

# Violence/Power/Force and Struggle over Time in Contemporary Brazil: Forum on the Actuality of Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' at Its Centenary, Part V

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**Abstract:** Walter Benjamin published his influential essay 'Critique of Violence'/'Zur Kritik der Gewalt' in 1921, and the work has troubled and provoked thinkers across disciplines for over a century now. This Forum gathers a group of scholars in philosophy, political science, international relations and legal studies to reflect on the *actuality* of Benjamin's essay for contemporary critical theory. In Part V of the Forum, Rafael Barros Vieira argues that Benjamin's essay 'Zur Kritik der Gewalt' (Critique of Violence/Power/Force) is deeply penetrated by the historical problems of the revolution and counterrevolution in Germany. In a certain sense, it is a conjunctural text, although it goes beyond its own context by seeking to apprehend historical phenomena of *longue durée*. Unfortunately, Vieira argues, this contextual aspect tends to disappear in readings that emphasize only a kind of philosophical 'purity' of this essay. Vieira hypothesizes that the essay, in addition to facing conjunctural problems, can be used to understand other conjunctures by highlighting the relations between law, history and social classes (in a wide conception of social classes that will be present in Benjamin's work and will be made explicit in his late writings). The purpose of turning to this essay is to critically understand the exercise of violence/power/force in liberal states, particularly that of Brazil, highlighting the movement through which the authoritarian and fascist forces rise around liberal state structures. As Benjamin points out in one of the variants of the essay on the work of art, fascism is the conservation of relations of production and property through violence. However, violence is not a product only of this type of regime, although it certainly radicalizes it. Vieira proposes to understand how this is expressed in this recent period of Brazil, marked by the combination of the rise of a president with fascist traits, the reorganization of certain liberal institutions and the implementation of typically neoliberal reforms.

**Keywords:** Walter Benjamin; law; violence; fascism; neoliberalism.

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## I.

Jeanne-Marie Gagnebin has been incisive in questioning the direction of Walter Benjamin's reception in Brazil thus far.<sup>1</sup> The author criticizes a proliferation of citations that may be more a sign of a fashion than anything else. She indicates that she would prefer to see a 'deeper radicality in so many interpretations, often somewhat melancholic and complacent' (Gagnebin 2018: 11). To be rigorous, Gagnebin was already problematizing some trends in this reception before this comment was made in 2018. In a 2015 interview, the philosopher speaks of an effort to 'try not to turn Benjamin into another cultural fetish, but take care of the questioning, restless, yes, subversive aspect of his thinking. All his thinking fought against this fetishization of culture and writing' (Gagnebin 2015). The type of approach criticized by Gagnebin ends up erasing the historical urgency that is present in some of Benjamin's main writings (these writings are characterized by a now-time brought to the very form of writing).

The problem identified by Gagnebin could be extended to the wider (not only Brazilian) reception of the well-known essay 'Zur Kritik der Gewalt', written during the episodes of the German revolution, and in defence of its continuity threatened by counterrevolutionary forces. The reception of this essay is on the one hand detached from the concrete historical dilemmas faced by Benjamin, disregarding the conjunctural aspect of this text (Vieira 2016: 53-92). On the other hand, a problem associated with the first is the priority of an approach focused on its logic and internal coherence, making it a matter only for specialists and giving secondary importance to the political intervention that characterizes the text. These formats of approach end up limiting the radically historical content and meaning of Benjamin's approach, compromising its communicability not only with his time, but with ours.

The essay 'Zur Kritik der Gewalt' is profoundly marked by the historical problems of the revolution and counterrevolution in Germany. Such historical events are part of the context in which the essay is embedded (Löwy 2008: 166; Bolle 1994: 17; 1986: 9-10; Gagnebin 2020: 1938; Fenves 2009: 215-219). The essay mentions several European historical episodes of that time: the post-war context, the strikes occurring throughout the continent, the revolutions in Russia and Germany. These events are part of Benjamin's line of sight and cannot be disconnected from the theoretical problems highlighted in the text. Crucially for this essay, Benjamin is addressing themes that were connected to the immediate context, and the dilemma of social classes in History became a matter of reflection – something more developed with his engagement with Marxism after 1924. The historical incursion in 'Zur Kritik der Gewalt' borrows some categories from Georges Sorel's *Reflection on Violence*. However, it is also possible to observe the theoretical influence of Gustav Landauer, as well as conversations with Ernst Bloch, Hugo Ball and Gershom Scholem in Switzerland, when the German Revolution had just begun (Scholem 2008: 92).

