

Colonial Reminiscences, Colonial Remains: Forum on the Actuality of Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' at Its Centenary, Part II

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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 II of the Forum, Aggie Hirst, Tom Houseman, and Vinicius Armele draw on Benjamin to analyse what remains of European colonialism. Hirst and Houseman interrogate the extent to which Walter Benjamin's notion of divine violence may be useful in the service of decolonial struggle. Insofar as it is antithetical to the colonial order – which is inaugurated and reproduced by the law making and law preserving functions of mythic violence – divine violence appears to open a space for conceptualising a far-reaching challenge to the violence encrypted in that order that is 'lethal without spilling blood'. Because the exercise of such 'power over all life' is exercised 'for the sake of living,' Benjamin argues, its accompanying sacrifices are acceptable. Drawing on postcolonial and decolonial theory, Hirst and Houseman offer a critique of the 'God's-eye view' inherent to any claim to divine violence. Benjamin's text can generate powerful insights into the nature and limits of decolonial struggles, but it ultimately fails in providing an alternative to the mythic violence it criticises, by reproducing – at the heart of the emancipatory concept of divine violence – a problematic impersonation of a divine authorial voice that is already a trope of coloniality. Armele's reflection seeks to recover ancient tragedy's role of reluctance toward the previously unquestionable power of the violence of mythical destiny. Resume Benjamin's contributions on (1) melancholy and Romanticism, which represents the revolt of repressed, channelled and deformed subjectivity and affectivity, and (2) the criticism of the violence that is established in the manifestation of its ethical relations between law [*Recht*] and justice [*Gerechtigkeit*], Armele reveals the intertwining of the experience of

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historical time and the orientation of current political struggles. Inspired by Benjamin, he examines the action of the Black Lives Matters movement in Bristol, UK, which toppled a statue of the slave trader Edward Colston, and threw it in the city's harbour, reopening a historical wound of colonialism and national memory.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin; colonialism; decolonization; Romanticism; violence; revolt; modernity; profanation.

'For the Sake of the Living'? Divine Violence and Decolonisation

Aggie Hirst and Tom Houseman

On the centenary of the publication of Walter Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' many of the intended objects of his critique remain entrenched. A number of unsettling parallels can be drawn between 1921 and 2021 – global crises have precipitated stark political and economic polarisations, far-right populist movements have destabilised an ambivalent democratic consensus, and racist and colonial violence continue to structure institutions of state, society, and jurisprudence. In such a climate, 'Critique of Violence' appears to offer a prescient analysis of the immanent, rather than incidental, character of state violence and the possibility of a radical rupture with the status quo through the obliteration of law-making and law-preserving infrastructures and their 'soul-murdering' processes of subjectification.

In particular, as authors such as Anisha Sankar (2019) and Neelam Srivastava (2010) have argued, divine violence – converging in many ways with the ideas of Frantz Fanon – can be fruitfully mobilised in the service of contesting the continuing and organising legacies of colonialism that are constitutive of modernity. By taking aim at the law-making and law-preserving functions of mythic violence which underpin the current global order, divine violence promises a systemic overhaul enacted 'for the sake of living' that is 'lethal without spilling blood'. This paper evaluates this claim, asking whether *Critique of Violence* delivers on its promise of a redemptive nonviolent violence or merely reproduces the mythic formula of self-exemption in which the violence of one's own violence is denied. The paper argues that Benjamin's claims to a bloodless lethality and a righteous 'for the sake of' rest on four key assumptions which are by no means conclusively established in the text: the possibility of radical rupture with the status quo; the necessarily salutary quality of such a rupture; the salience of a wholesale repudiation of guilt; and the claim to sovereign licence.

Having examined these points, the paper proffers a somewhat contradictory conclusion: On the one hand, read as a diagnosis of past and contemporary political atrophy and a call to problematise our shackled subjectivities, 'Critique of Violence' offers energy and tools useful for 'decolonising' (broadly understood) both our external and internal worlds. On the other hand, read as an appeal to a distinctly Judeo-Christian eschatology which allows Benjamin to claim – on behalf of the future movements he hopes to enable

– an authority from outside of history, the paper concludes that ‘Critique of Violence’ is of limited value to this decolonising project. This is because the appeal to the universality and accessibility (at least to the chosen few) of God’s perspective is a trope of colonial thinking (Grosfoguel 2012), and risks foreclosing the space for pluriversal and multivocal ontologies and epistemologies that decolonising theories – from both postcolonial and decolonial traditions – have fought to open.

Benjamin’s diagnosis of the violence sutured into the state and its institutions of law and governance remains astute and devastating. He exposes the state’s insidious powers of fatalism and subjectification, revealing what is rotten therein (1995: 285-6) by demonstrating how law guarantees violence while at the same moment curtailing individuals’ right of recourse to both. As such, Benjamin provides fruitful conceptual tools for thinking beyond Weberian assumptions and frameworks which have for generations served to normalise through obscurity the founding and administrative violences of the state. These mythic violences, Benjamin shows, affect political, philosophical, and subjectification processes in myriad ways, as the cause of the great crimes of history including colonialism and concentration camps (Tuitt 2018: 456), a process of binding through boundary construction (Zambrana 2018: 103), and the colonisation of the very conditions of critique through its processes of subjectification (Ertür 2019: 277). As such, mythic violence is soulmurdering (Butler 2006, 210). As the far-right rises and people of colour continue to be subject to lethal police violence, Benjamin’s ‘unabashed disgust’ (Taussig cited in Ertür 2019: 277) towards the state’s institutions of enforcement cuts through the apologetics of much mainstream discourse within and beyond the academy.

While analytically and politically powerful in its critique of the state’s immanent violence, Benjamin’s proposed solution has generated widespread consternation. He begins from the assumption that violence cannot be excluded from any possible challenge to mythic violence: ‘every conceivable solution to human problems... remains impossible if violence is totally excluded.’ Consequently, he continues, ‘the question necessarily arises as to other kinds of violence than all those envisaged by legal theory’ (1995: 293). The die is thus cast for the search for a different kind of violence, a pure violence (1995: 297) that can annihilate soul-destroying mythic violence, a nonviolent violence that is destructive of coercion but sheds no blood in the process (Butler 2006: 202). Such violence is bloodless in the sense that it strikes not at the bodies of individuals but rather the subjectivities of those shackled to the state’s mythic violence (Butler 2006: 210-11). This divine violence is intended, then, as the antithesis of mythic violence: ‘if mythical violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood’ (Benjamin 1995: 297).

