writings have in turn been caught in the crossfire of conflicting interpretations. The ‘Critique of Violence’ and the Eighth Thesis are cases in point. Their reception may conceivably have been marked by the cautionary example of the RAF; such matters are difficult to gauge.

Two opposed positions may be schematically contrasted here. On the one hand, interpretations of a liberal, broadly social-democratic persuasion close to that of Habermas find mirror images of Carl Schmitt in the *Critique* and the Eighth Thesis.¹⁷ On the other hand, Giorgio Agamben’s *State of Exception* – the offshoot of a much larger project¹⁸ – draws on Michel Foucault’s concept of ‘biopolitics’ and Benjamin’s distinction between a permanent, catastrophic state of emergency and a real one yet to come. The upshot is an analysis of the current world-political situation, whose ultra-radicalism matches that of the RAF. But the politics of ‘pure means’ that Agamben endorses is no longer one of terror or revolutionary violence. He finds it rather in complementary Benjaminian figures of childhood and play.¹⁹

The ‘real’ state of emergency invoked in the Eighth Thesis could not but strike terror at the heart of the powers that be (and that part of us that is wedded to them). A cryptic formula in a letter of April or May 1940 intimates that this prospect may have alarmed

Benjamin too – though for very different reasons. The outbreak of war and the larger constellation which brought it on have, he writes, induced him to set down certain reflections – later known as the *Theses* – which he has kept to himself, indeed from himself, for well-nigh twenty years.²⁰ This return of the (half-) repressed may be speculatively reconstructed as follows. The constellation of the Second World War – the rise of Stalinism and fascism, the Hitler–Stalin Pact, and the inadequate resistance of ‘progressive’ forces, notably the *Front Populaire* – reactualizes a number of intuitions first prompted by the First World War and its aftermath, notably the brief interregnum marked by the Spartacus movement. Chief among them is the conviction that the age-old cycle (*Umlauf*) of violence can be broken only by violence of a quite different order. What resurfaces in the Eighth Thesis would thus be the anarcho-nihilist theology first formulated in the ‘Critique of Violence’. Benjamin would not always have wanted to admit to himself the enormity of what at bottom he knew: namely, that it would take nothing less than the institution of a ‘real’ state of emergency – the ‘*Entsetzung* of the law and the state’ – to end the ongoing state of emergency. This interplay between knowing and unknowing perhaps has its counterpart in the First Thesis, where a similar relation obtains between the oblivious puppet and the canny dwarf.

Agamben proposes a complementary genealogy. As he presents it, the Eighth Thesis was Benjamin’s last move in a game of chess that he had been playing against Carl Schmitt for almost twenty years.²¹ It would thus represent a variation on the First Thesis – the allegory of the chess automaton that can take on ‘all comers’. The unnamed ‘enemy’ invoked in the *Theses* would be, among others, Schmitt himself, the theoretician of the allegedly permanent, in reality prehistoric, antagonism between ‘friend’ and ‘foe’. Ironically enough, the allegedly ‘dangerous relations’²² between Benjamin and Schmitt, whom political centrists have been eager to see as twin extremes, would itself have been such an antagonism.

‘The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “state of emergency” in which we live is not the exception but the rule.’ The key phrase in this sentence is placed between inverted commas, which signal that Schmitt’s concept of the *Ausnahmezustand* (‘state of emergency’ or, literally, of ‘exception’) is being cited against itself. ‘He is sovereign,’ so his definition goes, ‘who decides on the state of exception.’²³ At the time the *Theses* were written, a state of emergency – decreed by the sovereign, Hitler, and championed by his jurist, Schmitt – had been in force for seven

years. For those at the bottom, however, the state of exception was no exception. (It is true that Nazism would turn out to be an unprecedented historical break – a *Zivilisationsbruch* – with the civilized past, but it was also, in an easily misunderstood but easily verifiable sense, its continuation.) This bitter experience of the rule refuted the ruling standpoint. It was the standpoint of the oppressed – the one, that is, that could be ‘ascribed’ (Lukács) to them rather than their actual empirical consciousness – and it alone, that had normative, universalizable force. Normality – universal emancipation – had yet to be achieved.

With this move, which recalls the grand theological reversal (*Umschwung*) with which the book on the German ‘play of mourning’ had closed,²⁴ Benjamin places Schmitt’s sovereign in check and indicates what it will take to bring a checkmate about. If the so-called state of exception is the rule, then the true state of exception will have to be the exception to it. Hence Benjamin’s strategic assessment that we cannot ‘improve our position in the struggle against fascism’ without checking the sovereign in all his guises (and doing so, clearly, with more than the ‘checks and balances’ of bourgeois democracy). Otherwise the victory over fascism will, in the phrase of Sorel’s cited in the ‘Critique’, be no more than a change of rulers.²⁵ If the chess game is to be won, the kaleidoscope cannot be shaken into a new order; it will have to be smashed.

The RAF clearly saw itself as the executor of such imperatives. Vulgar Communist platitudes, Benjamin had argued, capture more levels of meaning than bourgeois profundity ever will.²⁶ No such layers entered the RAF’s thinking. The point was indeed to change the world, not merely interpret it. But their acts needed in turn to be interpreted as the acting out of a dilemma that it was in no one’s power to resolve.

1. In 1967 the student movement had gained legitimacy through its militant protest against the so-called ‘emergency laws’ (*Notstandsgesetze*), which for the first time since the Second World War paved the way for the possible declaration of a state of emergency within the framework of the West German constitution.
2. It was the RAF’s declared aim to get the state to show its true colours by declaring such a state of emergency. The violence of the judicial system and security apparatus would then be exposed for all to see. This is indeed what happened. The state (over)played its role.
3. But so did the RAF. They imagined that they were extending the revolution from the Third World

into the heart of the First and heralding the end of internationalized class relations. A new constellation had brought on another war. American imperialism had, they thought, revealed itself to be an extension of fascism. (Marcuse, we saw, privately entertained similar thoughts.) The victories of the Vietcong seemed to mark a historical turning point. On the basis of this assessment, which was all the more warped for containing some truth, the RAF wanted to light the fuse of a 'real state of emergency' through a campaign of bombings and assassinations. But in the public mind the one that they actually provoked reinforced the necessity of the rule of law.

While Benjamin's concept of a permanent state of emergency had not meanwhile lost any of its force – as level-headed a political thinker as Hannah Arendt came close to endorsing it in her Benjamin essay of 1968 – no one could honestly believe that West Germany still found itself in a *fascist* 'state of emergency'. Nothing is ever to be gained by denying the obvious. 'Just' and 'radical' are synonymous. We do not live in the *same* 'dark times' (Arendt). Darkness is a whole spectrum unto itself.

In his essay on surrealism Benjamin spoke of 'winning the forces of intoxication [*Rausch*] for the revolution'.²⁷ But he also made the following cautionary assessment. To place exclusive emphasis on the intoxicating, anarchic components of the revolutionary act was 'to subordinate the methodical, disciplined preparation for revolution entirely to a praxis that oscillated between exercise and advance celebration [*Übung und Vorfeier*]'.²⁸ At its weakest, surrealism would thus have travestied what was historically needed: a yoking together of anarchism and historical materialism. The RAF was an entirely different type of hybrid. It combined wild Marxian theory with the suicidal strategy of a would-be urban guerrilla without a sea to swim in. 'To each his own chimera': revolutionary aspirations had for Baudelaire been one more way of 'getting drunk' in a disenchanted world. The RAF drowned its illusions in killing, surviving and dying.²⁹ This deadly exercise was another variation of the 'childish' anarchism that both pacifism and activism represented in Benjamin's eyes. What the RAF lacked was, in short, his powers of political judgement.

Of these the Eighth Thesis is a highly contested example. Holding contradictory levels of meaning together, it makes the complicated claim that the anti-fascist position can be *improved* only in an *absolute* perspective. Benjamin usually associates the term 'improvement' with the belief in progress as a historical norm – the very belief that he is here diagnosing as

the fatal weakness of the anti-fascist Left. The latter's position therefore needs 'improvement' – but clearly not in any meliorist sense. Appearances to the contrary, the idea of substituting one emergency for another is not a politics of all or nothing; it aims for strategic gains. The RAF transformed this blend of prudence and daring into a very different kind of nihilism.³⁰ It hypostatized some of Benjamin's political impulses – just hatred, legitimate violence, positive barbarism – and was oblivious to others.³¹

Rainer Rochlitz makes the liberal case against the Eighth Thesis:

The recourse to an authoritarian politics indissociable from Carl Schmitt's concept of a state of emergency is understandable within the terrible context of the triumph of Nazism in Europe. Contrary to what Benjamin's formulation implies, however, it cannot be generalized beyond that situation. If the state of emergency is the rule, then the only sane course of action is the politics of making things worse [*la politique du pire*]. In the 1970s, the ethics of certain terrorist groups grew out of this despair; they described Western capitalist societies as fascist regimes, against which they sought to 'bring about a real state of emergency'. It was in the name of a *false* actualization that Benjamin's work exerted its greatest political influence. Whatever the ambiguities of postwar European regimes, their constitutions are those of states of law and do not rest on naked violence and oppression. We have to be able to differentiate between fascist regimes and democratic ones that contain certain class privileges: Benjamin's thinking does not allow us to do so. The terrorist violence that struck at those regimes mistook its target. Far from redeeming the suffering undergone by the victims of past generations, it merely created new injustices.³²

The RAF's actualization of the Eighth Thesis is here called 'false'. Yet the possibility of such misreading is located in the Thesis itself. In which case the RAF's response to it would not be so false after all – and social-democratic and terrorist versions of the Eighth Thesis not that far apart. The need for new analyses of new situations was – *pace* Rochlitz – intrinsic to Benjamin's method.³³ Correlatively, no text was to be generalized beyond the conditions of its emergence (or reduced to them). How to reappraise his own most exposed and time-bound texts in this light? How reactivate the Eighth Thesis better?