In a certain sense, 'Zur Kritik der Gewalt' can be read as a context analysis, although its content goes beyond the immediate time, seeking to understand historical phenomena of the *longue durée*. Unfortunately, the context analysis tends to disappear in readings that

focus on an alleged philosophical ‘purity’<sup>2</sup> of the text;<sup>3</sup> or in a hermeneutics that emphasizes its language and internal coherence, nurturing the fragile illusion that it is possible to analyse a text without its context. The hypothesis of this article is that the essay deals with contextual issues but can also shine light on the understanding of other contexts; the main contribution of its application to different historical circumstances is in exploring the relations between law, history and a broad concept of social classes as made explicit in Benjamin’s later writings. The approach proposed in this essay is grounded in the conjunctural character of ‘Zur Kritik der Gewalt’ to expand some of its concepts to other contexts. I would like to emphasize the possibility of a historical approach to Benjamin’s essay, going beyond the disciplinary divisions of knowledge that mark its reception (in philosophy, law, politics, history, linguistics, etc.) to put this text in front of the challenge of thinking contemporary reality. On this path, I dialogue with the original approach of Eduardo Rebuá in *Insólito Benjamin*, to whom this text is dedicated.<sup>4</sup>

I propose here an analysis of conjuncture in dialogue with Benjamin’s 1921 essay and his writings on fascism, engaging contemporary authors to discuss concretely a historical time/space different from Benjamin’s. While not an exegesis of either Benjamin’s essay or his subsequent interpretations, the exposure of some conceptual problems present in Benjamin’s essay in footnotes is intentional. As it is an analysis of conjuncture that mobilizes Benjamin’s writings, the aim is to gain conceptual density in the course of the analysis, giving priority to the analysis of sociohistorical reality. I do not depart from a previous definition to test the fit of terms and concepts proposed in the 1921 essay and in his later writings (Benjamin’s theory of knowledge and language seems to contravene this requirement). In this sense I will not therefore propose an excerpt with the exegesis of the essay on the critique of violence or its interpretations, only to then discuss current reality.<sup>5</sup>

My engagement with Benjamin’s apprehension of the historical semantics of *Gewalt*<sup>6</sup> reveals its relevance and limits for understanding contemporary Brazil. In proposing a brief analysis of the performance of *Gewalt* in liberal states and emphasizing the Brazilian case, the current paper stresses the *Gewalt* movement around which authoritarian and fascist forces arise. In this sense, *Gewalt* is not a unique product of a fascist regime, although it certainly intensifies it broadly. The objective of this essay is to understand how this phenomenon takes place in contemporary Brazil, with the historical articulation of the rise of a president with fascist features and the reorganization of certain liberal institutions together with the implementation of neoliberal reforms.

## II.

Walter Benjamin offered a possible definition of fascism in a footnote of one of the versions of his essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility.’ Benjamin argues that fascism is a regime based on the maintenance of the relations of production and of property through open violence amidst a crisis of capitalism (GS VII: 357; Bolle 1994: 220; also Benjamin 2002: 120-121, 123n8). This conception is very relevant for the understanding of the ascension of neofascist forces in Brazil. In its ascension, some of the

elementary traits are the outcry for state violence and the summoning of the autocratic past in answer to a putative ‘social issue,’<sup>7</sup> to which is added a defence of the open annihilation of the so-called enemy. This enemy – the communist – is held responsible for breaking a nation seen as a homogeneous body. It doesn’t matter if this claim is irrational and delusional. Once in power, the government aimed to achieve the closure of the regime with an escalation of both state and para-state symbolical and physical violence. To implement their project of power, the escalation of violence was also associated with the control of several forms of social dissent. Bolsonaro’s efforts to close the regime were restrained and the social struggles of the oppressed played a key role in this process. He was defeated in the last elections, however, the same way that the neofascist forces that supported him did not appear out of nowhere, they have not disappeared yet.

It is illusory to believe that the recent escalation of both state and para-state violence in Brazil is a phenomenon exclusive to our time. It is not necessary to go back to the colonial horror which was part of the primitive accumulation process (Marx 2013; Williams 2012) and also of the violent origins of the state in its modern sense (Tilly 1996). Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence’ shines a light on how violence/power/strength continues to operate in liberal states<sup>8</sup> (nowadays hegemonically neoliberal).<sup>9</sup> In contemporary Brazil, *Gewalt* is on the one hand the product of a historical transition ‘through the top’ to democracy (Fernandes 2007b), in which many apparatuses were inherited from the corporate-military dictatorship that ruled the country for over 20 years (Arantes 2010; Gagnebin 2010). Such apparatuses are also fundamental in terms of blocking meaningful and structural social changes. However, *Gewalt* is also a fundamental part of the liberal democracy designed in the post-1988 period (during Brazil’s re-democratization process); it will furthermore lay even deeper roots during the neoliberal decade of 1990. Changes are produced during the transition to democracy through social struggles, but continuity is easily observed if the point of view of those for whom the state of exception ‘is not the exception but the rule’ (Benjamin 2006: 392) is assumed – that is, the exploited and oppressed, black people, landless rural workers, homeless population, women, LGBTQI population and all those subjected to the imperative organization of the form of value.