The purity of divine violence is conferred in its capacity not just to interrupt the bonds of the state and law but the very process of binding which make these possible. Zambrana describes the difference as that between ‘mediation’ and ‘mediacy’. Drawing on the work of Werner Hamacher, she argues that ‘Critique of Violence’ subverts mediation itself by

positing a politics of pure mediacy, and in so doing breaks with the administrative strictures and structure of mythic violence. Because it does not replace one set of mediated ends with another, but rather ‘does not serve ends “situated outside of the sphere of mediacy”’ (Hamacher cited in Zambrana 2018: 104), divine violence is framed as qualitatively different from the necessarily ends-oriented mythic violence of the state and law. Importantly, while both mythic and divine violence are sacrificial, mythic violence ‘is satisfied in itself by sacrificing the living, whereas divine violence sacrifices life to save the living, for the sake of the living’ (Derrida 2010: 288).

The question of this ‘for the sake of’ thus resides at the core of the claim that divine violence is substantively different to mythic violence. Indeed, the question of whether or not divine violence can offer a route for critique of, and meaningful challenge to, prevailing forms of governance and subjectivity hinges on this point. To what extent, then, does divine violence serve the living? Is there a danger that Benjamin has fallen here into a trap of self-exemption in which he claims for himself a sovereign authorising voice for a violence ultimately no more defensible than that he targets? If divine violence strikes at subjectivities rather than bodies or individuals, what of the person is harmed and what survives? And perhaps most troublingly, if the soul – read as that which is of value in human life – has already been killed by mythic violence, does that make these spectre-subjects un-grievable as divine violence annihilates (parts of) them?

In ‘Force of Law’, Jacques Derrida considers these themes. His analysis is peppered with terms of agitation and discomfort: *Critique of Violence* is, he claims at intervals, uneasy, enigmatic, equivocal, unbearable, polyhydric, disconcerting, at once mystical and hypercritical. Among the reasons he gives for this trepidation are Benjamin’s nostalgia for an originary authenticity, his antiparliamentarian and anti-Enlightenment positioning, his elision of violence in God’s massacre at Korah, and his ‘obsessive thematic’ of annihilation and purification reminiscent of Heidegger’s *Destruktion*. Benjamin’s claim of bloodless killing and creative destruction work, Derrida argues, only if some elements of life and violence are discounted. If, following the Death of God, man’s ‘mere’ life becomes guilty and loses its sacred quality, then the killing of this mere life becomes not simply permissible but rather a nonkilling, since it is only the justice or the soul which is of value (2010: 289). Thus it becomes possible to ‘kill without bloodshed’. On account of this, Derrida alleges that at the same moment it delivers a truly radical disruption to ontopolitical violence, Benjamin’s writing surfaced and surfed on the same wave as Nazism (2010: 259) and ultimately leaves open ‘the temptation to think the holocaust as an uninterpretable manifestation of divine violence, ... an expiation and an indecipherable signature of the just and violent anger of God’ (2010: 298). As seductive as a purifying nonviolent violence might appear in the service of challenging mythic violence, then, for Derrida a fidelity to the victims of the holocaust requires that philosophical complicities and (unwitting) legitimations be thought and judged (2010: 298). It certainly invites us to reflect on the other historical examples in which killing has been framed as nonkilling, very often along racialised, ethnic, religious lines in imperial, genocidal, and biblical legacies.

Derrida's objections to Benjamin's inadequate guarding against 'the worst' have been insightfully explored by Judith Butler. She notes that the messianic Marxism of Benjamin's framing sits awkwardly with Derrida's worldview, but also overlaps with it in ways that might shed light on his trepidation. Butler argues that divine violence has the status of a commandment as opposed to a despotic or coercive imperative. By this she suggests that its authorial voice differs from that of mythical violence, making it an encounter with responsibility with which one must struggle in solitude (Butler: 212-5). She elucidates this claim by means of the Benjamin's recounting of the myth of Niobe, in which Leto, the goddess of fertility, kills Niobe's children and has her turned to stone as a punishment for having boasted of her greater fecundity. Leto's reimposition of the mythic order through this punishment exposes the violence at work in the gods' policing of mortals' speech-acts and subjectivities through which the former render the latter responsible for the violences inflicted upon them.

Benjamin seeks here to claim that a similar process is at work in the production and disciplining of subjectivity in the state's law-making and law-preserving violences, through which individuals are made responsible for violences which precede and produce them. In this framing, the mythic violence inflicted upon subjects is such that a divine rupture amounts to a reclamation. Benjamin's emphasis on the ways in which divine violence expiates subjects from the guilt imposed upon them by mythic violence holds insofar as those subjects can be read – like Niobe – as unproblematically the victims of the piece. Black people killed by police, colonised people struggling against imperial powers, or targets of homophobic or transphobic violence might be examples here. If, however, such subjects occupy a more complex position as at once privileged and subjugated – along lines of gender, race, class, and so forth – such divine violence becomes problematic. Most pernicious would be a claim to divine violence by privileged groups which view themselves as besieged – whether by immigrants, people of colour, members of other religions. Such a performance has just taken place in the storming of the Capitol building in the US by Trump supporters seeking to prevent the ratification of the popular vote in favour of Joe Biden. In short, the fungibility of divine violence presents a problem as it is readily deployable by reactionary as well as revolutionary forces.

In defence of Benjamin's project, we might assert with Srivastava that a qualitative difference exists between colonial violence and revolutionary violence (2010: 306). Both Sankar (2019) and Srivastava read Benjamin alongside Fanon, asking whether there can exist a 'revolutionary, "cleansing" violence (to paraphrase Fanon) that can distance itself, morally and politically, from a legal system and a state that claim to lay a monopoly on all forms of violence' (Srivastava 2010: 307). Such violence would be productive of new forms of humanity through the profound and radical transformation of the self (Srivastava 2010: 314).