Faced with our daily global news, Benjamin would surely have acknowledged the obvious – that the first task is to *achieve* the state of law. Whether he would have moderated his mistrust of it is another matter. To rethink his thinking today with its own imperatives in mind would mean, first, to give the 'power [*Gewalt*] of

facts' priority over 'convictions'³⁴ and, second, to let the *agon* between the best convictions – e.g. Rochlitz's (all too narrow and innocuous) and Agamben's (all too broad and catastrophist) accounts of the state of emergency – crystallize into *other* alternatives. *Tertium datur*. Justice was not a matter of scales and 'balance' (*Ausgewogenheit*) if these meant compromise.

What Benjamin meant by the 'organization of pessimism'³⁵ was precisely not a *politique du pire*³⁶ but an attempt to *avert* the worst. The RAF admittedly made comparable claims. But its version of the Eighth Thesis only made matters worse. If Benjamin's attempt to 'improve' them through an anarcho-messianic clarification of the political situation was a wager, it was not a game of Russian roulette.

The 'Critique of Violence', the Eighth Thesis, Benjamin's game of chess with Schmitt, and the headlong career of the RAF form an instructive constellation of extremes:

1. In its reaction to the Schleyer crisis a social-democratic state decreed the first state of emergency in the history of the Federal Republic – a turn of events that was accompanied by a modest revival of interest in Schmitt.³⁷ It lends credence to Agamben's larger thesis that since the end of the First World War Western democracies have increasingly integrated the possibility of declaring a state of emergency into their judicial arsenal. In which case, the claim that the 'state of emergency' is in fact the rule would apply, in a precise judicial sense, far beyond Benjamin's epoch.
2. Why, Kraushaar asks, did the state react to a group that it refused to recognize as a political association but only as a marginal 'band of criminal elements' as if it constituted a threat to its existence?³⁸ Surprise at this, Benjamin would surely have said, is '*not* philosophical'. According to the 'Critique of Violence', the modern state is allergic to any challenge, however disproportionate, to its authority. An order that 'creates a world in its own image' (Marx) tolerates no violence beside its own. Like the Enlightenment in general, it fears whatever it is unable to reduce to its own measure.³⁹ This the RAF put to the test. If its fate confirmed Benjamin's diagnosis of the state, its actions, far from implementing his critique of violence, helped worsen the latter's position.

To repeat: by what 'pure means' that critique *can* be implemented today remains the unanswered question.

A *Trauerspiel*

The conclusion to Benjamin's 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire', written in 1938, reads:

On occasion, Baudelaire also claimed to recognize the image of the modern hero in the conspirator. 'No more tragedies!', he wrote in the *Salut public* during the February days. 'No more history of ancient Rome! Are we not greater today than Brutus?' Greater than Brutus was, to be sure, less great. For when Napoleon III came to power, Baudelaire did not recognize the Caesar in him. Therein Blanqui was his superior. What they shared nevertheless went deeper than their differences: obstinacy and impatience, the force of their indignation and their hatred, and the powerlessness that was their common lot. In a famous line Baudelaire lightheartedly takes leave of a world 'in which action is not the sister of dream'. His was not as forsaken as he thought. Blanqui's deeds were the sister of Baudelaire's dreams. The two are intertwined – the entwined hands on a stone under which Napoleon III had buried the hopes of the June fighters.⁴⁰

In an age that had no use for heroes only the *role* of hero in the *Trauerspiel* of modernity was available.⁴¹ An earlier passage reconstructs Baudelaire's notion of modern heroism as follows:

The resistance that modernity pits against a man's natural productive élan is out of all proportion to his strength. It is understandable that he should weary and seek refuge in death. Modernity cannot but stand under the sign of suicide. Suicide sets its seal under a heroic will that makes no concession to a hostile environment. It is not renunciation but heroic passion.⁴²

Anger, impotence, failure, the disproportion between a heroic will and the existing order – these traits form a constellation in which revolutionary and counter-revolutionary impulses can veer into one another. 'To interrupt the course of the world – this was Baudelaire's deepest wish';⁴³ he raged against the crowd 'with the impotent anger of one who goes against wind and rain'.⁴⁴ In his last work, Blanqui pronounces 'the most terrible indictment' of his own revolutionary efforts.⁴⁵ Nietzsche's 'eternal return' is as intimately at odds with revolution as it is with religion.

Benjamin and the RAF constitute two further poles in this persisting 'Saturnine' constellation of act, dream, will, anger, impotence and suicide. Both represent a return of the bid to interrupt the eternal return of the same. But are their hands entwined on a stone under which their hopes lie buried? There is little to suggest that Benjamin's dream corresponded to the 'terroristic daydream',⁴⁶ let alone the deeds, of the RAF.

In his late writings Benjamin considers not merely Baudelaire but also Blanqui from varying angles. Within

three decades social democracy had, according to the Twelfth Thesis, managed to ‘erase almost entirely’ a name ‘whose sound sent tremors [*erschütterte*] through the last century’.⁴⁷ Benjamin detects this effect even in Blanqui’s final capitulation, *L’Éternité par les astres*.⁴⁸ Two years before, however, in the opening pages of his first published work on Baudelaire, he places Blanqui in a context which raises doubts about the effectiveness of his methods. He here occupies a ‘hybrid’ position. Marx, while acknowledging Blanqui as one of the ‘real leaders of the proletarian party’, portrays the professional conspirators as ‘alchemists’ who ‘improvise’ the revolution and ‘despise the more theoretical enlightenment of the workers concerning their class interests’. Their firebombs and other engines of destruction seem all ‘the more miraculous and surprising’, he claims, ‘the less rational their foundation is’.⁴⁹

Elsewhere Benjamin transforms this objection into a far-reaching insight:

One might well ask whether Blanqui’s political activity does not display features which reveal it as the action of the same man who in old age wrote *L’Éternité par les astres*. H.B. [Heinrich Blücher] even assumes that the world-view developed by Blanqui at seventy was conceived at the age of eighteen, and that this explains the desperate [*desparat*] character of his political activity in general. There is, clearly, no precise argument which could substantiate this assumption. On the other hand, we should not simply dismiss the idea that Blanqui’s persistent lack of interest in the theoretical foundations of socialism may have sprung from a deep-seated mistrust of the conclusions that await anyone who immerses himself too deeply in the structures of the world and of life. Blanqui would not, at the last, have escaped such immersion.⁵⁰

The hidden link suggested here between Blanqui’s revolutionary activities and his concluding quasi-scientific postscript on the eternal revolutions of the stars stands in stark contrast to the ‘unity of theory and praxis’ postulated by Marx. A split unity is now located not merely between Baudelaire’s dream and Blanqui’s action but also in the contradiction within the latter between theory and praxis.⁵¹ Not unlike the sudden, apparently gratuitous acts described in Baudelaire’s prose poems which serve to give ennui the slip and suspend the tyranny of Time, Blanqui’s *coups* would have been so many attempts to forestall the demobilizing effect of the recognition that revolution was *not* – *pace* Marx – inscribed in the logic of history. It could, if at all, only be snatched *from* its so-called progress. This widening

split between dream, action and knowledge recalled the post-mediaeval dissociation between knowledge and belief.

Like the concluding section of the preface to the *Trauerspiel* book, the above-quoted note could have been entitled *Pro domo*. It also sheds an oblique light on the desperado tactics of the RAF. Amalgamating



some of the above-mentioned motifs from Benjamin’s *Baudelaire* with others from his *Arcades Project*, one might characterize the RAF as follows. They acted like a man trying to brave wind and rain with a machine-gun. Unable to accept that the heroic role of the revolutionary agitator had been played out, they played it for real and tried to prove its – and their – existence by force. Their activism was an *ago quia absurdum*, a macabre theatre of the absurd. If capitalism was a religion, so was their anti-capitalism. For them, as for Benjamin, history was (in Stephen Dedalus’s phrase) a nightmare from which they wanted to awaken; or rather they wanted, by their example, to awaken the *others* – the ‘historical subject’ – to action; but they too were a ‘dream-collective’ and their sleep – a Marxist variant of Goya’s ‘sleep of reason’ – engendered monsters; in short, they merely contributed to the nightmare. Neither the rhetoric of their acts nor the phraseology of their declaration to the court could bridge the gulf between theory and praxis. What their lurid trajectory

did do, however, was to highlight that abyss and with it the intolerable political blockage of our times.

