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## UNPACKING WALTER BENJAMIN'S SOCIOLOGY OF VIOLENCE AND WAR

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Conflict, violence and, ultimately, war are central to Walter Benjamin's sociology of language. Using biblical language, his earliest work shows that after the fall of man, language becomes a vessel to be filled by the usurper, a tool, he uses that bends others to his will, as Satan does in *Paradise Lost*. Benjamin's study of German *Trauspiels*, mourning plays similar to *Hamlet* and *Richard III*, leads him to posit that the law and constitutional structures in the Baroque period are of single importance in understanding the role of conflict and violence. In "Towards a Critique of Violence," Benjamin makes two key arguments. The first is that a workers' general strike is a legitimate form of violence and that the state's response, often military, is not. The second is that the Commandment "Thou Shalt Not Kill" is misunderstood because it does not contain a penalty and, secondly, it cannot be a blanket injunction; Jewish law, he notes, allowed for self-defence. His best-known works, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" and "Theses on the Philosophy of History," are written after his turn to Marxism associated with the Frankfurt School. In the first, in addition to showing how mechanical reproduction destroys the "aura" of art, he is concerned with how Fascist art, such as Leni Riefenstahl's films glorifying Hitler. These performances are designed to "absorb" or overawe viewers, making them quiescent, silent participants in the power play that leads to conflict and, ultimately war. Using quasi-religious language, the Theses deconstruct "historicism," showing how Rankian history sides with the victors, the Great Men and Women of History at the expense of the ruled. He argues that each generation can redeem the past by "brushing history against the grain" and using discontinuities to show the violence and conflict that historicists seek to hide.

**Key words:** Walter Benjamin, conflicts, war, violence, sociology of violence, Baroque sovereignty, language and violence, Russian war on Ukraine.

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Walter Benjamin was born in July 1892 and died a suicide in September 1940, after the escape party he was part of had been stopped on the French/Spanish border; he feared he would soon end up Nazi hands. The pioneering cultural critic, whose work largely defines our understanding of the political impact of images from 16<sup>th</sup> Century iconography through Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda games and, today, video games, as well as Putin's revival of Stalinist poster images, lived under the sign of Ares, the god of war and violence.

Twenty-two-years-old at the start of the First World War, Kaiser Wilhelm's army rejected him for medical reasons; later in the war, when, to bolster its decimated ranks, Germany lowered the bar, Benjamin convinced the Kaiser's doctors that he was medically unfit.

Despite having lived through the tumult of the war, and after it, street battles in Berlin and the fledgling Weimar Republic's use of *Freikorps* to crush socialist governments in Bavaria and elsewhere, Benjamin's writings seem remarkably free of direct references to war.

One is in his 1936 essay, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov" (Benjamin, 1969) which discusses the Russian novelist, short story writer and playwright who died in 1895.

“With the [First] World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? What ten years later was poured out in a flood of war books was anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth. For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath those clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body” (Benjamin, 1969, p. 84).

This is about as close as Benjamin gets to writing directly about battle. Benjamin does not cite Nietzsche’s genealogy of language that showed that language is not just a field of force but retains shards that show the long-ago victory of the “nobles” over the “plebeians” and the triumph of “ressentiment” that saw the establishment of what Nietzsche calls “slave morality.” Benjamin focuses on language or, to be more precise, the impossibility of language to contain the violence: in this case, that experienced by the *Söldaten* of ‘14–18.’

In “On Language as Such and the Language of Man,” written in 1916 (Benjamin 1978), after rehearsing what philosophers concerned with language since Plato have said – that thought cannot take place without language, that language is a second level way of knowing, that our mental image differs from its linguistic cognate, Benjamin turns to the first chapter of Genesis. (In this period, Benjamin was heavily influenced by another German Jewish student studying at the University of Munich, Gershom Scholem, who would become Benjamin’s life-long friend and who would later become famous for his groundbreaking work on Jewish mysticism.)

