

# Walter Benjamin and the Actuality of Critique



# Walter Benjamin and the Actuality of Critique:

*Essays on Violence  
and Experience*

By

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## ABBREVIATIONS

References to the work of Benjamin are made parenthetically in the text according to the following conventions.

All references to the *Arcades Project* are to the convolute number without further specification, for example (M5,9).

- AP*        *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.
- BA*        Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin. *Briefwechsel 1938-1940*. Edited by Henri Lonitz. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1994.
- BS*        Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, *Briefwechsel 1933-1940*. Edited by Gershom Scholem. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1985.
- C*         *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910-1940*. Edited by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, translated by Manfred R. Jakobson and Evelyn M. Jakobson. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- CA*        Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1920-1940*. Edited by Henri Lonitz, translated by Nicholas Walker. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- CS*        *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*. Edited by Gershom Scholem, translated by Gary Smith and André Lefevere. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- GB*        *Gesammelte Briefe*, 6 volumes. Edited by Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1995-2000.
- GS*        *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7 volumes in 14 subvolumes. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1974-1989.
- OT*        *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*. Translated by John Osborne. London: Verso, 1998.

- SW* *Selected Writings*, 4 volumes. Edited by Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997-2003.
- WuN* *Werke und Nachlaß. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 21 volumes. Edited by Christoph Göttsche and Henri Lonitz with the Walter Benjamin Archive. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2008ff.



# INTRODUCTION

## ACTUALITY AND CRITIQUE

### 1. The Task of the Critic

In April 1930, Benjamin signed a contract with his publisher Ernst Rowohlt for a volume of literary criticism (the working title was *Gesammelte Essays zur Literatur*) that was to collect his previously published essays on Gottfried Keller, Johan Peter Hebel, Franz Hessel, Marcel Proust, André Gide and Surrealism, plus planned essays on Karl Kraus (already begun in March 1930), storytelling and Jugendstil. The volume was to be opened by a programmatic essay titled “The Task of the Critic” and to be closed by the 1921 essay “The Task of the Translator.” During the following months Benjamin worked intensely on the introduction, jotting down notes and a plan, now collected in volume VI of the *Gesammelte Schriften* under the title “Zur Literaturkritik” (GS VI: 161-84). This section collects however also notes and ideas relating to another, contemporary and cognate project, that of a journal to be titled *Krise und Kritik* that Benjamin discussed and concretized during the summer of the same year with Brecht and for which in September he managed to enlist again Rowohlt.<sup>1</sup> The financial collapse of Rowohlt the following year meant the demise of both projects (cf. Eiland and Jennings 2014, 342ff.; Steiner 2000, 516-17). In a letter to Scholem from July 26, 1932, Benjamin counted this as one of the bitterest failures of his life (BS 23/CS 14-15).

The never-written introduction can nonetheless be taken as emblematic, not only of a period of sustained reflection on the nature and essence of criticism,<sup>2</sup> but more in general of a well-defined and consistent “critical approach” that marked Benjamin’s career as a whole. The scattered notes

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<sup>1</sup> For a “memorandum” about the journal see GS VI: 619-21.

<sup>2</sup> It is in this context that Benjamin famously wrote to Scholem, in French, on January 20, 1930, that the goal he had set for himself was “*d’être considéré comme le premier critique de la littérature allemande*,” which implied the task to “recreate criticism as a genre” (GB 3:502/C 359).

contain *in nuce* the essence of what in the *Trauerspiel* book Benjamin had called “philosophical criticism” (*GS* I/1:358/*OT* 182), that is, his own philosophy of *Kritik* (where the German term translates both the English “criticism” and “critique”) or “criticism as philosophy” (Moran 2018, 7),<sup>3</sup> not limited to the criticism of literature and art but extended into a proper methodology of reading—the reading of books, art, movies, cities, and history. This critical approach, called here “*vollendete Kritik*” (accomplished, consummate critique), entails a sort of *Aufhebung* of polemic and commentary, where the strategic, political thrust of “polemic” merges with an immanent exegesis based on citation and gloss (*GS* VI: 162). Importantly, against “transcendent” criticism, oriented either towards the author or the audience, this “immanent” *Kritik* is *internal* (*innerlich*) to the work (*GS* VI: 166, 172): the cornerstone of Benjamin’s philosophy of *Kritik* is in fact the tenet that *Kritik* is a “manifestation of the life of the work” (*eine Erscheinungsform des Lebens der Werke*) (*GS* VI: 171/*SW* 2:373) and “life” is its proper “medium”—whereby “life” becomes therefore also the operative term of this whole theory. *Kritik*, Benjamin writes, is “a pure function of the life, or rather afterlife [*Fortleben*] of the work” (*GS* VI: 170; cf. Kaulen 1990).

This terminology clearly refers back to the early Romantics’ theorization of criticism that Benjamin had analyzed in his 1919 dissertation, but the vocabulary of *Leben* and *Fortleben* also strongly marks the 1921 “The Task of the Translator,” and it is precisely to this text that Benjamin explicitly refers as paradigmatic also for the task of the critic (*GS* VI: 171/*SW* 2:373). It is thus not by chance that “The Task of the Translator” was to close the volume that “The Task of the Critic” should have opened. In the translation essay, Benjamin stresses that his use of the vocabulary of life and afterlife is completely “unmetaphorical”: translation stands in a “vital” connection (*ein Zusammenhang des Lebens*) to the original insofar as it issues from its “afterlife” (*Überleben*) and marks its “continued life” (*Fortleben*) (*GS* IV/1: 10-11/*SW* 1:254). The work is not a static, self-contained entity, but rather a fundamentally *historical* one, and it is precisely history and not nature that determines the range of life.<sup>4</sup> The

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<sup>3</sup> Heinrich Kaulen (1990, 319) refers in this respect to no. 44 of Schlegel’s *Athenaeum* fragments, according to which “every philosophical review should be at the same time a philosophy of reviewing.” Benjamin’s sustained theorization of the “task” of the critic responds to this demand.