Certain 'relational concepts' (*Relationsbegriffe*), Benjamin writes in 1923, are perhaps best understood 'if they do not from the outset refer exclusively to man'. A life or a moment could be unforgettable even if all men had forgotten it. They would contain 'a demand unfulfilled by men' and 'probably also a reference to a realm in which it is fulfilled: God's remembrance'.⁵² The *Theses* restate this demand as the claim of our oppressed forebears on our attention.⁵³ This claim too – the demand for justice, for remembrance in action – would surely persist even if most men had forgotten it. Benjamin's 'theology' is synonymous with this melancholy experience of human obliviousness. Is it an accident that the winning combination of the First Thesis consists of two non-human partners, a puppet and a dwarf? Where are those to do the job? Is the human species up to it? If not, who? The sad, failed history – the *Trauerspiel* – of the RAF renews these questions.

Test of time

We began this essay with various forms of *Entsetzen* – the RAF's actions, their unclear association with Benjamin, the dormant anarchy awaiting collective release – and the spectrum of meanings that Benjamin associates with this word, ranging from the 'removal' [*Entsetzung*] of the state to certain minimal 'deviations' from the standard course.⁵⁴ It is 'not by violence', we recall, that the Messiah will change the world, but 'merely by adjusting it ever so slightly';⁵⁵ and the historical materialist must in turn attend to these 'most unobtrusive' of changes.⁵⁶ The greatest transformation can thus prove to be the merest shift of position. Power and powerlessness are as dialectically interlinked as sobriety and intoxication.⁵⁷ 'Pure' violence is the counterpart of 'perpetual peace'.

All the above-named elements coexist in Benjamin's thinking. It is as if the 'chess master' evoked in the First Thesis combined every virtue named thereafter, though doubtless not in any single move: the 'weak Messianic force' and the virile explosive power; the paralysed horror of the angel and the avenging hatred of the oppressed; single-minded resolution and devious humour; a monastic distance from world events and the closest attention to detail; violence and non-violence. All these conflicting, heterogeneous impulses are needed if historical materialism is to prove a 'match for all comers'. To object that they can cohere, if at all, only on paper is to ignore the relation that they state – and, in so doing, perform – between word

and deed. Benjamin's writings illustrate his theory of language – one in which the word partakes of the Word. Here at least a certain unity between theory and praxis obtains.

To return to the sticking point: what is the share of physical violence in the 'whole contradictory fund'⁵⁸ of his thinking? This can, he claims, only be decided from case to case. Let us therefore briefly consider a particularly relevant one: *The Destructive Character* (1931).⁵⁹ Like its model, who does not worry about 'being misunderstood', this text is exposed 'on all sides to idle talk'.⁶⁰ In today's climate, it could even be suspected of condoning terrorism.

'Ripeness for destruction' (*Zerstörungswürdigkeit*) is what the destructive character 'tests' the world for. 'Not always with brute force [*Gewalt*]; sometimes it is refined'. Unconditional non-violence is not a political option here; violence is essential as a 'pure means': 'What exists he reduces to rubble, not for the sake of the rubble, but for that of the way leading through it.' What does this stupendous programme involve? The dying fall of another sentence gives an ominous hint: 'First of all, for a moment at least, empty space – the place where the thing stood or the victim lived.'⁶¹ Not merely are (inanimate) thing and (living) victim given equally short shrift here. All superfluous affect, notably the smokescreen of virtuous indignation, is likewise removed.⁶² But can one assent without question to this suspension of moral affect? Questions and objections arise here thick and fast. Is it only a 'fine' terror (*schönes Entsetzen*) that the above sentence inspires? After all that has meanwhile happened, who can still derive satisfaction from such results? What if the victims' names were Philemon and Baucis? Was it because an end to mythical violence still did not appear 'unimaginably remote' to Benjamin that he could so coolly envisage the sacrifice of human life? If so, how tenable was such an assessment? How do we read it in the light of the subsequent Nazi and Stalinist campaigns of 'liquidation' and 'purification'? Would not the deadly misuse of such terms soon render them unusable? Or was it now all the more necessary to reaffirm them – in the teeth of possible misunderstanding? Benjamin seems to have adopted the latter strategy. The closing paragraphs of his Kraus essay, written in the same year, oppose a purifying, destructive justice both to the 'constructive ambiguities of the law' and to the impure rhetoric of the George circle, despite and because of the latter's talk of 'purity', 'sacrifice' and a 'new humanity'.⁶³ Here as elsewhere Benjamin pronounces judgement on what constitutes pure and impure violence, purity and sacrifice with apodictic

certainty and a biblically inspired furore.⁶⁴ Who does not share that fury? But who is granted that certainty? Can such distinctions always be so clearly made? Did not Benjamin once argue that Communism was not a matter of the 'right' course, but of a necessarily, symptomatically and productively false one? Doesn't the historical *Trauerspiel* show in terrible detail that a 'false' order imposes an impure, mixed violence even on its best enemies and that the circle of mythic violence could never be broken in entirely 'pure' fashion?

'The destructive character knows only one watchword: make room. And only one activity: clearing away.'⁶⁵ Such evacuation (*Entsetzung*) causes terror (*Entsetzen*). Wittingly or not, it is driven by the need to clean up a fallen, profaned, 'overnamed' Creation. The destructive character – the (in)human counterpart of an exterminating angel – fulfils Benjamin's anarcho-theological dream of justice in action. Here too, however, dream is not the sister of action; it is rather its distant relative. The fulfilment of the dream is still part of it; the portrait is not its model; his activity is mimed here by an act of language which symbolically partakes – but by the same token falls short – of it. Nor is it an accident that the actual models for this portrait were (anti-)cultural figures – destroyers of ornament (Loos), cliché (Kraus), catharsis (Brecht), and so on. Where, then, are this text and the character it describes to be situated? Notwithstanding the 'symbolic' relation of word to Word – and the 'spark' between speech and act – the separation between the literary and political spheres remains.

While not therefore a *directly* political statement, *The Destructive Character* nevertheless stands for a politics that would be 'nothing but politics'. Benjamin's theology of the profane has almost dissolved here *into* the profane. But theological elements persist,⁶⁶ among them an echo of the Jewish ban on graven images. The destructive character has 'no image' of the future and can thus pursue a 'teleology without end-purpose'. He is, in short, the profane executor of Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence'. The question thus arises once again: under what circumstances can the most 'monstrous' cases that these texts evoke – the 'revolutionary killing of the oppressor' or the 'clearing away' of the 'victim' – still be envisaged? At least in the West, it has long made little political sense to shoot replaceable 'character-masks' (Marx).

Let us consider the issue from another angle. Benjamin will later refer to his 'psychology' of the destructive character.⁶⁷ But what this figure represents is in fact the clearing away of what is usually

understood by psychology and character. Just as the surrealists 'exchange, to a man, the play of human features for the dial of an alarm clock',⁶⁸ he reduces not merely the world but his own psyche to a bare minimum. Benjamin's commentaries on Brecht likewise turn on the dismantling and retooling of person, name and function.⁶⁹ Those who 'stand firmest' in the Communist cause, he comments on 'Of poor B.B.', 'are those who started by letting themselves fall'.⁷⁰ Here, too, the question arises whether such claims have not meanwhile been refuted by events. Would not Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* show that it was precisely those who had stood firmest in the revolutionary cause who were reduced to testifying against themselves in the name of revolutionary justice?⁷¹ But surely the destructive character is armed against this travesty of revolutionary self-sacrifice by his 'insuperable mistrust of the course of events' and his permanent awareness – that of 'historical man' – that 'everything can always go wrong'.⁷²

He thus stands for powers of instant, active, critical judgement in a rapidly changing environment – in short, for what Benjamin calls 'presence of mind'. A German Bolshevik revolution, he wrote only a few months before this text appeared (in November 1931 in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*), might allow him to write differently; but he had no illusions about the reception his writings could expect from a victorious KPD.⁷³ This remark sums up the context of *The Destructive Character*. It intervenes in the virtual space – the no-man's-land – opened up between East and West by 'the fact of "Soviet Russia"'.⁷⁴ This fact no more convicts it of complicity with Stalinist purges and terror than its free-standing status frees it from the 'context of guilt' (*Schuldzusammenhang*) in which it, like all texts, is implicated. A just critique of this text would likewise involve presence of mind: rapid historico-critical judgement of *its* historico-critical judgement.