This question hinges on four key points. First, for divine violence to enact something meaningfully different from mythic violence, a rupture with the latter is necessary. As Sankar notes, the salience of divine violence revolves around the notion of rupture (2019: 120). However, the claim to effective rupture is much easier than its realisation. Indeed,

it precisely because of the difficulty and pitfalls of claiming such a clean break with the mythic and the ontopolitical that Derrida argues instead for a deconstructive occupation which inhabits and subverts from within regimes of power and violence. As Derrida convincingly shows, claims of a definitive rupture are most often enacted because of a desire for good conscience and clean hands, in other words for the sake of the self rather than the living.

Second, even if such a radical break with the violence of the status quo were possible, can we be as confident as Benjamin appears to be that all such ruptures are progressive? While those in the service of anti-colonial struggle and antiracism can readily be thought as creative destruction, as Benjamin Noys has argued (2012), the broader politics of affirmationist political projects are by no means so clear cut. Indeed, in his eagerness to annihilate the mythic violence of the current order Benjamin seems, as Butler puts it, 'to conjure similar images of lawless masses rising up to do all sorts of physical violence in the name of some sacred power. Is this Benjamin riding "an antiparliamentary wave," one that brings him perilously close to fascism?' (2006: 215). Writing this only days after the storming of the US Capitol building by armed neo-Nazis wearing slogans like 'Auschwitz Camp' and 'Six Million Wasn't Enough' who erected a hanging scaffold and beat people of colour, the possibility of a disastrous reactionary rupture is all too real.

Third, is Benjamin correct in his wholesale repudiation of guilt and the capacity of divine violence to expiate it from politics and subjectivity? The myth of Niobe provides a powerful allegory for how mythic violence produces guilty subjects by rendering them responsible for the violence it inflicts upon them. As Butler relays, this establishes a situation in which, denied supernatural authorisation, man is in league with 'mere' life and is therefore forced into sorrow (2006: 210). In such violent interpellation, the expiation of guilt made possible by divine violence would indeed seem justified. But, at the risk of betraying a certain (post)Catholic heritage, it does not follow that all guilt emanates from this source, nor that all guilt is a pernicious force in ethico-political terms. To be sure, guilt risks the 'fugitive narcissism' Butler identifies (2006: 216), but it is also the case that the assumption of legitimacy, defensibility, or entitlement bring with them their own perils. One may simply ask whether empire, crusades, domestic violence and so forth are caused by too little, rather than too much, guilt. While guilt may do more harm than good, a politics of 'indefensibility' might incorporate a critical vigilance as both a motivation and mode of thinking. Though likely incompatible with divine violence, such a commitment to indefensibility at the level of be(com)ing may have ethical and political purchase. One might also ask whether there is a motivated reasoning to the rejection of guilt as such in the context of (Western) political theory. If such a drive is in evidence, this casts doubt on the claim that divine violence functions for the sake of the living, implying instead a self-serving dimension which legitimises the violent steps taken to extricate the self from violence by denying they are violent (Butler 2006: 2016).

Finally, the eschatological ending of *Critique of Violence* requires further accounting. Derrida argues, and laments, that Benjamin concludes his essay by invoking a sovereign licence for divine violence. This move, Derrida asserts, amounts to Benjamin signing

as God, invoking absolute privilege and infinite prerogative (2010: 293). In so doing, Benjamin lurches from a radical destabilisation of ontopolitical arrangements to a rigid reterritorialization. Insofar as God is the ultimate and unassailable authorising figure, Benjamin claims legitimacy for divine violence which his own framing expressly forbids. Put differently, Benjamin's invocation of a sovereign licence appears to reinscribe the mediation explicitly prohibited by the criterion that divine violence has no authorisation or end outside of its own mediacy. If this is what, as Derrida argues, Benjamin invokes in his appeal to sovereign violence, he appears to exempt himself from the terms of his own framing, something done for the sake of the self rather than the living.

The following contradictory conclusion results from these ambiguities: read as a diagnosis of past and contemporary political atrophy and a call to problematise and transcend our shackled subjectivities, *Critique of Violence* offers energy and tools useful for decolonisation, in both our external and internal worlds. However, read as an appeal to a distinctly Judeo-Christian eschatology which allows Benjamin to claim – on behalf of the future movements he hopes to enable – an authority from outside of history, *Critique of Violence* is of limited value to the projects that confront colonialism and coloniality. This is because the appeal to the universality and accessibility (at least to the chosen few) of God's perspective is a trope of colonial thinking (Grosfoguel 2012), and risks foreclosing the space for pluriversal and multivocal ontologies and epistemologies that decolonising theory has fought to open. Against Derrida's reading, however, we argue Benjamin's divine violence is not an absolute and singular prerogative, invoked against particular instances of mythic violence crystallised into legal orders. Instead it is the mythic/legal order that is absolute, encompassing, for Benjamin, the whole of history. Divine violence in *Critique of Violence* is the counterpart to Messianic time in *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (Benjamin 1999: 254-255); it is arrayed against the entire "continuum of history" (1999: 254). It is the unity of history, and the total asymmetry between the power of the oppressed and the power of what oppresses them, that makes legitimate the claim of revolutionary violence to be divine. Reactionary violence – the 'worst' that Derrida worries will also be licenced by the concept of divine violence – cannot belong to this category as it is a continuation of rather than a rupture in the continuum of history as a history of oppression. Read in this way, Benjamin's Marxist inheritance is clear: while capitalism is not an overt system of personal oppression (and indeed, for Marx, the capitalist is as much enslaved to the discipline of capital as is the worker), it is the inheritor and continuation of all preceding forms of society based on the appropriation and domination of labour. Divine violence, rather than applying variously to all forms of seemingly law-destroying violence, would in this case apply only to that violence which might forever undo the enslavement of the living by the logic of capital: the revolutionary general strike.

