

Violence, Education, and the Tradition of the Oppressed in Benjamin and Du Bois

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses two thinkers who locate the possibility of revolutionary historical change in political projects oriented toward the formation of subjects and cultivation of sensibility. I begin by considering the relationship between historical violence and education in the works of Walter Benjamin. After introducing the provocative association of education with divine violence found in “Toward the Critique of Violence,” I expand on Benjamin’s conception of pedagogical force. Highlighting the centrality of education in Benjamin’s early work, I argue that his account of learning does not depend on the mastery of students by teachers, nor more generally on the mastery of objective reality by a sovereign subject, but on the mastery of the educational relationship by tradition. Drawing on W.E.B. Du Bois’ discussion of the abolition of slavery, I close by describing the revolutionary cultivation of sensibility as a dynamic and collectively achieved mode of historical learning.

BIO

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FULL TEXT

When the diagnosis of crisis is ubiquitous the question often arises as to the subject for whom the impending disaster could become a learning experience. Violence, shock, and woundedness

awaken hopes of redemption or meaningful incorporation. Who learns from crisis, and how do historical conditions facilitate or block this learning? I want to consider this question by turning to the early twentieth century – a time when the identification of crisis was just as widespread across the political spectrum as it is today. Early twentieth century attempts to think through the crisis of Weimar democracy and the failure of the revolutions across western and central Europe often tied their analysis to a unified and internally organized body capable of rising to the critical occasion. In philosophical works of the period, this thematic focus was found equally for example in Schmitt's conception of the sovereign,¹ and in the works of Marxists such as Lukács, for whom the proletarian party is the historical agent capable of exploiting the crises of capitalism in order to usher in a communist revolution.² As the theoretical apprehension and description of crisis reached a high degree of complexity during this period, the way of conceiving the "subject" of crisis varied, depending on the methodologies and political orientation of the authors.

Here we will explore a problem facing theories of an internally organized subject of historical crisis that are oriented toward a fundamental transformation of social and political reality. For those seeking a permanent end to the capitalist catastrophe rather than a better adjustment to its conditions, the need to incorporate crisis appears to demand a commitment to mastery, giving theory the role of developing the understanding of the agent capable of guiding the historical moment – whether this agent is a party, a revolutionary sect, or a class. Once theory has assigned itself this position, however, it might begin to seem that present problems do not lie in the historical nature of political power itself – in its internal and external dialectic – but

¹ Schmitt, *Political Theology*.

² Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*.

merely in the fact that it is held by the wrong people. In this way, the actuality of crisis can push theory into a premature fixation on immediately available objects and subjects, through which it forms its resistance only within the narrow terms and limited forms given by capitalist society. The theoretical apprehension of crisis thus threatens to produce its own catastrophe, in which the fundamental demand for critique is flattened, *via* an apparent need for control, into a rigid and lifeless form. This problem alerts us to the need for a consideration of crisis and learning that holds itself open to the realization of living subjects whose struggle against capitalism necessitates an essential transformation of its reified social forms, and thus a change in their own processes of self-formation. I want to suggest that theoretical and practical projects seeking to navigate crisis without succumbing to these rigidities might find resources in a philosophical consideration of political educational formation.

I will consider crisis and education through a reading of Walter Benjamin's "Toward the Critique of Violence," and other works surrounding this text's publication. Over the first three sections, I argue that the "subject" of crisis for Benjamin is an educational tradition. Beginning with Benjamin's discussion of divine violence as a form of compulsion fundamentally outside of law and the means-ends relationship it engenders, I next examine this work's association of divine violence with education, comparing it to other treatments of education in Benjamin's *oeuvre*. The relationship between educative violence and divine violence in this work alerts us to the possibility of a destructive form of learning through which the historically achieved rigidities of an increasingly administered society can be dismantled. Taking distance from prevalent modes of education and formation, the subversive and deeply political form of learning outlined in Benjamin is not reducible to the mere acquisition of concrete skills, nor oriented merely to the

seizure of power, but involves mastery of the educational process itself through the medium of tradition.³ Learning in Benjamin thus involves a re-formation of the senses, of bodily practices and of forms of life, cultivated through an essential openness to historical novelty. In this way, I argue that Benjamin's investigations of the problem of crisis and learning that we have begun to outline require a critical educational tradition cultivating new forms of sensibility. To illustrate this philosophical and historical dialectic of learning, I turn to W.E.B. Du Bois – another materialist theorist of revolutionary historical change who emphasized the role of learning and tradition. Drawing on Du Bois' account of the abolition of slavery, we will see that the learning that occurs in historical crises does not merely involve the ability of political institutions and collectives to act with mastery or proficiency, but also requires a long-term cultivation of sensibility and practices of resistance within existing traditions of struggle.

1. The Historico-Philosophical Meaning of Violence

In order to grasp the importance of Benjamin's association of divine violence with education, it is necessary to examine the way in which he philosophically situates "Toward the Critique of Violence" in relation to law. As we will see in this section, this essay introduces attention to dialectical historical change into the considerations of law developed by Benjamin's

³ By invoking a tradition through which the critical force of education can be organized and cultivated, my reading takes distance from those readings of Benjamin's essay which see divine violence as an element in a critique of sovereignty but refrain from approaching the question of political change in terms of concrete organizations. Aside from Agamben, cited below, see *e.g.*, Derrida, "The Force of Law," and (Andrew) Benjamin, *Working with Walter Benjamin*.

contemporaries. We can see this first and foremost in Benjamin's rejection of natural and positive law, and the subsequent transition to an investigation of the historical meaning of violence.