The mistrust – which Benjamin attributes to Blanqui – of the 'conclusions awaiting anyone who immerses himself deeply in the structures of the world and of life' may also, we suggested, have been his own.⁷⁵ Instead of seeking to come to terms with, say, Nietzsche's 'psychology of *ressentiment*' or Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, which gave advance insight into the mass psychology of fascism, he focuses on the mass as the matrix of a liberation from the entanglements of bourgeois psychology. It is this promise that the destructive character fulfils. Neither a communist 'new man' nor a Nietzschean 'superman' but an *Unmensch* (a 'monster' qua 'un-man'), this *terrible simplificateur* has effected

a 'complete reduction of his own condition, indeed the extraction of his root [*Radizierung*]'.⁷⁶ 'To be radical', Marx had written, 'is to grasp the *root* of the matter. But for *man* the *root* is *man* himself.'⁷⁷ Communism, thus conceived, completes the project of Enlightenment humanism. If, as the last-quoted sentence from *The Destructive Character* suggests, man in turn now needs to be reduced to his root, this is because bourgeois humanism has meanwhile got in the way. Such a quasi-mathematical reduction of the human – of what Nietzsche called the 'human, all-too-human' – naturally raises a host of questions. (How avoid a return of the repressed? The RAF's attempt to cut through all political and psychological knots is a warning example.) But its purpose is clear: to find a way through the labyrinthine 'structures of the world and of life', including bourgeois psychology and morality. It is, however, a measure of the difficulty of finding the right man for the job that the one presented here should not be a 'man' at all but rather an ideal type, a drawing-board model sketched at a certain distance from empirical reality.⁷⁸ He represents *one* experimental solution among a 'contradictory fund' of others in Benjamin's work to the problem of how to sidestep – or in his case demolish – the quasi-ontological 'structures of the world and of life' in order to do what needs to be done. 'Out of the crooked timber of humanity', Kant had written, 'no straight thing was ever made'.⁷⁹ If its knots are nevertheless to be undone, an equally crooked strategy is needed. Benjamin entrusts it to a hunchbacked dwarf, whose motto might be: 'The devil is old; grow old to understand him.'⁸⁰

'We have become poor', he wrote two years later; but he still saw a political chance in that reduced condition.⁸¹ *Our* world is characterized by a poverty of political alternatives. Many will, however, assent to Habermas's objection that the alternative posited by Benjamin between pure revolutionary violence and a mythical status quo is, under today's circumstances, too starkly Manichaean to be viable. But the destructive character is, precisely, a genius of the viable. 'Where others come up against walls and mountains, there too he sees a way.' It is in this refusal of existing alternatives that his actuality lies. Every moment, Benjamin claims, has its own 'peculiar revolutionary chance'.⁸² The question is: what type of genius would it take to seize it in post-revolutionary times?

For Hegel world history is its own Court of Judgement (*Weltgericht*). For Benjamin the historical equivalent to the Last Judgement is the 'standing judgement' of one historical moment on 'certain preceding ones'⁸³ – not, then, on the whole past, but on *that* past that is

à l'ordre du jour. Such summary justice is 'untimely' (Nietzsche), 'involuntary' (Proust), 'partial, passionate and political' (Baudelaire). Its enabling medium is the critical passage of time, its modality the flash in which the present and a no less particular past coincide in an unrepeatable image.⁸⁴ At every turn of phrase and events, the historical materialist, the literary critic, the writer and the translator, as Benjamin conceives them, exercise such judgement.

And so does the destructive character. What verdict, then, is *our* historical moment entitled to pass on *his* intervention in his? *He* is 'the bearer of a mandate'.⁸⁵ Do *we* still have one? The only question, Benjamin writes on his return from Moscow in 1927, is:

Which reality is inwardly converging with the truth? Which truth is inwardly preparing to converge with the real? Only he who gives clear answers to these questions is 'objective'. Not toward his contemporaries (that's not what matters) but towards events (that is decisive).⁸⁶

Just as all language and works of art ultimately address themselves, in the early Benjamin's scheme of things, not to an audience but to God,⁸⁷ so a political mandate issues here from the need of the times and not from public opinion, which might be oblivious to it. 'Truth' and 'reality' are destined to coincide. Global capitalism, which knows no truth outside reality, has reduced this revolutionary ontology to a ghostly, underground existence.⁸⁸ But even though no viable political alternative to this one-dimensional religion has so far emerged, it cannot lay its ghosts for good. If it could, world history would indeed turn out to be its own Last Judgement.

The aftermath

'Tiny radical minorities' make convenient scapegoats. But all the blame cannot be laid on the RAF. How Benjamin would have judged this particular 'extreme' we cannot know. He did, however, speak of the social order as a chronic 'context of guilt'. The so-called 'Baader–Meinhof complex' was surely one of its acutest contemporary symptoms. Extrapolating from one of Benjamin's boldest anthropological speculations,⁸⁹ one could also see the RAF as having acted out buried desires of the collective political unconscious. Hence the vestigial 'aura' that surrounds them, nowadays trivialized on the T-shirt market. That their strategy would fail was foreseeable. But what alternatives did 'false' circumstances permit? How, in a 'state of emergency', 'reach for the emergency brake'?⁹⁰ How move in an 'iron cage'? To act where action is blocked: can this be done without a streak of madness – a *passage*

à l'acte? Not to act when action is needed: is this not the reverse 'pathology of the normal', which serves to protect us from such madness? Only if this dilemma were no longer taken in the safe doses with which the media inure us to it could it begin to be resolved.

'Where are those', the young Benjamin quotes Nietzsche as asking, 'who are in need [Not]?'⁹¹ No one is belatedly being asked to become a 'sympathizer' with the 'real existing' RAF – but rather a 'foreign friend'⁹² of the need that drove them before it was supplanted by the activity of staying alive. What it drove them to provoked a massive reaffirmation of the status quo. It was *against* their cause that they united the collective. Their desperate gamble proved, if proof was needed, the impossibility of achieving justice through terror. This did not, however, yet prove that it was attainable *without* violence – violence of a 'purer' kind. Politico-ethical judgement can surely be exercised only from within this dilemma.

The real and imagined challenge posed by the RAF bore little relation to the relatively small number of its victims; the apparatus mobilized against it was even more disproportionate. It seems likely that the 'unmastered' German past was at work on both sides; but such a hypothesis is not easily tested. How deeply those 'leaden years' have impressed themselves on the collective memory is equally difficult to assess. The needs of capitalist production dictate that each present 'antiquate' what went before, which becomes as stale as yesterday's newspaper, as *passé* as a recent fashion and as unreal as last night's dream.⁹³ So too in the case of the RAF. The ensuing process of 'normalization' has closed the episode. By 'historicizing' it, scholarship too has helped lay it to rest. Without too much outcry, things again 'go on this way'.⁹⁴

And yet – to continue citing Benjamin – the enemy still does not feel entirely safe from the dead.⁹⁵ In the second exposé for the *Arcades Project* Benjamin observes of nineteenth-century France that 'the glitter and splendour with which this commodity-producing society surrounds itself, along with its illusory sense of security, are not immune to dangers; the collapse of the Second Empire and the Commune of Paris remind it of that'.⁹⁶ The 'spectre' of revolution (Marx) and the 'uncanny guest' of nihilism (Nietzsche) were the writing on the wall. The RAF was a latter-day heir to both. To criminalize their acts, to pathologize their motives, to demand their repentance, *and to leave it at that*, as the prevailing wisdom does, is to want to exorcise the vast problem – that of elementary political justice – which, however criminally and pathologically, they refused to ignore.

But the Left, too, has its ghosts.⁹⁷ 'We did 1968', said Wolinski, 'so as not to become whom we became'. Putting the past behind one is, however, the very sin for which the German protest movement originally denounced its fathers.⁹⁸ *Dr Strangelove, or How I learned to stop worrying and love the bomb*: most ex-protesters have meanwhile gone with the times, exchanging the critical theory they once learned from their adoptive fathers for a reality principle which is, from their former standpoint, the most insidious, self-effacing ideology of all. They have 'matured' and expelled their daimon (if they had had one) along with their demons.⁹⁹ Once burned, twice shy: how many former sympathizers with the RAF now keep a low profile? Others have recanted and joined the other side, like the ex-Communists of a former period.¹⁰⁰ Today's 'sobering-up' (*Ernüchterung*) knows only Weber's notion of soberness and disenchantment, not those of Marx or Benjamin, with which it is, precisely, disenchanted. In short, the observation made by Adorno and Horkheimer in 1969 that the disenchantment of the world has traversed all world-historical convulsions undeterred¹⁰¹ has been borne out by the aftermath of the student movement and its terrorist sequel. In this sense, they may indeed prove to have been mere episodes.