In its apex moment of neoliberal ideology, Brazil saw many massacres: Eldorado, Carandiru, Candelária, Vigário Geral, in addition to numerous but largely ignored slaughters in the urban peripheries and *favelas*. The movements ‘Mothers of May’ (*Mães de Maio*) and ‘Network Against Violence’ (*Rede Contra a Violência*) treat the 1990s as the ‘Age of Slaughters’ (*Era das Chacinas*), as might be said taking inspiration from Hobsbawm (*Mães de Maio* 2011: 19).<sup>10</sup> The period coincides with and is part of a huge ‘Urban Modernization’ – as noted by the sociologist Vera Telles. Under the mantra of the ideology of progress:

[T]hroughout the 1990s and more intensely in the early 2000s, sewer and electricity networks covered almost all of urban space, up to its ends. The same can be said in relation to the structures of health-care and education, although the quality of these are questionable. Moreover: there has been numerous social programs of different natures, as well as the ubiquitous presence of NGOs, articulated to

networks of various nature and extension. Nonetheless, the most important element is the crystallization of the city space as economic centre of first magnitude. This means that urban space is totally connected to the globalized economy circuits, multiplying consumerism and its mechanisms so they can reach the most distant and poor peripheries. (Telles 2011: 156; free translation).

A highly unequal model of development marked by different forms of social/racial conflict has been promoted. Traditional forms of solidarity and resistance (such as trade unions) have been broken. Social movements shaped in the 1980s have been criminalized. Meanwhile, the Neo-Pentecostal church's capillarity and growth has soared, offering (sometimes selling) spiritual comfort and forms of cooperation within a gregarious sociability. A fraction of the vulnerable youth enters the illicit drug retail market as a way of surviving, and in this process the illicit drug retail selling existence is turned into a socially hegemonic justification for the promotion of a set of politics of annihilation and social/racial control, based on the illusion that those actions will hold social tensions. In the 1990s, Agamben would use the examples of victims produced by car accidents in European highways (Agamben 2002: 121) as a metaphor for how trivial the death became, especially under 'bloody mystification of a new planetary [neoliberal] order' (Agamben 2002: 19). This metaphor is naïve when contrasted against the numbers of state-produced murders in Brazil under the mantra of the 'war on drugs.'

Neoliberal accumulation is connected to the expansion of a repressive politics of control. In the urban centres, military urbanism is on the rise, marked by vigilance technologies. In peripheral areas, trends toward a militarization of social life are often shaped with the use of lethal violence/power/force. Besides, the violence with which the police confront the so-called 'social issue' is certainly nothing new in an era in which the 'social issue' has been converted into a 'criminal issue' (Malaguti 2016). Social and racial control politics utilize force/power/violence in different forms in their effort to manage a tense daily life and a social form that concentrates resources and intensifies competition. In neoliberalism we face not a minimum state, but a strong state, guardian of private law, as correctly pointed out by Dardot and Laval (2016: 157-185). It is possible to observe the indetermination of state violence/power/force diagnosed by Benjamin by examining how neoliberal states guard private law. However, this political economy of violence/power/force is not exercised only as a guarantee of the existing conditions, but diffusely comprises the set of coercive practices that are present in the relations of exploitation and expropriation to which the legal form itself is linked (Gonçalves 2018).

Wacquant demonstrates the existing relations between the rise of a penal state (Wacquant 2009) and the affirmation of neoliberalism as the dominant form in the process of accumulation of capital, revealing the connected processes of militarization of social life. In a certain sense, his argument updates and radicalizes Benjamin's hypothesis that the police is a spectral and amorphous power, according to which spectral power is exercised in the indetermined zone between the instituting violence/power/force of law (through decrees and special rules) and rule of law – incorporating the violence of the

juridical order and beyond (Benjamin 1996: 243). Widespread and diffuse, police power does not dispense with forms of open sovereign violence, and state public force in an era of ‘war on drugs’ regularly turns into a war against blacks and the poor in the ghettos of Brazilian peripheral capitalism, expanding control policies aimed at managing a brutally unequal daily life.

The situation presented here is not structurally different in the so-called ‘progressive governments’ of Brazil, from 2003 to 2016.<sup>11</sup> These governments were based on the neo-liberal tripod (Braga 2017: 95), strengthening specific parts of national capital in the belief that the country could be competitive in the international market. The quest for capitalist economic growth endeavoured to guarantee a small slice of the national budget for social policies. These policies are generally understood as the core of the production of ‘consensus,’ in Gramscian terms. Such progressive governments were operating in a context of neoliberal hegemony on a transnational scale, reproduced internally with specificities that give form to a social liberalism, to use the precise formulation proposed by Rodrigo Castelo (2013).

This type of politics assumes that economic growth in capitalist terms would bring ‘social peace,’ reconciling capital and labour in the name of development. This political position promotes a de-escalation of social struggle, changing the focus from popular organization to institutional spaces, imagining that it would be possible to eliminate tensions between capital and labour with the use of the bourgeois state’s development plan. However, this objective is a historical and theoretical impossibility. Capital’s presupposition as a historical relation is labour exploitation, in complex and multifaceted ways, in an age of hegemony of fictitious capital. The vulgar concept of labour in the age of ‘progressive’ governments is intimately linked to the illusion that the march towards progress happens in a linear, empty and homogeneous time – as elucidated by Benjamin in his thesis ‘On the Concept of History’. This perception imagines itself capable of suppressing the structural conflict between capital and labour in favour of a pact of mutual satisfaction. This pact would produce a capacity for ‘social fixing’ that would sail smoothly in the direction of ‘development’ and ‘progress.’ Consequently, the violence against the ‘nameless’ (GS I: 1241) is considered a side effect, mere collateral damage in the march of progress.

