

Violence divine and revolutionary: The lesson of Walter Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence'

Brown University, April 2012

Jonathan Sozek

***** Draft. Please do not cite without written permission of the author. *****

To us practically inclined readers of the present day, Walter Benjamin's essay 'Critique of Violence' may seem to offer a solution to a problem: a problem unfolded with dialectical care in the essay's first fifteen paragraphs; a solution cast, abruptly and cryptically, in its final three. Yet one finds the utility of such a practical approach quickly exhausted, for the 'solution' Benjamin seems to offer in his concluding paragraphs is precisely no means for achieving any end, no 'solution' in the efficient sense. Rather, in response to the 'problematic' circumstances laid out in his first paragraphs, Benjamin's final pages set before us a kind of useless concept, 'divine violence', the extension of which seems no less enigmatic and aporetic than that of 'the divine' itself. Far from solving any problem, Benjamin's concept acts to smash – to 'annihilate' (250) – the whole human economy of means and ends, and so with it the whole business of problem-solving. 'Divine violence', on Benjamin's account, is not under our control, is not for us even 'recognizable as such with certainty' (252), and is, it seems emphatically, not 'useful'.

Yet to yoke and use Benjamin's concept is tempting, for the circumstances described in his first fifteen paragraphs are dark indeed. Taken together and rightly understood, perhaps as 'one single catastrophe', we find that these circumstances are none other than those of 'fate', the site of their manifestation none other than history itself. All too readily, after all, might history appear as just the 'dialectical rising and falling' (251) of successive legal orders: one such order asserts itself, maintains itself for a time and then, when the suppressed energies of its opponents build to an adequate pitch, is toppled, giving way to another, new order fated and marked to suffer the same

decay... too often, and precisely, we see just ‘one damned thing after another’. The act of asserting such an order Benjamin calls ‘law-making’ violence; the activity of its maintenance he calls ‘law-preserving’ violence. Both participate in the cyclic, human economy of means and ends; together, indeed, they constitute it. But how can this violent economy be broken? And how ought we to meet its threat, issued daily, to break us? Our modern, practical inclination to approach these questions as one would approach a ‘problem’ evinces a failure to conceive them in their proper register, yet also, conceived as expressing a deeply human intuition, bears testimony to the moral character of our spirit. For surely these circumstances, this economy, cannot be ignored.

It would seem to be for us, then, to craft a *response*, not offer a ‘solution’; to enact a *revolution*, not improve our strategies. Such, as shall become apparent, seems to be the lesson of Benjamin’s essay. Yet to conceive rightly the meaning and purport of this lesson, one must engage Benjamin’s concept of ‘divine violence’, and specifically hold this concept in its proper relation to what may seem to be its more familiar conceptual twin, ‘revolutionary violence’. Thus conjoined, one finds their extensions entwined – the two concepts are, at bottom, equally fleeting and aporetic, and, to that extent, equally ‘useless’ in the efficient sense. Neither is for us to employ, though both call to us, as it were – to the moral character of our spirit – to be ‘manifested’ (revolutionary violence) or be ‘let-manifest’ (divine violence). It is, we find, precisely in this dual, radically de-instrumentalized *act* of ongoing manifestation and letting-manifest that we encounter the promise of holding in thought – and so, perhaps, of translating in action – a positive political vision capable of breaking and ever re-breaking – of ‘annihilating’ ever anew – the violent economy of means and ends.

In moving toward this conclusion we begin, as we must, by addressing Benjamin’s text, first to think with Benjamin through several moves enacted in his first fifteen paragraphs, then to

engage more closely, in his concluding three, his account of divine violence (*göttliche Gewalt*) – as distinct from revolutionary violence – and his brief but significant discussion of the ‘one sanctioned manifestation’ of divine violence or power (both *Gewalt*) outside of religious tradition today: namely, our educative power (*erzieherische Gewalt*). This thinking-with and these engagements shall occupy the greater portion of our attention, and together serve to ground our third, concluding section, where an attempt is made to state schematically the findings of the previous two, and sketch in outline the contours of the positive political vision Benjamin’s essay seems, quite indirectly, to hold forth.