Benjamin's fortunes on the cultural market have followed suit.¹⁰² A long initial vogue¹⁰³ was borne by the 'cultural revolution' initiated by the student movement, whose break-up in the mid-1970s marked the 'turning of the tide' (the so-called *Tendenzwende*). The entry of Benjamin's writings into the academic canon and the cultural *feuilletons* was accompanied by a more sophisticated awareness of their complexities, but also by an increasing disengagement from their political stakes.¹⁰⁴ A project that was intended to smash the kaleidoscope of so-called cultural history is now a 'challenging', 'provocative' part of it. A conference held in 2006 by an international Benjamin society could in all impunity call itself a 'Benjamin festival'. All this parasitic activity around him cannot conceal the falling of his political stock.

They 'confirm their defeat', he wrote at a more threatening moment, 'by betraying their own cause'.¹⁰⁵ Today's (ex-)Left has confirmed its defeat by abandoning much of the ground it lost meanwhile and internalizing many of the arguments it used to fight. The debacle of the RAF may well have contributed its share to this general retreat. The horizon is one of non-expectation; and it is against this blocked prospect that Benjamin's writings are read today. There seems to be tacit agreement on all sides that their interest

can no longer lie in their politics. To excise these from Benjamin's corpus is, however, to abort its afterlife. A different type of 'mortification'¹⁰⁶ is needed.

Benjamin's own materialist historiography and literary criticism point the way. They show how works become 'readable', 'quotable' and 'criticizable' only in the medium of the historical experience that links them to, and separates them from, our present. To try to bring this method to bear on his own texts is to engage at every turn in a difficult exercise of judgement in which the 'court' itself may not emerge intact. The task is to develop combined powers of historical, political and aesthetic decision which draw their strength from the – always 'meagre'¹⁰⁷ – present without succumbing to the so-called spirit of the times. This is easier said than done. A tentative beginning was sketched above in the case of *The Destructive Character* – a text which posed the question of violence under vastly different conditions over seventy-five years ago.

Two sets of comments, objections and questions should at least be mentioned in conclusion:

1. While the RAF emerged out of the specific conditions of postwar Germany, we now know that it also stood at the threshold of an unforeseeable renewal of political terrorism in a new multipolar world. At a moment when the armed struggle of small ultra-radical groups had played itself out in the West, the destruction of the Twin Towers precipitated a new form of asymmetrical warfare between realigned geopolitical and ideological forces. The rhetoric of international class struggle was replaced by that of 'the clash of civilizations' and by reciprocal neo-religious anathema worlds apart, and light years behind, Benjamin's theology of the profane. But there is, thanks to globalization, now no corner of the earth where the demand for justice is not heard. One of the most tangible responses to it has been the creation of international courts of law to which nation-states cede a small portion of their sovereignty. Has, then, the case for *weakening* the rule of law become moot in a world where the first task is often to *strengthen* it? Would Benjamin have conceded that the state often needs to be bolstered before it can properly wither away? And what place can a particular – in this case, anarcho-messianic – version of universal justice claim in an increasingly multicultural context? To this latter question two late notes suggest the makings of an answer: 'The constructive principle of universal history allows it to be represented in partial histories.... Universal history in the present-day sense is never more than a kind of esperanto.'¹⁰⁸

2. Benjamin wrote of pointing a self-constructed telescope through a 'fog of blood'.¹⁰⁹ Now as then,

'impure', 'mythical' violence remains the rule, not the exception. The fog is partially pierced by isolated political demonstrations and strikes, some philosophical thinking, historical analysis and investigative journalism, a few works of art, and countless daily acts of resistance. Today's states, reaping the harvest of the violence that they inflict at home and abroad, are subject to intermittent disturbance from their inner margins and the threat of terrorist attack from without. The threat of 'mutually assured destruction' (MAD) that hung over the Cold War has yielded to another worst-case scenario: weapons of mass destruction in the hands of terrorists with nothing to gain or to lose. In this climate of latent terror, harassed, docile populations indiscriminately abhor 'violence' and blindly demand 'security' – unspecific notions behind which specific interests take cover. Under such conditions Benjamin's plea for 'pure' violence would seem to have little or no constituency.

The critique of violence, he argues, cannot afford to stop short at the law and the state. A 'lesser programme' will not suffice: the minimum is the maximum. Only the prospect of a 'way out' of all previous history – the term is *Ausgang*, as in Kant's 'What is Enlightenment?' – would enable a 'critical, discriminating and decisive [*scheidende und entscheidende*] angle of vision [*Einstellung*] on its temporal data'.¹¹⁰ It is on this premiss, conceived not as a regulative but as a realisable idea, that the *Theses* likewise rest. If the Angel of History, who sees one unbroken catastrophe, hardly seems to discriminate between the 'temporal data', such discrimination nevertheless remains the task of the 'historical materialist', who looks, as it were, over his shoulder.

One might be tempted to conclude that Benjamin's 'idea' has meanwhile been buried once and for all under all the 'temporal data'. The idea – the Angel – sees it differently. From his angle of vision, it is the earth that is buried, and the sky obscured, by the mounting facts.¹¹¹ Without some such perspective, history would, from this perspective, merely be what Anglo-Saxon understatement says it is: 'one damned thing after another'. Not for nothing, however, does Benjamin compare the historical materialist to a cameraman who adjusts the lighting and angle of his shots to the needs of the moment.¹¹² The wide metaphysical angle of vision does not suffice on its own. From this we may perhaps extrapolate the following conclusion. What is needed today is not a lesser programme – what other objective can there be than the institution of a classless society without further delay? – but its adjustment to straitened circumstances. If Benjamin never gave up

his minimum programme, several late formulations nevertheless reduced it to *its* minimum: a ‘dwarf’, a ‘weak Messianic power’, the ‘smallest guarantee’.¹¹³

A reduced model of anarchy is needed – one that could no longer lead anyone into the dead end of trying, against all better knowledge, to force the way out, go it alone, and claim, in so doing, to represent the oppressed. Might this, under the present circumstances, mean casting our lot with non-violence? Yes, if it is violent enough. Today’s winning combination might be one in which Benjamin’s critique of violence joined forces with those of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela.

Who, though, does not feel perplexity¹¹⁴ in the face of unabated global violence? ‘The best lack all conviction, while the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity.’¹¹⁵ But what if the former had made themselves at home in the void and the latter were merely trying to deny it? Something else is clearly needed if it isn’t ‘mere anarchy’ but, on the contrary, anarchy of an unprecedented kind that is to be ‘loosed upon the world’.¹¹⁶ The young Benjamin calls it belief, but adds that ‘everything depends how one believes in one’s belief’.¹¹⁷ Two decades later he is still ‘inclined to assume’ that the planet is waiting for an end to blood and horror. Whether *we* are capable of presenting it with this three or four hundred millionth birthday gift is, he goes on, highly questionable. But if *we don’t*, the planet will finally ‘have us, its heedless well-wishers, served the Last Judgement’.¹¹⁸

The day we *do*, Judgement too will have withered away.

The planet, then, is waiting. What, then, are we waiting for? But what we?