Throughout this process, in the name of ‘development’ and ‘progress,’ huge projects with immense environmental impacts took place, overriding indigenous, fishing and riverside communities, as well as *quilombo* communities. A broad policy of removal took place in the city of Rio de Janeiro, the main stage of the so-called ‘major events’ – which would supposedly bring progress according to the ‘progressive’ governments. Together with deals with conservatives that ensure governability, state violence was still exercised during this period in multiple forms: mass incarceration multiplied, as did police violence targeting the black and poor population, in particular in the peripheries. Urban entrepreneurship processes accelerated in large cities; and the working class (mostly black and female) struggled with precarious jobs, difficult access to affordable housing, and high cost of living. The commodity form crossed the multiple facets of the urban landscape – much in the manner that Benjamin describes in his writings on Paris of the Second Empire during Haussmann’s urban reforms.<sup>12</sup>

The contradictions and tensions produced in this arrangement exploded in 2013. A rise in urban transportation prices was the trigger for a much deeper and generalized uneasiness, a seemingly innocuous trigger that reveals how much deeper and broader are such processes (Gonçalves 2022). This paper will not go into details about Brazil in June 2013, a highly complex phenomenon with many interpretations, besides its temporality and regional specificities. At those protests, popular demands were voiced: for free public transportation, free health care and free education, against police violence, against the 'big events,' and in favour of demilitarization of the police. In 2013, fractions of the urban precariat were a relevant subject, and the popular protests and demands opposed some critical points of the neoliberal project for cities (Braga 2017: 221-244; Singer 2013). Concurrently, the direction of the protest movement came under dispute and corporate media vocalized the most salient fractions of the ruling class, terrified of the protests' proportions. After this move, the conservative middle classes also entered the protests with an agenda against corruption (Tatagiba 2017) – based on an individualized perception of it. However, the conservative forces weren't nationally hegemonic in the protests.

It is crucial to avoid an abstract rejection of anything that is related to June 2013 – an attitude that is not theoretically fruitful. In spite of what 'progressive' reason imagines, History cannot be reduced to a homogenous and linear form of time. It is not only the oppressed that mobilizes its forms of collective action; ruling classes also have their tools of intervention, which are focused on the reproduction and controlled modification of the *status quo*. History did not end with capitalist 'economic growth' – as imagined by 'progressive' governments.

The protests of June 2013 exposed a crisis of hegemony (in Gramscian terms); the formula for domination that took place between 2003 and 2013 was questioned by the ruling classes themselves. For the ruling classes, the commodity sold to them by the 'progressive' governments (the illusion of conciliation or of 'social peace') expired in June 2013. The reactions of the ruling classes are part of a broader movement, which would be called a 'conservative tide' (Hoeveler and Demier 2015). Dilma Rousseff won the 2014 elections with a tight margin, and her adversary on the second ballot did not acknowledge her victory and tried to sabotage her (re)inauguration as president. Additionally, the more acute effects of the capitalist crisis started in 2008 were felt with more intensity in the country (Badaró Mattos 2020: 147). During her 2014 election campaign Rousseff spoke against austerity. Nonetheless, her second mandate began with hard austerity measures, cutting pensions and education. With corruption scandals impacting her government, conservative groups marched in the streets demanding impeachment. Largely stimulated by the communications oligopolies and traditional right-wing parties, these marches had a completely different composition than those of June 2013. Dissatisfied with the speed in which austerity measures had been implemented, the most powerful fraction of the ruling class sponsored a *coup d'État*, ousting Rousseff and delivering the presidency to Michel Temer. The *coup* was a clear proposition to speed up neoliberal measures in the country, with Temer's government delivering a broad expansion of austerity policies, but also marked by abundant corruption scandals. Despite his weak popularity (less than 3%

during his office), Temer's support of austerity measures earned him the support of the most powerful fractions of the ruling classes.

Yet Temer's austerity measures were ineffective for the goal of resuming the levels of accumulation desired by the ruling classes. A context of 'organic crisis' emerged, articulating economic and hegemony crises (to use Gramsci's terms) (Bianchi 2002). It is from this context that Bolsonaro emerges. As Gramsci argues, 'When such crises occur, the immediate situation becomes delicate and dangerous, because the field is open for violent solutions, for the activities of unknown forces, represented by charismatic "men of destiny"' (Gramsci 1971: 210). According to Gramsci (1971: 276), 'The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum, a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.'

### III.

As Benjamin argues in 'On the Concept of History,' fascism benefits from its opponents confronting it in the name of progress, which they consider a historical norm. Precisely because they hold such dogma of progress, fascism's opponents are unable to fight it to the last consequences (Benjamin 2006: 392). In this sense, fascism feeds on violence/force/power exercised inside the bourgeois state and society themselves, as diverse forms of racism, expropriations, neo-colonialism, sexism and LGBTQI-phobia. Fascism furthermore benefits from the absence of a process of settling scores with structures of domination, both present and past. The counterrevolutionary (absence of) reason typical of fascism may erupt – although not necessarily – upon sensing the threat of revolt against the dominant order emerging from the emancipatory struggles of the exploited and oppressed in a situation of profound crisis of capitalism. In countries at the centre of capitalism, fascism was an answer to the real dread of ruling classes of social revolution. This fear was aggravated in a context of capitalist crises. In the peripheral spaces of capitalism, these phenomena can assume different shapes. The main difference is that a truly revolutionary context is not required to activate counterrevolutionary violence. When confronted with small and specific gains of the struggle of the oppressed/exploited, according to Florestan Fernandes, it is possible for ruling classes to appeal to a preventive counterrevolution as a mechanism of controlled containment, conservation and modification of order (Fernandes 2007: 409-424).