I.

The task of Benjamin’s essay is stated clearly in his title: his aim is to ‘critique’ violence, quite precisely in the way Kant undertook to critique pure reason, practical reason and the power of judgment. In Kantian terms, one may describe Benjamin’s task as the delineation of the ‘limits’ of his object of critique: the limits between its merely ‘phenomenal’ appearances (in, so to say, the violent human economy of means and ends) and its pure, perhaps ‘noumenal’ form (manifested in instances of divine violence). In his personal correspondence from around the time of the essay’s publication in 1921, one finds evidence that Benjamin at one point considered adopting a different title: ‘The Decomposition of Violence’ (Steiner, 2001: 61). This alternative title is intriguing, drawing attention as it does both (1) to the way in which Benjamin seeks in the essay to take apart, to ‘de-compose’, the phenomenal history of violence (by distinguishing several of its forms and unveiling the role each plays in the economy of means and ends), and also (2) to the nature of this history itself as a cyclic parade of legal orders, of their assertion and subsequent decay (‘decomposition’). ‘The critique of violence’, Benjamin states epigrammatically late in his text, ‘is

the philosophy of its history' (251). The stuff, then, of Benjamin's critique is, as it must be, the phenomenal *history* of violence (for, as Kant had it, mere thought without *content* is empty), while his method is critical in the Kantian *philosophical* sense (for content without *thought* is blind).

Benjamin begins his essay with a discussion of what he calls the 'basic dogma' common to both major schools of legal thinking in the modern period, natural law and positive law: namely, that 'just ends can be attained by justified means, justified means for just ends' (237). Justice, here – and so, the justification of violence – is conceived as proceeding from a right legal relation between means and ends. Natural law points to the purported justness of an end in order to justify the means by which it is pursued (as, for example, in the *jus ad bellum* criteria of just war theory); positive law, in turn, purports to justify a given means so thoroughly as to "guarantee", as Benjamin puts it, the justness of its end (as seen today, perhaps, in Rawls's theory of justice). Yet both approaches find themselves stuck in an 'antinomy', for 'justified' means and 'just' ends are viciously interdependent: one needs a *just end*, in advance, to ensure the justification of one's means, yet also one needs such *justified means*, in advance, to ensure the justness of one's end. To achieve justice truly, each of the two, justified means and just ends, are needed *independently*, yet according to the 'common dogma' shared by natural law and positive law, neither can be had in the absence of the other. Facing this antinomy, both schools proffer 'circular arguments', recounted above, yet neither, Benjamin thinks, has been willing to question their common dogma: in effect, again, that justice can be ensured by a right legal relation between means and ends.

Benjamin's own very Kantian approach is to accede to 'a standpoint *outside* positive legal philosophy but also *outside* natural law' (emphasis added), an aim he pursues, first, by assembling materials for the construction of 'a philosophico-historical view of law', and then, this in hand, revealing the manner of its 'annihilation' (238). Before coming to this move-outside and

consequent annihilation, we must think through three moves Benjamin makes in fleshing out his ‘philosophico-historical view of law’: (1) his account of legal violence, as both law-making and law-preserving; (2) his discussion of ‘pure’, *nonviolent* means for the regulation of ‘conflicting human interests’; and (3) his identification of ‘mythic violence’ as ‘fundamentally identical’ with legal violence.

Benjamin begins his account of legal violence by invoking the language of ‘ends’. A distinction is drawn between ‘legal ends’ (the legitimacy of which can be proven by reference to their ‘historical origin’) and ‘natural ends’ (the legitimacy of which cannot be so proven). For a legal order to persist, it is emphasized, all *legitimate* violence must be directed to the pursuit of the former, legal ends: for ‘a system of legal ends cannot be maintained if natural ends are anywhere *still* pursued violently’ (239, emphasis added). So must the activities of “‘great” criminals’ (their private, natural ends) be suppressed, however popular such figures may be (one thinks of Robin Hood); and so too must the interests of organized labor (its own natural ends) be checked by, paradoxically, allowing workers a violent, but legally limited, ‘right to strike’ against the law, thereby quelling their taste for more extensive and harmful violence (for example, the burning of factories).