<sup>4</sup> The whole formulation reads: “The concept of life is given its due only if everything that has a history of its own, and is not merely the setting for history, is credited with life. In the final analysis, the range of life must be determined by the standpoint of history rather than that of nature” (*GS* IV/1:11/*SW* 1:255).

concept of “task,” as Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (2014, 109) remark, indicates precisely the “historical dialectic” between the work and the action of the translator/critic.<sup>5</sup> Just like translation, also *Kritik* belongs to the processual being of works, in a fashion that Benjamin, borrowing a terms from Adorno’s musical writings, calls “shrinkage” (*Schrumpfung*): the action of time, which reduces the work to “ruins,” is completed by the “deconstruction” (*Abmontieren*) operated by the critic, whose action therefore marks, and belongs to, the “survival” (*Fortleben*) of the work (*GS* VI: 174/*SW* 2: 415).

The critical scholarship of the past five decades has showed and thoroughly analyzed the consistency (and the slight variations) of this form of critical approach throughout Benjamin’s career. Its roots can perhaps even be sought in the 1914-1915 essay on Hölderlin, but it was the dissertation on the concept of criticism in German Romanticism, completed in 1919 and published in 1920, that made explicit and systematized the philosophical idea of criticism and the critical methodology that was to constitute the bedrock of Benjamin’s critical approach from then on. The first part of the essay on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities* further developed this methodology around the concepts of “truth content” and “material content,” and the book on the German *Trauerspiel* systematized it into a “philosophical criticism” that, through the “mortification of the works,” aims to “make historical content, such as provides the basis of every important work of art, into a philosophical truth” (*GS* I/1:358/*OT* 182). This methodology guided Benjamin’s readings of literary figures, movements, and schools, but also became, in the 1930s, the cornerstone of his reading of history, and in particular of the “prehistory of modernity.” A telling methodological entry of *The Arcades Project* in fact reads:

Historical “understanding” is to be grasped, in principle, as an afterlife [*Nachleben*] of that which is understood; and what has been recognized in the analysis of the “afterlife [*Nachleben*] of works,” in the analysis of “fame,” is therefore to be considered the foundation of history in general.” (N2,3)

The “recognizability” and “readability” of the historical event that the materialist historian pursues are functions of its afterlife; the “historical index” that brings an event, a work, a situation to “legibility” is a function of their *Überleben*, *Fortleben*, *Nachleben*, and the task of the historian,

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<sup>5</sup> The task, *die Aufgabe*, is thus far from denoting an *aufgeben*, a “giving up” in the face of the endless and un-completable (but not for that *impossible*) work of translation/critique, as Paul de Man (1986) (in)famously argued.

just like that of the translator and of the critic, is thus to recognize their truth-content (“what was never written,” as Benjamin quoted from Hofmannsthal<sup>6</sup>) and make it “present,” “actual” (cf. e.g. K2,3; N2,2).<sup>7</sup>

The “durability” of a work (or an event) means therefore that the work lives on, but in a different form, with a life that comes after the “first” or “proper” life, a continued life that spells a processual afterness, a life after life. This also applies, with paradigmatic clarity, to Benjamin’s *own* work. If Benjamin was not the melancholic outsider that a certain romanticizing fashion liked to imagine (and that recent biographical efforts have corrected), his “fame” (such a central notion in his theory of criticism) certainly belongs to his afterlife. The posthumous popularity of his work (and of his romanticized image) has gone through different phases, when different aspects of his oeuvre have come to “legibility,” but has never waned and keeps returning in waves. The field of Benjamin studies could appear saturated, when so much (everything?) has already been said, analyzed, argued, and written, and what George Steiner named “Benjamin industry” (cf. Greenberg 2008a) does indeed show “signs of exhaustion” (Weidner 2015); however, new waves of interest and new publications keep reviving his “recognizability” in new fields and communities, so that his work survives in the endless work of the critics, it lives *after* the passing of fashions and trends, it “lives *forth*.”

Throughout the history of Benjamin’s reception, the question of the “actuality” of his thought kept popping up. The “actuality of Walter Benjamin” became a title for conferences, symposia, articles, and books, but up until at least the mid-1990s the insistence on this topic betrayed doubt and uncertainty rather than assertiveness: is Benjamin’s thought, so embedded in modernist categories, so imbued with theological and messianic concepts, at times so obscure and ambiguous, still “actual” and “useful” for our times? In a sense it was Habermas (1979) who, by

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<sup>6</sup> I want to emphasize the issue of the “truth-content” that is indexed by this methodology of reading, since a certain (for a time quite popular) way of reading Benjamin interpreted instead the afterness of this continued life as a moving *away* from a notion of self-contained meaning or signification—from “Truth”—, as for example did Samuel Weber (2008, 92) in his reading of “The Task of the Translator.” A critique of Weber (as paradigmatic of this way of reading Benjamin) will be carried out in the appendix of this volume.

<sup>7</sup> The vocabulary of “actualization” translates in this context *Vergegenwärtigung* and *gegenwärtig machen*, “presentification” and “make present.” For a thorough analysis of Benjamin’s theory of reading, see Wohlfarth (1992b); for an exploration of the concept of “afterlife” in Benjamin, see Weidner (2011). Gerard Richter (2011) devoted a whole book to the analysis of “afterness” in modern thought.

precisely questioning this “actuality” in a famous speech for Benjamin’s eightieth anniversary in 1972, started a defensive movement within Benjamin scholarship, which almost felt compelled to justify and demonstrate his enduring relevance. But in so doing it was forced to adopt the terms of the prosecution and fell into the trap of actuality as “topicality” and “usefulness.”<sup>8</sup> However, Benjamin’s *Aktualität* (a term ultimately untranslatable and not reducible to topicality or contemporary relevance) is not to be sought in an instrumental usefulness for problems of current concern, but rather in his enduring afterlife, in the historical index that his work contains and that brings it to legibility—even through, and perhaps precisely thanks to, a certain untimeliness and historical lag—at a certain time. This concept of *Aktualität* and of *Kritik* is the task that Benjamin assigned to those approaching his work (cf. also Weidner 2010, 131-32; Khatib 2013, 29).