As a work indebted to the Kantian and neo-Kantian tradition, Benjamin's "Critique" seeks a principle of limitation or criterion by which violence or force [*Gewalt*] can be judged. In Benjamin's immediate context, the dominant modes of philosophy through which this limitation is sought are natural law and positive law – and violence is considered only insofar as it bears on legal relations. Contemporary considerations of violence justify or condemn it with regard to the role it plays in the relations of means to ends. The means-ends relationship, as "the most elementary basic relation in every legal order," pre-forms any consideration of violence from within such an order.⁴ Accordingly, natural and positive law's respective approaches to violence equally consider it as a means to an end and seek its delimiting principle either in the justness of the end (as in natural law), or in the legality of the means (as in positive law).

Natural law and positive law form a "circle" confounding any attempt to evaluate violence on its own terms. This circle stems from the fact that both seek the criterion for violence through a consideration of legal violence only. Assuming the means-ends relationship and understanding violence as a means, both share in the "dogma": "[that] just ends can be attained by justified means, and justified means can be used for just ends."⁵ To base the critique of violence on the justness of ends or the legality of means leaves aside the possibility that just ends and justified means could be in "irreconcilable conflict."⁶ For this reason, neither natural law nor positive law

⁴ Benjamin, "Toward the Critique of Violence," 39.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁶ *Ibidem.*

are able to fully encapsulate the concept of violence: “No insight could be gained here, however, until the circle is abandoned, and the criteria for just ends and justified means are established independently from one another.”⁷ The critique capable of understanding violence in its essence must begin outside of what Sami Khatib calls, “the instrumental nexus of ends and means,”⁸ to reflect on violence as a means without an end.

To establish the criterion for justified means independently of a consideration of their ends, Benjamin turns to positive law, as this is the field purporting to offer a “fundamental distinction with respect to kinds of violence independently from cases of their use.”⁹ Positive law finds this criterion in the distinction between sanctioned and unsanctioned violence. Benjamin notes here that his own historico-philosophical critique of violence is not concerned with applying this distinction or of giving an account typical of the positive legal tradition that would determine, rigorously, what the law requires regarding violence in any particular case. Rather, Benjamin is interested in the essential and historical features of violence that make such a distinction possible at all.¹⁰ The meaning of the difference between sanctioned and unsanctioned violence, independent of any particular application, lies in the historical warrant of each individual measure: “positive law demands from every form of violence evidence of its historical origin, which under certain conditions conserves its legality, its sanction.”¹¹ Beginning from the

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Khatib, “Towards a politics of ‘pure means,’” 44.

⁹ Benjamin, “Toward the Critique of Violence,” 41.

¹⁰ “At issue is the question of what thus follows, for the essence of violence, from the fact that such a standard or differential can be applied to it at all, or in other words, what the meaning of this distinction is.” (*Ibidem.*)

¹¹ *Ibidem.*

positivist emphasis on the legality of means and the distinction between sanctioned and unsanctioned violence implied in such a determination, Benjamin seeks a standpoint beyond both natural law and positive law, from which the becoming and destruction of law can be grasped. He thus shifts the question from one of the possible legitimacy of violence in any case, to one concerning the origin of the violence and the legal order through which it is judged. The new standpoint offered by this shift is one from which the foundation, maintenance, and destruction of law and its nexus of means-ends relationships can be apprehended. Here, he calls this standpoint that of a “historical-philosophical reflection on law.”¹²

The shift from a consideration of the relationship between means and ends to the historical dimensions of legal violence allows a perspective for which force can be understood with regard to its formative influence on legal regimes.¹³ The historical-philosophical reflection on law allows for a view that can encapsulate the entire “sphere of [violence’s] use” – the legal sphere governed by the means-ends relation.¹⁴ In this way, Benjamin turns from a consideration of natural law and positive law to the differing historical functions of violence – law-positing and law-preserving. The transition from means and ends to law-positing and law-preserving takes us from violence as it appears in law, to a consideration of violence’s modification of and by law over history. In this shift, the static categories of positive and natural law are replaced by dynamic and historical concepts of law’s origin, its preservation, and eventually its destruction.

¹² *Ibidem.*

¹³ “In a word: if the standard established by positive law to assess the legality of violence can be analyzed only according to its meaning, then the sphere of use must be criticized with regard to its value.” (*Ibidem.*)

¹⁴ *Ibidem.*

Law-positing or lawmaking violence designates the power to found a legal order, or a sphere for which certain ends are legally recognized. From a time before their legal codification, this form of violence posits new legal ends – a new order – in history. Benjamin finds paradigmatic cases of law-positing violence in ancient myths, the strike, and military law. In each case, the force of the victorious party determines the setting of future struggles by establishing its own set of rules and rites. The positing of law is present more generally, however, in all violence that works toward natural ends. These acts of violence implicitly contain a relationship between means and ends. As Benjamin writes of the military ceremony, in which a new law is recognized and a new order therefore founded: “If a conclusion may be drawn from considering military violence as an original and archetypal form of violence, it would be that there inheres a law-positing character in all violence used for natural ends.”¹⁵ The tendency of legal systems to “divest... the individual person as legal subject of all violence”¹⁶ thus speaks to this lawmaking character of violence pursued for natural (as opposed to legal) ends. But it also betrays law’s fundamental instability and insecurity.