Yet despite this attempted containment, the distinction between natural and legal ends persists. The character of their relation becomes clear, with respect to the assertion and maintenance of a legal order, in Benjamin’s discussion of military violence and, especially, conscription. ‘Military violence’, Benjamin writes, is ‘primordial and paradigmatic of all violence used for natural ends’ (240) – *only*, that is, for the natural end of the legal order’s *own* self-assertion. For in that founding moment, the legal order cannot legitimize itself by reference to its

‘historical origin’; it is an historical novelty. This first form of violence, pursuant to a natural end, Benjamin calls ‘law-making’. Policies of military conscription, however, reveal a second form; ‘a duality in the function of violence’. For ‘the subordination of citizens to laws – in the present case, to the law of general conscription – is a legal end’ (241). This second form of violence, pursuant to a legal end, Benjamin calls ‘law-preserving’. These two forms of violence, law-making and law-preserving, come together to form an especially ‘spectral mixture’, we read further on, in ‘the police institution’. For here, in police violence, one may discern both a law-making function (an ‘assertion of legal claims for any decree’ in a given particular situation) and a law-preserving function (for the police remain ever ‘at the disposal of [legal] ends’, 243).

‘All violence as means’, Benjamin writes in concluding this first move in his argument, ‘is either law-making or law-preserving. If it lays claim to neither of these predicates, it forfeits all validity’. He continues:

It follows, however, that all violence as a means, even in the most favorable case, is implicated in the problematic nature of law itself. ... [Law] appears, from what has been said, in so ambiguous a moral light that *the question poses itself whether there are no other than violent means for regulating conflicting human interests* (243, emphasis added).

The question sounds as in moment of exasperation, at least for the reader. For is this really all there is? An endless, violent cycle of assertion and decay? Even private contracts and parliamentary debates, we find, participate in this cycle; for both are founded, though one may forget it, upon a kind of violence, either its future promise (in a case of breach of contract) or its past enactment (in the case of a legislative institution, insofar as it serves directly the interests of a legal order).

Having led the reader to despair at the pervasiveness of violence in every legal order, Benjamin offers hope, of a kind, in enacting a second move toward the achievement of his ‘philosophico-historical view of law’. We read:

Is any nonviolent resolution of conflict possible? Without doubt. The relationships among private persons are full of examples of this. Nonviolent agreement is possible wherever a civilized outlook allows the use of *unalloyed means of agreement*. ... Courtesy, sympathy, peaceableness, trust, and whatever else might here be mentioned are their subjective preconditions. Their objective manifestation however is determined by the law ... that says *unalloyed means are never those of direct solutions but always those of indirect solutions*. They therefore never apply directly to the resolution of conflict between man and man, but apply only to matters concerning objects’ (244, emphasis added).

One is struck especially in this passage by the appearance of a new notion: ‘unalloyed means’ (*reine Mittel*). So far in Benjamin’s essay, the means encountered (‘legal or illegal’) have been decidedly ‘alloyed’, unsatisfied with themselves, reaching ever to grasp and clutch at ends. Concealed within such means, we have found violence. Yet these new means are different. Proper to ‘a civilized outlook’, they are unalloyed, pure (*reine*); pursued in a spirit of ‘courtesy’, they refuse to grasp at things (‘objects’) not proper to themselves. Their application is indeed limited, as a matter of civility, to one’s relations with objects, never extending to relations between ‘man and man’, yet Benjamin’s reference to a ‘law’ linking the operation of pure means in both of these spheres, the material and the human, ought not to be overlooked: namely the ‘law’ that ‘unalloyed means are never those of direct solutions but always those of indirect solutions’. This does not surprise: for means that offer ‘solutions’ directly are precisely alloyed, not pure, bound up with the ends at which they clutch. Pure means can make no such direct approach; remaining pure, they decline to possess; they gesture and suggest, indirectly. To this extent they are nonviolent. Their application must be, it seems, in Kant’s sense, ‘disinterested’.

