

## Revolution and Violence: Walter Benjamin and the Problem of ‘Messianicity’

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### Abstract

*‘Messianism’ is a doctrine of the sacred. It is built upon nuances of linear time in the Judeo-Christian understanding of history. In this linear conception, there lies an unmistakable ‘law’ of progression, a ‘wait’ for a “second coming” and an urge for a future time where oppression (in theological terms) is “annihilated”. Marxism, as a theory and a discipline, is an atheist philosophy but with a similar conception of human history (from primitive communism to perfect communism), a ‘scientific’ law of progression and a ‘telos’ that consummates only through anti-oppressive, class based praxis. What is integral in the understanding of praxis is human agency; the same problem that Walter Benjamin looks at differently in his pre-Frankfurt days. To the early Benjamin, ‘revolution’ was about human agency in its appearances within the sensory world but had spiritual guidance at its “core”. In his seminal “On Critique of Violence”, he posits revolutionary violence in relation to ‘legal violence’ and looks at the politics of ‘ends and means’. His understanding of ‘divine violence’ as an antidote to this politics, his references to the concept of ‘pure means’ and his desperate urge to sanitize “mythic violence” through refusal of “spilling out blood” become an intriguing problem in demarcating the definitions of mythic violence against divine violence. In contemporary times, the idea of successful revolutions, itself, has to do with bloodshed which to Benjamin is a mythic totem. Hence, we fall back into a problem of circular hermeneutics.*

*My paper shall deal with the theoretical problems with these rigid definitions of mythic/messianic violence and look into revolutionary practices as art forms of the modern age, tracing from Benjamin’s early conceptions of romantic theory that played a major role in his politics. It shall also explore revolution’s (as a concept) possibilities as a techno-cultural event of contemporary times and locate the (un)conditions for its ‘reproductibility’.*

**Keywords:** revolution, mythic violence, blood, divine violence, pure means, art, event, modernity.

## **Introduction**

*“There is only one way to shorten and ease the convulsions of the old society and the bloody birth pangs of the new---revolutionary terror.”<sup>i</sup>*

----Karl Marx

This often quoted enunciation of Marx offers a strange interest for all those who ally with the various strains within Marxist interpretations of history. At least three phrases are of generic interest to me: “only one way”, “bloody birth pangs of the new” and “revolutionary terror”. The concepts and connotations of these three phrases are superlative in most Marxist-communist ideas of historical re-telling. Here, Marxist ‘History’ in its closest attempts to deal with the sense of the past expands to a broader horizon. Here, I refer to History with all its dialectical engagement with ideas and *praxis*, hence the use of ‘ideology’ and ‘theory’ becomes critical. It expands from its retrospective analytical mode to outline a sort of temporal blueprint of the future. Here ‘future’ serves not as an anticipation of a time to come but as a function of a certain condition already realized in the course of human history, only to be manifested (and perhaps materialized) with the forward movement of time.<sup>ii</sup> Of course, this forms the central tenet of all utopian theory, and here, the debate regarding utopia as a possible case of social dreaming/ an imaginary impossible receives its due connotations. The concept of ‘utopia’ is one of the primary aspects of the ‘problematic’ terms that I deal with: that is the idea and the ‘semiology’ of revolution, of revolutionary violence, language and ‘justice’, all of which repeatedly encourages the same debate on utopian understanding. I approach the problem of ‘revolutionary justice’ primarily with Walter Benjamin’s system of thought. Benjamin’s vast oeuvre of artistic and cultural commentary is doubtlessly difficult and his ideas have more to them than a stringent Marxist lexicon would nurture. Benjamin, ceremoniously, adheres to the system of dialectics in historical re-reading, (he cites historicism as “depicting the ‘eternal’ picture of the past; historical materialism, an experience with it, which stands alone”) and collaborates it to the idea of progression.<sup>iii</sup> However, he visibly shies away from the theory of contradictions i.e. the Fichtean and Hegelian theories regarding ‘unity of opposites’ are done away with for a seemingly linear and disruptive portrayal of historical life which differs from the constant over-determination forming the solid plinth of Marxist politics.<sup>iv</sup> His formative opinions on left politics have been more inclined towards anarchist philosophical tendencies. His first explicit attempt to articulate a political viewpoint emerges in 1921 (AD) in the essay as *Zur Kritik der Gewalt (On the Critique of Violence)*.<sup>v</sup> Here, I must admit that my study has been affected by barriers of translation which have also plagued most English adaptations. Thereby, analyses of certain terms have been difficult. However, the recent standardized versions of Benjamin’s texts translated into English have greatly aided me in my research.<sup>vi</sup> The very primary contention regarding the adapted title occurs around the German word *Gewalt* that has had covered a lot of nuanced connotations, ranging from the closest English equivalents of force, coercion, violence to power and authority.<sup>vii</sup> The immediate perception that

can be deduced from the title is the fact that the German word *Gewalt*, in its semantic complexity, envelopes in its core the human ability to generate social existence as an agent to create both physical (biological) and affective (culturally, politico- economically) changes. The text, “Critique of Violence”, in a first, declares Benjamin’s notion of sovereignty and touches upon the ‘state of exception’. It looks upon *Gewalt* as a primary point of contention between legitimised authority and human agency. However there is an important issue with regard to this translation-related complexity in semantics. We may note here that the term ‘authority’, however, has been adopted as the most effective lexical equivalent in English when it comes to German political discourse even in the present times. This owes fairly to the fact that 20<sup>th</sup> century adoption of *Gewalt* as ‘authority’ treats it as a stable referent to German political discourse across premier university departments of international legal studies.

Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*), the 20<sup>th</sup> century article reads, “*Alle Staatsgewalt geht vom Volke aus.*” that can be roughly translated to “*All authority is derived from the people.*” This has been accepted as the official German statement in translation.<sup>viii</sup> And here, we have our first moot point. If official German law reads ‘*Gewalt*’ as ‘authority’ (the old, easiest definition of ‘authority’ is a combination of ‘force’/‘agency’ and ‘legitimacy’), then it is not difficult to suppose the reason behind translators insisting on ‘violence’ as a textual variant of the legal term; the work of translation here is more figurative in its semiotic signification. For Benjamin, himself, attempts to read ‘authority’ in terms of violence and if the equation is justly reversed, then every human agency outside the state has its own grain of legitimacy i.e. the politics of sovereignty adds to itself a newer dimension, the discussion of which will be dealt with later.

### **The Historical Context**

Here, it will be pertinent to locate his treatise within a historical context before we delve into the broader tenets of the Benjaminian perspective. In the first quarter of the twentieth century in Germany, there already had have existed a form of state machinery that has exhibited a vivacious mercantile character. This had effectively initiated stronger capitalist mode of functioning by the first decade of the quarter. Subsequently, this economic-political system had been damaged by the disastrous fall out of the First World War.<sup>ix</sup> Politically, Germany had witnessed a string of failed anarcho-syndicalist uprisings across its various principalities. Preliminary research suggests Benjamin was greatly influenced by authors like Gustav Landauer and Georges Sorel, both being open practitioners of anarchist philosophies.<sup>x</sup> Benjamin had only read Marx and Lenin after 1924 and this should provide us with enough explanation regarding his complete silence on class issues.<sup>xi</sup> It must be mentioned here that Gersholm Scholem had been a great influence on Benjamin with whom he had regularly exchanged letters on religious and spiritual understanding

and this would later turn out to be an effective dimension to his formative opinions on law and the character of justice within which I seek to understand his idea of revolution (and the stakes of revolutionary discourse in the next chapter).<sup>xii</sup>

Benjamin's affinity for left politics primarily rested on a couple of planks: his intense disgust for centralized, militantly ethnic states that promoted homogeneity over cultural diversity and the horrible nightmare of the First World War. The brutal repression of certain sections of populace within each sovereign individual nation state, the jingoistic rhetoric of development and a sinister pleasure at attempting 'victory' through mass slaughter of the 'other-ed' communities were political realities. The social phenomenon of political 'othering' was a guise for alienating 'internal foes' gained currency. These were primarily the opponents of the hyper-nationalist imagination. The failure of Germany in the War and the subsequent witch hunting of communists in general and the Jews in particular ('the –stab-in-the-back legend') had been an intense experience of psychological and existential negation (or a supposed threat of tangible violence in future).<sup>xiii</sup> On the other side of the spectrum, Benjamin's belief in the Zionist myth and his trust in Judaic thought as an ultimate spiritual philosophy of faith had greatly contributed to the rather contradictory Marxism that he espoused.<sup>xiv</sup> This overwhelming religious dependence had intense resonating effect on his literature. Here, it should suffice to say that the sovereignty that Benjamin deals with encloses within itself the tension between state as a political institution and religion as a socio-cultural formation.