Notes

1. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* (henceforth *GS*), ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1972–89, II, 1, pp. 297–8; ‘Surrealism’, in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings* (henceforth *SW*), ed. Michael W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1999, vol. 2, p. 209.
2. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe* (henceforth *GB*), ed. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1995–2000, III, p. 159, letter to Scholem of 29 May 1926; *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910–1940*, trans. R. and E.M. Jacobson, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1994, p. 301.
3. Theocracy ‘has no political, only a religious, meaning’. *GS*, II, 1, p. 203; ‘Theologico-Political Fragment’, in *SW*, vol. 3, p. 305.
4. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, I, ‘On the New Idols’, Friedrich Nietzsche, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (henceforth *KG*), ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, De Gruyter, Berlin, 1969, VI, 1, pp. 57–60.
5. *GS*, VI, pp. 104–8; ‘The Right to Use Force’, in *SW*, vol. 1, pp. 231–4.
6. *GS*, VI, p. 105; *SW*, vol. 1, p. 231.
7. *GS*, VI, pp. 105–6; *SW*, vol. 1, pp. 231–2. Non-violence, Benjamin here claims, has little prospect of *political* success. Non-resistance to the point of martyrdom can, however, be a *moral*, indeed a sacred action, as when communities of Galician Jews let themselves be cut down in their synagogues.
8. *GS*, VI, pp. 106–7; *SW*, vol. 1, p. 233.
9. Cf. Benjamin’s early ‘Notes for a Work on the Category of Justice’, *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter* IV, 1992, pp. 41–2.
10. *GS*, VI, pp. 107–8; ‘The Right to Use Force’, in *SW*, vol. 1, pp. 233–4.
11. *GS*, II, 1, pp. 203–4; *SW*, vol. 3, p. 155.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *GS*, VI, p. 203; ‘The Right to Use Force’, in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 233.
14. *GB*, III, p. 160; *Correspondence*, p. 301.
15. *GS*, I, 2, p. 697; ‘On the Concept of History’, Thesis VIII, in *SW*, vol. 4, p. 392.
16. *GS*, I, 2, pp. 702–3; Thesis XVII, in *SW*, vol. 4, p. 396.
17. Cf. in addition to Habermas’s essay, Axel Honneth’s interpretation of the ‘Critique of Violence’, in Burkhardt Lindner, ed., *Benjamin-Handbuch*, Metzler Verlag, Stuttgart, 2006; and Rainer Rochlitz, *The Disenchantment of Art: The Philosophy of Walter Benjamin*, trans. J.M. Todd, Guilford Press, New York, 1996. From entirely different perspectives, the aforementioned texts of Bolz and Derrida place Benjamin, Schmitt, Heidegger and others in the context of a ‘philosophical extremism’ that emerged between the world wars.
18. Cf. on the overall structure of this project Lieven De Cauter, ‘The Bloody Mystifications of the New World Order: On Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*’, in *The Capsular Civilization: On the City in the Age of Fear*, NAI Publishers, Rotterdam, 2004, pp. 154–71. It turns on two extreme theses: the concentration camp as the biopolitical paradigm of modernity and the ‘state of exception’ as that of modern governance.
19. Cf. Vivian Liska, *Giorgio Agambens leerer Messianismus*, Schlebrügge, Vienna 2008.
20. *Walter Benjamin/Gretel Adorno. Briefwechsel 1930–1940*, p. 410; also cited in *GS*, I, 3, p. 1223. It likewise takes Zarathustra the longest time to face his ‘most abysmal thought’ and ‘heaviest weight’. (*Also sprach Zarathustra*, III, ‘Der Genesende’, *KG*, VI, 1, pp. 266–7). Nietzsche’s affirmation and Benjamin’s refusal of ‘the eternal return of the same’ are perhaps the most intimate of enemies.
21. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. K. Attell, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005, ch. 4. The earlier moves in this game could be described as follows. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* Benjamin offered a subversive variation on Schmitt’s definition of the sovereign. The latter had in turn been a response to the ‘Critique of Violence’. The sovereign had filled the power vacuum resulting from the threatened suspension of law and state; deposed by revolution from below, he was restored by counter-revolution from above. If Agamben’s reconstruction is accurate, then Schmitt, for one, would not have considered the prospects of Benjamin’s ‘word against

- the law' to be 'unimaginably remote'.
22. Cf. Susanna Heil, *Gefährliche Beziehungen. Walter Benjamin und Carl Schmitt*, Metzler Verlag, Stuttgart, 1996.
 23. Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie. Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität*, Duncker & Humblot, Berlin, 1985, p. 11; *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1985, p. 5.
 24. *GS*, I, 1, p. 406; *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, Verso, London, 1998, p. 232.
 25. Cf. *GS*, II, 1, p. 194; 'Critique of Violence', in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 246.
 26. *GB*, IV, pp. 19–20; *Correspondence*, pp. 372–3.
 27. *GS*, II, 1, p. 308; 'Surrealism', in *SW*, vol. 2, p. 215.
 28. *GS*, II, 1, p. 307; *SW*, vol. 2, pp. 215–16.
 29. Distant parallels may perhaps be drawn between the hard revolutionary romanticism of the RAF and the *fin de siècle* decadence that Benjamin saw at work in Jünger's cult of war. It 'complied with the desires of the bourgeoisie, which longed for the downfall of the West the way a schoolboy does for an inkblot in the place of a wrong answer' (*GS*, III, p. 243; 'Theories of German Fascism', in *SW*, vol. 2, p. 316). The difference between this 'downfall' (*Untergang*) and the one sought (according to the 'Theologico-Political Fragment') by happiness is roughly that between Thanatos and Eros. Zarathustra's love for 'those who know not how to live except by going under' ('Zarathustra's Prologue' (4), *KG*, VI, I, p. 11) embraces both.
 30. Cf. on the differences between nihilisms my articles 'Messianischer Nihilismus. Zu Benjamins Theologisch-politischem Fragment', in Ashraf Noor and Josef Wohlmuth, eds, *Jüdische und christliche Sprachfigurationen im 20. Jahrhundert*, Schöningh, Paderborn, 2002, pp. 141–214; 'Nihilismus kontra Nihilismus. Walter Benjamins Weltpolitik aus heutiger Sicht', in Bernd Witte and Mauro Ponzi, eds, *Theologie und Politik. Walter Benjamin und ein Paradigma der Moderne*, Erich Schmidt Verlag, Berlin, 2005, pp. 107–36.
 31. 'To do the job properly [*um ganze Arbeit zu leisten*], one must ... have felt what one wants to destroy' (*GS*, III, p. 265).
 32. Rochlitz, *The Disenchantment of Art*, p. 235. Rochlitz also rejects Benjamin's version of the proletariat as the 'avenging' class that social democracy has schooled to forget its 'hatred' and its 'spirit of sacrifice' (*GS*, I, 2, p. 700; Thesis XII, in *SW*, vol. 4, p. 394). Here Benjamin is, Rochlitz claims, far from Marx's class analysis and close to Nietzsche's identification of socialism with *ressentiment*. In fact, however, Benjamin's equation of vengeance with justice is remote from Zarathustra's psychological diagnosis (in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, II, 'Of the Tarantulas', *KG*, VI, I, pp. 124–7) and close to Marx's biblical sense of justice and to Nietzsche's defence of active virtues against reactive vices. The early fragment 'The Meaning of Time in the Moral Universe' makes it clear that vengeance is not to be equated with retribution: the 'retributive power' of law is contrasted here with the fury of divine justice – a fury which sweeps through history in a 'storm of forgiveness' (*GS*, VI, p. 98; *SW*, vol. 1, p. 286–8). Similarly, Benjamin alternately admires the 'hatred' of the downtrodden and a 'need for fresh air and open space' that is 'stronger than any hatred' (*GS*, IV, 1, p. 396; 'The Destructive Character', in *SW*, vol. 2, p. 541). An overwhelming mass of historical and social-psychological material can undeniably be adduced in support of Rochlitz's claims. But even if (as Marcuse observed in 1965 of terms such as 'culture of the heart' and 'redemption') Benjamin's notions of 'vengeance' and 'hatred' sound today like echoes from another age, can we forgo them without becoming Nietzsche's 'last men'?
 33. Cf. *GS*, V, 1, p. 593 (N10, 1); *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2002, p. 474 (N10, 1).
 34. *GS*, IV, 1, p. 85; 'One-Way Street', in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 444.
 35. *GS*, II, 1, p. 308; 'Surrealism', in *SW*, vol. 2, p. 216.
 36. To prove that it was, it would be necessary to show that Benjamin's insistence on separating historical materialism from the forces of 'progress' could only further weaken the anti-fascist position. His answer to the centrist argument that both left and right extremisms played into the hands of fascism by undermining the democratic structures of the Weimar Republic would presumably have been that it was, on the contrary, the liberal centre that caved in.
 37. Cf. Wolfgang Kraushaar, 'Die Schleyer-Entführung: 44 Tage ohne Opposition', in *Revolte und Reflexion. Politische Aufsätze 1976–1987*, Verlag Neue Kritik, Frankfurt am Main, 1990, pp. 84–92. In the course of this crisis, the executive established two new bodies which 'simply undercut the legal and constitutional principles which it constantly invoked' (p. 90). The Committee for Internal Affairs oversaw the creation of a secret police agency no longer subject to public, federal or parliamentary processes; and the Crisis Command robbed parliament of its 'last possibility of influence, namely the power of defining what situation may be designated as a "state of emergency"' – a step 'not even foreseen in the regulations governing the declaration of a state of emergency' and 'utterly contrary to the constitution' (*ibid.*). This suspension of the constitution for reasons of state was uncomplainingly accepted by the media (p. 91). The statesman who took upon himself the decision to sacrifice Schleyer, Helmut Schmidt, enjoyed widespread support. The popular admiration of which Benjamin's *Critique* speaks for the great criminal who defies the law yielded here to that for an iron chancellor who showed what stuff the state was made of.
 38. Kraushaar, 'Die Schleyer-Entführung', pp. 91–2.
 39. The ideal of the Enlightenment is 'the system from which everything and anything follows.... In their mastery of nature, the creative God and the ordering mind are alike.... Man's likeness to God lies in his sovereignty over existence, in the lordly gaze, in the command.... Whatever might be different is made the same' (Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1969, pp. 12–18; *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. E. Jephcott, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2002, pp. 4–8). Cf. on the 'fear' at the core of the Enlightenment (p. 22; p. 11); and on the fear that haunts the modern state (*GS*, II, 1, pp. 185, 192–3; 'Critique of Violence', in *SW*, vol. 2, pp. 240, 245). Witness the *Berufsverbot* (the disqualification of politically undesirable individuals from employment in the civil service, including the teaching profession) and perhaps also de Gaulle's secret visit to Baden-Baden on 29 May 1968.