Fascism represents a movement of reorganization of a set of violences/powers/forces existing in the process of production and reproduction of bourgeois society. Fascism feeds upon and at the same time reshapes and radicalizes these forms of violence. In this sense, the phenomenon differs from other political regimes of the bourgeois state. This specificity may be the reason why Benjamin will elaborate the concept of the totalitarian state in his later work (Vieira 2023). The counterrevolutionary and anti-communist nature of fascism transforms the physical annihilation of the opposition into a political program. Extended counterrevolution is elevated to the condition of state policy, in a context of persecution against everything that it sees as 'left-wing,' regardless of whether it is real or

imaginary. If there is no limited concept of enemy (Zaffaroni 2007), the anti-communism can also affect social-democrats, progressives in general and even some liberals; all are thus capable of representing a threat to monolithic conservative reason.

Fascism fully disqualifies (physically and symbolically) those defined as 'other' or 'enemy'; the 'enemy' is presented as capable of fracturing the homogenous body of the 'nation' and the traditional family model and its underlying sexuality (Reich 1988: 33-70). The aspiration of stabilizing social, racial and political relations is part of the modern state; in fascism, such ideal is amplified, using as a permanent resource the physical elimination of those capable of shaking the purity ideals typical of the fascist ideology.

Benjamin was one of the first thinkers to realize that other factions of right-wing movements are built on political fragmentation, apathy, and demobilization; fascism, on the other hand, has mobilizing traits. Such reflections are present in Benjamin's analyses of Baudelaire's texts about the directing of masses,<sup>13</sup> a crucial element of totalitarian states. Benjamin argues that one of the traits of fascism is at the same time to legitimize and control the process of mass proletarianization, preventing any desire for the abolition of the relations of production and property from rising among those masses (Benjamin 2002: 120-121). Fascism seeks to mobilize in favour of order by organizing the masses, both in daily life and in major public events, and submitting them to the dynamics of leader [*Führer*] worship. The masses express themselves and manifest themselves in this sense as long as they contribute to preserving intact the foundations of the existing order.

These reflections on fascism or on the historical semantics of *Gewalt* can be fruitful in understanding contemporary reality, and because of that Benjamin's writings on fascism have been the object of interest in attempts to explain some important traits of the phenomenon (Khatib 2018: 621-623; Rebuá 2019: 109-142; Löwy 2019: 109-123). However, the existence of a current neofascist movement in the periphery of the system introduces new elements that extrapolate the profile produced by Benjamin in the 1920s and 1930s. On the one hand, the debate about so-called neofascism brings specific elements to the problem (Badaró Mattos 2020: 65-97). On the other hand, Benjamin's writings need to be reassessed considering space and time dimensions in Latin America.

#### IV.

Brazilian history requires a specific historical treatment distinct from some points of Benjamin's 1921 essay. In 'Zur Kritik der Gewalt,' Benjamin's focus is on state violence and law, essential for the production and reproduction of an unequal society. However, the reality of dependent and peripheral countries with a slave-centred past requires an approach that extends beyond state violence and law as preservers of the ruling order. In countries formed out of slave-centred systems, broad sections of punishing power were exercised privately. Masters could exercise violence/force/power against those that were seen as their properties, with the direct or indirect compliance of the state and/or of sovereign institutions. In his text, Benjamin seems to presuppose the reality of European countries, clear in the fragment 'The right to use Force.'<sup>14</sup> In European countries, the state

seeks the monopoly of the exercise of legitimate violence through law, at least in their own territory. In these texts from the early 1920s, Benjamin questions the legitimacy of this violence and the unequal character of the order it intends to preserve. However, Benjamin does not address the cases in which the exercise of *Gewalt* that conserves the *status quo* goes beyond simply state and law. An exception might be the 1930s essay 'Theories of the German Fascism,' where Benjamin analyses the soldiers demobilized after the First World War who subsequently offered their services to the German bourgeoisie to counter communism and became one of the principal constitutive and supportive forces of the rise of Nazism to power. Addressing the context between the German counterrevolution and the ascension of Nazism, Benjamin observed the mutation of the post-war mercenary into the 'fascist class warrior' (Benjamin 1999: 319).

The focus of the analysis on the exercise of violence by the State and Law in texts from the early 1920s can hardly be transferred to analyse dependent countries of colonial past. In Latin American and Brazilian reality, private violence is exercised by masters and bosses, heirs to the 'Big House' (*Casa Grande*, where slave owners lived). This exercise of violence often extrapolates the state or the institutions of sovereignty, despite the intimate relation that these people can have with these institutions. Violence is present in the historical character of the foremen (*capatazes*) or masters responsible for the exercise of direct private violence. This phenomenon survives in a set of practices destined to conserve the latifundia power, or the unequal distribution of urban space (with the use of gunmen, private security staff, militia gangs, etc.). The rationality of state violence in the areas of the periphery expresses the boundaries between state sovereign violence/force/power and the direct powers of the ruling classes. These boundaries clarify the porous zone of non-determination between the state and the private sphere.