There is an analogy to be drawn, Benjamin suggests, between this application of ‘pure means’ to material relations (civility) and to human relations (politics): ‘pure means [*reine Mittel*] in politics [are] analogous to those which govern peaceful intercourse between private persons’ (245). Benjamin dwells at length upon one such example of pure political means: the ‘general strike’ as conceived by Georges Sorel in his 1910 *Réflexions sur la violence* [Reflections on Violence], a work which exerted a crucial effect on Benjamin’s thinking. Such a general strike is to be distinguished from a ‘political strike’. For while a *political strike* aims to achieve just ‘an external modification of labor conditions’, a *general strike* ‘sets itself the sole task of destroying state power’; while in the former, workers plan to resume work upon the granting of concessions, in the latter, workers determine ‘to resume only a wholly transformed work, no longer enforced by the state’; and while the former, political strike is *violent* (to a degree sanctioned by the state, as noted above), the latter, general strike is *nonviolent*, a pure means with no end in view other than total revolution (246).

Benjamin’s third move returns us from nonviolence (civil or political) back to violence, thus completing his ‘philosophico-historical view of law’ and, with it, his preparations for the final step of acceding to ‘a standpoint outside positive legal philosophy but also outside natural law’. His discussion here is resistant to summary, yet its effective conclusions may be stated clearly enough. In short, Benjamin identifies a new form of violence, ‘mythic violence’, which, unlike the law-making or law-preserving forms that together constitute the dual character of legal violence, is not a *means* in relation to an *end* (either natural or legal). It is, rather, an ‘immediate’ (or ‘nonmediate’) form of violence, bearing its end within itself, just as anger ‘is not related as a means to a preconceived end.

[Anger] is not a means but a manifestation' (248). Reflection upon the very (actual, historical) existence of such an immediate form of violence, we find, belies the truth of the 'basic dogma' common to modern legal thought: the claim, recall, that 'just ends can be attained by justified means, justified means for just ends'. For this dogma functions to conceal a truth which appears plainly enough once one considers it alongside the phenomenon of mythic violence: namely that the economy of means and ends is no *rational* economy; that the circular arguments proffered by natural and positive law alike do nothing to make legal violence just. Rather, this economy is an economy of power, and legal violence, especially in its law-making form, is alien to justice: '[l]awmaking is powermaking, assumption of power, and to that extent an immediate manifestation of violence. Justice is the principle of all divine endmaking, power the principle of all mythic lawmaking' (248).

By his isolation of mythic violence, then, and distinction between it and 'the divine' which we shall presently consider, Benjamin is made ready to take up a position *outside* this economy; to see it for what it is, taken whole. For mythic violence itself presents no desirable 'alternative' to legal violence. Prism-like, it merely exposes the true unity and hidden total character of legal violence as such, collecting all its forms and phenomenal instances into one vast, new spectacle; a spectacle so overwhelming – as broad as history, as capricious as fate – that one may well identify it as an instance of the sublime, both quantitative in scale and dynamical in degree (Schiller, indeed, makes just such a suggestion, i.e. that the whole of history itself may be taken as a sublime object, in his late essay 'Concerning the Sublime'). Such speculations are not, in any case, without foundation in Benjamin's text, given his suggestion that precisely this encounter with legal violence in its

total character *as mythic violence* leads us to pose a new ‘question’; to seek out a new, ‘pure’ form of violence beyond the limits, it seems, of the phenomenal (of myth, of all legal violence) in the realm of the noumenal (of the divine). To cross this limit – to which Benjamin’s reflections hitherto have led us and which the ‘basic dogma’ of legal thinking had concealed – is to cross, for the first time, from the realm of mere *power* (mythic law-making) into that of *justice* (divine end-making). We are indeed ‘obliged’ to make this crossing... as one may say with Kant, *wir sollten*:

[T]he mythic manifestation of immediate violence shows itself fundamentally identical with all legal violence, and turns suspicion concerning the latter into certainty of the perniciousness of its historical function, *the destruction of which thus becomes obligatory*. The very task of destruction poses again, ultimately, *the question of a pure immediate violence that might be able to call a halt to mythic violence* (249, emphasis added).