Conceived as tied to the unity of history-as-oppression, divine violence seems clearly relevant to decolonisation, which recognises the lethal continuation and perhaps even deepening of colonial power in post-colonial modernity. Indeed, Sankar argues that Benjamin's political project is *only* relevant today in the service of anti-colonial politics (2019: 121). The *living*, for whose sake divine violence is invoked, are reinscribed as

colonised subjects, meaning colonial rule can be apprehended properly as a mythic violence that crystallises into legality/modernity. It is here that the limits of Benjamin's divine violence become clearer.

The force of Benjamin's messianic-Marxist imaginary flows from the *absolute* asymmetry between the 'living' (which we can read in terms of Marx's distinction between living labour and undead capital (Marx 1990: 342) and the all-encompassing logic of domination that enslaves them. But the divine, revolutionary violence that would obviate this order, and abolish the working class itself, became less and less thinkable in the decades after Benjamin's death, not because its fatal descent into fascism was completed, but because the European proletariat became partial beneficiaries of that order. Capital progressively outsourced the worst and most exploitative parts of the capital-labour relation, eventually transforming Western Europe into a deindustrialised service/consumer economy, propped up by underpaid labour, especially in the former colonies. This is what makes it difficult to transpose *Critique of Violence*, and Benjamin's broader political project into decolonising territory: colonialism rarely operated by instituting a total cleavage between coloniser and colonised, which would be necessary for the absolute asymmetry on which Benjamin's appeal to the divine rests. Instead, colonial rule operated by *both* asserting the difference between coloniser and colonised, *and* by differentiating between various colonised sub-groups along lines of race, caste, class and religion. The 'rule of colonial difference' (Chatterjee 1994: 16-27), which casts some colonised groups as having come closer to 'catching up' to European ideas of enlightenment and civilisation, became the basis for incorporation and even reward within the colonial order, often premised on the participation of colonised elites in the repression of other colonised groups.

The rule of colonial difference, and its relevance to postcolonial global modernity, complicates a Benjaminian reading of anti-colonial struggles that locates the defensibility of its violence in the total asymmetry of the oppressed and the historically-crystallised forces that oppress them. 'For the sake of the living' cannot be claimed so easily, especially with reference to those who would defend their status *within* the (post-)colonial rule of difference, unless we allow some dubious appeal to an 'authentic' subjecthood that would be saved by a law-destroying violence that obviates the colonial order, in order to disregard any of the living's actual objections. We do not wish to argue here that anti-colonial or decolonising projects must be tempered by a liberal respect for those who would rather not risk the status quo, only that Benjamin's concept of divine violence only *appears* to ground the absolute defensibility of revolutionary, colonialism-annihilating violence. This seductive premise rests on a reading of colonialism as the total difference and asymmetry of the oppressed and that which oppresses them, whether this means the colonisers or the colonial system (to the extent that they can be disaggregated). Such a Manichean reading of colonialism, while perhaps politically invigorating, commits a simplification that sits ill at ease with generations of postcolonial scholarship. Ultimately, Benjamin cannot show us 'how to distinguish between "purifying" violence, an end in itself and limited in time and execution, and the perpetuation of colonial violence in its postcolonial incarnations remains an open and troubling question' (Srivastava 2010: 318).

Between Niobe and Edward Colston Statues: On Profane Contagion of Colonialism

Vinicius Armele

There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.

—Walter Benjamin (2005: 70)

On 7 June 2020, protesters associated with the Black Lives Matter¹ movement toppled down the statue of slave trader Edward Colston (1636-1721) and later threw it into the Bristol Harbour. Colston, a senior official at the Royal African Company in the late 17th century, is estimated to have made a fortune by trafficking 84 000 men, women, and children traded as slaves in West Africa, with 19 000 dying on the journey to the Caribbean and the Americas. The statue was erected in 1895 in the centre of Bristol as a tribute to slavery, to commemorate Colston's philanthropy for contributing to the economy through the slave trade². As David Blandy (2019) notes, most public sculptures celebrate 'figure-heads of empire, the powerful and wealthy, who shaped public discourse and have consolidated Britain's position through war, colonization, and the enslavement of others.'

To tear it down, Bristol protestors used a coiled rope. Soon after, some placed their knees against the statue in reference to the police action that culminated in the assassination of George Floyd, rolled him to the port, and threw him into the river. The images quickly gained worldwide repercussion, triggering an intense debate on slavery and colonialism, bringing to the surface another conception about the British past, and stimulating new struggles against racism.

Amidst the various discussions galvanized by this event in the public debate, the issue of violence stands out: is this considered a violent act? In what sense? Walter Benjamin offers a unique perspective to analyse this phenomenon, as well as other manifestations of contemporary struggles. In *Critique of Violence* [*Zur Kritik der Gewalt*]³, Benjamin elaborates a critical theory of law understood in the figure of sovereign power. It establishes the limits of individual action by norm, overcoming an essential precept of the modern rule of law that revolves around the idea of consensus to constitute itself as a means of asserting a specific power. Therefore, violence is seen as a fundamental part of the law, as it guarantees the legal purposes that sustain it. In addition, the law monopolizes power and control in the form of legal systems, ensuring the role of the state's empire over individuals within the framework of the law itself⁴.

Hence, Benjamin seeks to mark various domains in which *Gewalt* is exercised, mainly reflecting upon the opposition between the 'power as violence' of law and the state and the 'violence as power' of the revolutionary strike. Benjamin's essay is notoriously challenging, and there are many distinctions to be dealt with. For this article, we will address two sets of essential distinctions. First is between the violence that establishes the law [*rechtsetzend*] and the violence that maintains the law [*rechtserhaltend*], and then between 'mythical' and 'divine' violence. According to Benjamin (2011: 136), 'all violence as a means is either lawmaking or law preserving'⁵.



Image 1: Protesters knocking over Colston's statue

Source: AFP/William Want [Twitter @willwantwrites].



Image 2: Protesters throwing the Colston statue at the Bristol Harbour

Source: Ben Birchall/PA via AP.