### Problems with 'Messianic' Politics.

The problem that arises in such an intersectional and theoretically contradictory stance is that it yokes together the professed doctrines of atheistic suspension (of religious belief) against a spiritual quest that is particularly individual though embedded within a sense of the community. The Judaic religion has engendered a strict sense of community so much so that the grand myth of a promised land has mobilised together different Jewish 'regionalities' (or nationalities) with a sense of collective building; however, like almost all religious doctrines, the urge for individualsalvation remains a greater goal amidst a failing community.<sup>xv</sup> Anarchist thought (as Benjamin steps into Marxism four years after *Zu Kritik der Gewalt*) however is largely a collective *praxis* that overrides personal, individual success into disobedience as a 'nominal effective mean' for collective engineering towards radical change. In short, Judaic belief is no different from any religion that holds individual redemption as of greater importance than the potential of redemption for a larger mass as opposed to the superlative significance of complete collective *praxis* to generate even a small effect. This has serious implications in the messianic discussion which will duly ensue from Benjamin's endorsement of Marxism. If in the Marxist messianic stance that he takes in "On History", 'messianism' or the coming of the messiah becomes a central tenet of 'political salvation'; the imaginative construction of the coming of the messiah

runs the extremely risky ground of believing in the One: for Messiah can only be one, a God's messenger that descends human history for a radical change.<sup>xvi</sup> The other form of the Messiah can only be regarded as an over-humanly 'chosen' human, one who has been granted God's grace. Now, in political philosophy if 'revolution' is a handiwork of one 'chosen' man, the question that inevitably arises is regarding the distinction that separates the idea of a messiah in communism (or left wing politics) from that of fascist political structures. The fascist worldview effectively endorses 'trust' in one as an unquestionable doer of good. If the political messiah is a self endorsed doer of good (for that he must in human history), he also represents through himself the unquestionable discourse on leadership: for every questioner is condemned to betrayal.<sup>xvii</sup> The question of leadership, here, is extremely significant as in most operations of left political party structures.

Now, pure Marxist thought differs from anarchist ideological universe in that it proposes a dictatorship (of the proletariat) after a revolution is executed.<sup>xviii</sup> The idea of a direct democracy is balanced against politburo dictatorship that functions as more of a sort of an 'oligarchical' constitutive framework. (for we may remember that original source texts of Marxist philosophy by Marx and Engels never spoke about elective democracy in party structures.)<sup>xix</sup>

Leadership, then, if supposed to be mediated by the chosen being of God or as an agent who theoretically performs what could be called the sociology of 'theological incorporation' into a materialist class struggle, the problems would be diverse. This might result in a conjunction of antithetical elements that could unsettle the zones between personal value system (and in turn personal welfare or 'redemption') on one hand and on the other, jostle against the idea of class struggles. While one operates to form a cohesive structure that would view 'justice' through an external interruption (that would belittle the notion of complete human agency), the other sees justice only possible through internal independence in social life. When one follows spirituality that breaks away from all material analyses into blind faith of the extra-normal and subsequently in one's own actions (thus creating a sort of self-justification for one's actions without the values of debate and dissent within the shades of left), this would promote an unmistakable policy of centralization that undercuts the possibilities of the philosophical plurality which young Benjamin longed for.<sup>xx</sup> The Marxists, who ideally have a different conception to the kind of political plurality practised in a liberal democracy, speak of revolutionary practice in the collective sense and view leadership as an embedded form born from within the materiality of the conditions.

Benjamin's mediation between the two seems to be an endorsement of the belief that human efforts would fail to perpetuate or sustain a radical change (his witnessing the failed movements in Germany can be a reason) unless it is God himself who would manifest his 'word' through human actions: as naive it may sound, Benjamin comes closer to a sort of 'theological hypnosis' to justify political movements being guided by God.<sup>xxi</sup> This particularly might not seem to be extremely inappropriate if Jewish political myth is taken into account. But his very idea implodes when we consider the idea of a 'revolution' through the supernatural. In other words if an

engagement in indulgence into revolutionary praxis is not safeguarded through a system of intra-party/ organizational exchange or engagement and left to take its course without an intended end, the revolution itself is liable to become a mythic calamity that negates what Benjamin understands as ‘human history’. Therefore, a revolutionary movement associated with the divine essentially suggests an idea of surrendering to the causal events (or human instincts) as opposed to human decision<sup>xxii</sup> If ‘causal events’ assume better of material praxis, it is human history that dissolves into the very mythic pattern that it propounded to rescue itself from.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Consequently I contend that the idea of **‘messianism’ when conjoined with Marxist revolution is but a negation of plural possibilities.** This can be explained in two different ways. First, that human history is essentially a history that relocates power from the regnant class (pre-destined sovereign or representative of God’s rule) to the subjects, thus granting the will of the masses to chart their own course. However when it comes to the singular identity of the ‘messiah’ (in political theory the chosen leader) the problem which arises is that it establishes exactly the same inefficient mediation that representative democracies are condemned to. Second, if ‘messianism’ is perceived as an ‘event’ that makes essential disjuncture with the predictable, this eventually restores the ‘just’ order through the new and thus grants ample leeway for human decision to follow. This in turn leads to a be two-fold problem .

One that I call ‘theological hypnotism’ at those very moments of change (the radical event) and the second is in the fact that the freedom espoused in such optimism never addresses the fact that this very freedom, like all other conceptions of freedom fail to safeguard the probability of the ‘just order’ degenerating into the ‘fall’ i.e. the betrayal of the idea that guides agency.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Now, if we are tempted to believe in the fact that every contamination of evil in human history would be ‘sanctified’ by divine intervention and subsequent change, we might as well interrogate the idea of ‘progression’ that we still associate with classical Marxism.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, if the ‘Messianic-Marxist’ conception, with all its inherent contradictions, is seen as an optimistic idea of philosophical possibility, the issue of ‘justness’ remains open to question: how can orthodox Marxism that often stumbles against other parameters of marginality (race, ethnicity, gender and creed) in favour of the overarching economic phenomenon of class struggles accommodate a spiritual event that in turn is rooted in religion and ethnicity in its primary conception. Isn’t ‘justice’ different for the ones who understand class struggle as the greater force with the base-superstructure mechanism in place, and in doing so, stand against a curious understanding of a religious prophecy that might not be imagined in a similar vein in non-Abrahamic religions?<sup>xxv</sup> How would ‘justice’ through revolution be viewed as a declaration of God across the globe when many religions or theological philosophies do not cater to the belief in an external entity outside human time?<sup>xxvi</sup> If this problem is valid, then how could any movement be called ‘just’ if there is no sanctity attached to safeguard its ‘truth’ (as the belief in the messiah-driven movement seems to be the

dead-end discourse against uncertainties)?

### **Law and Revolt**

Benjamin's understanding of 'revolution', as that of most cultural critics, is always in relation to law. However, it is to be noted that what Benjamin uses in his *On the Critique of Violence* is significantly different from the earlier commentators, his deconstructionist approach to 'law' as a term successfully breaks the 'aura' that 'law' as a coded sanction enjoyed.<sup>xxvii</sup> Benjamin is brilliant in his dissection where the outcome shows 'law' as an apparatus that has been based on the order of 'violence': the same order that constitutes 'revolution'. He goes on to cite that 'law' has been given its sacrosanct character with the image of legitimacy that the state frames as but a collective promise (evident in the various theories on the social contract). At the same time, disobedience is regarded as a blasphemous attempt against the state and hence its people. On a side-note, we might on a parallel plane remind ourselves that though liberal democracies with its *bourgeois* character swear upon anthropocentric worldview, the notion of a God was never brushed aside completely.<sup>xxviii</sup>

In an earlier discussion, I had pointed out that the German word '*Gewalt*' has a wide variety of connotations: the stark contrast between the translators who insist on 'violence' as the precise equivalent of the German term and those that settle on authority, (as the German basic law dictates). This is of particular relevance here. The concept of authority, as Benjamin relates (and Derrida admits) is inseparable from state power; Foucault in his *The Birth of the Clinic* has delineated how the authority in the name of the people were exercised by the state itself.<sup>xxix</sup> That is the republican state in opposition to monarchical structure swore not in the name of the king (or his sovereignty) but on the sovereignty on the body of the citizens, a tangible unified mass as it were. Benjamin of course pre-empts Foucault in the argument on sovereignty and focuses on the 'force' or the 'violence' that sanctions state decisions or broadly the legal apparatus which, in caution, denies any plane for any other extra-constitutive body to exert such power. Benjamin categorizes legal 'violence' into the broader categories of 'law making' and 'law preserving' violence. His argument is rather simple and spaces out that the omnipresence of the state which is manifested through the police force. Benjamin says that the police indulge in law 'preserving violence': the rule of law that allows state violence to curb rule-breaking. However, in encountering novel resistance on ground, they create 'new law' to root out all forms of extra-state competition.<sup>xxx</sup>

The 'violence' that state associates with the entire process of administering those set of rules that is termed as law, is in fact, violence done to curb expression and the will of the republic.