II.

So we arrive at Benjamin’s concept of divine violence – a ‘pure immediate violence’. It is *immediate*, like mythic violence (and even, in its hidden character, legal violence), insofar as it does not relate to any end as a means; yet more than this, it is *pure*, as courtesy and the general strike are pure, insofar as, unlike mythic violence, it conceals no end within itself. If it were to conceal such an inner end it would still be marked, like the immediate violence of anger, by the exercise of a kind of legislative function; it would still be ‘law-making’, even if a kind of law-making enacted by an infinitely ‘powerful’, divine agent. In such case, divine violence would not stand wholly beyond the limits Benjamin has delineated; it would fail to escape fully the (phenomenal) economy of power, of means and ends; it would bear no relation to *justice*, but

only, merely, to power. Yet divine violence has other work to do. Its character is vividly exposed in an oft-quoted passage immediately following that quoted above:

Just as in all spheres God opposes myth, mythic violence is confronted by the divine. And the latter constitutes its antithesis in all respects. If mythic violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythic violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine violence only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood ... Mythic violence is bloody power over mere life for its own sake; divine violence is pure power over all life for the sake of the living (249-50).

How to approach this litany of antitheses? One thing seems sure: the passage is meant to be read through the distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal which, as has been suggested, seems to structure Benjamin's essay. On one side we have myth, the phenomenal. Here, laws are made and boundaries set; a cyclic, pernicious economy of guilt and retribution keeps us ever-wary of a looming, spectral threat – a threat manifested most forcefully, perhaps, in 'the police institution'; here, in the phenomenal realm, which is just history, just fate, we find blood – we find, that is, our bodily life *merely*, 'barely', held ever under heel by forces and persons more powerful than ourselves. In these descriptions of mythic violence we find collected together, again, into a kind of frightful, totalized spectacle, all that to which divine violence is utterly 'antithetical'; and accordingly, *as* spectacle, that to which it 'calls a halt'.

For consider Benjamin's parallel account, in this passage, of pure immediate violence as divine, as noumenal. Here all law and, what is finally the same, all boundaries are destroyed; the economy of guilt and retribution is broken open, all debts repaid; no threat looms over us, for 'threat' implies vision, fore-sight, and this violence that is divine 'strikes' without warning, as a thief in the night strikes a house well-secured. This noumenal violence is lethal – pertaining absolutely to life and death, to existence as such – yet not bloody, for its sovereignty is exercised

not over ‘merely’ our bodily life (where ‘there is no sacredness’, 251), but rather over our person as such; over ourselves *as* bodily, yes, for so we are in one respect, but more adequately stated: over ourselves *as* bearing ‘the irreducible, total condition that is “man”’ (ibid.). Where mythic violence exercises power over us, as merely-living ‘humans’ (in the unfortunate contemporary idiom), and does so for the sake of *its own* aggrandizement, divine violence exercises over us a ‘pure power’ – over ‘us’ conceived in the fullness and interdependency of our condition (over ‘all life’) – not for its own sake, disinterested as it is, but for *ours*; ‘for the sake of the living’.

To determine the practical consequences of Benjamin’s identification of this pure and immediate, divine violence shall be our concern in what remains of these pages. For as has been suggested, Benjamin clearly thinks the ‘practical’ significance of divine violence in relation to ‘the revolutionary’:

If the rule of myth is broken occasionally in the present age, the coming age is not so unimaginably remote that an attack on law is altogether futile. But if the existence of violence outside the law, as pure immediate violence, is assured, this furnishes proof that revolutionary violence, the highest manifestation of unalloyed violence by man, is possible, and shows by what means (252).