To preserve itself against threats to its authority, however, legal force must assume another historical function. To this end, law-preserving violence works within an existing legal order, aiming to maintain it beyond the initial act of its genesis. The law-preserving function, “consists in the use of violence as a means to legal ends.”¹⁷ As the safeguard of the existing realm of order, law-preserving violence prevents the forceful realization of natural ends, and any other

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁶ *Ibidem.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

case of law-positing violence that could give rise to a competing legal order. Benjamin's examples of this function are the violence used against strikes and universal conscription. Here we can already begin to understand the tension between these two functions of law. Since the historically recognized forms of violence – as legal means in the positivist sense – must already be set out by the law, but the positing act through which this law became a historical reality was unconstrained by an existing law, a legal system necessarily works against the principle of its own genesis from the moment it begins to protect itself. This is what Werner Hamacher calls the “decay of political and legal forms” in his reading of this essay. The law, once posited, must betray the principle of its own foundation by blocking new legal positings: “Thus every positing—according to its dialectical law—is dethroned by its internal reversal into a positive institution, by its immediate self-alienation.”¹⁸

Every legal order from which a relationship between means and ends might be securely determined is predicated on the self-alienation of its founding principle, through which it must conscript conservative and rigid forms of violence to preserve itself. This historical dialectic of law confounds any attempt to find the criterion for the violence of pure means from within the legal order itself. It also gives rise to legal institutions that hide themselves from critique owing to their structure, as Benjamin notes in his prescient description of the police. The force of the police is law-positing and law-preserving at once, since the state offloads onto this institution all those functions which it needs to preserve itself but cannot attain through already-available means. Police force thus posits law at the same time as it preserves it, uniting these opposed

¹⁸ Hamacher, “Afformative, Strike,” 1136.

principles in one.¹⁹ The “shapeless” and “ghostly” appearance of this institution is due to the fact that its mixing of historical functions of law admits of no essential and immanent principle through which it could be critiqued.

To understand violence primarily as *legal violence* – as a means to an end – is already to determine the object of investigation before its criterion has been discovered. The confusion that results from an attempt to delimit violence by discerning its relation to legal ends goes beyond a mere inability to understand legal institutions such as the police or general conscription, however. For the identification of violence with legal violence takes the prevalent appearance of violence for its essence, leaving a historical consideration of transformations of these appearances (transformations in the legal sphere) aside. As Benjamin writes: “A gaze directed only at what is closest at hand can at most become aware of a dialectical back-and-forth in the formations of violence into its law-positing and law-preserving kinds.”²⁰ In order to understand the logic of law’s dialectic, Benjamin claims that we must adopt a philosophy of the history of violence: “The critique of violence is the philosophy of its history. The ‘philosophy’ of this history because only the idea of its ending makes possible a critical, incisive and decisive attitude toward its temporal data.”²¹ The historico-philosophical concern of this essay thus requires a new function of violence, beyond its legal functions of positing and preserving.

It is in this connection that we discover a third historical form of violence toward the essay’s close: the annihilation of law, which Benjamin associates with the divine. Opposing this

¹⁹ Benjamin, “Toward the Critique of Violence,” 48.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

destructive “divine violence” to the primordial mythical image of law-positing, Benjamin writes: “Indeed, divine violence designates in all respects an antithesis to mythic violence. If mythic violence is law-positing, divine violence is law-annihilating; if the former establishes boundaries, the latter boundlessly annihilates; if mythic violence inculcates and expiates at the same time, divine violence de-expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal in a bloodless manner.”²² Violence that destroys law is opposed point-for-point to that which founds law. If lawmaking and law-preserving violence conspire to divest individuals of their ability to forcefully (and even nonviolently) pursue natural ends, for the law’s fear of the positing implicit in such pursuits, divine violence undoes the law’s encapsulation of all dimensions of human life. Benjamin writes: “For the domination of law over the living ceases with mere life. Mythic violence is blood-violence over mere life for the sake of violence itself; divine violence is pure violence over all of life for the sake of the living.”²³

Unlike those functions of violence bearing a direct relationship to the positing or maintenance of order, divine violence cannot be represented as such. It speaks more of a general tendency underlying every act of positing or preservation, than of a specific legal function whose commission can be linked to a certain actor. Owing to this, divine violence cannot be recognized in its immediate effects. The judgment issued by this form of violence, the criterion which Benjamin had sought at the essay’s opening, is historically realized, rather than one whose fulfilment can be delimited by a set of conditions. Benjamin writes:

²² *Ibid.*, 57.

²³ *Ibid.*, 57-58.

Divine violence may appear in the true war exactly as it does in the divine judgment of the multitude upon the criminal. To be rejected, however, is all mythic violence, the law-positing kind, which may be called attending [*schaltende*] violence. Also to be rejected is the law-preserving kind, the administrative [*verwaltete*] violence that serves it. Divine violence, which is the sign and the seal but never the means of sacred dispatch, may be called prevailing [*waltende*] violence.²⁴

In divine violence, we have discovered a historical role of violence that lies outside of the foundation and preservation of law, and so a principle of delimitation independent of the relationship between means and ends. This form of violence also takes the essay's consideration of force outside of the realm of representation through a consideration of violence divorced from any of its particular appearances. Divine violence, as the violence of pure means, can only be understood with regard to history, but this understanding constantly encounters the possibility that its designations are invalid. The historico-philosophical account of force beyond the law thus finds its principle in a form of violence that cannot be represented within the law, but which is always realized within and through it. Benjamin secures the purity of this principle by sheltering it in the religious. Since divine violence is the principle for the historical destruction of legal order, the perspective opened by its consideration is one from which laws and the myths that sustain

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 60; translation modified. Julia Ng's discussion of translation choices for this difficult passage illuminates much about Benjamin's position. See the translator's note: Fenves and Ng, *Toward the Critique of Violence*, 293 n. 61. For our purposes I have chosen to use "administrative" [for *verwaltete*] and "prevailing" [for *waltende*], in place of "expended" / "pending," respectively. This choice partially follows Edmund Jephcott's earlier rendering of the same passage. See: Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 252.

them can be seen as illusory and fetishistic products of humankind. Despite this destructive function, as we will see, Benjamin also links this violence in an interesting way to the process of education, and thus to a generative possibility.