40. *GS*, I, 2, p. 604; 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire', in Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, trans. H. Zohn, Verso, London, 1997, p. 101.
41. *GS*, I, 2, p. 600; *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 97.
42. *GS*, I, 2, p. 578. Cf. Baudelaire, 'De l'Héroïsme de la Vie Moderne', *Salon de 1846*, in Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres Complètes* (henceforth *OC*), ed. Y.-G. Le Dantec, Gallimard, Paris, 1968, pp. 949–52.
43. *GS*, I, 2, p. 667; 'Central Park', in *SW*, vol. 4, p. 170.
44. *GS*, I, 2, p. 652; 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', in *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 154. It is of the essence of anger, Benjamin writes of Baudelaire, to rage against friend and foe alike (*GS*, I, 2, p. 642; *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 143). Contrast God's just anger in the 'Critique of Violence' (*GS*, II, 1, 196; *SW*, vol. 1, p. 247).
45. *GS*, V, 1, p. 75; 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century', Exposé of 1939, in *The Arcades Project*, p. 25.
46. *GS*, I, 2, 516; 'Paris of the Second Empire', in *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 14. Benjamin is referring here to the dreams of mid-nineteenth-century French conspirators.
47. *GS*, I, 2, p. 700; Thesis XII, 'On the Concept of History', in *SW*, vol. 4, p. 394.
48. 'Blanqui submits to bourgeois society. But his genuflection is of such violence that its throne begins to totter.' *GS*, V, 1, p. 168 (D5a, 2); *The Arcades Project*, p. 111.
49. 'For them', Marx adds, 'the only condition of revolution is the adequate organization of their conspiracy' (cit. *GS*, I, 2, pp. 514–19; 'Paris of the Second Empire', in *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 13).
50. *GS*, I, 3, 1154 (Ms 1080).
51. Cf. on the 'shattered components of authentic historical experience' *GS*, I, 2, p. 643; 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', in *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 144.
52. *GS*, IV, 1, p. 10; 'The Task of the Translator', in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 254.
53. *GS*, I, 2, p. 694; Thesis II, in *SW*, vol. 4, p. 390.
54. Cf. on 'deviations' and 'differentials' *GS*, V, 1, p. 570; *The Arcades Project*, p. 456 (N1, 2).
55. *GS*, II, 2, p. 432; 'Kafka', in *SW*, vol. 2, p. 811.
56. *GS*, I, 2, p. 695; Thesis IV, 'On the Concept of History', in *SW*, vol. 4, p. 390. Zarathustra says something similar against 'great events' – by which, however, he means revolutionary uprisings: 'Then it spoke to me again as a whisper: 'It is the stillest words that bring on the storm. Thoughts that come on doves' feet guide the world' (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, II, 'The Stillest Hour', *KG*, VI, 1, 185).
57. Cf. on the 'dialectic of intoxication' *GS*, II, 1, pp. 299, 307; 'Surrealism', in *SW*, vol. 2, pp. 210 and 216. Is Benjamin, to cite his critique of the surrealists, always 'up to' this dialectic? Doesn't his language sometimes seem 'drunk' on theology – as if its recourse to the power and glory of the Word were calculated to compensate for its actual powerlessness on the 'literary battle-field'? The sober materialist style of his late work deliberately blunts this élan.
58. *GB*, IV, 408 (letter to Scholem of 6 May 1934); *Correspondence*, p. 439.
59. *GS*, IV, 1, pp. 396–8; 'The Destructive Character', in *SW*, vol. 2, pp. 541–2.
60. One such misunderstanding should be mentioned here. The 'spectacle of the deepest harmony' that the world affords the 'destructive character' as he goes about making room for a viable world is clearly not to be confused with the fascist and futurist 'aestheticization' of war and politics that Benjamin denounces four years later.
61. *GS*, IV, 1, p. 397; *SW*, vol. 2, p. 541, my emphasis.
62. 'For to organize pessimism means nothing other than to expel moral metaphor from politics.' *GS*, II, 1, p. 309; 'Surrealism', in *SW*, vol. 2, p. 217.
63. Cf. *GS*, II, 1, pp. 366–7; 'Karl Kraus', in *SW*, vol. 2, pp. 456–7. Derrida argues for an exploration of the 'shared thematic of "destruction" that emerged in the interwar period, and especially of its German-Jewish "reflections" in Benjamin, Carl Schmitt, Heidegger and Others', *Force of Law*, pp. 65–6. Benjamin, for his part, sought to make his writings as 'unpalatable' as possible to the 'counter-revolution', at the risk of making them 'unpalatable to everyone'. *GB*, IV, p. 25 (letter to Scholem of 17 April 1931); *Correspondence*, p. 378.
64. 'As the cleansing hurricane goes before the storm, so God's wrath roars through history in a storm of forgiveness in order to sweep away everything that should [*mißste*] be consumed forever by the lightning-flashes of the divine weather' (*GS*, VI, p. 98; 'The Meaning of Time in the Moral Universe', in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 287).
65. *GS*, IV, 1, p. 396; 'The Destructive Character', in *SW*, vol. 2, p. 541.
66. The destructive character's 'insuperable mistrust of the course of things' (*ibid.*, p. 398; *SW*, vol. 2, p. 542) is the reverse side of an unspoken, theologically inspired faith in the revolutionary potential of the real. Cf. by contrast Zarathustra's pagan trust in the 'heart of the earth' and his accompanying mistrust of the 'overthrow- and scum-devils' of revolution. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, II, 'On Great Events', *KG*, VI, 1, p. 166.
67. *GS*, I, 3, p. 1244 (notes and materials for 'On the Concept of History').
68. *GS*, II, 1, p. 310; 'Surrealism', in *SW*, vol. 2, p. 218.
69. Cf. in particular *GS*, II, 2, pp. 506–10; 'From the Brecht Commentary', in *SW*, vol. 2, pp. 374–7; and *GS*, II, 2, pp. 526–27; 'What is Epic Theatre?' (first version), in Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock, London 1973, p. 9.
70. *GS*, II, 2, p. 554; 'Commentary on Poems by Brecht' in *SW*, vol. 4, p. 231.
71. 'In the interests of communism': this formula from Brecht's didactic play *Die Massnahme* ('The Measures Taken') is put in the mouth of the young comrade who is sacrificed for the cause; *Die Massnahme*, ed. Reiner Steinweg, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1972, pp. 82–3. It alone does not suffice to substantiate Ruth Fischer's interpretation of the play as an ominous anticipation of the Moscow show trials (416–18). But it is against these that the play has meanwhile to be read. The issue of revolutionary violence is ventilated here in connection with the execution of a comrade whose lack of discipline has endangered the other members of an underground group: 'Terrible it is to kill./ Not only others, we are ready to kill ourselves if necessary./ For this deadly world can only be changed by force [*Gewalt*]/ As every living man well knows' (pp. 80–81). From here it is not far to *The Destructive Character*. However problematic certain communist motifs in Brecht's and Benjamin's writings may appear in hindsight, they allow us to measure the narrowing of the horizon within which the question of violence has meanwhile come to be considered.