As Butler (2020: 1905) reminds us, while law-preserving violence, which the courts and the police exercise, represents constant and institutionalized efforts to ensure that the law continues to bind the population it governs and repeatedly imposes its obligation on subjects, lawmaking violence is different. Benjamin demonstrates that the act of imposing the law of lawmaking is the work of fate⁶ – a term that has a specific meaning to him. Fate belongs to the Hellenic realm of myth, and law-preserving violence is, in many ways, the by-product of lawmaking violence because the law that is being maintained is precisely the one that has already been established (Butler 2020: 1905).

The second distinction, albeit delicate and complex, is essential to this analysis. The author evokes the opposition between the violence he calls 'mythical' – related to the violence of the law – and the violence deemed 'divine', which is external to the law, endowed with the capacity to destroy law itself⁷.

Therefore, this work seeks to recover the ancient tragedy's role of reluctance in the face of the previously unquestionable power of the violence of mythical destiny. The purpose of the article is to recover the criticism of the violence established in the manifestation of its ethical relations between law [*Recht*] and justice [*Gerechtigkeit*]. It intends to reveal the overlap between the experience of historical time and the orientation of current political struggles, as the event of Bristol demonstrates, reopening a historic wound of colonialism and national memory.

Romanticism as revolutionary violence

Arendt's (2008: 176) description of Benjamin as 'probably the most unique Marxist ever produced by this movement that, God knows, had its full share of eccentricities' led authors to identify him with a 'Marxism of melancholy' (Konder 1988) or even a kind of 'gothic Marxism' (Löwy 2005: 26). The pessimism that is manifested in Benjamin, according to Michael Löwy (2005: 26), represents a type of 'revolutionary melancholy', which would translate to the feeling of disaster repetition, that is, the 'fear of an eternal return of defeats.'

As Löwy (2005: 15-17) shows us, Benjamin's philosophy of history is based on three distinct sources: German Romanticism, Jewish messianism, and Marxism. However, his thinking is not a mere combination or eclectic 'synthesis' of these three supposedly incompatible perspectives, but rather, his own theoretical construction. Rejecting the Hegelian teleology of history present in Marxism but maintaining the aspect of class struggle in combination with Jewish messianism, the author engenders a profoundly original and heterodox conception of emancipation, in which the nostalgia of the past is used as a revolutionary method for criticizing the present. Here is a central aspect of Benjamin's criticism: his 'anti-progressive' perspective on the philosophy of history and his criticism of positivism, understood as a common denominator of conservative historicism, social-democratic evolutionism, and the 'official' Marxism dominant at the time (Löwy 2005: 33)⁸.

Walter Benjamin's view of modernity conveys a severe criticism of industrial civilization. It opens up possibilities for thinking about forms of ruptures, impelling the creation of a new concept of revolution: the messianic revolution, which leads to the idea of a rupture with the existing. Again in *Zur Kritik der Gewalt*, Benjamin proclaims the possibility of revolutionary violence, the highest manifestation of pure violence by men. This rupture could bring forward a future justice linked to the world of truth, coming from the world of politics, of the profane, which would break the dialectic of mythical violence that establishes and preserves the legal order. Given this possibility, Romanticism, present within the author's thought, sets a new relationship with nature, refusing its instrumentalized

understanding embedded in modernity. At its core, Romanticism carries a revolutionary power that is critical of the industrial-capitalist civilization. The aesthetic glimpse of another form of subjective and social life allows us to question the dystopia of the present in the form of an economic/social/planetary catastrophe and paves the way for a radical utopian alternative.

According to Löwy (2005: 18), Romanticism is not limited to literature and art, nor to the historical period in which the so-called 'romantic' movements of the early 19th century developed; it is a 'true world view, a style of thinking, a structure of sensitivity that manifests itself in all spheres of cultural life, from Rousseau to the Surrealists.' Löwy and Sayre (2015: 34) define the romantic worldview [*Weltanschauung*] as a collective mental structure that is in itself cultural criticism of modern (capitalist) civilization in the name of pre-modern (pre-capitalist) values. Thus, Romanticism is a resistance to the way of life in modern capitalist society; it is a form of (self) criticism of the modernity produced within. The romantic view of the world represents an inherent questioning of the market economy and the society dominated by it, pursuing the recovery of specific essential human values lost with the alienation, reification, and generalization of commodity fetishism (Löwy and Sayre 2015).

The romantic opposition to capitalist-industrial modernity reacts against some characteristics and meanings of this modernity that seem intolerable, unbearable, and degrading, such as the disenchantment of the world; the quantification and mechanization of life; the rationalist abstraction that organizes all economic, social, and political life according to the requirements of bureaucratic rationality; and the dissolution of the community's social bonds (Löwy and Sayre 2015: 52-67). However, it should be noted that this nostalgic look from the past does not necessarily make it retrograde as well. As Löwy (2005: 19) points out, for revolutionary Romanticism, 'the objective is not a return to the past, but a detour through it, towards a utopian future'. In this sense, Romanticism involves melancholic nostalgia and the experience of loss, revealing all its critical strength against ideologies of progress. Romanticism actively values positive traits, through the valuation of individual subjectivity, freedom of imagination, and the unity of the human community, mainly because it refuses fragmentation and the instrumentalized understanding of life imposed by modernity and the individualistic liberal view (Löwy 2005: 265).⁹

Within this framework of influence among dominant cultural forms in late-19th century Germany, a relation will deeply mark Benjamin's thinking amid cognitive meshes of aesthetic, theological, and historiographic ideas. The famous figure of the *flâneur*, notorious in the writings on Benjamin's Baudelaire, is well known and reaffirms his approach to Surrealism, in which the desire for idleness is marked as a profanation of the fundamental value of bourgeois society on wage labour as untouchable (D'Angelo 2006: 246).

Benjamin's reading of Marxism had its roots in the romantic critique of industrial civilization; it sought to bring a new philosophy of history that was more radical, Marxist, and messianic, which would allow us to 'brush history against the grain', that is, from the point of view of losers (2005: 70). Therefore, pessimism is the point of effective convergence between surrealism and communism, insofar as it is not a contemplative feeling, but

an active, practical pessimism that is contrasted with the optimism linked to the ideology of linear progress, of the 'illusions of progress' present, above all, in the thought of the German and European left (Löwy 2002: 201-2).