What interests Benjamin is not, as one might expect given his later emphasis on discontinuities and emblematic readings, the fact that the Bible begins with two rather incongruent accounts of creation. Rather, Benjamin focuses on what could be imagined as a pastoral moment: Adam’s naming of the birds, fish, animals and everything else. This, the narrative implies, completes creation. God may have spoken the architecture of creation into being, but for the Earthly world to be complete, Benjamin writes, Adam must perform these speech acts.

This *adequatio*, the perfect balance between word and thing, begins to collapse when Satan gives Eve knowledge of good and evil – “knowledge from outside, the uncreated imitation of the creative word” (Benjamin, 1978, p. 327). Here is the “birth of the *human word*, in which name no longer lives intact” (Benjamin, 1978, p. 327). Benjamin does not follow the biblical narrative to Cain’s murder of Abel or mention that the construction of the Tower of Babel leads God to come close to cursing language itself, sundering the one language into a multiplicity that leads, inevitably, to violence. Instead, Benjamin says that knowledge of good and evil turns language into what Søren Kierkegaard called “prattle” (1978, p. 327). This linguistic form cannot but fail to contain violence. Nature, which once bespoke the act of creation, both God’s and Adam’s act of naming, is now mute, an after-effect of God’s cursing the serpent and his judgement in what might be termed the case of, “Jehovah vs. Eve and Adam.” Mute, nature can do no more than mourn silently.

In a moment, we will consider another essay Benjamin wrote in 1916, “Toward Critique of Violence” (Benjamin, 2021) that speaks in more sociological terms, but before we examine it, I want to jump ahead a decade to his *Habilitationsschrift*, the *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (Benjamin, 1977, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*). The *Trauerspiels* were or, “mourning plays, were written during the Baroque period and can be thought of as German cognates of plays like *Hamlet* and *MacBeth*, complete with plenty of intrigue, murders and wars and rumours of wars.

Once again, Benjamin focuses on language and the ramifications of the fact that it has lost its truth value. In these plays we see that language is an empty vessel filled by the intentions of the speaker (and not Adamic truth), which includes the figure of the intriguer the courtier who schemes, or the sovereign seeking absolute power; the figures of the intriguer and the sovereign can be merged, as Shakespeare shows when we enter the world (I almost said, hall of mirrors) of *Richard II* and *Richard III*, the latter of which famously says at the beginning of the eponymous play:

Now is the winter of our discontent  
Made glorious summer by this sun of York;

...

I, that am curtail'd of this fair proportion,  
Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,  
Deformed, unfinish'd, sent before my time  
Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,  
And that so lamely and unfashionable  
That dogs bark at me as I halt by them;

...  
And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover,  
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,  
I am determined to prove a villain  
And hate the idle pleasures of these days.  
Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous,  
By drunken prophecies, libels and dreams,  
To set my brother Clarence and the king  
In deadly hate the one against the other: . . .  
(Shakespeare, 1969)

The dominant literary critical school of thought when Benjamin was coming of age was Russian Formalism. To take only one example, in his *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, published in 1928, Vladimir Propp divided up folk tales with almost mathematical precision, identifying particular types of actions (e.g. seeking, testing, being tested, fighting and marrying) what were needed for a plot (if the villain does not steal the princess, you don't have a story. He discussed what's come to be called the "hero's journey" and the seven types of characters, including the hero, villain, donor, helper, dispatcher and false hero. Propp and his fellow formalists argued that the proper study of a narrative was its internal structure, that is, what (they saw) as the uniquely literary elements of its architecture. They eschewed reference to outside factors such as historical trends, religious beliefs and, especially, how the work in question fit into its society.

Benjamin's thought owes nothing to the Russian Formalists. Rather, as the New Historicists would in the late 1990s and early 2000s, for Benjamin, literary texts do not exist in a closed aesthetic system referring, at most, to and through each other. Rather, he views them as being in dialogue with the societies in which they were written, those that came before and, indeed, in the world of their readers, which, perforce, exist in both the near term and far future. The politics, religion, economy created in the theatre or theatre of the reader's mind is shot through with the history, in short.