Benjamin proposes a new form of 'violence' that hints at as 'violence against law'. This would be something 'beyond' violence and hence, 'beyond law' (in that it escapes the dichotomy of state and its people as mortal arrangements) but something divine, something that the will of people mobilises itself into, far beyond the capability of ordinary times.

Here, let us read the definition of 'divine violence' as directly put forth by Benjamin.

Benjamin contrasts between ‘mythic’ violence and ‘divine violence’ by asserting, “Just as in all spheres God opposes myth, mythic violence is confronted by the divine. And the latter constitutes its anti-thesis in all respects. If mythic violence is law-making, divine violence is law destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter 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. It is this domain of pure divine violence which is the domain of sovereignty.”<sup>xxxix</sup> Here, we should also consider his eighth thesis from his essay “On History” where he distinguishes between ‘perpetual violence’ under the autocratic laws of a dictatorial regime and ‘pure violence’ that such ‘messianic event’ would retaliate against and redeem. From here, Benjamin derives his conception ‘about the state of exception’ that the autocratic order of law has continually subjected us to.

This ‘suddenness’ and ‘swiftness’ of a violence that splinters law is ‘revolutionary’, ‘divine’ and provides the ground for his ideas of ‘messianism’. Divine judgement is “unrotten” and hence, impossible to look at.<sup>xxxix</sup> The same that Alain Badiou, in his philosophical conversation with Benjamin and Zizek explains as “mythic violence belongs to the order of being, while divine violence belongs to the order of Event.”<sup>xxxix</sup>

From the above references, two points can be inferred. First that this idea of ‘divine violence’ is never existent (or ‘manifested’) except in relation to some form of coded law (through human language). Hence, this can only be delineated or detected in presence of a primary situation (an existing politico-legal structure) and thus is secondary in its relation of being at place.

Secondly, the idea of divine violence is actually a language of counter-order (or at best anarchical, as we understand in current philosophical politics). However, the question of ‘divine violence’, apart from its overt spiritual connotation is interesting in itself through its linguistic coinage. There is an attempt to juxtapose two apparently contradictory traits to a sort of philosophical marriage. Divinity, in Judeo-Christian conceptions, is generally opposed to ‘violence’ as a human function. This is against religious orders that are essentially polytheistic (pagan religions); in polytheistic religions, there is an unmistakable focus on violence as a device to exterminate evil which of course can be advocated on symbolic terms.

However, we need to remember that no relevant research has established that Benjamin had been duly influenced by either classical religions of the West or the Hindu religion in the East.<sup>xxxix</sup> The only thought that comes any closer to Hindu religious philosophy is the idea of the *bhramaself* or the world and the ego (Advaita Brahma) that has found recurrence in German idealism.<sup>xxxix</sup>

Benjamin expounds his idea of ‘divine violence’ in his *Critique Of Violence* itself, where he philosophizes the idea as one that is beyond rational/cognitional engagement and one that shatters the causal relationship between ‘ends’ and ‘means’, and hence is beyond the scope of



natural law or positive law.

If then what follows what Benjamin calls ‘justice’ through divine violence is essentially a formulation that creates and re-creates the ‘just’ through negation of codified law. As mentioned earlier, central to the understanding of human political law lies decadence or ‘rotteness’.

Divinity, seeks to invigorate human life precisely by overthrowing it.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Here, we may observe that the logic of European enlightenment that attempts to explore the operations of ‘just ends’ through ‘just means’ (positivist law) or ‘just means’ that would lead to ‘just ends’ is completely annihilated. This would liberate human history from the cycle of ends and means or ‘the mythic cycle’.

Benjamin echoes the Judaic Decalogue, “Thou shalt not kill” in scrutinizing any political deed (without the logicity of ends/means) but forbids death or “the right to kill” as a teleological possibility to justice. What is intriguing is his reference to the ‘commandment’ not as a legal statute but as one of guidance.<sup>xxxvii</sup> His argument, “no judgement of the deed can be derived from the commandment” is extremely ambivalent and can be accused of rather free-playing with the idea of ‘religious law’( not to mention the Derridean argument regarding any form of generality that always is unjust to particular and nuanced situations).<sup>xxxviii</sup>

But even if we grant him his religious interpretation, what he names ‘divine violence’ has a greater problem. Its orientation is basically counter-intuitive in the fact that it promotes a precisely tautological opposite: i.e. a violence that does not seek violent mean to establish a new regime but violates law in its basic nature. This process of an external divine justice is what he calls as ‘violence without means’. An essential feature of it is the fact that it does not seek a final goal ( *Endzweck* )or a closure, as Frederick Jameson would have called it, but keeps the *telos* waiting. Divine violence might create a situation which would be close to an ideal condition but leaves scope for contamination.

This in turn invites the possibility of another occasion of divine interruption (the same concept of progressive utopia). And theoretically, though the concept sounds brilliant, the problem becomes perhaps far more complex when he associates ‘divine violence’ as a figurative representative of political revolution.<sup>xxxix</sup>

This also reminds me of a significant point. Revolution, in both Marxist and non-Marxist sense, has been a political position across the continents. The ‘messianic’ belief of salvation that guarantees (or perhaps braves) the future of revolution might not realized to be as effective as we might have presumed through the course of the political ‘event.. For followers of religious practices who do not believe in messianic advent or direct God-human interaction, here would not be any surety of the messianic legitimacy or conviction regarding the ‘sanctity’ of political action. This uncertainty which historically has damaged post- revolutionary societies which might neither theoretically nor spiritually experience what had been promised.

Secondly, the openness that messianic utopia creates for Benjamin is also liable to transform into

to a possible dystopia (let us think of the Nazi leadership, or a Napoleon or the period of cultural revolution under Mao or the Stalinist horror that has either usurped democratic election in favour of an authoritative redemption or has established a dictatorship without the ability of civic demand and interrogation), thus imploding itself. Jewish political revolutionaries, on the other hand, there will run the probably assign the messianic belief to whichever course a revolution takes. And here, my research focuses on two issues.

Has every post-revolutionary government/dictatorship historically been redemptive? And more importantly how can divine violence that seeks to destroy legal violence without resorting to violence legitimize the latter as a politically necessary adjunct? Of course, the violent clash of class histories and the complete overhauling of an established structure will invite state force and citizen resistance (and thus violence) but there can be no doubt to the fact that histories of most revolutions have documented a blood bath that has outlived the revolution and been perpetuated even after a new political framework has been put in place.<sup>xl</sup> Of course, I do not question the prospect or the validity of ‘revolution’ as an effective political conception, but rather seek to enquire into the causes behind post-revolutionary failure and unprecedented revolutionary terror Blood: Judaic Myth and ‘Mythic’ Revolution

While re-reading Benjamin’s conception of a non-violent ‘divine violence’, there has been an explicit mention of bloodlessness as an unmistakable expression of extra-human interruption, “divine violence annihilates without blood, it strikes to destroy evil...it does not spill out blood.” If that be a ‘criterion’, how would Benjamin look at the histories of revolution (Bolshevik Revolution had already taken place by the time he was writing and there has been occasions to question Lenin’s political procedure against the different shades of socialists and former comrades) which has often indulged in excessive bloodshed and has failed to restrict it in its required agitation against organized state terror while carrying the same seeds of violence in subsequent ‘left dictatorships.’? How would bloodshed be viewed by Judaic (or Judeo-Christian) theological understanding/ explanations given the fact that Benjamin never wrote extensively on his philosophical proposal or its validity in political movements?