At least three forms of the exercise of this type of violence were intensified in Bolsonaro's government. First, the rise of violence in the Brazilian countryside, with the use of armed troops that are often willing to use private violence against landless rural workers, peasants, indigenous populations, and human rights activists. This violence is used against all those who try to establish limits to the latifundium hegemony and the amplification of the agricultural frontier – an amplification that is generally achieved by the incorporation or invasion of lands as a support in the process of increasing the land's value. Recent reports by the *Comissão Pastoral da Terra* (2020) have pointed out a rise in the (already high) number of deaths in the countryside. Second, Bolsonaro's family has a historical connection to the militia gangs. The area of control and influence of those gangs now stretches far beyond their traditional territory of Rio de Janeiro. Furthermore, Bolsonaro's government had a deep affinity with the project of power/force/violence exercised by these gangs. The social control they produce articulates territorial, economic and social control of popular classes. Third, in addition to the above elements, there is also the reactivation of new forms of extreme-right and fascist militias around Bolsonaro. These groups draw inspiration from the so-called 'Command for Hunting Communists' (*Comando de Caça aos Comunistas*), which acted during the corporate-military dictatorship (1964-1985). There is an underground preparation of these groups allied to specific

actions currently underway and in the face of a more explicit effort to end the existing regime.

On the one hand, fascism intensifies sovereign violence; on the other, it feeds upon a culture of praise for violence/power/force. This glorification of violence/power/force is expressed as an *ethos* of violence and virility, allied to and affirming a pattern of masculinity. Bolsonaro's participation in institutional politics is marked by the correlation between masculinity and heteronormativity, merging both as an affirmation of virility and violence. Many types of violence/power/force are mobilized to 'keep in their places' (to use their domination vocabulary) women, black people, LGBTQIs. This type of violence already has a great dose of historical magnitude in Brazil that was further increased in Bolsonaro's government. It is as if Bolsonaro's figure as the head of the state authorizes the private exercise of patriarchal, racist and heteronormative power, both in domestic and public spheres. The exercise of such powers and his presence in the public sphere reinforce each other, boosting these types of violence under his rule. The nature of this type of violence is the reason why the broadest and biggest resistance movement to Bolsonaro's campaign and ascension was the Feminist movement, especially the #nothim (*#elenão*) campaign.

## V.

Under Bolsonaro's administration, Brazil had both a neofascist president and a neofascist movement, although not a neofascist regime – despite the efforts of the president's supporters. Or, to quote Rebuá, there is a process of fascistization among fractions of the bourgeois civil society (Rebuá 2019: 126-135). The fascistization of social life represents in Brazil today an increase of the (already alarming) rates of state violence. The result is a rise in the lethality of the state, which is exercised under the excuses of 'war on drugs' and zero tolerance policies targeting specific territories and specific bodies. In his first moments in office, Bolsonaro and his allies pursued a project of brutal devastation of labour and living conditions (Behring 2019: 223-237). This attack aimed to put capital's offense against labour on the same level of the worst days of the corporate-military dictatorship. In order to pursue that, Bolsonaro sought the support of his 'hard core' supporters,<sup>15</sup> utilizing fake news diffusion schemes, as well as participation in Neo-Pentecostal fundamentalism. State militarization is also noticeable, especially considering the use of military and police officers in strategic positions both in ministries and in environmental agencies. Bolsonaro merges a project that is based on neoliberalism, moral conservatism and a program of unmaking the democracy. During the pandemic, some of those traces have been intensified, at the same time that executive power commands an anti-science crusade. This crusade is responsible for the implementation of a genocide policy during the COVID-19 pandemic; the Bolsonaro government's virus denials and refusals to adequately acknowledge the public health crisis have an especially cruel impact on black and indigenous populations.

The distinction between having a neofascist in office and a proper neofascist regime, as well as interrupting the transition from one thing to the next will be defined over the

dynamics of the historical struggle between classes, as Benjamin argues. Quite evident were the efforts of both the former president and of groups of his most ardent supporters promoting a new dictatorship; those efforts have been made in broad daylight during the pandemic. Subaltern struggle imposed limits to this process, in a dispute that was also a clash over historical temporality and political processes in the country. This struggle will oppose in one corner the affirmation of a linear and homogenous shape of time (violently reinforced by neofascist power/violence/force) and, in the other corner, an attempt of the oppressed and exploited to wrest from institutional powers a new and distinctive time, as proposed by Benjamin in Thesis XIV.

In Thesis X, Benjamin (2006: 393) argues:

At a moment when the politicians in whom the opponents of fascism had placed their hopes are prostrated, and confirm their defeat by betraying their own cause, these observations are intended to extricate the political worldlings from the snares in which the traitors have entangled them.