Thus when writing about the sovereign in the *Trauspiels* (think of the kings in *Richard II* or in the plays that make up the *Henriad*), Benjamin moves beyond the literary examples and references the "kings of Spain and England, respectively" and continues "A new concept of sovereignty emerged in the seventeenth century from a discussion of the juridical doctrines of the middle ages. The old exemplary problem of tyrannicide became the focal point in this debate. Among the various kinds of tyrant defined in earlier constitutional doctrine, the usurper had always been the subject of particular controversy" (1977, p. 64f.)

Both in Baroque society and within the plays, Benjamin asserts, the sovereign himself is the "representative of history" (1977, p. 65).<sup>1\*</sup> Benjamin continues, "the sovereign holds the course of history in his hand like a sceptre" since the "the Baroque knows no eschatology" (1977, p. 65f.) The Baroque is haunted by the idea that without an ultimate heaven, all there is is a "vacuum" that one day will "destroy the world in catastrophic violence" (1977, p. 66). Even the sovereign's executive power, his emergency status, cannot stop this because, as Benjamin notes, quoting Immanuel Kant, "emergency law was no longer any law at all" (1977, p. 66).

Aestheticians will take little comfort from the fact that the caesura Benjamin identifies with the collapse of the Adamic *adequatio* is the sine-qua-non of both symbolism and allegory. In both, "This" stands not for itself but for "That." This caesura, Benjamin shows, is also where the intriguer dwells. Even as allegorical images freeze history into the setting – and thereby preserve the violence of the play and in a larger sense history – the emptiness of language, or, better, the fact that it is a vessel that can be filled with the speaker's intentions (as opposed to Adamic truth) turns it into the engine of history; the story of history being, sadly, wars and rumours of wars.

John Milton's epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, was published in 1674, in the middle of the Baroque period. Technically speaking, the conflict between Lucifer and God, and the War in Heaven take place before Adam names the beasts in the field and birds in the air. However, conceptually, since we are in the world of recognizable politics and questions about the legitimacy of sovereignty (God's), this episode and then the debate in Hell that follows the defeat of the rebel angels can be treated as emblematic of the Baroque.

Once God announces, without, it's worth noting, any justification, that after time out of mind his Son and not Lucifer will stand at the lordly right hand, Lucifer speaks not the praises of the Almighty but, rather, in recognizably political words. According to Milton's narrator, driven by envy, Lucifer denounces, "New Law from him who reigns" (*PL*, Book V, 680) and warns that if this could happen, then what else might God intend; one-third of the angels follow Lucifer to the North to consider their future.

Once in the North, in the Palace of Great Lucifer, the archangel who will soon become known as Satan implores his fellow angels to cast off the yoke put upon them, asks if they will bend their knees to the

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<sup>1</sup> I use the masculine advisedly, but, recall, Queen Elizabeth I called herself, Elizabeth Rex

new order in Heaven. While Milton may have evinced little doubt about the legitimacy of the new order in Heaven (indeed, his Puritan religious views fairly depended on the order in Heaven being legitimate), in the poem Milton's words become strangely legalistic.

Warming to his theme, Lucifer says, "for Orders and Degrees [Decrees]/Jar not with liberty, but well consist./Who can in reason then or right assume Monarchy over such as liver by right/His equals, if in power and splendor less." (*PL*, Book V, 792-796). I have emphasized the key word here, "power," the very attribute Lucifer can keep some hold on by his language, defeating, as the does, those angels who ask "Shalt thou give Law to God" (*PL*, Book V, 821). Though patently false, since God is credited with all creation, Lucifer makes it plausible, and by being plausible, believed, that the angels ancient age means that they were co-terminous with God. "We no know time when were not as now;/ Known none before us, self-begot and self-raised/By our own quick'ning power. . . . Our puissance is our own." (*PL*, Book V, 859-861, 864).