72. *GS*, IV, 1, p. 398; 'The Destructive Character', in *SW*, vol. 2, p. 542.
73. *GB*, IV, 24 (letter to Scholem of 17 April 1931); *Correspondence*, p. 377.
74. *GS*, IV, 1, 317; 'Moscow', in *SW*, vol. 2, p. 22.
75. Anyone of his generation, writes Benjamin in 1926, who grasps the historical moment 'not as mere phraseology but as a struggle cannot renounce the study and practice of the mechanism through which things (and conditions) interact with the masses' (*GB*, III, p. 159; *Correspondence*, p. 300). Was it in order to preserve his model of a potentially critical mass that he gave little emphasis to the conservative, even 'counter-revolutionary', mechanisms at work in that struggle? To that extent Blanqui's willed ignorance would also have been his own.
76. *GS*, IV, 1, p. 397; 'The Destructive Character', in *SW*, vol. 2, p. 541. Cf. the transvaluation of the *Unmensch* and the 'barbarian' in 'Experience and Poverty' and 'Karl Kraus', *GS*, II, 1, pp. 215, 355, 367; *SW*, vol. 2, pp. 732, 447–8, 456–7.
77. In *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*.
78. 'Among the great creators' – Descartes, Einstein, Scheerbarth, Klee, Brecht, Loos and the Cubists are named here – 'there have always been the inexorable ones who began by clearing a tabula rasa. They wanted a drawing-table; they were constructors' (*GS*, II, 1, p. 215; 'Experience and Poverty', in *SW*, vol. 2, p. 732). As an abstract of these figures, the destructive character has in turn, like Klee's figures, been 'constructed at the drawing-board' (*ibid.*). This whole text sketches the precise, unrepeatable context in which the notion of a destructive character could emerge. But whereas the 'barbarian' artists, engineers and mathematicians evoked here clear away spurious *cultural* excess or *intellectual* obstacles, *he* allegedly clears away *realities*.
79. In his 'Idea for a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Intent'.
80. Cited by Max Weber in 'Science as a Vocation', in *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H.H. Gerth and C.W. Mills, Oxford University Press, New York 1946, p. 152.
81. *GS*, II, 1, p. 219; 'Experience and Poverty', in *SW*, vol. 2, p. 735.
82. *GS*, I, 3, p. 1231; 'Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History"', in *SW*, vol. 4, p. 402.
83. *GS*, I, 3, p. 1245; *SW*, vol. 4, p. 407. 'The saying from an apocryphal gospel – "Where I meet someone, there will I judge him" – casts a peculiar light on the Last Judgement. It recalls Kafka's note: "The Last Judgement is a kind of martial law [*Standrecht*]"' (*ibid.*). Like the 'state of exception' in the Eighth Thesis, martial law is here cited against itself – against the army, the state, the law. What distinguishes martial from regular law is the summary of its verdicts. Cf. on the immediacy of divine justice *GS*, I, pp. 154, 198–9; 'Critique of Violence', in *SW*, vol. 1, pp. 249–50.
84. Cf. *GS*, V, 1, pp. 576–7 (N2a, 3); *Arcades Project*, p. 462.
85. *GS*, IV, 2, p. 999, notes and materials for 'The Destructive Character'.
86. *GS*, IV, 1, p. 317; 'Moscow', in *SW*, vol. 2, p. 22.
87. *GS*, IV, 1, p. 9; 'The Task of the Translator', in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 253. Cf. *GS*, II, 1, p. 144; 'On Language', in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 65.
88. If the destructive character can tell that things 'can't go on this way', this is because 'at their hidden core' (*wirklich, im Innersten, Verborgnen*) they *don't*: they go 'from one extreme to the other' (*GS*, IV, 2, p. 1001, notes and materials for 'The Destructive Character'). He thus has ontology on his side, but a subversive one, an ontology of extremes at the opposite extreme from the above-mentioned quasi-ontological 'structures of the world and of life'. The latter – alias the continuum of 'homogeneous empty time' (*GS*, I, 2, p. 701; Thesis XIII, in *SW*, vol. 4, p. 395), the 'reality-principle', and so on – ensure that life *does* go on this way. The first ontology, which is perhaps the 'unconscious' of the second, introduces hairline fractures into it – 'fissures' and 'asperities' in the wall of the real that offer 'footing to one who would cross over them' (*GS*, V, 1, pp. 591–2; *Arcades Project*, pp. 473–4 (N9, 4 and N9a, 5)).
89. Cf. *Schönes Entsetzen* ('Fine Terror'), *GS*, IV, 1, pp. 434–5. Partially cited as a motto to Part 1 of the present essay, this piece is not included in the selection from *Denkbilder* ('Thought Images') in *SW*, vol. 2.
90. *GS*, I, 3, p. 1232; Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History', in *SW*, vol. 4, p. 402.
91. The full quotation reads: 'My writings are said to be so difficult. I would have said that all those understand me who are in need. But where are those who are in need?' (cit. *GB*, I, p. 161, letter to Carla Seligson of 4 August 1918; *Correspondence*, p. 50).
92. *Ibid.*, p. 182, letter to Carla Seligson of 17 November 1913; *Correspondence*, p. 57.
93. Cf. *GS*, V, 1, pp. 47, 501; *The Arcades Project*, pp. 4, 397 (K4, 3).
94. 'That things "go on this way" is the catastrophe.' *GS*, I, 2, p. 683; 'Central Park', in *SW*, vol. 4, pp. 184–5.
95. Cf. *GS*, I, 2, pp. 694–5; 'On the Concept of History', in *SW*, vol. 4, pp. 390–91. Meanwhile a complication of the fronts has taken place. The enemy remains; but 'we' are in large measure part of him.
96. *GS*, V, 2, p. 1256.
97. Cf. on ghosts and justice, Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, Routledge, New York, 1994.
98. 'Having sold their soul to the bourgeoisie, along with profession and marriage', Benjamin writes in 1915, 'students insist on those few years of bourgeois freedom.' *GS*, II, 1, p. 85; 'The Life of Students', in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 45.
99. In their book *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern (The Inability to Mourn)*; Piper, Munich, 1967), Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich venture a parallel between the secret service technique of 'turning' someone 'around' and the collective process by which, after the collapse of the Third Reich, love for the *Führer* was transformed into its opposite. We lack any corresponding psycho-historical study of the inner permutations undergone by succeeding generations. Two initial attempts contradict one another: Wolfgang Leuschner, 'Kriegskinder und 68' and Günter Franzen, 'Nach Auschwitz. Zur Identitätsproblematik der 68er', *Psyche*, no. 60, issues 4 and 6 respectively.
100. One of the most influential contemporary ex-communists, varying *The Future of an Illusion* and *The God that Failed*, has diagnosed his former creed

- as a religion without a future. Cf. François Furet, *Le Passé d'une illusion. Essai sur l'idée communiste au vingtième siècle*, Robert Laffont/Calmann-Lévy, Paris 1995; *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999.
101. 'The development toward total integration ... has been interrupted, but not halted; it threatens to realize itself through wars and dictatorships' (*Dialektik der Aufklärung*, pp. ix–x; *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. xi–xii).
 102. I have elsewhere discussed a test case: 'Warum hat man das Passagenarbeit nicht gelesen?', in Peter Rautmann and Nicolas Schalz, eds, *An Walter Benjamins Passagen-weiterschrieben. Ein Bremer Symposium*, Hochschule für Künste, Projekt, Bremen, 2006.
 103. The counter-culture was *also* a consumer culture, a 'scene' whose 'icons' included Benjamin as well as 'El Che'. Cf. Otto Karl Werckmeister, *Linke Ikonen (Icons of the Left)*, Munich and Vienna 1997. Benjamin's 'cult-value' was boosted by his fate as a Jewish Marxist refugee driven to suicide. The academic study of his work has partially counteracted this cult of personality. But it too belongs to a market whose concerns are well insulated against his.
 104. Already in 1973 Habermas observed that the academic treatment of Benjamin offered 'at best a corrective, but no real alternative' to the conflict of partisan interpretations ('Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique', p. 92).
 105. *GS*, I, 2, p. 698; 'On the Concept of History', Thesis X, in *SW*, vol. 4, p. 391.
 106. Cf. on this concept *GS*, I, 1, p. 357, and *GB*, II, p. 393; *Correspondence*, p. 224.
 107. Cf. *GS*, 111, p. 259; 'Against a Masterpiece', in *SW*, vol. 2, p. 383.
 108. *GS*, I, 3, pp. 1234, 1238; 'Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History"', in *SW*, vol. 4, p. 404.
 109. *GB*, V, p. 193, letter to Werner Kraft of 28 October 1935; *Correspondence*, p. 516.
 110. *GS*, II, I, p. 202; 'Critique of Violence', in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 251. Elsewhere Benjamin puts this in secular terms: all historiography needs to be tested against the notion of the classless society (*GS*, I, 3, p. 1245; Notes and materials for 'On the Concept of History').
 111. *GS*, I, 2, p. 697; Thesis I, in *SW*, vol. 4, p. 392.
 112. *GS*, I, 3, pp. 1164–5.
 113. Cf. *GS*, I, 2, p. 693; Thesis I, in *SW*, vol. 4, p. 389; *GS*, I, 2, p. 694; Thesis II in *SW*, vol. 4, p. 390; *GS*, I, 3, p. 1243 (Notes and materials for 'On the Concept of History').
 114. Benjamin traces the decay of 'counsel' to the rise of capitalism. Cf. *GS*, II, 2, pp. 442 ff.; 'The Storyteller', in *SW*, vol. 3 pp. 145 ff.
 115. Yeats, 'The Second Coming'.
 116. *Ibid.*; stress mine.
 117. *GB*, I, p. 182, letter to Carla Seligson of 17 November 1913; *Correspondence*, p. 57.
 118. *GB*, V, p. 193, above-cited letter to Kraft; *Correspondence*, p. 516. The double meaning of the (*Welt*)gericht that we are to be served – 'judgement' and/or 'meal' – combines biblical affect with ironic play.

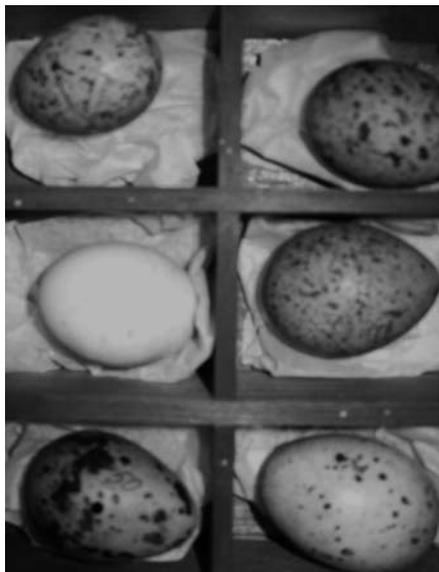
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