It is necessary to avoid past mistakes and to directly connect this concern to an urgent and immediate task: defeat neofascism. This task is not in the homogeneous and linear time flux, counted in election years, but a task for right now. This task needs to be addressed in a continuous movement, in a process of overcoming itself, in which the defeat of neofascism and creating the historical conditions for a qualitatively different time are related to each other. This motion can be elaborated in Benjaminian terms, in which political action both in the process and in the now are not split. This motion exceeds the dogmatic relation between means and ends, and the temporal model tied to it.<sup>16</sup>

This urgent task is certainly multifaceted, and belongs to the praxis field, without dispensing critique and self-criticism. The task demands a denunciation of the 'organic and paralysing violence of the established order' (Fernandes 1982: 147), exercised in broad daylight in the form of state and para-state violence. This task must also consider and reflect upon the counterpower/counterviolence of the oppressed that can interrupt the violence of the order. It is possible that this is what was on Benjamin's mind in the 1921 essay while elaborating the complex concepts of divine, pure or revolutionary violence/power/force.<sup>17</sup> There are also other interconnected questions that must be taken into consideration, like understanding the current and trending configuration of labour and social reproduction, and the gender and racial elements of labour. These questions are part of the massive task of reorganization that all these struggles are dealing with. Such elements are crucial to understanding the transformation of the struggles of the exploited and oppressed, which Benjamin did not ignore (Löwy 2011; Adorno 1992: 9-26), even in his later writings.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The first version of this text was written in the end of 2020, and slightly modified after the peer review process in the second half of 2021 – which would be its year of publication. The text is full of references to episodes from the time it was written. Despite this, it deals with a set of processes that has not completely

disappeared, which justifies its contemporary publication. It is essential that the reader keeps this factor in mind to evaluate the episodes and historical intensities portrayed in this paper.

- <sup>2</sup> Jonnefer Barbosa mentions very briefly the essay's context in the 1920s but prefers to suggest an approach to the concept of *reine Gewalt* (pure violence/power/force) as a 'formal concept' or 'relational, methodological and non-substantial' (Barbosa 2013: 161-162). Inspired by Arendt, Barbosa affirms that the historical approaches made by Žižek and Agamben to the concept of *reine Gewalt* 'only violate a philosophical text' (Barbosa 2013: 163). The author prefers to disregard the presence of the concept of revolutionary violence in Benjamin's text. In this gesture, he rejects historical approaches to the concept of *reine Gewalt*, extending the concept of purity to the very approach of the 'pure' text, to which historical approaches would only 'violate' the text.
- <sup>3</sup> Andrew Benjamin, in *Working with Walter Benjamin*, also identifies this tendency in approaches to prioritizing the philosophical: 'the argument is that to allow Benjamin's work to be productive is to maintain it as philosophical' (A. Benjamin 2013: 17). The examples are many. In general, see the texts provided in the first part of 'Towards a Critique of Violence: Walter Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben', especially Menke 2015: 19-37; Ross 2015: 39-56; Ahmadi 2015: 57-71; Moran 2015: 73-90; see also: Rolo 2021.
- <sup>4</sup> Andrew Benjamin's proposal of not only working on Benjamin but with Benjamin was expanded in a recent workshop to discuss possible contemporary uses of the 'Critique of Violence'. See: <http://walterbenjamin.info/event/call-for-papers-working-with-benjamin-on-law/>.
- <sup>5</sup> See, for example, the book *Indignos de vida: a forma jurídica da política de extermínio de inimigos na cidade do Rio de Janeiro*, by Orlando Zaccone (2015).
- <sup>6</sup> The German term can be translated into English as violence, power or force (Hamacher 1994: 127 note 2; Khatib 2016: 43). This is not simple wordplay. The use made by Benjamin of this German term expresses how force, power and violence are mutually indeterminate in the concreteness of social relations in bourgeois society. In order to demonstrate this, the author presents several historical episodes of his context, listing situations that disrupt any attempt to coherently differentiate violence, force and power in its relations with law. According to Benjamin, these categories belong to the conceptual and historical universe of law (Derrida 2007).
- <sup>7</sup> For a better understanding of the 'social issue' through a theoretical and historical reconstruction of the term, see Netto 2012.
- <sup>8</sup> Benjamin wrote in the beginnings of the liberal democracy in Germany, built upon the bodies of the militant German proletariat in the period of 1918-1919. The slaughter of the Spartacus League in January 1919 was a defining event for Benjamin, and returns in his last work, the famous thesis 'On the Concept of History'.
- <sup>9</sup> Benjamin's text is greatly influenced by Sorel's *Reflections on Violence*. The French intellectual draws attention to the centrality of both economic and extra-economic coercion in daily life under capitalism. The exercise of such organized coercion is part of the primitive accumulation processes, but also part of the amplified reproduction of the system. The amplified reproduction encompasses several forms of coercion, both direct and indirect. Coercion is expressed through diverse mechanisms of expropriation and violence – many of these features are discussed in contemporary debate, under terms clearly different from Sorel's (Fontes 2010: 21-97; Gonçalves 2018). The exercise of force is not a simple setback. It is part of a scattered form of coercion, connected to the consolidation of capitalist social relations, seen by the dominant ideology as 'natural law'. Such forms of coercion do not imply the total absence of open coercion, which can and does take place. According to Sorel, state force is linked to an organization in which a minority rules, and such force has been employed by the bourgeoisie since the origin of modern times (Sorel 1992: 195).
- <sup>10</sup> These movements are formed by mothers that had their children killed by police violence in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.
- <sup>11</sup> Benjamin's critique of German social democracy in his 1921 essay can shine a light on 'progressive' governments in Brazil, often called 'reformism almost without reforms' (Arcary 2006) or, in the best light possible, a 'weak reformism' (Singer 2012). Benjamin's critiques are inspired by analyses shared by the fractions of the German left and by the Sorelian critique of parliamentary socialism (in *Reflections on Violence*).