The history of blood and bloodshed in Judeo-Christian imagination has more to it than recent mystic implications might suggest. Blood and the ‘body’, of course have explicit biblical echoes in Christ and also bear a history in Judaic cultural identity that has been a result of segregation and marginalization of Jews , emigration and racial stereotyping. To cite anthropologist, Marie Douglas, “the body is a model that can stand for every bound system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious.”<sup>xli</sup> Central to my research on blood’ is Bettina Bilddhauer’s “Blood, Jews and Monsters in Medieval Culture” that proposes that blood in medieval thinking “ affirmed and contradicted the notion of the integrated body, marking the margins inside which an individual can be accepted or included.”<sup>xlii</sup> She rakes up the incidence of the Gog-Magog myth which is significant in the Anti-Christ myth. The figure that illustrates the belief shows a child (representative of Jesus) crucified with his blood spilling out and being taken by the devilish Gog-Magog who , for long, has been equated to the Jews ( since

Christ' death).<sup>xliii</sup>

Here, lies notion of the blood of Christ as pure and redemptive that while draining it from himself will also allow sustenance to the non-believers who secretly valued its strength. This belief is figurative where the Christians reflect on Jewish magic and witchcraft. This is relevant to study how they propound the death of virtue and look at the strength of the evil.<sup>xliv</sup> The ritual murder, the accusations against Jews of draining blood of baptized babies primarily indicated the magical powers of the blood, blood as healer of wounds, as giver of life. In Jewish mysticism, the significance of blood has featured not very differently. Though the Jewish community had never accepted Christian stereotyping, they have never shied away from the superior position that Judaism has bestowed upon Christianity.

The medieval theory of humours with the various fluids looked upon blood as the substrate from which invisible vapours arise and establish mediation with the bloody of flesh. This has classical Aristotelian associations which relate to these 'invisible vapours' as the soul justifying the 'soul-body's integration.<sup>xlv</sup> The parable of Longinus and his blindness, specifically Jewish in character, have vouched on an anatomical system where pure blood that cures his eyes requires 'bad blood' to move out on the completion of the process.<sup>xlvi</sup> The gushing out of impure blood, similarly associated with the taboo of menstruation and lower body anatomy requires blood, as the symbol of life and death. This is in relation to the functions of re-building and annihilating. This might be a significant explanation to this theological conundrum of what Benjamin calls as divine violence.

If this explanation holds ground, then 'revolution' can be perceived as the art of cleansing a space, an experience (often collective) of 'bodies' that constitute power. Bloodshed then becomes an important aspect of the very notion of 'violence' that would mediate between the old and the new; and in certain cases violence as a medium of temporal/spatial travel from the old order to an order that might be unpremeditated or at best, what Benjamin calls 'the messianic kingdom'.<sup>xlvii</sup> The theological explanation that I try to offer here might well appear to be plausible; but essentially the same idea is also associated with the culture of sacrifice. If divine violence actually signifies an aesthetic of transferring 'new blood' for old, then blood no longer becomes a concrete referent in itself. Blood becomes a synecdochal image for 'bodies'; the boundaries that determine the politics of acceptance/inclusion through its socio-structural permeability. Here, I introduce into my argument the concept of 'messianic bodies' as a manifested medium of God's presence. These 'messianic bodies are' those complexes that allow

God to enter human history and are driven by the idea of messianic justice.<sup>xlviii</sup> If the primary idea of messianic presence belongs to the order of the transcendental realm, the bodies that operate through the divine idea are the immanent embodiments of the transcendental. To understand it in more concrete terms, every revolutionary movement is spearheaded by a group

of philosophers or a group of pioneers who lead the movement both intellectually and physically, thus becoming conduits of transcendental advent in human history. If we recall the Gog-Magog mythic paradigm, the idea of ‘purgation’ would apply to the probability in creation of a human history. Here, the messianic bodies, though guided by the transcendental idea, contain blood that belongs to the older order. One might reflect upon the crucifixion of baby Jesus from the myth whose blood is shown to be drawn by the ‘impure’ Jews to sanctify life: Jesus had to be ‘sacrificed’ (or abandoned) due to the allegiance of his blood to the same worldly order from which evils multiplied. This means that though Jesus had been guided by messianic powers, his mortal body of the world of sins had to be sacrificed so that a new order can be created through his blood.

The blood of Jesus (from the order of sins) would give birth to the world of salvation, thus making messianic advent possible and human history scriptable.<sup>xlix</sup> Here, then, blood occupies a central concept of the divine event from which both sacrifice of the older order and the creation of a new history is made: blood from the chosen being (Jesus) is therapeutic and nourishing.<sup>1</sup> The idea of sacrificing old therapeutic blood for a new creation also has to do with the fact that through this sacrifice, the old order even with the chosen body is exterminated.

Drawing from the myth, the messianic bodies that lead the event contain blood that belongs to the order of oppression. These bodies are sacrificed as the revolutionary movement furthers and their sacrifice is redemptive to create a newer order of messianic inspiration. But the fault-line lies in the fact that the Messianic Idea is ‘revealed’ only to the messianic bodies. Messianic leaders of revolutionary movements interpret what fundamentals are crucial for an egalitarian society and engage with masses who look up to them for guidance, inspiration and the sense for meaning. Then with the sacrifice of the bodies, the Idea that had been revealed is hidden behind coded languages and semantics that are alien to the masses. Instead of the Idea, blood becomes the guiding principle of the movement, revolutionary terror substitutes divine violence and human history falls back upon mythic history; ‘blood’ being the driving motive of cyclical history that denies agency. And hence messianic possibilities are destroyed with its own creation.

Theologically, God refuses to enter human history. Human history, with all its sets of possibilities (as Benjamin views it) becomes essentially mythic: its transcendence over bare life to engrave and change through action is mythic and more importantly, materiality in transit (and thus never exactly the same) preserves the mythic. Thus human history preserves the mythic and anti-essentially existential. ‘Revolution’ in this sense and in messianic politics is not just a sudden detour of history but the act of ‘revolving’ in mythic templates with perhaps, some curious nodal points. Though history ‘revolves’, it does not necessarily ‘regress’. Revolution in messianic belief follows the same pattern of philosophical history through its own sense of contradiction.

### **Revolution: The ‘Truth’ Content and Romanticism**

While dealing with bodies as complexes of the spatio-temporal matrix, it is important to remind ourselves of a temporal dimension that Benjamin develops later in his *Theological Fragment*. In this text, Benjamin elaborates on his idea of ‘messianism’ that had been developed sketchily in his previous text *On Critique of Violence*. Benjamin while dealing with the advent of messiah counters the Kantian concept of history “that puts faith in the infinite extent of time and thus concerns himself only with the speed, or lack of it, with which people and epoch advance along the path of progress.”<sup>li</sup> His conception of history looks at the ‘messianic’ not as the *telos* (as earlier stated) but in the form of the “ultimate condition” as the “highest metaphysical state of history”, which is immanent and has the potentiality to manifest at any moment. I had earlier spoken about the ‘art’ of blood transfusion (symbolically used in mystic texts) and the ‘art’ of sacrifice integral which is integral and foundational to the aesthetics of revolution. Benjamin provides us with more than a few evidences to suggest that his ‘messianic theory’ of revolution and praxis has been an outcome of his deep interest in German Romanticism.<sup>lii</sup> It is in this context that he develops the idea of the ‘truth in art’ as bearing affinity with the ‘truth in history’ and if I could add here, the idea of ‘the truth in revolution’. Then revolution, steeped in messianic understanding, appears both as a philosophical concept and as political praxis in the form of an art.

Benjamin’s doctoral dissertation on German Romantic aesthetics traces the historio-graphical nature of cognitive thought: Fichte’s reflection “that free consciousness takes itself as the object of thought, its capacity for thinking of thinking.” had come into criticism where ‘immediacy’ (where the process of ‘thinking’ can effectively grasp the ‘thinking subject’ as its own subject) was juxtaposed against the idea of the ‘infinite’ or the ‘transcendental’ that revises/measures the criterion of determining ‘knowledgability.’ This occurs in order to gauge the substantiality of those perceptions and qualify them as knowledge. Benjamin departs from this view towards an argument on non- mutually exclusive functions (unlike the former distinction between what is thought to be immediate, perceived knowledge and the substantiality of those perceptions to qualify as knowledge) where “ the romantic concept of infinitude is not empty, always anticipating the future but substantial and filled, with an affinity towards the present tense.”<sup>liii</sup>

He formulates a proposition based on Goethe who delineates the process of ‘art criticism’. To Goethe, art criticism “consummates the finite and particular work by raising it to a higher level, in which the form of the work is transformed into content and as the object of criticism, and simultaneously connects the work’s particular artistic form with the continuity and unity of absolute form in the Idea of the art.”<sup>liiv</sup> Here, ‘criticism’ then is an activity that ‘completes’ a work through its connection with other works of art and criticism. Benjamin distinguishes between the Romantics and Fichtean school of enlightenment in the light of infinity being “an experience” for the romantics but a quantum measure in positivist thought. However, a re-appraisal of Benjamin’s dissertation (done by Benjamin later) has pointed out that even in the

romantic idea of ‘immanent criticism’, it has failed to judge the ‘quality’ of the piece of art and had fallen under the “false interpretation” of unity of works.<sup>lv</sup>