At the conclusion of “Literary History and the Study of Literature,” a text published in April 1931 in *Die literarische Welt* and thus belonging to the period of intense reflection about criticism that failed to produce “The Task of the Critic,” Benjamin writes:

What is at stake is not to portray literary works in the context of their age, but to represent the age that perceives them—our age—in the age during which they arose. It is this that makes literature into an organon of history; and to achieve this, and not to reduce literature to the material of history, is the task of the literary historian. (GS III:290/SW 2:464)

This has been the spirit guiding my readings of Benjamin. The chapters of this volume, though they were written for different occasions, all strive to read Benjamin in a Benjaminian way, merging strategy and exegesis, resting on citation and glosses, eschewing the question of usefulness or topicality, and pursuing instead the “life” that becomes recognizable in Benjamin’s work in the present time.

## 2. The Actuality of the Critique of Violence

If the issue of Benjamin’s “actuality” is much less questioned today than in the last decades of the twentieth century, this is, importantly if not largely, due to a renewed interest in a particular text, the 1921 “Critique of Violence.” Probably the only surviving part of a never-completed major

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<sup>8</sup> A paradigmatic example is the volume edited by Laura Marcus and Lynda Nead, published on the wake of the centenary of Benjamin’s birth in 1992 and titled precisely *The Actuality of Walter Benjamin* (1998).

project on “Politics,” this text was largely ignored during Benjamin’s lifetime (though Agamben argues otherwise<sup>9</sup>) and, despite the fact that it opened the 1955 two-volume collection of Benjamin’s *Schriften* edited by Theodor and Gretel Adorno, it was mostly ignored also in the first wave of Benjamin’s posthumous reception. It briefly came to “legibility” in Germany during the ferment and unrest of the radical student movement in the late 1960s: in 1965, for example, Herbert Marcuse published a slim volume of Benjamin’s essay under the title *Zur Kritik der Gewalt und andere Aufsätze*, also penning a brief though influential afterword focusing on a “revolutionary” reading of the text (cf. also Bernstein 2013, 56-58), and in 1968 Oskar Negt used Benjamin’s essay in a critical analysis of the current political unrest. However, the difficult and obscure language of the essay, steeped in religious metaphors and messianic concepts, and Habermas’ disapproval in the early 1970s, soon re-marginalized it in the Benjamin renaissance that started in the 1970s with the publication of first volumes of the *Gesammelte Schriften*. Udi Greenberg (2008b, 325-26) names two important examples of this marginalization: the fact that one of the first major books on Benjamin in English, Richard Wolin’s 1982 *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*, devoted only three sentences to “Critique of Violence,” and that Momme Brodersen’s 1990 important biography of Benjamin further reduced the scope to one single sentence.

The “now of recognizability” of Benjamin’s arduous text started when Derrida focused on it (albeit quite critically) in his famous 1989 paper on justice and deconstruction, “Force of Law,” and its current popularity is also due to the substantial wave of deconstructionist readings that followed.<sup>10</sup> A second and no less important factor is the central role that Agamben assigned to “Critique of Violence” in his *Homo Sacer* project, begun in 1995 with the publication of the first volume of the series.<sup>11</sup> Since then, “Critique of Violence” has become an unavoidable focus in the contemporary political-philosophical debate. More generally, Simon Critchley (2012; cf. also Weigel 2010) argues that what characterizes our so-called “post-secular age” is an ominous entanglement of politics, religion, and violence, and that is why a text such as “Critique of Violence” results

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<sup>9</sup> As it is well known, Agamben (2005, 52ff.) argues that this essay had a major (though unacknowledged) impact on Carl Schmitt, who supposedly wrote his *Political Theology* in response to and against Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence.”

<sup>10</sup> Beatrice Hanssen’s argument that Derrida’s text “pulled the essay out of relative obscurity” (2000, 8) is only a slight overstatement. But scholars generally agree on this point (cf. e.g. Weigel 2010, Eiland 2017).

<sup>11</sup> On Agamben’s intensive relation with “Critique of Violence” see e.g. Moran and Salzani (2015).

so “actual”—thanks precisely to those features that made it “indigestible” only a few decades ago! The revival of political theology and of a critical engagement with the political theory of Carl Schmitt marks no doubt the “historical index” of Benjamin’s text and exponentially enhances its legibility.<sup>12</sup> Our epoch, Richard Bernstein (2013, 48) concurs, is no longer what Eric Hobsbawm named “the age of extremes” characterizing the “short” twentieth century, but rather a new “age of violence” marked by the bloody beginning of the twenty-first century, which obsessively pushes ever new readers to return to “Critique of violence” and to take a stand in regard to it. All these factors (and certainly many more) characterize the afterlife of Benjamin’s text and assure that it lives forth.

This obsessive focus also means, however, that “Critique of Violence” is, in Critchley’s words, “massively over-interpreted” (2012, 213; and he states that when proposing yet another interpretation). There is hardly a line, a statement or a concept in Benjamin’s text that has not been analyzed, scrutinized, criticized, and debated, with often contradictory and conflicting results. And the already-huge critical literature on it never stops growing. The three chapters composing the first part of this volume find their place in this massive critical wave, although they do not tackle Benjamin’s text frontally and in its entirety: they rather focus on some specific aspects that emerge from it and from a number of texts that chronologically and thematically belong to the context of the project generally known as “Politics.” In this sense they are thematically connected and consistent, though they do not build up a comprehensive interpretation. They do share a singular perspective insofar as they all pursue, in different ways, the question of what constitutes, for Benjamin, “true” or “proper” political action. And they do so with an eye on the *Aktualität* of the Benjaminian notions, which does not mean their “usefulness” in the analysis of current political concerns, but rather their legibility in a constellation of reading bringing together their—dated, out-of-time, “useless”—signification and our own time.