- <sup>12</sup> A sentence by Benjamin referring to Haussmann can be used to understand the evictions and the urban situation of Rio de Janeiro in the era of urban reform during the administration of mayor Eduardo Paes (Azevedo 2019), with a difference that Brazil is not an imperialist country, but which in certain circumstances had sub-imperialist traits, as pointed out by Virginia Fontes (2010). Benjamin writes: 'Haussmann's activity is incorporated into Napoleonic imperialism, which favors investment capital. In Paris, speculation is at its height. Haussmann's expropriations give rise to speculation that borders on fraud' (Benjamin 2002b: 23).
- <sup>13</sup> There is a fundamental distinction between mass and class in Benjamin's analysis of fascism, besides the petty bourgeois character of the fascist movement. This discussion can be found in a footnote (which also discusses Lukács's concept of class) in the second version of the essay on 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility' (Benjamin 2002: 129).
- <sup>14</sup> This fragment seems to be a first draft of the reflections that will show up in 'Critique of Violence'. The text is a debate with the positivist legal expert Herbert Vorwerk. Vorwerk utilizes the Weberian definition of State to argue that this is the institution that holds the monopoly on the legitimate exercise of violence. Although criticizing Vorwerk, Benjamin does not problematize the instances and contexts in which state and para-state violence complement and reinforce each other.
- <sup>15</sup> At first, Jair Bolsonaro received a nationwide boost based on a petty bourgeois mass resentful and fearful of the proletarianization caused by the crisis (Vieira 2017), and from large contingents of the police, the army, militiamen, conservative traditionalists and those nostalgic for the dictatorship, who constitute the 'hard core' of support. During the election period, a powerful and previously unprecedented fake-news scheme, sponsored by fractions of the Brazilian and international bourgeoisie, was responsible for one of the biggest electoral frauds in the country's history, in addition to an alliance with religious fundamentalism that opened the way to influencing popular sectors.
- <sup>16</sup> For traces of the concept of political action in the 1921 essay, see Khatib 2020.
- <sup>17</sup> Despite interpretations that understand this text as marked by a naïve pacifism, in the text itself and in his later writings, Benjamin rejects any such pacifism (Benjamin 1996: 250-251; see also: Scholem 2008: 34).

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## **Violência/poder/força e luta contra o tempo no Brasil contemporâneo: Fórum sobre a atualidade da “Crítica da Violência” de Benjamin em seu centenário, Parte V**

**Resumo:** Walter Benjamin publicou seu influente ensaio ‘Crítica da Violência’ / ‘Zur Kritik der Gewalt’ em 1921, e o trabalho tem perturbado e provocado pensadores de várias disciplinas há mais de um século. Este Fórum reúne um grupo de estudiosos em filosofia, ciência política, relações internacionais e estudos jurídicos para refletir sobre a atualidade do ensaio de Benjamin para a teoria crítica contemporânea. Em Parte V do Fórum, Rafael Barros Vieira argumenta que o ensaio ‘Zur Kritik der Gewalt’ (Crítica da violência/poder/força) de Benjamin é profundamente penetrado pelos problemas históricos da revolução e da contrarrevolução na Alemanha. Em certo sentido, é um texto conjuntural, embora vá além de seu próprio contexto, procurando apreender fenômenos históricos de longa duração. Infelizmente, este aspecto contextual tende a desaparecer em leituras que enfatizam apenas uma espécie de ‘pureza’ filosófica deste ensaio. Na hipótese deste artigo, o ensaio, além de enfrentar problemas conjunturais, pode ser utilizado para compreender outras conjunturas, destacando as relações entre direito, história e classes sociais (em uma ampla concepção das classes sociais que estarão presentes na obra de Benjamin e serão explicitadas em seus escritos posteriores). O objetivo deste ensaio é entender criticamente o exercício da violência/poder/força nos Estados liberais, particularmente o brasileiro, destacando o movimento através do qual as forças autoritárias e fascistas se levantam em torno destas estruturas. Como assinala Benjamin em uma das variantes do ensaio sobre a obra de arte, o fascismo é a conservação das relações de produção e propriedade através da violência. Entretanto, a violência não é um produto apenas deste tipo de regime, embora certamente a radicalize. A proposta é entender como isto se expressa neste período recente do Brasil, marcado pela combinação da ascensão de um presidente com características fascistas, a reorganização de certas instituições liberais e a implementação de reformas tipicamente neoliberais.

**Palavras-chave:** Walter Benjamin; direito; violência; fascismo; neoliberalismo.

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