Here a distinction is clearly suggested between, on the one hand, *divine violence* and, on the other, ‘the highest manifestation of unalloyed violence by man’, *revolutionary violence*. The difference here turns on a question of agency: who is doing the manifesting? In the case of divine violence, as discussed so far, the agent clearly is God, the divine; in the latter case, of revolutionary violence, the agent is different: it is man, *acting under the ‘assurance’* that there exists ‘a violence outside the law’. Divine violence and revolutionary violence are, thus conceived, not identical, not even coextensive. The former, divine violence is, in a certain sense, a condition of the possibility of revolutionary violence; it, divine violence, comes first, and we

human beings, ‘assured’ and perhaps conditioned, even chastened, by our witness of its manifestation, press onward more confidently in our wholly human revolutionary pursuits. Yet both, it seems, are needed in order *actually in history* to break, as Benjamin puts it, ‘[the] cycle maintained by mythic forms of law’; to break what has been called here the economy of means and ends, of phenomenal, mythic power. The danger is that one or the other, divine or revolutionary violence, will be forgotten; that, by privileging some manifestation of divine violence, we would *fail to act* under its assurance, or that, by privileging practical, revolutionary violence, as such, we would *fail to attend* to manifestations of pure immediate violence that, in Benjamin’s language, proceed from the agency of ‘God’, and not, even in its ‘highest’ form, from that of man.

Where does divine violence manifest itself, then, as divine? In a sense Benjamin’s answer here is clear: we cannot know. ‘For only mythic violence, not divine, will be recognizable as such with certainty, unless it be in incomparable effects, because the expiatory power of violence is invisible to men’ (252). Yet if the reading proffered in these pages may be taken as correct – namely, that Benjamin’s essay is in a crucial sense structured around Kant’s distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal – then this invisibility of divine violence, its unrecognizability, should occasion no surprise. For of that which is noumenal, for Kant, one can have precisely no knowledge – no vision, no re-cognition – though indeed one may be drawn to attend to things noumenal (to the ideas of reason, the moral law) by an encounter with ‘incomparable effects’; this latter, ambiguous term being taken to refer, as it may, to the sublime effects certain objects work upon our cognition or perception, in scale or degree.

Although we cannot recognize instances of divine violence with certainty, then, case by case, Benjamin does suggest that we can identify certain likely sites of its manifestation. Two stand out: religious tradition, and ‘the educative power’:

[D]ivine power [*göttliche Gewalt*] is not only attested by religious tradition but is also found in present-day life in at least one sanctioned manifestation. The educative power [*erzieherische Gewalt*], which in its perfected form stands outside the law, is one of its manifestations (250).

Religious *tradition*, Benjamin writes in the singular, ‘attests’ to the manifestation of ‘divine power’, divine violence. Here a precise reading is important: for ‘attests to’ differs from ‘bears within’, and Benjamin should not be read as suggesting that real-existing religious *traditions* – institutionally, in the plural – enjoy, as ‘religious’, any special corner on manifestations of the divine. They ‘attest’ (merely) to the expiatory moment of divine violence; they have arisen in relation to it (merely) as so many phenomenally imperfect responses. Religions too, as social institutions, after all bear a legal structure, and so, it seems, can only and precisely ‘attest to’ the divine, yet never, so to say, incarnate it.