Chapter 1 focuses on the peculiar notion of violence that Benjamin’s text puts forward, in a comparative reading with that proposed by George Sorel. For both Benjamin and Sorel, a certain form of violence comes to identify “pure praxis,” pure political action, against a whole tradition that deems instead violence as merely instrumental, and as such non-political or anti-political, neither essential to, nor constitutive of, the *bios politikos*. Benjamin famously used Sorel’s conceptualization of the “proletarian

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<sup>12</sup> Agamben (e.g. 1998, 2005) reads it precisely in contraposition to Schmitt’s concepts of sovereign violence and state of exception.

general strike” as a possible instance of this form of practice, where the identification of pure praxis with the strike, with a suspension of action and thus a non-action, problematizes the definition both of praxis and of violence. The two thinkers came from two different cultural and philosophical traditions, and ultimately produced two different discourses, which meet in Benjamin’s use of Sorel but remain nonetheless distant. The two notions of praxis that they propose are nonetheless similar in many ways, and the chapter will pursue the commonalities and similarities, especially in the strong ethical emphasis both thinkers put on their concept of pure, political praxis. Commentators usually place the major difference between the two in their apparently opposed idea of “myth,” whereby for Sorel myth is a form of heartening narrative aimed at inspiring true political praxis, whereas Benjamin links it to fate and guilt and identifies it with the (anti-political) realm of necessity. It is not however these terminological dissimilarities that truly distance their concepts of praxis: rather, whereas Benjamin identifies pure praxis with a suspension of action, with a “standstill,” Sorel remains instead attached to a metaphysics of action, an exaltation of action for action’s sake. This, the chapter argues, is the true difference between the two concepts of praxis which also makes alternative their two notions of violence.

Chapter 2 carries on with the focus on “pure praxis” by extending it to the notion of “purity” that marks not only the concepts of “pure means” and “pure violence” in “Critique of Violence,” but also that of “pure language” in Benjamin’s essays on language and also the notion of “expressionless” in his aesthetic writings. The chapter focuses in particular on three essays written around the crucial year 1921: “Critique of Violence,” “The Task of the Translator,” and “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*.” I will argue, on the one hand, that the “purity” to be found there is one and the same concept, and, on the other, that it is strongly indebted to, if not a by-product of, Kant’s theorization of the moral act and of the aesthetic judgement. In order to make this claim, the chapter analyses Benjamin’s intense engagement with Kant’s writings in the 1910s and early 1920s (also through the influence of Hermann Cohen): “purity” is a category strongly connoted within the philosophical tradition in which the young Benjamin moved his first steps, namely Kantian transcendental criticism. The argument is that the notion of purity in Benjamin, though deployed outside and often against Kant’s theorization and that of his followers, and moreover influenced by different and diverse philosophical suggestions, retains a strong Kantian tone, especially in reference to its moral and ethical aspects. Whereas Benjamin rejects Kant’s model of cognition based on the purity of the universal laws of reason, and thus also



Kant's theorization of purity as simply non empirical and a priori, he models nonetheless his politics and aesthetics around suggestions that arise directly from Kant's theorization of the moral act and of the sublime, and uses a very Kantian vocabulary of negative determinations construed with the privatives *-los* and *-frei* (*motiv-frei*, *zweck-los*, *gewalt-los*, *ausdrucks-los*, *intention-frei*, etc.). The chapter explores thus the connections that link "pure means," "pure language" and "pure violence" to one another and to the Kantian tradition.

Finally, Chapter 3 adds a further connotation to pure, political praxis: its thoroughly profane character. The focus of the chapter is the 1921 fragment "Capitalism as Religion," which is read in the context of Benjamin's *Politik*-project and thus with strong chronological, terminological, and conceptual links to "Critique of Violence." The core of Benjamin's important fragment is a critique of capitalism as a thoroughly religious phenomenon that belongs to the realm of myth and is thus characterized by fate and guilt. Reading "Capitalism as Religion" as part of the *Politik*-project allows to identify a strategy (or *the* strategy) to counter capitalism in what Benjamin in his correspondence names, in a Kantian fashion, "true politics": it is only *true*, i.e. pure, political praxis, that can allow to break out from the mythic order of capitalism, precisely as, in "Critique of Violence," this pure praxis is the only way out from the mythic order of law and retribution. And this praxis cannot be marked again by religion, but must be *profane*, that is, a politics that breaks with the religious logic *tout court*, and with the capitalist logic of guilt/debt in particular. The reading of this fragment also allows to put further stress on the question of Benjamin's *Aktualität* and thus on the task of the critic approaching his work: the differences between the capitalism Benjamin criticized in 1921 and the "late" capitalism of the early twenty-first century evidence a certain "untimeliness" of "Capitalism as Religion." But it is precisely this cultural and temporal lag that allows to construe a "constellation" between Benjamin's time and our own and enables his fragment to shatter the continuum of our temporal horizon and to open a way for thought. Benjamin's fragment, precisely thanks to this temporal and cultural lag, has come today to the moment of its "legibility," and it is our task to "recognize" and "actualize" it: this is what it means to attempt and think, today and for our time, the urgency of the *Umkehr* (reversal, inversion) that Benjamin's text calls for.

### 3. The Actuality of the Critique of Experience

The “actuality” of Benjamin’s critique of experience is not as conspicuous as that of his critique of violence, and indeed the “buzz” about this topic is not nearly as intense as that about the violence text(s). However, the importance of this critique has marked every phase of Benjamin’s reception and of his “renaissance” since the late 1960s and early 1970s, and can thus be said to constitute the solid bedrock on which rests Benjamin’s afterlife. In fact, one of the main motors of Benjamin’s posthumous fame in the first waves of his reception was the attention aroused in many different disciplines by his analyses of the media industry, the cinematic experience, the “impoverishment” and commodification of experience and the new “barbarism” brought about by the media revolution of the twentieth century, whereby his Artwork essay, among other texts, became an unavoidable reference in many syllabi and debates. Despite being strongly marked by his modernist context, Benjamin’s take on media, aesthetics, art, and politics resulted much more “actual” and “legible” than, for example, Adorno’s staunch opposition to and critique of the “culture industry.” Benjamin’s writings on technology, media, and industrial and metropolitan life knew a moment of high “legibility” in the heyday of postmodernism and post-structuralism, and this legibility lives on even after the digital revolution and the “virtualization” of experience.<sup>13</sup> His *Aktualität*, it can’t be stressed enough, rests precisely on the temporal and cultural lag that allows for the shattering of the continuum of a homogeneous narrative in the “recognition” of a revolutionary intellectual moment.