Between guilt and profanation

In rejecting the modern cult of progressivism, Benjamin centres his philosophy of history on the concept of catastrophe. It attacks the ideology of progress in all its components, representing the industrial barbarity of technical and scientific progress. According to Bhabha (2013: 24), unlike the 'dead hand of history that counts sequential time accounts as a rosary, seeking to establish serial, causal connections,' it is necessary to recover Benjamin's description as 'the explosion of a monadic moment since the homogeneous course of history,' establishing a conception of the present as the 'time of now.'

Here, the question of the 'metaphysics of historical temporality' is verified. Benjamin opposes the linear and quantitative view of history and proposes a qualitative perception of temporality [*qualitative zeitliche Unendlichkeit*] that stems from romantic messianism. In his view, time is an eminently dialectical process. Temporality is seen as an excellent continuity that drags through the transmission of tradition. However, there is room for contradiction. The messiah is the figure that brings redemption. He is the utopian image that breaks out and interrupts the time continuum and its tendency to progress. The possibility is based on remembrance and rupture, revolt and melancholy, messianic/revolutionary interruption of the continuity of the tradition of the oppressed in favour of the realization of human life and not simply of becoming. 'Redemption is a task that takes place in the present' (Löwy 2002: 204-205; 2005: 21 and 53). To the extent that 'capitalism is a religion of mere worship, without dogma,' messianic fulfilment is the liberating profanation of men (Benjamin 2019: 37).

Benjamin uses the legend of Niobe to better illustrate the understanding of mythical violence not only as an open wound in history due to punishment but also the very manifestation of gods in lawmaking violence. In Greek mythology, Niobe was the daughter of Tantalus and Dione, and from her marriage to Amphion, king of Thebes, she had seven sons and seven daughters. Niobe would then have risen as superior to the goddess Leto and should be worshipped instead of her. Feeling offended, Leto asked her children, Apollo, and Artemis, to avenge her by killing Niobe's sons and then her daughters. In desperation, Niobe kills herself. However, Zeus intervenes and turns her into a statue, forever petrified on Mount Sipylus in Lydia (Leeming 2009: 289, Benjamin 2011: 147).

Benjamin (2011: 147-148) argues that the action of Apollo and Artemis extends beyond the execution of a punishment resulting from a transgression, as their killing is the lawmaking violence upon the one who defied destiny (that could not fail to prevail). In addition to manifesting the convinced violence practised by the Gods, the aftermath of Niobe represents the burden of forever carrying the blame on the dead, transforming it into the silent petrification of the limit between men and gods, the bearer of the endless memory of the oppressed. As Butler (2017: 84) points out, punishment produces the

subject bound by law, it is the transformation of Niobe into a juridical subject, that is, the act of fury of the gods acts performatively to mark and transform Niobe, petrifying the subject, interrupting her life in the moment of guilt, paralyzed in this state of perpetual guilt, as it turns the subject who carries it into stone.

Considering the collapse of Edward Colston's statue, one ought to question: why does the fall of historical monuments still surprise us? As Benjamin prophesied, 'tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of exception" in which we live is the rule', the tradition in the present is precisely the transmission of massacres and wars from the past to the future (2005: 83). In this perspective, the 'enemy has not ceased to win,' which is why the danger of the present is the constant fear of being dominated by the ruling class. The intensity of this phenomenon assures that even 'the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious; [a]nd this enemy has never ceased to be victorious' (Benjamin 2005: 65, 70).

If history is written in the 'opposite direction,' there is a need to refuse affective identification with official heroes – for example, the colonizers –, those are the ones that remain in the 'triumphal procession' of the winners over those who are 'lying prostrate.' It means deeming each monument of colonial culture a document of barbarism, a product of war, extermination, and oppression. Therefore, there should be no moral or 'philosophical astonishment' about the fall of the statues. They are precisely the representation of history, of the 'one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it at its feet' (2005: 70, 87). In the same way that the punishment transformed Niobe, the colonial past, which is a continuous present, produces the subject bound by law. The continuum of history, which derives from the oppressors, remains inscribed and marked on the bodies of the oppressed, representing the mythical violence that endures in history.

A second interesting question to ask would be: what is the difference between Niobe's statue and Colston's statue in terms of forms of 'life' and responsibility? In a way, Niobe represents the economy of infinite penance and atonement. She is a life condemned by guilt to become a weeping stone, partially stiff, hardened in and with guilt, but full of grief, weeping endlessly at that petrified fountain. Butler (2020: 1915) reminds us that Niobe would be dead with guilt if not for her sadness and her tears. Niobe's guilt is externally imposed; she takes responsibility for the death of her children as a result of the blow dealt by the gods. Being a subject in these terms (a juridical subject) means taking responsibility for a violence that precedes the subject and whose operation is occluded by him, which comes to attribute the violence he suffers to his own acts (Butler 2020: 1915). Therefore, the formation of the subject who occludes the operation of violence by placing themselves as the only cause of what they suffer is an additional operation of this violence.

In this sense, fate establishes the coercive conditions of law over the subject of guilt. It binds the person to the law, instituting the subject as the singular cause for his suffering, immersing Niobe in the form of responsibility dominated by guilt (Butler 2020: 1915). Meanwhile, Colston's is a statue of a man long dead, but it represents the maintenance of colonialism in a post-colonial society. However, before this recent event, there was not any guilt imposed upon him. He does not carry any blame for his actions, not for any death nor blood on his hands. In other words, he does not suffer; he is not a subject of guilt. In

that sense, he is ‘inculpable’, ‘irreproachable’, ‘uninvolved’ and ‘righteous’. Thus, colonialism is a form of life that remains innocent and crimeless.

The third and last question of this work is: how does the critique of this idea of representation allow us to think about a messianic revolution? Two events resulting from the collapse of the Colston statue are interesting in this sense. The first concern was changing its location on Google Maps to the new ‘position’ within the river made by an internet user. The second was the suggestion given by the famous street artist Banksy, who proposed a new representation of the Colston statue. For the artist, it would be an idea that caters for ‘both those who miss the Colston statue and those who don’t, (...) we drag him out the water, put him back on the plinth, tie cable around his neck, and commission some life-size bronze statues of protestors in the act of pulling him down. Everyone [is] happy. A famous day commemorated.’