‘The educative power’ presents a different case. For here we have a ‘sanctioned manifestation’ of divine violence; sanctioned, it would seem, by the state. This granted, an analogy may be drawn between, on the one hand, institutional sites for the manifestation of this power – universities and secondary schools, one thinks initially, but other sites as well – and, on the other, state-sanctioned workers’ strikes. In both cases, we find an effort on the part of the state to control, by legally regulating, the manifestation of a power which could otherwise more seriously threaten its existence. In the case of a strike, the power limited is that contained in the angry dissatisfaction of an exploited proletariat; without some controlled, sanctioned site for the release or expression of this power – without a ‘safety valve’ – the threat of real revolution

would loom too large. The case of the educational institution is similar: here, the power regulated is not that of *anger* but of *thought*. The whole youth of a nation, for four years, eight or more, finds itself channeled through, and consequently formed by, a sequence of highly-regulated curricular activities; regulated by the state itself, as in the case of secondary and public higher education, or by administrators at private institutions. Thought, in this way – our educative power – is made to fit the Procrustean beds prepared anonymously for graduates by what is called, cheerfully, ‘the marketplace’; though perhaps even such an image is too optimistic. For all too often *reason* – Kant’s *Vernunft*; one’s rational capacity to think ideas, not concepts; or better, here, the capacity, exercised by Benjamin, to unveil ‘antinomies’ like that encased in the ‘basic dogma’ of modern law – reason too often is made to appear as a kind of utopian luxury by comparison with its today triumphant, phenomenal twin, *understanding* – Kant’s *Verstand*; our technical capacity to distinguish and organize concepts and objects. The point to made here is not the pedantic and dubiously nostalgic complaint that students these days are unable to ‘think for themselves’, but rather the structural observation that formal educational institutions and their most often well-meaning administrators do in fact participate in what has been called here the economy of means and ends, Benjamin’s mythic economy of power, and that the forms and practices characteristic of such institutions, all sanctioned by state and law, serve a ‘law-preserving’ function.

Yet here again, in the passage quoted above, Benjamin offers reason to hope: for our educative power, he writes, can be ‘perfected’. What could this mean? Happily, we are given an answer: ‘in its perfected form [our educative power] *stands outside the law*’ (emphasis added). It would be our *power*, then, which would ‘stand outside the law’ – which would arrive or be resourced, as it were, from beyond the law – *not ourselves*. Like Kant’s scholar, we exercising

this educative power would remain under the law, subject to whatever policies, administrative or governmental or legal, prevail upon and structure the site of our educative activity. Yet this activity itself, as a kind of ‘letting-manifest’ of *thought* – of (perhaps) the noumenal, or, in any case, of a power beyond legal control (indeed, often beyond our own control) – this educative, thinking activity would offer the promise of *breaking* open and *holding* open a kind of space *within* the mythic economy of law and power; a space where, despite our phenomenal situation, we could perhaps, in terms introduced by Giorgio Agamben, ‘de-activate’ the law, and so – in that perhaps ‘expiatory’ moment – ‘play’ with it (Agamben, 2007: 63-4).

Such perfected exercise of our educative power would be, as Benjamin suggests, a manifestation of ‘divine power’, divine violence. We could not, indeed, ‘recognize’ it as such ‘with certainty’ in any particular case, and, so long as the power remained ‘divine’ in Benjamin’s sense, pure and immediate, we could not grasp or control or ‘use’ it in any efficient sense. Yet these very conditions, far from disabling or obstructing our educative activity, would serve as conditions of its possibility *as* a full and true manifestation of our ‘educative power’; they would condition the possibility of exercising reason in Kant’s sense, *Vernunft*, even in an institutional environment increasingly hostile to such phenomenally idle pursuits. Such a cultivation of our educative power *as* divine power – such a free and disinterested ‘letting-manifest’ of this noumenal, expiatory moment, in the sense suggested above – would serve as a necessary supplement to any broader practical program for pursuing redress of the real-existing, structural injustices maintained by the phenomenal, mythic economy of power. Revolutionary violence, in the distinct, wholly human sense distinguished above, seems to require, in other words – truly to *be* revolutionary, truly to *break* the cycle of mythic violence – a parallel and complementary, though distinct and, in a sense, prior, ‘letting-manifest’ of Benjamin’s ‘divine’.

III.

The reading of ‘divine violence’ implied in the preceding may now be set out more schematically, and an effort may be made to outline in broad fashion the positive political vision at which, it has been suggested, Benjamin’s essay seems gesture, and which may be said to constitute – in the full, ‘educative’ sense – its ‘lesson’.