2. *Education and Tradition*

Owing to its unrepresentable character, Benjamin gives few examples of divine violence's destructive power. Aside from the revolutionary general strike, and the case of the rebellion of Korah from the Old Testament, however, he does allude to a "manifestation" of divine violence in contemporary life, in the process of education. He writes: "divine violence acquires attestation not only through religious tradition; on the contrary, it also has at least one hallowed manifestation in present-day life. What, as educative violence, stands in its completed form outside of law is one of its forms of appearance."²⁵ Benjamin describes the force exerted in education, which is elsewhere called violence in the pursuit of a natural end, as a force potentially existing outside of the law, suggesting that this form of violence bears the seal of divine sanction.²⁶ This commonly cited passage has been the basis of critiques of Benjamin's work, tying it to his devotion to the school reform movement in his earlier years.²⁷ As some have pointed out, however, this reading overlooks other places where Benjamin clearly articulates insights completely opposed to an apparent endorsement of forceful educational methods.²⁸

²⁵ Benjamin, "Toward the Critique of Violence," 58.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁷ Axel Honneth, for example, suggests that Benjamin advocates the corporal punishment of children by analogizing the adult world to the divine order, and the child to humanity. See, Honneth, "Saving the Sacred," 124.

²⁸ See, e.g., Charles, "Towards a Critique of Educative Violence."

In order to better grasp how to understand educative violence as a manifestation of divine violence, it is useful to begin looking at other parts of Benjamin's works – since, as Peter Fenves and Julia Ng note, “every single one of Benjamin's publications prior to 1921, with the exception of his dissertation, is associated with the theory of education in a broad sense.”²⁹ Benjamin's reflections on education extend beyond this period as well, with a well-known example coming from *One-Way Street*, which was published in 1928, but drafted sometime in the years just after “Toward the Critique of Violence.” In the final aphorism of this text, titled “To the Planetarium,” Benjamin writes:

The mastery of nature (so the imperialists teach) is the purpose of all technology. But who would trust a cane wielder who proclaimed the mastery of children by adults to be the purpose of education? Is not education, above all, the indispensable ordering of the relationship between generations and therefore mastery (if we are to use this term) of that relationship and not of children? And likewise technology is the mastery of not nature but of the relation between nature and man.³⁰

Earlier in the aphorism, Benjamin had considered the trauma of the Great War, understanding it as an attempt – on a nearly indiscernible level – for humankind to reenact a new relationship to the cosmos. Here, we see that the religious perspective opened up by a consideration of humanity's communal relationship to nature allows for a position through which technology and education can be grasped in their essential instrumentality, without succumbing to this

²⁹ Fenves and Ng, *Toward the Critique of Violence*, 281, n. 14.

³⁰ Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, 487.

instrumentality. The significance of education stems not from the adult's position of power, but from the way in which education is a means of ordering the relationship between the young and the old. The historical promise of educational force, if we take account of this quote, is thus not a function of the teacher's mastery over the student, but rather the possibility of humanity mastering its relationship to itself through intergenerational tradition.

In the discussion of education in *One-Way Street* it becomes clearer that whatever Benjamin means to say about educational violence in the "Critique" must be separated from the prevalent modes of education during his time. Similarly drawing on the aphorism from *One-Way Street* as well as, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility," Matthew Charles' recent commentary on educative violence in Benjamin's work thus distinguishes between two kinds of education in Benjamin's view. The first mode of education, according to Charles, "aim[s] at the mastery of children by adults," exemplified in the coercive and violent pedagogical methods that force the child to adopt the ends of the educator.³¹ The second kind of education, "aims not at the direct mastery of children but merely a control over the educational relationship," allowing for an exchange between student and teacher; as Charles points out, this second mode of education is exemplified by the teachings of Benjamin's early mentor Gustav Wyneken.³² Although the second form of education still exerts a kind of force or violence in the pursuit of its natural ends, this force does not characterize the student-teacher relationship, and is not to be found in the immediate educational situation. Instead, it is directed toward the pedagogical relationship itself.

³¹ Charles, "Towards a Critique of Educative Violence," 532.

³² *Ibidem*.

If educational violence has the capacity to destroy the rigidified forms of subjective and objective domination in current and legally sanctioned modes of education, the transmission of this kind of force does not flow from teacher to student, but from both teacher and student as participants in a *tradition* to the means and ends of education in its current instantiation. In a letter to Gershom Scholem from September of 1917, Benjamin describes the importance of tradition in ways that strikingly parallel the discussion in the “Critique.” In the latter text religious tradition is understood as an exemplary manifestation of divine violence, with education serving as another. In this earlier letter, Benjamin also likens education to religious tradition, writing: “It is so difficult to speak about education because its order completely coincides with the religious order of tradition.”³³ Forcefully arguing against Scholem’s position that educators ought to teach by example, Benjamin urges his friend to remove the concept of the example from his pedagogical theory. Learning does not occur through examples, according to Benjamin: for the teacher who shows an example to their students is not actually exemplifying how to learn, but pretending to learn.³⁴ For this reason, the concept of the example cannot be applied to education except in a metaphorical sense.

Instead of understanding pedagogical practice in terms of the example, Benjamin suggests that Scholem sublate this concept into a concept of tradition in which learners are continuously transforming themselves into teachers. Benjamin writes: “I am convinced that tradition is the medium in which the person who is learning *continually* transforms himself into

³³ Benjamin, “Letter to Gerhard Scholem (September 1917),” 94.

³⁴ “You can, of course, designate teaching as ‘learning by example,’ but you will immediately discover that the concept of example is being used figuratively. The teacher does not actually teach in that he ‘learns before others,’ learns in an exemplary way.” (*Ibid.*, 93)

the person who is teaching, and that this applies to the entire range of education. In the tradition everyone is an educator and everyone needs to be educated and everything is education.”³⁵ To the tradition in which learners and students alike are members, Benjamin attributes a historical process through which generations encounter and influence one another. Developing his discussion of intergenerational contact using the sea as a metaphor, Benjamin writes: “Our descendants came from the spirit of God (human beings); like waves, they rise up out of the movement of the spirit. Instruction is the only nexus of the free union of the old with the new generation. The generations are like waves that roll into each other and send their spray into the air.”³⁶ Just as the transition to its lawmaking and law-preserving functions had introduced a historical dialectic into the concept of violence, the transition from the example to the pedagogical tradition brings the theory of education into a deeper relationship to historical time.