Benjamin could have been writing with a copy of *Paradise Lost* on his desk. For, while considering the disordered sovereignty of the Baroque period, he writes about how the usurper uses language to effect what appears to be "an ecclesiastical and political restoration" (1977, p. 66). That the usurper's language is empty, or, better, filled with his own intent, is both beside the point and the point Benjamin makes about language becoming little more than a power play, one that institutes a regime that all too soon will try to cover up its violent origins using even more twisted language. We are witnessing the violence in this decayed language manifested in the world on the stage, an unstable world, we know, because of the violence that the prince must use to maintain his position and that is necessary to unseat him.

(Professor Peter C. Herman, a Miltonist at San Diego State University, argues that Lucifer's rebellion was justified because, with the creation of his Son and, especially the order that Lucifer, previously the Morning Star, must bend his knee to him, God changed the rules of Heaven. In this reading, the terrible battle fought in Book VI – where we read of mountains being thrown out of place, the moment when "*Satan* first knew pain" (*PL*, Book VI, 327), canon and the defeat of the rebel angels by the Son driving what sounds like a tank – is God's. His minions, his Son included, affect "an ecclesiastical and political restoration." In other words if the reader sides, as Milton apparently believed he did, with God or if the reader is of the "Devils Party," as the 19<sup>th</sup> Century poet William Blake claimed Milton was (without him realizing it), once God changed the rules, both sides can do no other than act within a new linguistic and conflict-ridden order.)

This becomes even clearer if we look at what happens in the debate in Hell; because the poem is an epic, that is, begins *en media res*, the first few books we read are actually the middle of the story; in this case, we read about the rebel angels after they have been cast into Hell.

There, famously, Satan, still driven, the narrator tells us, by his "sense of injur'd merit," will, "wage by force or guile eternal War/Irreconcilable to our grand Foe" against the "Tyranny of Heav'n" (*PL*, Book I, 97, 121–122, 124). After escaping from the burning lake, Satan and his demons gather in an antitype of Parliament, *Pandaemonium*, where they debate their stature and consider how to make war against Heaven. Belial's words touch on Benjamin's concern about the functioning of language *in extremis*. Fearful of God's wrath, Belial councils acceptance of their fate or else they risk losing their "intellectual being,/Those thoughts that wander through Eternity,/To perish rather, swallow'd up and lost/In the wide womb of uncreated night" (*PL*, Book II, 147–150).

But Satan wins the day, by guile, by, as the successful intriguer must, being able to at the last moment sway the argument. Back in Book I, he had laid down his marker when he said, "To reign is worth ambition though in Hell" and then, spoke the poem's most famous word, "It is better to reign in Hell than serve in Heav'n" *PL*, (262–263). The rhetorical power play that wins the day, is Satan's offering of himself to attack God's creation through the newly created race of man.

Thus does *Paradise Lost* show Benjamin's point about language, that emptied of its truth value, it can no longer contain conflict it becomes the very means by which conflicts are ignited, spread and how they become war.

The jump to Vladimir Putin, who the summer before ordering the full-scale invasion of Ukraine published the essay "On the Historical Unit of Russians and Ukrainians," which seeks to argue that the two peoples are one – and that one is Russian – is a short one. The essay is sophistry, that is, it purports to make an argument grounded in facts. But, it distorts facts. He telegraphed how a theoretical conflict could, at the wave of his hand, become a war that as he said in the essay and has shown many times since (especially in when meeting Metropolitan Kirill) is nothing more than what for Russian nationalists is "an ecclesiastical and political restoration." This "restoration" is of a political/religious order created by misuse of language, something neither Putin nor, in the case of *Paradise Lost*, Satan could ever admit publicly. For, were they to do so, the "history" that has congealed before them would break apart and all that would be left is a vacuum.

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The terminology in "Critique of Violence" is, perhaps, more familiar to this audience: natural law, positive law, bourgeois capitalism and Kant's essay "Toward Perpetual Peace" – though, I warn you, Benjamin does return to the Bible.

He begins by delimiting his subject: positive law's understanding of violence. Though he does not cite the 17<sup>th</sup> century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, Benjamin could have when arguing that violence is the *sine qua non* of the state and its legal structures and the state's law, positive law, seeks to suppress all other violent acts. Recall that in his *Leviathan* (published in 1651), Hobbes argues that the "state of nature," in which there is "war of all against all," is ended when the right to use violence is transferred from the individual to the state.