Image 3: Colston statue on Google maps

Source: Google.



Image 4: Banksy's suggestion

Source: Instagram.

The above images show what Agamben (2007: 23-5) calls profanation in action. Profanation means restoring to the unrestricted use and property of human beings what has left the sphere of human law. Thus, profanation presupposes the existence of the sacred [*sacer*], the act of withdrawing from common use. Profaning, therefore, means touching the consecrated to free it (and free itself) from the sacred and promote a new use to it.

In the first situation, there is the desecration of the symbol, initially in a public place of celebration, now in its new historical position, at the bottom of the river, but without being erased from the city. In the second image, we see the importance of the criticism of representation, insofar as the idea of preserving the statue is profaned, and it preserves its romantic messianic strength by incorporating the elements of the revolt in its new structure. To believe that history evolves and that, necessarily, these statues need to be forgotten would be to believe in the progressiveness denounced by Benjamin and would not honour the dead themselves.

Benjamin (2013: 21-3) argued that capitalism acts like a religion. According to him, in the West, capitalism developed as a parasite of Christianity. In that sense, capitalism is a purely cult religion devoid of dogma. Benjamin marks that capitalism is a celebration of a cult *sans trêve et sans merci* (without truce and mercy) that has a permanent duration of the service and is the first case of non-expiatory but blaming worship. In other words, it is a religion that no longer cares about reform of being but with is crumbling because God must be hidden and can only be invoked at the zenith of their guilt (2013: 21-3).

For Agamben, capitalism acts like a religion because of its ability to remove things, places, animals, or people from everyday use and transfer them to a separate sphere (Agamben 2007: 23). If we analyse colonialism through these lenses, we can observe that it also operates as a religion because, as well as capitalism, colonialism can also create separate spheres without truce or mercy. Both colonialism and the overthrow of the statue are representations of history. They are inscribed on the bodies and must be transmitted in a history that does not know how to expiate but blames the same bodies.

We can correlate this idea with what Grosfoguel (2016: 31-32) calls 'epistemic structures of the "capitalist, patriarchal, western, Christian, modern and colonialist world-system" created from colonial expansion in 1492 that stimulated the new racial logic of genocide/epistemicide on the part of Christians. According to him, Western man's epistemic privilege was built at the expense of the genocide/epistemicides of colonial subjects, which creates the right to say 'I think, therefore I am' (*Ego cogito*) is the "I exterminate, therefore I am" (*Ego extermino*). In that way, the God of colonialism (racial logic of genocide/epistemicide) must also be hidden and invoked to blame the subject.

The passage from the sacred to the profane is a 'profane contagion', a touch that 'disenchants and returns to use what the sacred had separated and petrified' (Agamben 2007: 24). The event should not be ignored or celebrated but must ensure that its representation is never forgotten.

As Benjamin reminds us: the 'true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the moment of its recognizability and is never seen again,' also adding that 'it is an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear

in any present that does not recognize itself as intended in that image' (2005: 62). This leads us to reflect on whether, perhaps, simply toppling the statue, as it is a representation of the truth, and erasing the memories of the slavery past, we would not be making the mistake of trying to cover this fragment of the past and ignoring the deaths and debris for the sake of progress. Therefore, it is a misplaced hope that suffering will redeem us in the future through romanticization and naturalization (opposite to what Romanticism sought). Simply erasing the figure of the oppressor from the landscape can be pretty comfortable for him. For this reason, in Benjamin's perspective, the most important thing would be to profane this representation; after all, we have been given, each generation, a 'weak messianic power' (2005: 48). We must profane the representation, whether in the virtual moment of image 3 or as in image 4 that seeks to petrify the messianic revolt itself, re-signifying the representation of the truth, recalling a transmission of the oppressed that breaks out the continuum of history, that is, nothing less than perhaps a 'pure violence' [*reine Gewalt*].

Conclusion

Interpreting Walter Benjamin is a defying contemplative challenge that always leads to violating his words. Nevertheless, this work sought to reclaim Benjamin to reflect on the struggles of the present. We have recovered Benjamin's contribution to Romanticism, demonstrating the critical revolutionary power to the industrial-capitalist civilization immanent to him and how it can be operated to enact a critique of violence through the messianic revolution. It is not fortuitous that Michael Löwy describes the author as a 'philosopher of the open present, which includes the possible.' Löwy recovers the author's 'fire alarm' due to the catastrophe that accumulates up to the sky and calls the revolution an 'emergency brake' in the face of incessant advances of progress (2005; 2019). Through the example of the overthrow of Edward Colston's statue in Bristol by the Black Lives Matter movement, we demonstrated the overlap between the experience of historical time and the orientation of current political struggles, as these call into question the historic victories of the oppressors, insofar as they undermine the legitimacy of the power of the ruling, old and new classes. The event of overthrowing the statue and other social revolts that reopen the wounds of oppression and desecrate its symbols, instead of erasing them, are manifestations that allow us to glimpse the idea of the messianic revolution. Therefore, we reinforce the importance of Benjamin's criticism, which remains profoundly prophetic, decisively profane.