What Benjamin identified as the “poverty” of experience caused by modernity with its many revolutions is still our poverty and is still our experience. The technological and cultural transformations that characterize our time were unthinkable in Benjamin’s time (and even in later generations), but the trauma and revolution of experience they brought about—together also with new, perhaps revolutionary possibilities—are analogous to those Benjamin was already able to identify, and are thus still “legible” in a constellation with Benjamin’s by-now outmoded readings. Importantly, unlike many other critics such as Adorno, Benjamin identified a potential for critical intervention even in all this poverty and

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<sup>13</sup> The bibliography on the Artwork essay, on technology, media and the cinematic experience is too vast to be even hinted at through some examples. On the “actuality” of his work in the age of virtual reality one can take as paradigmatic the special issue that the journal *Transformations* devoted to “Walter Benjamin and the Virtual” and edited by John Grech (2007).

decay of experience, and thus his legibility is also a call to do the same in our times of hyper-digitalized, hyper-connected, virtualized, and disembodied experience. The task of the critic of this new experience is not (only) that of naming the loss it entails, but is (still) also that of seeking in its poverty, as Benjamin wrote in “Experience and Poverty,” “a new, positive concept of barbarism” that could, perhaps, even “lead to something respectable” (*GS* II/1:215, 218/*SW* 2:732, 734).

A more recent focus on Benjamin’s early writings emphasized how Benjamin’s critique of experience essentially rests on a critique of Kant’s limited concept of experience, but is at the same time also in a relation of dependence with the Kantian theorization, or at least with its “spirit” (cf. e.g., Quadrio 2003; Tagliacozzo 2018). The roots of the important critique developed in texts such as the Artwork essay, “Experience and Poverty” or “The Storyteller” are thus to be sought in Benjamin’s critical engagement with Kant during the late 1910s and early 1920s, epitomized by “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy.”<sup>14</sup> Attention to the Kantian (and Neo-Kantian) roots of Benjamin’s critique of experience is important in order to fully understand his (mostly implicit) critique of Dilthey and his notion of *Erlebnis*, then developed by Husserl, to which Benjamin always counterposed his peculiar concept of *Erfahrung* (these terms will be defined and contextualized in the chapters of part II). This contraposition is essential for the construction of a constellation between Benjamin’s critique of experience and our own poverty of experience and to gauge its potentiality and its *Aktualität*. The three chapters composing the second part of this volume focus on different aspects of Benjamin’s critique of experience, but, as in the case of the chapters in the first part, come together in their consistent intention to assay the conditions of possibility for a meaningful praxis.

Chapter 4 relates Benjamin’s critique of experience to his analysis of boredom, which he performed in a number of texts from the 1930s, and in particular in convolute “D” of the *Arcades Project* (“Boredom, Eternal Return”). This analysis extends to a number of related terms, such as ennui, spleen and melancholy, which Benjamin often fails to tell apart, and is in turn read in this chapter in a constellation with some contemporary literature on boredom, which in the past few decades has witnessed some important developments. Benjamin recognized that boredom is a fundamental component of modern life and of its phantasmagoria and

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<sup>14</sup> Already at the end of the 1970s, Agamben had analyzed and reworked this link in his *Infancy and History* (1993b, originally published in 1978), where Benjamin’s “poverty” was upgraded to a proper “destruction” of experience and the link between experience and language was further developed.

planned to include its analysis in his work on the prehistory of modernity; this chapter of course was never written, and a consistent analysis of this modern mood is thus not to be found in his writings. Moreover, he never related his notes on boredom to his critique of experience, but I will argue that this connection is not only implicit but also constitutive of his analysis of boredom and of modernity. Boredom is what marks the “crisis of temporality” that characterizes modernity: it is the time of the metropolis and of the machine, the eternal return of the same that destroys any possibility of experience and also any chance of resistance. In particular in the notes for the Arcades Project and the Baudelaire book, boredom can be related to *Erlebnis*: it is the “malady” that accompanies the disintegration of the traditional forms of experience, which Benjamin called the “atrophy of experience.” However, I will finally argue, thanks to its connection to allegory, boredom also plays a fundamental role in Benjamin’s emancipatory project: the melancholy gaze of the allegorist reduces the historical event to ruins, showing its *facies hippocratica*, its “death mask,” thus exposing the naked truth of the demise of experience. This is the dialectical potential of allegory and thus of boredom.

Chapter 5 links instead the critique of experience to Benjamin’s lifelong interest for childhood, which produced a number of diverse and scattered but ultimately consistent writings. Since the time of Benjamin’s involvement with the *Jugendbewegung* (where however the place of childhood is taken by youth), the question of the child accompanies, albeit often implicitly or in a minor tone, the critique of experience and can be said to stand for a concept of “truer” of “fuller” experience opposed to the hollowed-out experience of the modern bourgeois adult. In Benjamin’s corpus, the child is therefore a figure of/for redemption and revolution. On the one hand, Benjamin absorbed from the early Romantics (who are responsible for the “invention” of childhood) an idea of childhood as prelapsarian innocence and wholeness that precedes the “fall” into lapsarian adulthood, and represents therefore an alternative and a possibility for a “different” form of experience; on the other, the influence of Freud’s psychoanalysis and other “anti-Romantic” suggestions lead Benjamin to associate at times the child with the “primitive” and the “barbarian,” thus with a form of mechanized, non-innocent experience that, external and foreign to traditional, bourgeois, “poor” experience, can help shattering the modern phantasmagoria and re-found experience anew. These two levels are never explicitly defined and never clearly distinguished, so that, rather than a neat opposition, they constitute a dialectics that ultimately construes the child as a figure of anti-bourgeois redemption. Recovering the experience of childhood represents therefore simultaneously a dream of fullness and

innocence and an instance of discontinuity that does away with (the traditional concept of) experience as such and foreshadows a mechanical, technological scenario without innocence and wholeness.