About a third of the way through this 21-paragraph essay, Benjamin introduces the historical actor that, following Georges Sorel's "Reflection on Violence," Benjamin says, has a right to claim legitimate access to violence: the Revolutionary vanguard that stages a "general strike" (2021, p. 52).

This unstable situation, when wage labour asserts itself, necessitates the consideration of the use of military force to stabilise the existing order. Note the homology with what Benjamin says about the role of the dictator in his study of the *Trauerspiels*. Violence creates new law, *tout court*.

The mention of military force against strikers leads Benjamin to consider military violence in its usual realm: war between nations. Again we are in an unstable situation, partially because, as many have argued, lacking the sovereign's power of unique access to violence, we can say, "international law is no law at all." At best, even the Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War (1929) is a tacit agreement among nations to follow a set of rules that descend not from natural law or morality but, rather, from the *politesse* of chivalry. Or, to put it more bluntly, Geneva's requirements regarding the taking and treatment of prisoners are nothing more than the extension to all military personal the *realpolitik* of the mediaeval period when not mistreating captured knights and nobles was in the capturer's economic interest, for such prisoners could be ransomed.

On the battlefield, as tragically is demonstrated in the areas of Ukraine that Russia presently occupies, war establishes new "legal" norms that violate international law. One example of this is Vladimir Putin's recent decree that residents of the Donbas are required to take out Russian passports or face possible deportation to Russia.

Looking back to what in the 1920s the English-speaking world called, "The Great War," Benjamin points to militarism, by which he means raising of mass armies via conscription. This he avers is a paradigmatic form of violence as the means to an end desired by the state.

"Toward the Critique of Violence" contains much more of interest, but here I want to hasten toward its end and Benjamin's exegesis of four of the most famous words in history: "Thou shalt not kill." In an audacious thought experiment, Benjamin imagines the commandments as answers to questions. In this case the question being "May I kill?" (2021, p.58) –which apparently comes to mind because of the many instances of divine violence, such as in the story of Noah.

He continues by noting that the commandment is incomplete, for there is no penalty assessed for breaking it, which suggests to him that God had not foreseen the circumstances when that might arise.

"For this reason, those who base the condemnation of every violent killing of a human being by a fellow human being on the commandment are wrong" (2021, p.58) Benjamin writes.

The commandment exists, Benjamin argues, not as a standard of judgement outside the realm of human affairs but, rather, "as a guideline of action for the agent or community that has to confront it in solitude and, in terrible cases, take responsibility for disregarding it. Thus did Judaism, which expressly rejected the condemnation of a killing done in self-defence, understand the commandment" (2021, p. 58).

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I turn now to what are Benjamin's best-known works, "The Work of Art in the Age Mechanical Reproduction" ("Art and Mechanical Reproduction") and his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1969).

At first, "Art and Mechanical Reproduction" does not seem to offer us much. How technical reproduction, photography and lithography, *destroyed* the "aura" of the original work of art and how film completes that *annihilation* could be spun to our topic. Indeed, I just made a stab at doing so by using loaded words like "destroyed" and "annihilation." But that would, as the British say, be "over-egging the pudding."

Rather, where this essay intersects with our concern is in this sentence: "The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the 'spell of the personality,' the phoney spell of the commodity" (Benjamin 1969, p. 231). This was written well after Benjamin turned to being a Marxist, albeit, of his own brand that shared nothing with vulgar Marxist beholden to Moscow, as, for example Benjamin's contemporary literary critics and theorist Georg Lukacs

was to, to Stalinist rigid economic determinism.<sup>2\*</sup> Benjamin's sentence points directly at Leni Riefenstahl, Hitler's favourite videographer.