The educational instruction that could be sensitive to its own historical character, rather than constituting itself from contemporary relationships as though they were its true horizon, requires a form of intergenerational contact. In this critical tradition, the polarized activity and passivity of the teachers and students which characterizes customary pedagogy is displaced for the sake of a more profound submission of the pedagogical relationship to its own history. Continuing with his metaphor, Benjamin writes: “Theory is like a surging sea, but the only thing that matters to the wave (understood as a metaphor for the person) is to surrender itself to its motion in such a way that it crests and breaks. This enormous freedom of the breaking wave is education in its actual sense: instruction—tradition becoming visible and *free*, tradition emerging

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

³⁶ *Ibidem.*

precipitously like a wave from living abundance.”³⁷ The specific nature of the violence exerted by the educational relationship is understood (akin to the breaking of the waves) as an interaction among humans that forms them, making possible new relations between humanity and nature through the participation in, and questioning of, a tradition. As Howard Eiland writes in a discussion of this letter, “Structuring this fluid medium of transmission is the reciprocal tension between old and new, reception and conception, learning and teaching, as each pole continually turns into the other. A *living* tradition, then, is one that is constantly rejuvenated—and that means put into question.”³⁸ In the process through which students are transformed into learners, which as we have seen is a continuous process, both students and teachers find their own possibilities for transformation.

The potential for transformation provided by the living tradition is further developed in Benjamin’s “Program for a Proletarian Children’s Theater.” In this essay, inspired by his collaboration and relationship with the Bolshevik theater director and educator, Asja Lācis, Benjamin draws a distinction between proletarian and bourgeois education as a difference, respectively, between a materially grounded practice capable of supporting learning, on the one hand, and the technical striving towards an ideal on the other. Unlike bourgeois educational practices which can constantly modify themselves for use in any context, proletarian education demands a definite set of practices and institutional realities in which it can be contained: “Proletarian education needs first and foremost a framework, an objective space *within* which education can be located. The bourgeoisie, in contrast, requires an idea *toward* which education

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ Eiland, “Education as Awakening,” *boundary 2*, Vol 45, No. 5 (2018): 203-219, 216.

leads.”³⁹ The framework provided by children’s theater allows children to engage their entire lives within a defined space. To contrast, the bourgeois form of education orients itself toward continual development of new “methodologies” and disciplinary processes of education, each oriented towards its ideal, but incapable of allowing children to engage their entire lives. Aside from its aims and methods, the mode of proletarian education outlined here also breaks from bourgeois education in its protection of the vital energies of childhood within this framework, which Benjamin describes as proletarian education’s insistence that children should be guaranteed their childhood.⁴⁰

The productions of the proletarian children’s theater are the product of collective work and have a highly experimental nature. To begin with, the role of the teacher is to assist the children during workshops in which they prepare the various aspects of the performance (the set, the props, the costumes), to turn the students’ “gestures” and “signals” from the “hazardous and magical world of pure fantasy and apply them to materials.”⁴¹ Over every aspect of the production the children experiment with new forms of gesture and play, improvising with their materials, their interactions, and their characters. In the performance itself the students produce new forms and contents of consciousness in a kind of playful aesthetic re-education of the audience and students at the same time. This is particularly striking in its effect on the director or teacher. Benjamin writes: “New forces, new innervations appear—ones that the director had no inkling of while working on the project. He learns about them only in the course of this wild

³⁹ Benjamin, “Program for a Proletarian Children’s Theater,” 202.

⁴⁰ “Proletarian education theory demonstrates its superiority by guaranteeing to children the fulfilment of their childhood.” Benjamin, “Program for a Proletarian Children’s Theater,” 205; original emphasis.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 204.

liberation of the child's imagination. Children that have learned about theater in this way become free in such performances. Through play, their childhood has been fulfilled."⁴² The role of the teacher and the student is inverted in the performance, not in order to demonstrate the one-sided superiority of the child's perspective, but to destructively break down those ossified modes of perception present in the adults. The performance thus disturbs and re-forms prevalent modes of sensibility.

In Benjamin's description of the proletarian children's theater, we can see one concrete instantiation of what we noticed above, that in the shared and living tradition everyone becomes a learner. In an illuminating reading of this essay, Sami Khatib writes: "In this performative process, both the educator and the educated are involved—and in the unfolding of this experimental, that is, open and unprescriptive interaction, a purposive process generates a nonintentional effect: a reversal of perspectives and roles that open up to the new."⁴³ In proletarian education, both students and teachers become learners, and the subject-object and means-ends separations orienting bourgeois education begin to dissolve. As seen in the figure of the teacher's critical displacement, each of these learners are induced into a new mode of perception: "The neutralization of the "moral personality" in the leader unleashes vast energies for the true genius of education – namely, the power of observation."⁴⁴ In the interaction between children and adults spelled out in this essay, both modify their sensibility as participants in a shared tradition of learning, in order to produce something never before experienced. The

⁴² *Ibid.*, 205.

⁴³ Khatib, "Practice Makes Perfect," 71.

⁴⁴ Benjamin, "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater," 203.

materially grounded educational tradition is thus able to effect a novel perspective, a new mode of observation, through a destructive transformation of bourgeois sensibility and pedagogy.⁴⁵

Here we have begun to see that understanding Benjamin's association of divine violence with education can be enriched through attention to his reflections on pedagogy, and particularly the latter's relationship to tradition. Like his concept of divine violence, Benjamin's treatment of education seeks to save a sphere of human action whose forceful or violent means of control would not be exerted against other humans, but against the relations into which they are caught. According to Benjamin, it is by setting tradition free – a process that remains impossible from without – that learners might discover a form of life less spellbound by the constraints and idealisms of the present. In his 1915 essay titled, "The Life of Students," in which he explores the possibility of an educational community, Benjamin likens the discovery of one's own imperatives and commitments within such a community to "liberating the future from its deformed existence in the womb of the present."⁴⁶ From this perspective, it is clear that the means of this liberation are not clearly marked; the path from alienated conditions to a redeemed humanity is indirect, involving the destruction and re-formation of social forms and modes of perception. From here, we might say that the destruction of educative violence is the unlearning that necessarily attends every instance of learning, and the dissolution of the tradition's immersion in the categories of the past.