As a development of this last possibility, finally, Chapter 6 opens the critique of experience to a number of related suggestions (the question of the body, of nature, the definition of the human, art and mechanical reproduction, etc.) through a reading of the figure of Mickey Mouse as defined and used in a number of Benjamin's texts and passages, from the 1931 fragment "Mickey Mouse" to "Experience and Poverty," an entry to the *Arcades Project* and a section of the Artwork essay. In the Disney figure the decay and loss of experience is not lamented as a crippling impoverishment but rather saluted as a liberating possibility that, disavowing and destroying the parameters and criteria of traditional, bourgeois, humanist experience, clears the way for a re-founding of experience itself. The visionary tone of these sparse references to Mickey Mouse is not devoid of ambiguity and Benjamin himself appeared ill at ease when pushed to develop these suggestions into a proper political vision, as in the case of the Artwork essay (where he finally deleted, among other things, also the reference to Mickey Mouse). Moreover, he was fully aware of the dangers that the destruction of experience entails, namely that of leading to the "wrong" kind of barbarism, which in his time took the nefarious form of fascism. The questions he raised through his readings of this figure, however, are still relevant for us and retain a high "legibility" when read in a constellation with our time: Benjamin's texts highlight for us the necessity of deactivating the normative boundaries separating the organic and the machine, the human and the animal, the male and the female; of "inventing" a different relationship between human beings, technology and nature; of breaking free from the teleology of "biological destiny"; and of reaching thereby a different social, economic and sexual organization.

#### 4. Note on the Texts

Early versions of the chapters were published as follows.

- Chapter 1: "Violence as Pure Praxis: Benjamin and Sorel on Strike, Myth and Ethics." *Colloquy: text theory critique*, 16 (November 2008), special issue on *Critique of Violence: Benjamin and Derrida*, 18-48.
- Chapter 2: "Purity (Benjamin with Kant)." *History of European Ideas* 36 (2010), 438-47.

<<https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rhei20/current>>.

- Chapter 3: (in Italian) “Politica profana, o, dell’attualità di ‘Capitalismo come religione.’” Introduction to Walter Benjamin, *Capitalismo come religione*, edited and translated by Carlo Salzani, 7-37. Genoa: Il nuovo melangolo, 2013.  
A much shorter and abridged translation was published in English as “False Religions and True Politics: Countering Capitalism as Religion.” *JCRT: Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 19.3, special issue on Walter Benjamin and Religion, edited by Brian Britt (October 2020): 453-62.
- Chapter 4: “The Atrophy of Experience: Walter Benjamin and Boredom.” In *Essays on Boredom and Modernity*, edited by Barbara dalle Pezze and Carlo Salzani, 127-54. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009.
- Chapter 5: “Experience and Play: Walter Benjamin and the Prelapsarian Child.” In *Walter Benjamin and the Architecture of Modernity*, edited by Andrew Benjamin and Charles Rice, 175-200. Seddon, VIC: re.press, 2009.
- Chapter 6: (in Italian) “Sopravvivere alla civiltà con Mickey Mouse e una risata.” Introduction to Walter Benjamin, *Mickey Mouse*, edited and translated by Carlo Salzani, 5-33. Genoa: Il nuovo melangolo, 2014.  
English translation: “Surviving Civilization with Mickey Mouse and a Laugh: A Posthuman Constellation.” In *Thinking in Constellations: Walter Benjamin and the Humanities*, edited by Nassima Sahraoui and Caroline Sauter, 161-183. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018.
- Appendix: “Virtuality, Actuality, (De-)Konstruktion: On Reading Walter Benjamin.” Review essay of Samuel Weber, *Benjamin’s – abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008). *The Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*, 7.1 (Fall 2008).  
<<http://www.brynmawr.edu/bmrc/LFall2008/Benjamin%27s%20abilities.htm>>.

All chapters have been reworked for the present publication, not only to engage with the most recent literature, but also to try and avoid unnecessary repetitions. However, since each chapter is a relatively self-contained unit, repetitions and the reiteration of certain themes, points or analyses are ultimately unavoidable.

**PART I:**

**THE ACTUALITY OF THE CRITIQUE  
OF VIOLENCE**





## CHAPTER ONE

### VIOLENCE AS PURE PRAXIS: BENJAMIN AND SOREL

Though for the Western political tradition violence is usually deemed merely instrumental, and thus neither essential to, nor constitutive of, the *bios politikos*, Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" and Georges Sorel's *Réflexions sur la violence* (Reflections on Violence, 1908) constitute exceptions. In very different ways, both texts put forward a notion of violence which comes to coincide with pure praxis, that is, with pure political action, in sharp contrast to a political tradition that rather identifies in violence an a-political or anti-political form of action. In Benjamin's case, the ambiguity of the term *Gewalt* is not secondary to the argument: as it has by now become commonplace to point out, in German *Gewalt* can mean force, power, might and violence, depending on the context; it reunites thus *potestas* and *violentia* in a dialectics that Etienne Balibar (2002) values as positive and fruitful.<sup>1</sup> The French *violence*, on the contrary, presents a univocal connotation, though Sorel, as we will see, redefines it to his own purposes.<sup>2</sup> However, the explanation cannot be limited to the terminology, but must rather be pursued in their notion of praxis.

The history of the reception of the two texts is marked by this dissonance. *Réflexions sur la violence* is the work that made Sorel's name for posterity; it also earned him the title of apologist of violence, and the high esteem in which people like Charles Maurras or Benito Mussolini

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<sup>1</sup> Given this ambiguity, interpreters have increasingly decided to keep the term untranslated (cf. e.g., Jacobson 2003; Fenves 2011). Werner Hamacher (1991, 1133n2) argues, however, that in the context of Benjamin's text "there is no doubt that any translation other than *violence* runs the risk of euphemizing the problems in question here." In the translation of Benjamin's essays and fragments here quoted, the term is inconsistently rendered as *violence*, *force* or *power*; I will thus mostly retain the German term in order to emphasise it.