"Art and Mechanical Reproduction" was, in fact, written in 1936, a year after Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, her video documentary of the 1935 Nuremberg Rally, premiered. This film, which was seen all over Germany, indeed, all over Europe, in Britain, Canada and the United States, opens with Hitler's plane flying through the clouds to the monstrous reception when he lands. Riefenstahl misses no chance to overawe the viewer, from long shots of arrayed soldiers, to focusing on the huge flags emblazoned with swastikas, to lingering on the death's head of the Waffen SS, she absorbs the viewer in the forms and, through them, to some extent, the rites of the Nazi movement. We are manipulated into being entranced with Hitler's personality turned into what amounts to a movie set he bestrides – with us, like his soldiers, mere bit players.

Put another way, Riefenstahl's films attempt to (and, if the students to whom I have shown these films are any indication, are largely successful at) all-but dissolving individual viewers' wills, dissolving each one into conformity with the Wehrmacht soldiers giving the Hitler salute and yelling, "*Seig Heil!*"

Today we can see this visual violence on RU TV. Day after day, producers intend to over-awe their viewers, using excellent production values and, often, images of tanks that appear on the verge of bursting onto the sound stage where Vladimir Solovio or Margarita Simonyan are calling for the extermination of Ukraine.

Equally important are RU TV's shots of Russian president Vladimir Putin, which are usually larger than life and appear, more often than not, when one of the experts on the sound stage is praising his insight and foresight.

All of this, Benjamin foresaw when he wrote, "The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life" (1969, p. 241). Here, Benjamin does not mean aesthetics in the Kantian sense of beauty or when a literature professor discusses the poetry of Taras Shevchenko or T. S. Eliot. Rather, the aesthetics Benjamin means in the technical manipulation of the image of the great leader: think of the towering posters of Stalin or Mao, Kim Jung Un, Putin or, indeed, of the electronic trading cards issued by Donald J. Trump, which show him as a younger, thinner, even "buff," man.

Benjamin continues, "The violation of the masses, whom Fascism with its *Führer* cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of the apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values (1969, p. 241). These last words mean something akin to the "cult of personality that wraps around a Fascist leader, who uses old rituals toward his purpose." Think here of Putin's embrace of Metropolitan Krill and his embrace of Putin.

Lest we doubt that this is intimately connected to violence, Benjamin writes in the very next sentence, "All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war" (1969, p. 241).

The aestheticization of war reached its apotheosis with Filippo Marinetti and his fellow Futurists. Benjamin lets the Italian poet speak for himself by quoting at length from his manifesto on the Ethiopian war, which began when Italy invaded Abyssinia in October 1935 and was raging while Benjamin was writing his theses:

"For twenty-seven years we Futurists have rebelled against the branding of war as antiaesthetic . . . Accordingly we state . . . War is beautiful because it establishes man's dominion over the subjugated machinery by means of gas masks, terrifying megaphones, flame throwers, and small tanks. War is beautiful because it initiates the dreamt-of metallization of the human body. War is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine guns. War is beautiful because it combines the gunfire, the cannonades, the cease-fire, the scents, and the stench of putrefaction into a symphony. War is beautiful because it creates new architecture, like that of the big tanks, the geometric formation flights, the smoke spirals from burning villages and many others . . . Poets and artists of Futurism! . . . remember these principles of aesthetics of war so that your struggle for a new literature and a new graphic art . . . may be illuminated by them! (Quoted in Benjamin 1969, pp. 241-242).

Again, I cannot help but refer to the nightly fare on RU TV, which revels in showing both the machinery of war and, even more so, the images of buildings and railroad stations bombed by Russians. The encomiums semi-official talking-heads provide over terrifying images are lineal descendants of Marinetti –and as such are today's version of what Benjamin concludes about Marinetti. "*Faits ars -pereat mundus,*" ["It makes

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<sup>2</sup> \* Although Benjamin had visited Moscow and had a long running affair with Asja Lacis. Lacis was a Latvian who, in addition to be a director of a clandestine theatre, and a formidable political thinker in her own right, was a committed member of the Communist Party. By contrast, Benjamin's Marxism should be understood through his connection to the Frankfurt School of Social Research. It commissioned a number of his essays and, when, after the school moved to New York to escape Nazi Germany, continued to supply Benjamin, who was on the run from the Nazis, with funds. Like Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Benjamin was influenced by the publication in 1932 of Karl Marx's 1844 Manuscripts, which, especially in contrast to *Das Capital's* rigid economic determinism showed a much more humanist Marx. Although Benjamin rarely cites Sigmund Freud, one of the central contributions of the Frankfurt School was the synthesis of Freudian social analysis with Marx's from the 1844 Manuscripts.

the art of the world perish”] says Fascism, and, as Marinetti admits, expects war to “supply the artistic gratification of a sense of perception that has been changed by technology.”