⁴⁵ Khatib interprets Benjamin's lifelong considerations of pedagogy as an "undoing" of bourgeois pedagogical concepts, outlining its departure from Kant in particular. Khatib, "Practice Makes Perfect," 63-5.

⁴⁶ Benjamin, "The Life of Students," 46.

3. The Tradition of the Oppressed

We saw in the last section how the relationship between divine violence and educational instruction does not represent a facile endorsement of violent means of educating students, nor a purely transcendental (and nowhere apparent) approach to education. The bearer of education, to take Benjamin's reflections from this period, is the critical tradition. Since true education does not represent submission to tradition so much as a conscious and critical rejuvenation and modification of it, this category is especially suited to understanding the dynamics of historical change found in Benjamin's search for a criterion of violence through the philosophy of its history. The de-expiating, divine function of violence does not merely reject the new in history, nor strive for the wholly new (and so unrecognizable) but realizes the already-existing decay of legal violence through an explication of its inner tendencies. The destructiveness of divine violence, which can be oriented against forms of life and laws but never against the soul or spirit of humanity, thus inaugurates new historical possibilities through an understanding of the meaning of the present.

We can therefore begin to clarify the perspective Benjamin develops on the problematic with which we began this paper: the relationship between crisis and learning, and the lure of attempts to think this relationship that would rigidly assign the learning of crisis to an already-formed subject. Benjamin's thought proceeds, as an extension of what we have seen here, from the impossibility of an incorporation of crisis conditions by a unified subject. This is the significance of the way in which he bifurcates the figure of the sovereign in his 1928 habilitation thesis, splitting the subject in which the norm and the decision are unified into a melancholic and

insurmountable duality of decision and indecisiveness.⁴⁷ In contrast to the theory of sovereignty propounded by Schmitt, according to which the sovereign is able to bring both lawmaking and law-preserving violence into a definite relation, Benjamin aims always for a figure or form of life outside of the law, and so outside of the contemporary constitution of forms of violence.⁴⁸ From the perspective opened up by our problem – the learning demanded by crisis, and the possibility of a subject of this learning – Benjamin’s treatment of educative violence illuminates an approach declining to aim for historical mastery over situations outside of our control, taking instead as its object the mastery of the relationship between humanity and those means through which its self-preservation is typically pursued.

Is there a subject of crisis, a historical entity situated so that they might learn from its occurrence? We might be inclined, given the possibility evinced by Schmitt and conservative political developments since his time, to deny this possibility. The belief in an agent in which the conflicts between the nomic and the anomic can be resolved seems to ensure the perpetuation of the kind of dynamic that Benjamin describes in his brief discussion of police law in “Toward the Critique of Violence.” By reifying law in its current state as the *sine qua non* of legal violence, the end of all legal ends, the state becomes a continually expanding reality admitting of no limiting principle even within positive or natural law, since it subjects both lawmaking and law-preserving violence, whose distinction is ultimately the condition of possibility for these fields’ forms of critique, to an *ad hoc* purpose. Just as the sovereign in Schmitt blends constituted and

⁴⁷ Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, 144-148.

⁴⁸ This is helpfully outlined by Giorgio Agamben, whose construction of an exoteric and esoteric exchange between Benjamin and Schmitt sheds light on Benjamin’s specific blend of religious and legal thought. See: Agamben, *State of Exception*, ch. 4.

constituent power in the unity of the decision, the police state mixes the functions and aims of legal violence imperceptibly, creating what Benjamin calls a “ghostly” appearance of means and ends offering the critic no purchase.⁴⁹ Although denying the possibility of a subjective unification of law seems to offer us a way to avoid this dynamic, however, it also gives us no way to make sense of the objectively constraining force of law in the present. For law constitutes subjects—not only the subject of decision, but also those subordinated to it. A mere denunciation or rejection of the reality of this constraining force, or the construction of an ideal realm related only negatively to the appearance of law in the present, amounts to what Benjamin calls a “childish anarchism.”⁵⁰

Benjamin’s way of conceiving the relation between law and violence allows a more complex understanding of the question of the subject of crisis. He is not claiming that we ought to do away with the concept of subjectivity, or the possibility of meaningful incorporation of the catastrophe of the present. But the one who can learn from the crisis is not the sovereign of Schmitt, but rather a shared tradition of learning, or a medium through which subjects are formed. This tradition, although forming part of the vital abundance out of which individuals develop, is primarily realized through an interaction between subjects—in the relationships through which education is carried out. This living tradition’s struggle to rejuvenate itself outstrips the particular dynamics among its members and depends on these members’ continual questioning of the tradition itself.

⁴⁹ Benjamin, “Toward the Critique of Violence,” 48.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

In his theses “On the Concept of History,” in which he would allude to a “secret agreement” between older and younger generations according to which the past carries the index of redemption for those in the present, Benjamin also ascribes importance to tradition.⁵¹ In the eighth thesis, in which he returns to the concept of the “state of exception” popularized by Schmitt, he writes: “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that accords with this insight.”⁵² Departing from Schmitt’s episodic conception of the state of exception, Benjamin places the knowledge of this theoretical vision’s shortcomings in the hands of a tradition. The tradition of the oppressed, as he calls it, bears the possibility of a new conception of history which might allow for the creation of “a real state of emergency,” through which their revolutionary force might blow the transformative potential of the present “out of the continuum of history.”⁵³ As some have noted, here Benjamin follows Lukács in identifying the proletariat as the subject of historical knowledge.⁵⁴ But our closer attention to the role of education in Benjamin’s thought has shown the way in which this “subject” is not realized through an aggregation of isolated individuals, but on the basis of the intergenerational learning, the tradition, of this class itself.