Benjamin’s revision convinced him that the theory of romantic messianism cannot be understood by mere criticism alone but through judgment. Here, he effectively departs from Goethe’s conception. Judgment requires a “negative moment of completion through self-annihilation”. He builds up the finite theory of art-forms-through the image of the ‘torso’, in its “deadness” and then the true task of criticism (through judgement) would be the destructive completion of the finite artwork.<sup>lvi</sup> In his essay on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*, he entrusts criticism with the practice of ‘revealing the truth content’ of the very artwork.<sup>lvii</sup> This ‘truth content’ that he finds in the unity of the particular art-form is an object of experience, enclosed within a material content which refers to the techniques used to create and read the artwork. To Benjamin, criticism shoulders the duty of unraveling the particular point of disjuncture where the ‘mimetic function’ of the artwork falls of in the realm of “expressionlessness” and thus “interrupts the apparent harmony of it.”<sup>lviii</sup>

While elaborating on his understanding of the artistic conception in the reputed *The Origin Of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin emphasizes on the contrast of the representational tropes of symbol and allegory, he finds in symbols the causal relationship of the referent and that which is referred to dwell in “the mystical instant”, stagnant and arbitrary in its loosened associations.

This is dealt in detail in his later works like “Essay on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*”, *One-Way Street* and finally, his masterpiece, *The Arcades Project*. Allegory, on the other hand is dynamic, refuses to be encapsulated by any moment of time and is thus indifferent to the idea of death.<sup>lix</sup> The truth content, the ‘expressionless’ in art or the allegorical nature of representation features again as “envisioned in the encircling dance of represented Ideas”, he harbours the famous image of ‘a constellation of stars’ with each star having a bit of truth to collective form a whole i.e. a non-united manifestation of truth content.<sup>lx</sup> Thus truth is both fragmentary and pluralistic and cannot be duly represented by the ‘symbol’ in a dynamic society.

### **Revolution: A Cultural Art-form Of Each Age**

My idea is to look at the various tenets of ‘revolution’ as an art-form (as mentioned earlier). My proposition around the fact that revolution, as a constitution of human history is condemned to degenerate and integrate into mythic history can be further explained through locating the ‘truth content’ of the ‘event’. If the ‘truth content’ of an art-form is ‘expressionless’ i.e. revelatory in breaking away with a historical realm of possibility from mythic prediction (disrupts history mimicking/representing bare life) and the relationship between the ‘expressionless’ with the allegorical trope of representation is complimentary, then human history in its allegorical dynamism fails to arrest the moments of messianic advent. Benjamin himself, has believed in the

idea that the messianic advent lies at the moments of arrest, and to that extent is symbolic and hence, betrays truth. On the other hand, allegorical history with its dynamism and “indifference” fails to adhere to the messianic, the messianic must manifest in its pure form as the Idea, attempt to heal the world and return back to its noumenal form. If ‘revolution’ as a universal idea is like the Idea of romantic art with each revolutionary incident the finite representation of the idea or ‘the torso’, the parallel between the act of criticism that leads to the ‘annihilation of the art-work’ (thus releasing its ‘truth content’) and an armed revolution lies where criticism generates and finally beguiles in the act of violence itself, the ‘power’ or the ‘force’ that creates possibilities of self annihilation i.e. violence that after directing resistance and overhauling the authoritarian/corrupt structure either kills its ‘bloody’ nature for realizing the ‘Idea’ (in post-revolutionary societies) or kills the Idea in its quest to survive in blood. (that might be contextualized with respect to most 20<sup>th</sup> century revolutionary movements).

### **‘Blind’ Violence: Divine?**

It would be interesting to consider Alan Badiou’s understanding of ‘revolution’ as an ‘event’ in this context. To Badiou the idea of ‘revolution’ is one that deactivates the existent law by unprecedented, unstructured radical change. Of course, given his ideological position his open espousal of violent Maoism and articulating that “politics that aim to bring radical change cannot happen with soft, heartening , progressive rhetoric” has brought both praise from far left positions on one hand and ‘fascist’ acclamations from the centre-left on the other. Badiou essentially appears to be Benjaminian in the concept of revolution as an occurrence that fails rational thought or cognitive knowledge, he comes closer to what we call, in psychoanalytical terms, towards ‘the operations of the unconscious’. It is not theoretically problematic to emphasize on the urge of the unconscious and the desire for liberation (liberation as a concept of political sexuality). This might be viewed as an enactment of the Bakhtinian social phenomenon that travels beyond ‘constraint’. However, Badiou endorses revolutionary violence and bloodshed as effective and ‘human’ (in that it anticipates the human) and calls for fidelity to preserve the revolutionary moment. Placing fidelity to the ‘event’ as like that of love, politics, science and art (let us consider revolution as an art here as discussed earlier) would , in Badiou’s view provide revolution with its ‘ideal’ character but the problem here appears to be the same that has recurred in our discussion .<sup>lxi</sup>

Revolutionary violence in contrast to divine violence (the concept that I have negated) often seeks to bear fidelity not to the idea of the utopian dream (even if it is open and perpetually progressive) but to the medium of violence (the criticism of art for the sake of it and not for self annihilation of the art-work), where it destroys the Idea for its own survival and hereby, lies the problem with revolution as art. Badiou’s endorsement of ‘blind violence’, then, has more tendencies to cater to mythic predictability than in arresting messianism with dynamic

allegorical history that Benjamin perhaps wrongly ruminates upon as a possibility.

### **Revolution as a Techno-Cultural Event**

Benjamin's work changed after 1924 and became significantly Marxist in the 1930s, he became one of the prime figures who influenced the Frankfurt School and had an overwhelming reception by Adorno. Benjamin did not completely dissociate with messianic thought. For instance, his essay "The Destructive Character" written in 1931 and the seminal "Theses on History" written in 1940, published in 1942 suggest Benjamin's interest in messianic despite harboring Marxist thought. However, one aspect that clearly becomes visible in the later works of Benjamin is the idea of technology with the 'crisis in art and culture.'<sup>lxii</sup> The relation of technology to metropolitan capitalism, the class struggles with increasing industrialization of cities in Europe, and the cultural turn towards mass satisfaction (that was an effective weapon to benumb the angst working within the working classes), consumer fetishism taken to an outrageous extent---all of it had affected the Marxist Benjamin. *Arcades Project* in its vast and incomplete form is a critical testimony to the situation. Choosing Paris as the locale that resonates not only with capitalist haunts but also with an extreme sense of desire in the form of fashion industry and its cultures of entertainment, it also debates the dialectic between 'past' and 'present' and an attempt to situate the cultural historiography of the Second Empire in France.

Benjamin had effectively discovered the relation between capitalism and imperialistic wars with the craze for technological innovation---Benjamin's acquaintance with most Marxist writers and cultural critics of the age revealed that the idea of technology was being portrayed as detrimental to socialist conceptions. These being completely market oriented in their formulation and indulging in an attempt to eliminate any breaking point between consumer price and psychological/ethical value.<sup>lxiii</sup> To Benjamin, however, technology was not squarely "a fetish of doom" but a tool that contained within itself "the key to happiness".<sup>lxiv</sup>

Here, it is pertinent to mention that Benjamin's idea of communism used 'collective' as a unified term for the masses and his adherence to technology has always been re-conceptualised as "an art" for the collective. The classification of technology into two functional categories of the 'first' and the 'second' makes him believe that contrary to the technological exploitation common to the 'first' grade analysis, the 'second' grade usage would be to relate to an effective interplay between nature and human.<sup>lxv</sup> Mentioned elaborately in the *The Work Of Art...* and in *Arcades Project*, Benjamin comes close to the image of the 'machinic assemblage' in Deleuzerian terms which he relates to the revolutionary mode of praxis, "the idea of revolution as an innervations of the technical organs of the collective...and the idea of the 'cracking open of natural teleology'".<sup>lxvi</sup>

Benjamin's idea of the revolution in 1930s is different from the revolution that the pre-Marxist or the newly Marxist Benjaminian self was dealing with. Benjamin locates the idea of the 'collective



body' as an assemblage of 'machinic' parts whose realization through expression/release (similar to the concepts of deterritorialisation-reterritorialisation in Deleuze would have a parallel in a mass reproductive technique of cultural reproducibility in films, audio recordings, montages and paintings that would negate the 'aura' that authoritarian sovereignties create.<sup>lxvii</sup> From that perspective, the "innervating" energies of the masses as 'organs' would have to bear anti-fascist ideals through the 'democratization' of public spaces, real and virtual, in a technocratic society. Communication and criticism can ignite the fervour for democracy in languages that are 'without' power and despite censorship. Such communication when channelized and reproduced in understanding the operations of the power apparatus can destabilize the 'epicentre' of power against the state. The language of everyday senses and sensibility can demolish the aura of an autocratic state by the populace in each performing an organic function within the social system with a teleological anticipation towards practical alliances in groups with the languages of counter culture that would dissolve the binary between 'high' and 'low' discourse.