In March of the year Benjamin wrote “Art and Mechanical Reproduction” (1936) Hitler ordered the remilitarization of the Rhineland, which, even at the time, many saw as nothing but a step toward a war, the one that would soon engulf Europe.

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Since the publication of Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” in 1950 and, especially after their publication in English in the late 1960s, this short, at times, enigmatic, text has become one of the most powerful in the Western canon.

In the second thesis, Benjamin again employs quasi religious language, speaking of the past as carrying a “temporal index by which it is referred to as redemption.” However, despite the fact that two sentences later he uses the words “Messianic power” (Benjamin 1969, p. 254) for Benjamin in 1940, “redemption” did not have a religious (or at least not a classical) religious meaning. For the redemptive power lies, not in a supernatural God who intervenes in human affairs or even God the clockmaker. Rather, Benjamin, who was on the run from the Nazis, places this burden squarely on us.

“There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on the earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply” (Benjamin 1969, p. 254).

But what “past.” The good, the bad, and the ugly? All. For, Benjamin writes, “Nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history” (1969 p. 254) While Jesus said, “Let the dead bury their dead” (Luke 9:59-60). Benjamin is saying that the dead have a claim on us, not to worship them as in an ancestor cult, but to redeem them.

For, he writes in Thesis IV, “They have a retroactive force and will constantly call into question every victory, past and present of rulers” (Benjamin 1969 p. 255.) What he is saying, rather elliptically, is clarified in Theses V and VI. “The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and never seen again” (Benjamin 1969 p. 255).

This means that the project of historicists like Leopold Ranke, who claimed to be able to articulate the past “the way it really was,” is not just impossible, it is disingenuous, even dangerous. The past “flashes up at the moment of danger” (Benjamin 1969 p. 255).

It is almost as if Benjamin foresaw that, as with tens of millions of others, he won’t survive the Nazis and that he is beseeching the future not to forget him. Here, then, he admonishes his readers that the past contains *gnosis*. (I’ve grasped for the word here, settling on *gnosis* because it pushes beyond the mere notion of historical knowledge and floats somewhere near divine knowledge understood by living men.)

It might be clearer, however, to use a present-day example. Note how Benjamin’s theses give a rather fair picture of what has occurred outside Ukraine, in the West since Russia’s full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022. The images of Ukrainians toppling Russian statues, of renaming hundreds of Pushkin streets and squares, and, most importantly, the growing understanding outside Ukraine of the Holodomor, constitute for the West something like Benjamin’s idea of the past flashing by in the moment of danger. For most Westerners, these illuminations from the past give entrée into understanding the unique historical moment being lived through in Ukraine.

The toppling of Russian statues is more than the collective thumbing of noses at the Russians. In the Ukrainian context, we are talking about a Russia<sup>3\*</sup> that would consign the living to the half-light of a Hades designed by those who would erase the lived experience of tens of millions and destroy their bodies.

“Historicism,” we read in the seventh thesis, sides with the victors because they get to write what led to their triumph, to put it rather bluntly.

Here is where we can begin to clearly see Benjamin’s critique of violence, of war, “All the victors are heirs of those who conquered before them” (1969 p. 256). In fact, we are getting very close to hearing Benjamin from beyond the grave point to Putin, who depicts himself as a later day Peter the Great. “Empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers” (Benjamin 1969 p. 256), the word “victor,” of course, signalling in almost all cases the one who won a war. All too we forget what the glory of Greece and the grandeur of Rome stood upon, though the name Spartacus might remind you.

This thesis continues and rips the bandaid off the wound of historicism.