By stressing the tradition of learning shared by the oppressed, Benjamin shifts the question of crisis and our role in averting it from a consideration of the changes that would effect a new mastery of contemporary organs of power to one about the changes required among those

⁵¹ Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 390.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 392.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 392, 395.

⁵⁴ “The subject of historical knowledge is the struggling, oppressed class itself.” (*Ibid.*, 394)

engaged in political struggle that would allow them to master the relations in which they find themselves caught. The question becomes one of political education. The institutions and traditions through which political struggle are carried out are not important solely for their ability to achieve political victories, but for the way in which they facilitate the cultivation and sharing of consciousness, and a passing of these modes of perception to future generations. This learning process takes place through “means without ends” – in the realm of culture and cultivation – even amid the struggle for intermediate ends on the part of the oppressed. Theory aligning itself with the “tradition of the oppressed” is thus oriented toward the continuation of this tradition as a lived reality.⁵⁵

It is within this tradition itself, and not as isolated thinkers, that theorists might come to have some effect on the crisis whose existence cannot be denied. In a tradition subjecting itself to critique, the individuals engaged in theoretical and practical political struggle develop forces of resistance – which are often new modes of perception – in a milieu capable of supporting their overall formation. This tradition’s freedom from the shackles of past confusions is only won through reflective engagement with all the appearances of this crisis, the destruction of conventional ways of seeing and understanding these conditions, and the work of cultivating new forms of experience.⁵⁶ Benjamin’s account of crisis and learning is thus also different from others

⁵⁵ As Sami Khatib writes, an important difference between the tradition of the oppressed and the traditions of bourgeois society is that the former “is not continuous, transparent, and neutral but discontinuous, opaque, and politically partisan.” Khatib, “Where the Past Was,” 4. Rather than ensuring the continuity with the past, the tradition of the oppressed passes down modes of perception bearing some hope for effecting a discontinuity. In this sense it is a critical, living tradition.

⁵⁶ The task of this cultivation is the emphasis of Lukács’ work on the party as the institution facilitating the self-education of the proletariat, although this dimension of his thought is often overshadowed. See, *e.g.*, Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 317ff. The relationship between Lukács’ party and Benjamin’s work is further explored in Reynolds, “Immediacy and Experience in Lukács’ Theory of Reification.”

placing the emphasis on an internally organized and consistent subject for a deeper reason. Since Benjamin locates the “subject” of crisis in the tradition, he does not depend on an already-formed part of the social order, nor on a readily representable institution, but on a medium supporting the formation of historical subjects and the cultivation of new means of representation. In moments of historical crisis, the very way in which the social world presents itself to individuals is transformed. Benjamin highlights the need to attend to the tradition through which these transformations are consciously developed. In closing we will briefly consider one of these moments of crisis, in which an interlocking of critical traditions fomented the abolition of slavery in the United States.

4. *“The Coming of the Lord”*

In his history of reconstruction, W.E.B. Du Bois uses the terminology of the general strike to describe the massive work stoppage and migration that proved decisively important for the northern forces during the American Civil War.⁵⁷ In the historical events leading eventually to the abolition of slavery, we find a case of the redemptive undoing of human laws and customs realized through an incredible sequence of human actions. As Du Bois shows in great detail, if the

⁵⁷ “It was a strike on a wide basis against the conditions of work. It was a general strike that involved directly in the end perhaps a half million people. They wanted to stop the economy of the plantation system, and to do that they left the plantations.” Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 67. Du Bois’ description should not be read as departing from Benjamin’s characterization of the general strike’s unwillingness to resume work after “some modification of certain conditions.” Benjamin, “Toward the Critique of Violence,” 41. After all, in this case ending the conditions of work would mean ending the slave system. The work stoppage among the slaves can thus be aptly characterized using Benjamin’s words, as taking place “in the resolve to resume only an entirely transformed work that is not compelled by the state.” *Ibidem*.

abolition of slavery—or “The Coming of the Lord”⁵⁸—was the possible dawn of freedom, its historical conditions and effects were manifold.

But it is not only due to his provocative invocation of a general strike that Du Bois’ historico-philosophical account of reconstruction can be connected to Benjamin. Attention to the history of reconstruction additionally alerts us to the more representable, and merely-human, conditions through which the law’s destruction might be occasioned, even if this destruction is never reducible to these conditions. The most prominent way in which we can see this dynamic is found in Du Bois’ exposition of the agency of the enslaved leading up to abolition. Summarizing the period before the general strike, Du Bois writes:

It must be borne in mind that nine-tenths of the four million black slaves could neither read nor write, and that the overwhelming majority of them were isolated on country plantations. Any mass movement under such circumstances must materialize slowly and painfully. What the Negro did was to wait, look, and listen, to try to see where his interest lay... As soon... as it became clear that the Union armies would not or could not return fugitive slaves, and that the masters with all their fume and fury were uncertain of victory, the slave entered upon a general strike against slavery by the same methods that he had used during the period of the fugitive slave.⁵⁹

The period before the general strike is here linked to both the traditions of fugitive struggle during the antebellum period and the cultivation of sensibility regarding the war among the

⁵⁸ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, ch. 5.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

slaves. If prior to the war neither side had been aware of the centrality of the slave in their economic and political situation, through diffuse and careful actions, “[t]he slave, despite every effort, [became] the center of the war.”⁶⁰ The movement leading to this awareness throughout the North and South, though slow to build, developed into a force impossible to ignore, “like the great unbroken swell of the ocean before it dashes on the reefs.”⁶¹ In their escalating actions towards self-emancipation, the slaves became the center of the war and the reconstruction period following it by transforming the nature of the conflict – and the conditions of sensibility allowing this conflict to be apprehended – for the other parties involved.⁶²