Notwithstanding the harsh feedback that he received from his collaborator Brecht, Benjamin's notion of the mechanical body mass can be applied to the potential of the reproducibility of revolution. Here we may note that Benjamin recognizes revolution only with respect to a given law and identifies coded human law as insufficient to deal with the 'truth' of justice while Derrida and Agamben talk about particularity of situations and impotency of general law to deal with each of them. Though different in character, Schmittian understanding of culture and 'decision' at the times of exceptions also have their own narratives to contribute to the understanding of it.<sup>lxviii</sup>

### **Revolution: A Reproducible Idea?**

But the question that remains is if an image of an archetypal revolution (the French Revolution and the Bolshevik Revolution are generally considered as the purest examples of this criterion) would be possible to be reproduced against times which are never the same whether in socio-cultural experience or economic structure. Of course, there has to be a structure of similarity in those points of disjuncture. But if reproduction of an art is used effectively to damage or dismantle the 'aura' of law, revolution as a cultural concept can only be promoted in discourse and in generic language. The 'state of exception' or the execution of 'decision' can never be predicted, (a temperament of human history), but a linguistic use of anti-fascism or anti-establishment is possible. How revolutionary language is used in philosophy and politics forms my quest in the next chapter but in the idea of its reproducibility, a condition of the material event is possible. Then the question that still lingers is when I propose most contemporary, bloody and violent revolutions tend to belong to 'mythic history' and not 'human history'; then

how do I place reproducibility of revolution in that context?

The question of ‘reproducibility’ occurs when there is an affirmation of human history dissolving down into mythic history, the giving up of the ‘idea’ for the blood as the teleological product, and thus the need to produce and re-produce revolutionary thought. The day a post-revolutionary ‘idea’ is materialized (albeit can never happen completely), the question of reproducibility will perhaps cease. Revolution is revolutionary only when the ideal and the material realities degenerate; on the contrary when the material and the ‘ideal’ come close, ‘revolution’ has already been the norm. And since such probabilities are always already utopian to an extent, human history appears overwhelming to be possible; in events when revolutions are just means to dictatorial ends, human history might struggle to resist death in its birth.

In other sense, the idea of reproducibility of a revolutionary event can be only made when the ‘bodies’ are guided by messianic ideals without the revolutionary event turning into an end in itself.

### **Revolution: A Modern Event?**

Here, to address the temporal question, I propose that revolution, has always been a modern event. Benjamin while translating Baudelaire speaks of modernity as an ephemeral and transitory experience.<sup>lxix</sup> Herein we may move towards a conception that observes a different interpretation of ‘modernity’; modernity not as something chronological in our ‘periodizing’ strategies nor technical in capitalist sense of productivity. The idea of the modern does not align with the ideas of labour time and mass production in terms of communist analysis either. Modernity would be ‘queer’ in its urge towards change.<sup>lxx</sup> I propose that modernity defines itself through its virtue of change and alteration where there were little hopes for it. Modernity, then, would lie in consciousness of identity and politics and in the will for challenge. If that be true, all revolutionary movements, whether bloodless or otherwise have been ‘modern’, all those phases of history were periods of modernity. It would overlap in all historic processes of re-telling and in all the epochs that chronological linearity supposes to be of the old and the forgotten.

Modernity lies in contrasts and contradictions, in dialectics and progressive conflicts. This ceremonious betrayal of standard chronology makes modernity an intersecting locus against all our pre-historic and historic times of the conventional. And our ‘post-modern’ times might not be very different. Modernity, then, is the only human history having given itself up to mythic convention time and again.



## END NOTES

<sup>i</sup> Karl Marx, “The Victory of the Counter Revolution in Vienna”.

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/11/06.htm>

<sup>ii</sup> Marxist strain of thought have not only sought to re-visit history in its dialectical core of conflicts (later on class struggles) but has attempted to delineate a sort of economic reasoning of conditions through which Marx (and later on revised by Engels) developed his idea of ‘progression’. The economic idea of ‘primitive communism’ to a gradual development into capitalist monopolies and finally communist societies (as the teleological end of history) has offered a sort of prediction (though underdeveloped on many grounds).

See: Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique Of Political Economy*, trans. S.W. Ryazanskaya, ed. Maurice Dobb, with an introduction by Maurice Dobb ( New Delhi: Createspace Indian Publishers), 2015, 45-58.

Also, see: Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique Of Political Economy*, trans and ed. Ben Fowkes and David Fernbach (New Delhi: Createspace Indian Publications), 2010, 98-125.

<sup>iii</sup> See: Walter Benjamin, “On Concept Of History”, translated by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970, 4-7.

<sup>iv</sup> Walter Benjamin’s view of historical materialism though endorses Marxist conceptions of an “experience” of an economic epoch, strikingly moves away from Marx’s emphasis (and perhaps over-emphasis) on the theory of constant contradiction. To Benjamin, historical materialism, with its ambit of experience, suggests a linear conception of historical life that diverges away from the ‘mythic’ life of bare existence (and thus not fairly materialist in conception). However, in 1930s, Benjamin had engaged with the sphere of materiality but does not provide with explicit statements on human history as a statement like the early Benjamin As indicated, early Benjamin’s view of ‘history’ is more theological than materialist. His turn towards class-based Marxism happens with George Lukacs’ *History and Class Consciousness*, 1926-1927

<sup>v</sup> Walter Benjamin’s early writing deals with the counter-Kantian (and counter-enlightenment) philosophies of German Romanticism and thinkers like J G Hamann and Goethe. It is only with *Critique Of Violence* that Benjamin deals with an explicit political statement and a historical perspective that he goes on to develop in “On Theses Of Political History”

<sup>vi</sup> Much of Benjamin’s works were not translated into English till the 1980s.

<sup>vii</sup> The German word *Gewalt* covers a wide range of significance from ‘force’ and ‘state coercion’ to ‘power’, ‘violence’ and ‘authority’. Most semantic meaning has been ascribed according to the subtleties of the context in which the word occurs in a particular text of reference. The German word *Gewalt* originates from the Old High German verb *waltan* which roughly translates into ‘to be strong’, ‘to dominate’, or ‘to master.’ In modern High

German *Gewalt* covers a variety of meanings, among them violence, force, coercion, power and authority. The latter meaning is today most notably used in the German constitutional “Basic Law” (*Grundgesetz*), the 20<sup>th</sup> article of which reads: “Alle Staatsgewalt geht vom Volke aus.” [All state *authority* is derived from the people]. The German

Parliament, the *Bundestag*, chose the translation “authority” for the German word “Staatsgewalt” <https://www.btg-bestellservice.de/pdf/80201000.pdf>

As Étienne Balibar notes: “the term *Gewalt* thus contains an intrinsic ambiguity: it refers, at the same time, to the negation of law or justice and to their realization or the assumption of responsibility for them by an institution (generally the state)

Etienne Balibar: “Reflections on *Gewalt*”, in *Historical Materialism*, 17 (2009), p. 101

<sup>viii</sup> The latter meaning is today most notably used in the German constitutional “Basic Law” (*Grundgesetz*), the 20<sup>th</sup> article of which reads: “Alle Staatsgewalt geht vom Volke aus.” [All state *authority* is derived from the people]. The German Parliament, the *Bundestag*, chose the translation “authority” for the German word “Staatsgewalt”.

<https://www.btg-bestellservice.de/pdf/80201000.pdf>

<sup>ix</sup> German economy had developed rapidly around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With its strong economic base, German entry into WW1 was rather unexpected an event. With the British blockade, German economy steadily declined. The Treaty Of Versailles, 1919 proved to be disastrous to the nation. One of the most prominent enunciations was that of Jon Maynard Keynes in his book, *The Economic Consequences Of The Peace*, where he called the treaty as a bearer of “Carthaginian Peace” and “a misguided attempt to destroy Germany on behalf of French revanchism...” See: John Maynard Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of The Peace*, (London: Macmillan and Co.) 1919, reprint, 1956, 189-205.