<sup>2</sup> *Violence* probably combines *vis* (force) and *latus*, the past participle of *ferre* (to carry), and has thus the sense of "to carry force at or toward something/someone."

held this work led to its branding as pseudo- or pre-fascist.<sup>3</sup> “Critique of Violence” on the other hand, is the only part that survives of a projected large-scale study on politics, which was never completed.<sup>4</sup> It is an extremely dense and esoteric text, relegated by the first wave of Benjamin scholarship to the juvenile, pre-Marxist (thus less “digestible”) phase of his work.<sup>5</sup> Even for subsequent interpreters, though, this work sounded apparently out of tune with the Benjamin of the 1930s and its tone remains suspicious for “liberal” interpreters: if Habermas (1979) branded Benjamin’s hermeneutics as “conservative-revolutionary,”<sup>6</sup> Derrida’s famous reading of “Critique of Violence” in “Force of Law” (1990) approaches the text—especially the issue of a pure, divine violence—with suspicion, and in a more recent work Beatrice Hanssen places the essay squarely “in an antiliberal tradition that does not shun force to achieve its transformative socio-political agenda” (2000, 3).<sup>7</sup> The past forty years have seen, however, a reassessment of the two texts. A new interest in

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<sup>3</sup> The list of the literature on Sorel-as-apologist-of-violence—which very often focuses on the “Sorelians” rather than on Sorel’s work—would be very long. For a few examples see Goisis (1983) and Roth (1980); a particularly venomous critique can be found in Lévy (1981).

<sup>4</sup> As emerges from the correspondence (cf. *GB* 2:54, 109, 119, 127, 177, and *GB* 3:9), the project was planned in three parts: 1) “Der wahre Politiker” (“The True Politician”); 2) “Die wahre Politik” (“The True Politics”), to be divided into a) “Der Abbau der Gewalt” (“The Decomposition of Violence,” perhaps “Zur Kritik der Gewalt”) and b) “Teleologie ohne Endzweck” (“Teleology without Final Purpose”); 3) a philosophical criticism of Paul Scheerbart’s utopian novel *Lesabendio*. On the background and development of this project, see Steiner (2001). The genesis of this project will be analysed with some more details in chapter 3.

<sup>5</sup> If Theodor W. and Gretel Adorno inserted it as opening piece of the first, two-volume 1955 edition of Benjamin’s *Schriften* and Herbert Marcuse republished it ten years later in a slim volume of Benjamin’s writings (1965), telling is the fact that Hannah Arendt did not include it in the first English collection of Benjamin’s writings, *Illumination* (1968), and did not even mention it in her own meditations *On Violence* (1970). The first English translation of “Critique of Violence” appeared only ten years later in *Reflections* (1978), a new collection of Benjamin’s writings edited by Peter Demetz.

<sup>6</sup> In the 1980s, Habermas stepped up his criticism and even associated “Critique of Violence” to Carl Schmitt’s aesthetic of violence, reducing it to “an essay on Sorel” (1989, 137). As Sigrid Weigel (2010, 232) shows, in fact, before Derrida’s 1989 “Force of Law,” the reception of “Critique of Violence” was dominated by his relation to Sorel. Cf. also Bernstein (2013, 52-58).

<sup>7</sup> These assessments of Benjamin’s text are not all dismissive; they are examples, however, of the perduring “liberal” mistrust towards it.

Sorel, especially in France and Italy, led to a more “sober” re-evaluation of his work beyond the stigma of fascistic apologist of violence.<sup>8</sup> Derrida’s essay assured new interest in “Critique of Violence” and the extensive use Giorgio Agamben makes of it in his work, together with a deeper understanding of Benjamin’s early writings, produced a number of new interpretations.

The two texts, however, come from cultural and theoretical traditions which are very distant and produce two different discourses. They meet of course in Benjamin’s “use” of the *Réflexions* in “Critique of Violence”; however, critical interpretations always underline the theoretical divide between them, wherein the literature on Benjamin rarely goes into an analysis of Sorel’s text, and the literature on Sorel usually mentions Benjamin’s reading as a footnote. Benjamin himself, while acknowledging his debt to Sorel, highlights the difference between the latter’s “political” considerations and his own “purely theoretical”<sup>9</sup> analysis (*GS* II/1:193/*SW* 1:245). Exhaustive accounts of Benjamin’s reading of Sorel do exist,<sup>10</sup> but none attempts a comparison between the two notions of pure praxis. Noteworthy in this direction are two essays: Hamacher’s seminal “Affirmative, Strike” (1991) on Benjamin’s notion of strike, and Stathis Gourouris’ “The Concept of the Mythical” (1999; see also 1997), on Sorel’s (and Schmitt’s) concept of myth. Their perspectives, arguments and scopes are different, but both insist on the notion of pure praxis and its relation to violence.

The aim of the present chapter is to follow Hamacher’s and Gourouris’ lead and attempt to explain how in the two authors violence comes to be equated to pure praxis. The hypothesis that guides and justifies a comparison is that Benjamin’s lasting interest in the *Réflexions* testifies for a deeper understanding of a text often—and still—undervalued. Without trying to “Benjaminize” Sorel, this chapter will attempt a reading of his work in the light of some issues which guide Benjamin’s approach to the question of violence. The analysis will focus on the philosophy (or philosophies) of history in which, in different ways, the related concepts of strike, myth and ethics receive their peculiar meanings. In the case of

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<sup>8</sup> The establishing of the Société d’Etudes Soréliennes in 1983 and the publication of the *Cahiers Georges Sorel* from the same year are signs among others. In 1989 the journal changed name and continued publication as *Mil neuf cent. Revue d’histoire intellectuelle*.

<sup>9</sup> It must be emphasized, with Uwe Steiner (2001, 46), that “politics is, for Benjamin, in the first order a philosophical problem, which remains a persistent foundation of his later political remarks and leads to frequent misunderstandings.”

<sup>10</sup> See for example Kambas (1992) and Müller (2003).

Benjamin, I will use a number of texts and fragments on which Benjamin worked during—or slightly before and after—the preparation of “Critique of Violence”; not only the explicitly “political” texts, but those which help understanding his politics. The evident assonances to Benjamin’s later works will not be pursued. As for Sorel, *Réflexions* is itself a collection of articles, published first in the Italian journal *Il Divenire sociale* between 1905 and 1906 and then re-elaborated for publication in book form in 1908. The book exposes the author’s reflections on the subject of violence over an extended period of time; the analysis will thus be limited to this text.