Du Bois’ account of reconstruction attests to the centrality of education and tradition in moments of historical crisis. For “the coming of the lord” was not an event that arose from an unrepresentable oblivion, but one fomented and navigated by interlocking traditions of struggle. This is so even if the totality of this historical reality – the truth of freedom, however fleeting its moment of realization – is in principle beyond the possibility of representation. The different historical groups involved in this case are so many threads of Benjamin’s “tradition of the oppressed,” including the struggle of slaves and fugitive black communities in the antebellum period, which we have already seen were cultivating a sense for the historical situation. Among these communities, according to Angela Davis, this cultivation depended on the “tradition of

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁶² “[The war] was a lovely dress parade of Alphonse and Gaston until the Negro spoiled it and in a perfectly logical way. So long as the Union stood still and talked, the Negro kept quiet and worked. The moment the union army moved into slave territory, the Negro joined it... And yet the army at first tried to regard it as an exceptional and temporary matter, a thing which they could control, when as a matter of fact it was the meat and kernel of the war.” *Ibid.*, 62.

supreme perseverance and heroic resistance” cultivated by slave women, a development through which the theme of resistance became “thoroughly intertwined in the fabric of existence.”⁶³ In addition to these forms of resistance among the slaves and the struggles of black and white abolitionists in the North, there was also the socialist tradition which played a prominent role in the West – where socialists seasoned by the 1848 revolutions in Germany served in the Union Army⁶⁴ – and in international relations, when the English working class overcame their apparent and immediate interests to block their government from recognizing the rebel states through concerted action.⁶⁵ Together each of these traditions of resistance had their eye on the historical situation, and were ready to do what they could in order to tip the scales.

For Du Bois, revolutionary historical moments attain their form not through the senseless clash of structures, nor the actions and initiatives of great men, nor still through the miraculous arrival of metaphysical judgment, but through an interlocking of critical traditions. In the tradition both formed by and actively forming its members, historical actors and groups attain a sense of their role in the crisis, and of the actions available to them. Divine violence, or “the coming of the lord” – in this case the literal, albeit fleeting, destruction of the laws and customs enshrining slavery and the order upon which this institution was built – takes place through an interaction

⁶³ Davis, “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role,” 15ff. Saidiya Hartman also notes the central role played by women in the resistance to slavery, although we cannot fully address her critique of Du Bois here due to space constraints. See, Hartman, “The Belly of the World,” 166-7.

⁶⁴ For more on this connection, see Andrew Zimmerman’s work on the role played by European revolutionary traditions in the Civil War. See: Zimmerman, “From the Rhine to the Mississippi.”

⁶⁵ “Notwithstanding [the scarcity of cotton and attendant decline in English industry], the English workers stood up for the abolition of Negro slavery, and protested against the intervention of the English.” Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 89ff.

of these traditions and their concerted efforts. The ability to grasp this historical process philosophically is thus a matter of attending to the communities who were struggling, their particular histories of formation, and the ways in which they were able to represent the situation to themselves. In these histories, we find a merely-human trace of the divine in history.

Introducing the history of abolition and reconstruction allows us to see the way in which the educational tradition described by Benjamin is the representable companion to divine violence. As we saw above, specifying the relationship between education and divine violence suggested by Benjamin presents us with difficulties. Considering this problem, James Martel suggests that we hold the two types of force – educational violence and divine violence – separate, owing to the latter’s total inability to be represented. Martel proposes that we conceive of educational violence as an “in-between” phenomenon, which allows for individuals to partially transcend the reified and fetishized possibilities open to them, even if it does not create a space entirely free from these possibilities:

If educative power... is neither mythic nor (completely) divine, it is perhaps an in-between force, a power that neither projects itself onto false screens nor is of a piece with a truly transcendent authority. Accordingly, educative power can be understood as an aspect of representation that is not itself inherently fetishistic (not ‘lawmaking’). Such a position does not mean that the subject of educative power is somehow immune to fetishism (to say so would be to conflate divine and human power once again) but only that he or she has a chance to act in ways not simply determined by it.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Martel, “A Divine Pedagogy?” 174.

Following Martel's interpretation, I want to suggest we designate education – understood now as the work of a living and critical tradition – as a provisionally representable correlate of divine violence. It is representable because it is capable of being theorized, practiced, and improved. It is only *provisionally* representable, however, because the living tradition is nothing less than a constant unmaking and remaking of the conditions of representation, of the sense and feeling of what is possible within the present. While the division between educational and divine force is worth maintaining, this division indexes the gap between the representable and the unrepresentable in history. If the struggle of traditions of resistance told by Du Bois and others clearly falls on the “representable” side of this distinction, the function of these groups and their struggles was precisely to work on and upset the division itself through the formation and reformation of new political subjects, and the attendant transformation of political conditions. Martel's distinction is thus constantly prone to renegotiation, as the educative powers of today's struggles, and the crisis conditions to which they necessarily respond, undo and remake the conditions of representation themselves.

The victory of the lived tradition of critique takes place through a dissolution of customary societal relations. As the case of abolition makes clear, this dissolution is often a long and multifaceted process through which the conditions of sensibility, of possibility, and of political hope, are transformed, not only for the members of tradition itself, but for all historical actors. In this way, what Benjamin might call the historico-philosophical disclosures of God's judgment – moments such as the abolition of slavery and the short-lived reconstruction government of South Carolina, for example – can be related to transformations in experience made possible through the cultivation of resistance within various parts of the social order. The promise of new

relations attending these moments of divine destruction – relations which will never themselves bear divine sanction but will always be merely human – is thus predicated on the continual formation, reformation, and revolutionary struggle of the tradition of the oppressed.

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