<sup>x</sup> Gustav Landeur and Georges Sorrel were both philosophers working with anarchist philosophies in the 1910s and 1920s. Both emphasized on the concepts of revolutionary anarchy and theorized against ‘law’ as a political device. In fact Sorrel envisaged an ‘acephalous society’ as the ‘most just and free’ society. Benjamin’s *Critique Of Violence* is often touted to strike a dialogue with Sorrel’s works. See: Georges Sorrel’s *Radicalism and the Revolt against Reason: The Social Theories Of Georges Sorrel* and *Revolution and Other Writings :A Political Reader*

<sup>xi</sup> Benjamin had read Marx and Lenin only after 1924; became class conscious after 1927 after he read Lukacs and joined Frankfurt School in the early 1930s.

See: M. Bordersen, *Walter Benjamin: A Biography*. (London: Verso), 1996, reprint 2007, 58-59.

<sup>xii</sup> Gersholm Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of A Friendship*, trans. Harry John with an introduction by Lee Siegel (New York: New York Review Of Books), 2001, 223-224.

<sup>xiii</sup> Hitler's Nazi Party had effectively been anti-communist and the communist party structurally had been supported by the Jews.

See: U Herbert, "Extermination Policy : New Answers and Questions about the History of The Holocaust in German Historiography" , in *National Socialist Extermination Policies: Contemporary German Perspectives and Controversies*, ed. U. Herbert (Oxford: Berghahn, 2000), p. 27. As quoted in Oded Heilbrunner's "German or Nazi Antisemitism".

<https://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Holocaust/stone.pdf>

<sup>xiv</sup> Benjamin had been deeply influenced by the Jewish philosophy and most of his early writings have been affected by it. Most of his theological conceptions can be seen in his letters that he exchanged with Scholem. His influence strikes mostly in Benjamin's "Theologico-Political fragment".

<sup>xv</sup> See: Daniel R. Langton's "God, The Past and Auschwitz: Jewish Holocaust and Theologians' Engagement With History" as reference

<sup>xvi</sup> Messianic theology believes in direct interference of God in human history, and thus builds its philosophy on a potential of radical change and hence, radical justice. Benjamin elucidates more on it in his "Theses On the Philosophy of History"

<sup>xvii</sup> While self-endorsement of 'messiahs' are common in religious belief system (that has been non-critically endorsed on trans-cultural planes of religious scholarship, it is worthwhile to wonder if politics can really be equated with religion. Religion begins with a particular point in human imagination that demands an entity like 'God' or pantheistic forces (in polytheism personified as Godheads) and to that extent is central to religio-philosophical question. However, when we discuss politics or political philosophy , that at least on ground, is purely based on human action (Marxism preaches atheism in particular) , one wonders if the unquestionable status of God or a messiah can be made a parallel to the 'authoritarian', centralising status of a political messiah or a dictator.

<sup>xviii</sup> Anarchist political thought believes in political associations that are voluntary in nature and does not depend on an exceptional 'authority' called state unlike communist thought that at the first instance, proposes a state on the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' that will eventually lead to the 'withering of state.'

See: Pierre Joseph Proudhon's *General Idea Of The Revolution In The Nineteenth Century*

<http://fair-use.org/p-j-proudhon/general-idea-of-the-revolution/>

<sup>xix</sup> Marxist strain of thought in politics never thought of an elective democracy but a proletarian dictatorship. See: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* , translated by and with an introduction by Gareth Stedman Jones (New York: Penguin Classics), 1996, 45-56.

<sup>xx</sup> Walter Benjamin had attempted to understand romantic art-philosophy on the basis of ‘truth content’: the idea of finite art and infinite, extended truth. The concept of philosophical plurality in political discourses would be lost with one singular notion of the ruler (theologically ‘the messiah’) and would betray the idea of dissent and debate, thus betraying ‘the truth’ behind revolution as a means to liberation. (Benjamin compares ‘truth’ to be fragmented but to exist a collective like the stars. See: Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of The German Tragic Drama*, trans by John Osborne (London: Versopublications), 1998, 57-59.

<sup>xxi</sup> (a) Most Judaic parables talk of space and place, migration and kingdoms, with a sense of identity and belonging central to the experience as a collective community. This, in fact, strengthens the fact that there is a strong tendency to ‘remember’ a socio-religious existence against oblivion, almost to cling on to a sense of certainty and trust against the political force of oblivion. And the Torah and the Tanakh too provide enough instances relating to the concept of the exodus and the ‘promised land’.

(b) I use the word ‘theological hypnotism’ keeping in mind the lack of questionability that is associated with divine ‘messiahs’. Messiahs and allegiance to them seeks to establish a sort of psycho-motor hypnotism to retain supremacy in the world of religion, politics and culture. Here, the political messiahs could have done strictly the same. See: Daniel R. Langton’s “God, The Past and Auschwitz: Jewish Holocaust and Theologians’ Engagement WithHistory”, *Holocaust Studies: A Journal Of Culture and History*, Vol.17, NO.1, Spring 2011, 29-62.

<sup>xxii</sup> Human instincts play the major drive in a world driven by causality, there is little room left for an alternative possibility for instincts are pre-conditioned by natural processes without the concept of ‘free will’ as opposed to decision making where other probabilities are kept aside in favour of one condition by human power of ‘judgement’. Ironically Benjamin’s argument seems to shove human history into the mythic to implode his political philosophy from within

<sup>xxiii</sup> Mythic history refers to the History that has been shaped by the bare rule of succession in nature; a sort of Darwinian process of survival; on the other hand, human history is that narrative that allows man to enact his ownliberty or bondage.

See: Walter Benjamin’s “Theses On The Philosophy Of History” translated by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970, 4-7.

<sup>xxiv</sup> By the Judaic Book of the Genesis, this was in fact an act of human will. This also makes the sense of human history clearer: the fact that agency is a double aged sword seems to be a significant consideration in understanding the failure of revolutionary praxis and the argument surrounding mindless violence

<sup>xxv</sup> Here we have two coordinates to refer to: first, that revolution in Marxist discourse is a religiously ‘secular’ concept and of universal potential (Trotsky’s permanent revolution an attempt to execute it on ground), second: if ‘faith’ is the pre-supposed guiding force to preserve the sanctity and the validity of a revolutionary course, then for non-Abrahamic religions that may not believe in the idea of a messianic certainty would fail to be assured in the ‘sanctity’ of the revolutionary bloodshed or terror. (Even in Islam, an Abrahamic religion, there

is no conception of ‘mediation’ between the creator and the created, and hence rules out possibilities of messianic advent. See: Holy Quran (Verses: 29:6) that state that “God is above creation; He cannot exist within creation. He is without the ideas of space and time. He cannot enter the created world.”

<sup>xxvi</sup> For instance, a school of Mahayana Buddhism believes in the concept of ‘shunya’ that refuses to acknowledge either God as an external power or the perceived reality of the senses: God and his creation are all parts of *maya*: reality is nothing or shunya.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Law, the purpose of legislation in this case, has a varied history. In feudal societies, the decision of the sovereign was based on the personal capability of the king and the individuality of the situation though there remained a rough law for conducts of apprehension. The sovereign was given a position, both social and psychological superlative to the rest of the subjects. His rules or laws were given an aura of ‘absolutism’ and rightful ‘authority.’ The centre of power was the position in the order of ranks. In capitalist societies, power lies with the economy and the idea of authority was channelled in biblical law books that swore ‘equality’ for every citizen, and even for the highest order of the premier /president for republican societies. However, keeping in tradition with the feudal order, ‘law’ was viewed to have a place of sanctity and unchallengability even in its most ‘compromising situations’. It is this ‘aura’ that Benjamin tries to dissect.

See Walter Benjamin, “On the Critique Of Violence” in *One Way Street*, ed and trans by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970, 132-155).

<sup>xxviii</sup> The 1791 adoption of a new constitution after the French revolution did away with all religious oath taking ceremonies and vows, bestowed sovereignty “on the nation” and contradicted the church on various issues of civic (erstwhile religious importance) like marriage. However, the Gerondins, in their opening statement, had made clear that the constitution is not anti-papal and they believed in God “as the real preserver and guide to this constitution”.<sup>30</sup> See: Michel Foucault, *The Birth Of The Clinic*, trans by Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge Classics), 1976, reprint, 2001., 34-36.