Divine violence has been distinguished from two other forms of violence. On one side, it is distinct from *mythic violence*, to which it stands in absolute antithesis (as noumenal to the mythic phenomenal), and against which it strikes ‘lethally’, effecting a total ‘annihilation’ of myth and so of the whole mythically-supported economy of power, of means and ends. On the other side, so to speak, divine violence is distinct from *revolutionary violence*, which, though indeed ‘the highest manifestation of unalloyed violence by man’, nonetheless differs from divine violence in its answer to the question of agency: the revolutionary agent is man; the divine agent, ‘God’. Revolutionary violence is ‘assured’ by divine violence, insofar as the latter proves ‘the existence of violence outside the law, as pure immediate violence’, and in this sense divine violence temporally precedes revolutionary violence. Yet the two are entwined: *both* are forms of pure immediate violence, and *both* effectively annihilate myth. Both do so, that is, *only when held together in their effectively interdependent distinctiveness*.

The point is crucial. To take divine violence alone – a ‘useless’ concept in the technical, efficient sense – threatens to settle one all too easily into the comfortable morass of an academicist quietism; a *merely* aporetic ‘letting-manifest’ of Benjamin’s ‘divine’, of Kant’s ‘noumenal’, or perhaps, for us, of ‘thought’ – such a puerile, seminarian fetishism! Against such quietists – Kant’s ‘light doves’ – one may rightly direct all the vitriol commonly, if misguidedly, poured upon mere ‘deconstructionism’. Yet the opposite danger is no less present: that we should

take alone revolutionary violence – take alone the phenomenal; simply ‘use’ it – and so fail to recognize its foundation and assurance in Benjamin’s ‘divine’. For, lacking recognition of this mooring, Benjamin’s ‘pure immediate’ revolutionary violence may all-too easily appear as a matter for ‘mere life’ – a thing finally tragic, all-too human – shorn first of its *purity*, by a devolution into mere populist anger, and then, with the sun’s gentle announcement of the ‘day after’ every truly revolutionary enactment, its *immediacy*, as we wake to find the need for some new legal order pressing upon us.

So must the two be held together, divine *and* revolutionary violence; as distinct, surely, yet also as interdependent. For each contributes essentially to a single positive vision: a practical and so ‘effective’ vision of ‘annihilating’ the mythic economy of power – of making it *effectively*, for us, ‘nothing’, by revealing it, to ourselves, *as* ‘nothing’ – and of welcoming, in train of this achievement and perhaps quite despite ourselves, the ever-new arrival of justice. A ground for hope in this vision, it has been suggested, may be found in our possession of an ‘educative power’; or specifically, in the possibility, suggested by Benjamin, that this power may be ‘perfected’, and so enable us to break open the potential of every state-sanctioned educative site to appear as a space for a letting-manifest of ‘the divine’ – of the noumenal, of thought – even while remaining ourselves, phenomenally, subject wholly to the law. One may hope that such a practice would steel us for the practical task of working *with* and *on* and *through* such manifestations – of effecting their phenomenal translation – in and by the enactment of a truly *revolutionary*, truly pure and immediate violence *of action*: in and by, that is, a practice of revolutionary violence which, undertaken in a manner cognizant of one’s perennial debt to the elusive noumena of thought, may be unfolded with greater confidence that real success is possible (if ever fleeting); yet too a practice which, faced with a chance to institute its success in

the consummate form of a new legal order, may approach the task with a kind of ultimate humility; with, that is, political chastity. Only in this way may it be hoped that such practical, ever-merely hopeful and anticipatory revolutionary efforts might be prevented from sliding back into the mythic economy of power; and, more than this, that, as the consequence of such efforts, the foundations of ‘a new historical epoch’ (252) – of an age always ‘coming’ (ibid.), never *merely* present – may be laid even here, scandalously, within the mythic economy itself.