## 1. Strike

1.1. The meaning of “strike” in Benjamin’s and Sorel’s texts has been thoroughly discussed and analyzed. The argument must be here briefly rehearsed in order to set the terms of our question. In the first pages of “Critique of Violence,” the concession of the right to strike unveils an “objective contradiction in the legal situation” because it is the only case in which the application of *Gewalt* by a non-State power is permissible. When the right to strike is taken to its extreme consequences in the revolutionary general strike, it is declared illegal by the State (“the right to strike was not ‘so intended’”). The State thus acknowledges a form of violence whose ends sometimes it regards with indifference (the improvement of work conditions or salary), but in different circumstances (the revolutionary general strike) confronts with violence. The contradiction and paradox here is that the exercise of a right, legally sanctioned by the law, can sometimes be considered as violent; or again, the strike as a fulfilment of a right contravenes, when it employs violence, the legal order that guarantees that right in the first place (*GS* II/1:183-84/*SW* 1:239-40). This contradiction opens up a space for the critique of State *Gewalt*.

The first important characterization of the strike is made here: it is defined as an “omission of actions” and thus essentially as “nonaction” (*ein Nicht-Handeln*). Non-action is deemed equivalent to non-violence, thus the strike is considered non-violent non-action. A nonaction is not considered as violence by the State power and thus its threat passes unperceived; or, better, when the omission of an action amounts to a “severing of relations,” then it can be considered non-violent, or a “pure means.” The right to strike conceded by the State power to the workers is intended merely as a “withdrawal” (*Abkehr*) or “estrangement” (*Entfremdung*) from a violence indirectly exercised by the employer. However, if the omission of action takes place with the readiness to resume work under

changed circumstances, then the omission includes a moment of violence in the form of “extortion.” In this second case, the right to strike becomes just another means to an end, the right to use force in attaining certain ends (*GS* II/1:183-84/*SW* 1:239). In the case of the general strike, Benjamin writes, the strikers’ conduct can be called “active” and the strike can be called *Gewalt*, as the strikers exercise their right to strike “in order to overthrow the legal system that has conferred it”; otherwise, the strikers’ conduct is passive and the exercise of the right amounts merely to “extortion” (*GS* II/1:185/*SW* 1:240). This distinction will be later explored through Sorel’s work.

The State thus concedes the right to strike against its interests and precisely “because it forestalls violent actions the State is afraid to oppose”: denying such a right could produce reactive violence, but by conceding it the State eventually comes under a greater danger. “The fear of mutual disadvantages that threaten to arise from violent confrontation” can provide “pure” instead of violent means, that is, it can induce citizens “to reconcile their interests peacefully without involving the legal system” (*GS* II/1:192-93/*SW* 1:245). However, the revolutionary general strike provokes a contradiction that threatens the existence of law itself. What is important to note, for the moment, is that the strike is identified, under certain conditions, with a politics of pure means: means which are “pure” insofar as they are “beyond” the legal system, the violent order of the law.<sup>11</sup>

1.2. Sorel is credited by Benjamin for having first distinguished the two possible kinds of strike. As it is well known, these are the “political general strike” and the “proletarian general strike.” The two strikes are “diametrically opposed to one another” (Sorel 1999, 148), and, Benjamin emphasizes, they are “antithetical in their relation to violence” (*GS* II/1:193/*SW* 1:245). The political general strike corresponds to that “passive” exercise of the right to strike which is based on the principle of “extortion”: organized by the “politicians” and “intellectuals” of the class struggle, it merely aims at bringing down one political class in order to substitute it with another one. Sorel writes:

The political general strike concentrates the whole of this conception into one easily understood picture: it shows how the State would lose nothing of its strength, how the transmission of power from one privileged class to

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<sup>11</sup> The notion of “pure means” will be analysed in chapter 2.

another would take place, and how the mass of producers would merely change masters. (1999, 171)<sup>12</sup>

Far from threatening the rule of law, the political general strike is a simple change of masters for the working class and its goal is the inversion of power-relations and the preservation—and strengthening—of State power.

In contrast to this, the proletarian general strike sets itself the sole task of destroying State power, abolishing the State and the legal order maintained by it: “The general strike destroys all the theoretical consequences of every possible social policy; its supporters look upon even the most popular reforms as having a bourgeois character” (Sorel 1999, 126).<sup>13</sup> The syndicalists, Sorel argues, do not propose to reform the State, “they want to destroy it,” because they want to realize Marx’s idea that the socialist revolution “ought not to culminate in the replacement of one governing minority by another” (1999, 107). For Sorel, parliamentary socialists are but “offspring of the bourgeoisie,” “who know nothing outside the ideology of the State”; they are therefore disoriented and bewildered by, and look with terror on, proletarian violence (1999, 18). They would understand “that the people may attempt an insurrection when they feel sufficiently well organized to take over the State,” but violence with no such an aim “seems to them only folly and an odious caricature of revolt” (1999, 19-20). They thus merely replicate State force. Sorel, with some terminological funambulism, differentiates the terms force and violence, whereby “the object of force is to impose a certain social order in which the minority governs, while violence tends to the destruction of that order” (1999, 165-66). Force aims at authority, whereas violence at the destruction of authority.

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<sup>12</sup> Another passage quoted by Benjamin reads: “The strengthening of the State is at the basis of all their conceptions; in the organizations which they at present control, the politicians are already preparing the framework of a strong, centralized and disciplined authority, which will not be hampered by the criticism of an opposition, which will be able to enforce silence and which will give currency to its lies” (1999, 162). *Réflexions sur la violence* will be translated into German only in 1928 with the title *Über die Gewalt*. Benjamin thus read it in the original and used his own translation in “Critique of Violence.” It is interesting to note that, in the translation of these passages, he used *Staatsgewalt* for the French *État*, *Gewalt* for the French *pouvoir* (which in the English translation is rendered as “authority”) and *Kraft* or *Macht* for the French *force* (GS II/1:193-94).

<sup>13</sup> And also: “This conception of the general strike manifests in the clearest manner its indifference to the material profits of conquest by affirming that it proposes to suppress the State” (Sorel 1999, 161).