<sup>xxix</sup> The concept of the ‘extra-constitutional bodies’ too have their own arrangement of power; in forms of free associations and voluntary groups, they exert influence which is a vital source of power. Such structures fail against the brutal force of the state and are hence resistant in nature. With the idea of a liberalizing modernity, this structure holds more value than in previous times. We can understand Habermas’ understanding of communicative rationality with respect to this. As Foucault says, power is everywhere in his texts repeatedly, the idea of power cannot be associated solely with the state.

See: Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans by Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge Classics), 1979, reprint, 2004.

<sup>xxx</sup> Law making violence is that violence that is made while attempting to preserve the existent law (law preserving violence) in situations of emergency or novelty: a circular hermeneutics of violence. See: Walter Benjamin, “On the



Critique Of Violence” in *One Way Street*, ed and trans by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag), 1970, 139-141..

<sup>xxxix</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On the Critique Of Violence” in *One Way Street*, ed and trans by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag), 1970, 139-141.

<sup>xxxix</sup> The concept of ‘divine judgement’ originates from an unmediated experience of God’s word, in terms of metaphoric usage. In both Judaic and Christian scriptures of the Exodus, the idea of divine ‘law’ is expressed in the form of ‘commandments’. The episode of Moses and the burning bush is an instance of ‘unrotten’ law. In these legal words, the presence of God has been thought to be brighter than that which can sustain human visibility. Here, one might keep in mind the importance of the Word as the most mediated essence of the divine. Such law (comprising of words) are pure and without any trace of pathology. See: *Exodus: ‘Moses and the Burning Bush’*.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus+3&version=NIV>

<sup>xxxix</sup> Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, Edited and translated by A J Barlett (New York: New York Press), 1998, 43-44.

<sup>xxxix</sup> No relevant research for such associations have been established. In fact, Benjamin’s idea of pagan is essentially contrary to the messianic idea of God. It is unlikely that Benjamin had idea about the Upanishadic advaita system though his research into German idealistic thought could have provided him with the fodder. German idealism has on more than one occasion adopted the idea of *shunya* and *satya* from Buddhist and Hindu thought. With Western philosophy having its own sense of religion from Abrahamic school, Benjamin’s idea of messianic advent is a curious blend of both Western and Indian thought

<sup>xxxix</sup> The idea of phenomenology in German Ideal thought is curiously similar to the Buddhist concept of *shunya* and the Hindu epistemology of the *satya*, the idea of the object and the ego, the relative properties of matter like shape, senses and texture and its manifestation in the anthropological ego has formed an integral facet of 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century CE Indian thought. See : S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol.1 (New Delhi: Vintage Publications), 1978. 204-217

<sup>xxxix</sup> See: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344207> (Accessed: 09/08/2018. 11:33) 357

<sup>xxxix</sup> There remains doubt if religious and moral ‘commandment’ can really be looked upon as ‘guidance’ and not absolute sanctity. Historically most religious templates of instruction have been looked at as the basic ‘duties’ and ‘observations’ upon which the concept of law has been developed in kingdoms and fiefdoms. The secular law that most nations deal with today, in fact, has been highly influenced by the Roman Catholic law of the medieval period. The contention would be if religious codes of conduct can really be exempted of its modern legal character with its ‘aura’ and ‘authority.’

<sup>xxxix</sup> Derrida states that a ‘general law’ can never be used as an all absorbing code: the moments of ‘particularity’ of each incident has to form a new manner of judgement.

See Derrida’s “Mystical Foundation Of Authority”, 23-24.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Benjamin considers strikes as an initiation into revolutionary politics, in revolutionary act that includes unprecedented bloodshed, a symbol of contamination in Benjamin’s own language, ‘divinity’ ceases to be a concept

that allies less with an open utopian possibility of a headless state but invites a new order, and thus pre-empts a specific *telos* of condition

<sup>xl</sup> Major revolutions of revolutionary praxis have been bloody in its own count. To consider something like the French Revolution of 1789, the February Revolution 1848, the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 or the Cuban history of 1859 or the Indian Naxalbari Movement, none of these movements that aimed towards justice has been able to restrain the fanatical and continual thirst for blood. If we adhere to Benjamin's view of revolution without blood, can revolutions be really associated with ;divine violence that views blood as a symbol of rottenness and contamination?

<sup>xli</sup> See: Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge Classics), 2002, 98

<sup>xlii</sup> Bettina Bildhauer, "Blood, Jews and Monsters in Medieval Culture" in *The Monstrous Middle Ages*, ed. Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills, (New York: University Of Wales Press), 2003, 75-97.

<sup>xliii</sup> Ibid. In the Book Of Genesis and in the Book of Ezekiel (with a reference in the Book of Revelation as well), they have been materialized as demons to indicate the pagan threat to monotheism.

<sup>xliv</sup> The belied in Jewish myth and the obsession with black magic is an intriguing part of Medieval western culture, through the segregation of race and ethnicity through the body was perpetuated. See: Salo Wittmayer Baron, *A Social and Religious History Of The Jews*, Vol.11 (London: Columbia University Press), 1967.

<sup>xlv</sup> The medieval theory that proposes that manifestation of the 'purity' and 'beauty' of soul is through the 'vapours' that mediate between the spirit and the physical body. Thus the external appearance of an individual was directly a reflection of his spiritual health. See: Nancy Caciola, "Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual in medieval Culture" in *Past and Present*, 1996, 152.

<sup>xlvi</sup> The parable of Longinus See: *Gospel of Nicodemus*

<sup>xlvii</sup> Benjamin talks about the 'Messianic Kingdom' in his "On History". Here one may also wish to engage with St. Augustine's distinction between the City Of God and the City of Man. Incidentally, Scholem who influenced Benjamin had also mentioned Augustine in many of his own works including his texts on Kabbalah and symbolism.

<sup>xlviii</sup> The idea of messianic justice believes in deferral of judgement without its execution. In Benjamin's terms, this leads to 'political annihilation' but without dropping blood, blood being a symbol of mythic power and violence

<sup>xlix</sup> This also relates to the understanding that the messiahs directing away from the 'order of profane' have to sacrifice themselves for the messianic kingdom or sacrifice their messianic ideas that would re-establish the mythic, oppressive order.

<sup>l</sup> The idea of sacrifice becomes significant here. One's sacrifice of messianic ideas reaffirms mythic oppression whereas messianic world demands sacrifice of their own selves from power that corrupts. State power here would invariably be a mythic symbol that corrupts even the messiahs

<sup>li</sup> The Kantian idea of measuring history through the speed of chronological progression and endurance as opposed to messianic transience. See: Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W Jennings, (London: Harvard University Press), 37.

<sup>lii</sup> See: Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W Jennings, (London : Harvard University Press), 116-117

<sup>liii</sup> See: Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W Jennings, (London :HarvardUniversity Press), 135

<sup>liv</sup> See: Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W Jennings, (London :HarvardUniversity Press), 137.

<sup>lv</sup> See: Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W Jennings, (London :Harvard University Press), 167.

<sup>lvi</sup> Ibid, 197.

<sup>lvii</sup> Ibid, 296.

<sup>lviii</sup> Ibid, 340

<sup>lix</sup> See: Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, (London, New Delhi : Verso) 40, 41, 43-44, 166

<sup>lx</sup> Ibid, 263.

<sup>lxi</sup> See: Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy* (New York : New York Press), 212-217.

<sup>lxii</sup> See : Walter Benjamin , *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughin, (London : Belknap Press),1999, 128.

<sup>lxiii</sup> Benjamin's encounter with the Frankfurt School formed the basis of his class based Marxist politics and his attempt to understand 'mass culture' and technology within the spectrum of cultural capital

<sup>lxiv</sup> See: Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W Jennings, (London :HarvardUniversity Press, 2 and 341.

<sup>lxv</sup> See: Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W Jennings, (London :HarvardUniversity Press, .345-348.

<sup>lxvi</sup> See: Deleuze and Guatarri, *Anti Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*,( London: Continuum), 2004, 128

<sup>lxvii</sup> See: Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* in *Illuminations* (New Delhi:Penguin Books), 1998, reprint, 2009, 217-228.

<sup>lxviii</sup> See: G Agamben *State of Exception*, trans K Attell (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press), 2005, 87-95.

<sup>lxix</sup> See: Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (New Delhi: Penguin Classics), 2004, 45-46.

<sup>lxx</sup> Modernity, then, is used as an experience of transience and ephemerality as opposed to a chronological idea or that of philosophy. Life experienced to the full is an experience of modernity for Benjamin. We can note that to Benjamin, modernity, is not an alienating experience as for most Marxist thinkers. It is rather the fulfilment of life, its existence and essence in its short-lived feeling of contentment.

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