Notes

- 1 [Note by Armele] Black Lives Matter (BLM) is an international activist movement; it is a decentralized political and social movement that protests against police brutality and racially motivated violence against black people. While specific organizations such as the Black Lives Matter Global Network, founded in 2013 in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer, label themselves simply as 'Black Lives Matter', the Black Lives Matter movement comprises a broad array of people and organizations. For more information, see <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>

- 2 [Note by Armele] For more information, see <https://www.pmsa.org.uk/vision>
- 3 [Note by Armele] It is essential to highlight the polysemic character of the word used by Benjamin. *Gewalt* comes from the verb *walten*: meaning 'to rule', 'to reign', 'to have power over'. Thus, *Gewalt* can mean both violence and power.
- 4 [Note by Armele] The historical process involves the dialectical movement of power configurations while instituting and maintaining order. Benjamin called this phenomenon the spatiotemporal mutability of the law. Over time, there are oscillations in the dynamics of the law in which the power that maintains the law ends up indirectly weakening the power that instituted it. Due to dynamics of resistance that law faces over time, whether because of external opposition or deregulation of internal order. this process extends until new powers, or those previously oppressed, overcome the then instituted power, forging a new law that underlies a new historical era but subject to new decay.
- 5 [Note by Armele] During the revolutionary situation, there was initial violence that established legal order. This founding violence does not abdicate the possibility of violence that maintains the law, sanctioned and administered by that law – it establishes such possibility instead. 'Lawmaking is power making, and, to that extent, an immediate manifestation of violence. Justice is the principle of all divine end making, power [*Macht*] the principle of all mythical lawmaking' (Benjamin 2011: 148).
- 6 [Note by Armele] Benjamin's word for 'fate' is *das Shicksal*. For an approach to Benjamin's concept of fate, see Benjamin 1969.
- 7 [Note by Armele] The concept of 'mythical' violence starts from a distinction between lawmaking violence and law-preserving violence. The distinction is presented when second violence manages to justify itself as mediate violence due to the legitimacy of its historical process. In this way, what will establish these means as legitimate or not is the very violence that establishes the law; that is, the means is only legitimate after the lawmaking violence reaches its own end – of establishing itself as law. According to Benjamin (2011: 150), because the mythical power does not inaugurate a purer sphere, showing itself only as identical to all legal violence, Benjamin will elaborate a pure *Gewalt*, a 'pure sphere' that can break and abolish the mythical power because of the harmful character of its historical function. This pure violence or this pure power [*reine Gewalt*] would depose the law. That is the excellent point of the author's critique of violence, which should apply to the relationship between means and ends. Since violence is 'divine' as a 'pure sphere,' it would be characterized by not constituting a means to specific ends but by relating itself differently to the pair means/end.
- 8 [Note by Armele] Unlike Marxisms of his time, Benjamin used this doctrine as a heuristic-methodological stimulus; his concern centred on the intimate connection between the spirit and its material manifestation, which would allow the author to reveal the correspondences between the object and its meaning. From this aspect, it is possible to verify the influence of surrealism through the attempt to capture the portrait of history in representations of reality, and Romanticism (including the adjective 'gothic'), as it is sensitive to the magical dimension of past cultures, to the moment of rupture of revolutionary action, and also for the positive reference of profane medieval culture (Löwy 2005: 26).
- 9 [Note by Armele] According to Hanssen and Benjamin (2002: 1), the writings of the Early Romantics (*Friihromantik*) have left a complex philosophical legacy in the relationship between Early Romanticism and modernity. For the authors, this has at least two reasons. First, because 'early Romanticism ushered in a new philosophy of history and understanding of historical time as prophetic renewal and infinite becoming in the present, whose revolutionary potential, (...) was to be actualized through unprecedented interpretive and poetic practices'. Second, the legacy of Early Romanticism is the centrality of criticism (*Kritik*). In other words, Romantic criticism demanded, 'not simply amount to a subject-centred, speculative appropriation of the object under analysis.' Nevertheless, for Hanssen and Benjamin (2002: 1), Romantic criticism demanded an 'altogether different thinking, indeed "activation", of the object and hence a different construction of the artwork; it was variously conceived as the fragment, the project, the experiment or as poetry (*Poesie*) - that is, poetry as the progressive, universal project of production and becoming'.

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Lembranças Coloniais, Restos Coloniais: Fórum sobre a Atualidade da ‘Crítica da Violência’ de Benjamin em seu Centenário, Parte II

Resumo: Walter Benjamin publicou seu influente ensaio “Crítica da Violência”/ “Zur Kritik der Gewalt” em 1921, e o trabalho tem incomodado e provocado pensadores de várias disciplinas por 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. Na Parte II do Fórum, Aggie Hirst, Tom Houseman e Vinícius Armele baseiam-se em Benjamin para analisar o que resta do colonialismo europeu. Hirst e Houseman interrogam até que ponto a noção de violência divina de Walter Benjamin pode ser útil ao serviço da luta descolonial. Na medida em que é antitética à ordem colonial – que é inaugurada e reproduzida pelas funções de criação e preservação da lei da violência mítica – a violência divina parece abrir um espaço para conceituar um desafio abrangente à violência criptografada nessa ordem que é ‘letal sem derramar sangue’. Como o exercício de tal ‘poder sobre toda a vida’ é exercido ‘em nome da vida’, argumenta Benjamin, seus sacrifícios acompanhantes são aceitáveis. Baseando-se na teoria pós-colonial e descolonial, Hirst e Houseman oferecem uma crítica da ‘visão de Deus’ inerente a qualquer reivindicação de violência divina. O texto de Benjamin pode gerar insights poderosos sobre a natureza e os limites das lutas descoloniais, mas acaba falhando em fornecer uma alternativa à violência mítica que critica, reproduzindo – no coração do conceito emancipatório de violência divina – uma problemática imitação de uma voz autoral divina que já é um tropo da colonialidade. A reflexão de Armele busca recuperar o papel da tragédia antiga de relutância em relação ao poder anteriormente inquestionável da violência do destino mítico. Retoma as contribuições de Benjamin sobre (1) melancolia e Romantismo, que representa a revolta da subjetividade e afetividade reprimidas, canalizadas e deformadas, e (2) a crítica da violência que se estabelece na manifestação de suas relações éticas entre lei [Recht] e justiça [Gerechtigkeit], Armele revela o entrelaçamento da experiência do tempo histórico e a orientação das lutas políticas atuais. Inspirado por Benjamin, ele examina a ação do movimento Black Lives Matters em Bristol, Reino Unido, que derrubou uma estátua do comerciante de escravos Edward Colston e a jogou no porto da cidade, reabrindo uma ferida histórica do colonialismo e da memória nacional.

Palavras-chave: Walter Benjamin; colonialismo; descolonização; Romantismo; violência; revolta; modernidade; profanação.

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