“For, without exception the cultural treasures he [the historical materialist] surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of

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<sup>3</sup> \* I use the article “a” here to draw attention to the possible contingent status of present-day Russia. I leave aside the question of whether Russia is fated by its history to always be an aggressor state with no regard for the international law or, indeed, the laws of war, or whether this is a manifestation of Putin’s Kremlin. For the record, my sense as an historian and literary scholar is that Russia’s history and dominant culture cannot but combine to produce a war-like, hard and expansionist polity.

the great minds and talents that created them but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries” (Benjamin 1969 p. 256). Thus does Benjamin redirect our attention from the Great Men and Women of History and towards the forgotten.

We can get a better idea of what Benjamin is saying by pausing a moment to look at Berthold Brecht’s poem, “A Worker Questions History,” written a few years before Benjamin wrote his theses and, which, he almost certainly knew, for Benjamin both knew and wrote about Brecht. The middle of the poem juxtaposes, as in a film montage, the great military men and what the American poet John J. Rooney called, “the men behind the guns.”

Young Alexander conquered India.  
He alone?  
Caesar beat the Gauls.  
Was there not even a cook in his army?  
Phillip of Spain wept as his fleet  
was sunk and destroyed. Were there no other tears?  
Frederick the Great triumphed in the Seven Years War.  
Who triumphed with him?

(Brecht, website)

Accordingly, Benjamin writes: “There is no document of civilization, which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another” (1969 p. 256).

If you are having trouble grasping Benjamin’s point here, look at your smartphone and make believe you have X-ray vision. What do you see? A bunch of circuits, some microchips, yes. There’s the lithium-ion battery, to take only one example, the ore for which is mined in places like Zimbabwe, often by children in extremely dangerous conditions. The smart phone, one of our civilization’s greatest technological feats, rests on labour practices that Caesar would have recognized and might very well have considered brutal.

What I just said is a capsule version of Benjamin’s historical method. The historical materialist’s “task [is] to brush history against the grain” (1969 p. 257.) By doing so, you open fissures, show discontinuities, breaks, the attempts to repair the fresco of progress. By doing so, almost always, you will find violence, hidden, violence that even tries to hide itself because those upon whom it is meted out feel (as Nietzsche could have written) ashamed for having been defeated. By doing so, you will almost always find war either in its most direct form or its aftermath. We stand on a mountain of skulls crying out for our recognition, for our efforts to give them voice.

Halfway through the theses, Benjamin refers to a painting by Paul Klee, named “Angelus Novus” or “New Angel.” Benjamin imagines it as the angel of history.

“His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, these wings spread. . . . His face is turned toward the past [Us?] . . . . The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is brewing in Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress” (1969 p. 257).

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With the general thrust of these pregnant paragraphs in mind, I want to return to Thesis VI, which names Leopold Ranke and his view of telling history “the way it really was” (Benjamin 1969 p. 255) Only now, I will draw attention to the thesis’s final lines in the context of Russia’s war against Ukraine and, especially, what I understand of the history of how the Ukrainian language had been oppressed, Ukrainian culture and Ukrainian’s ethos. In the third to last sentence, Benjamin tips again into religious language that could very well have come from a priest or Protestant preacher, writing about how the Messiah, who comes “not only as a redeemer” but also as the “subduer of the Antichrist” (1969 p. 255). The next sentence, however, thrusts us back into the affairs of men, of the historian.

“Only that historian [i.e. in the image of the Messiah, who recognizes his or her “weak Messianic power”] will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past ” (Benjamin 1969 p. 255). Note two things about this sentence. First, it decisively breaks from the religious implications of Benjamin’s earlier sentence, for, it speaks of the “hope of the past” and not the world to come. Secondly, the grammar of Benjamin’s phrase, “fanning the spark of hope in the past,” pivots on “fanning,” which is a gerund, and, while not as clearly part of the present as are present participles (e.g. “I am fanning the flame in the fireplace), gerunds refer to habitual actions in the on-going present: e.g. “Reading is my favourite leisure activity). Accordingly, Benjamin’s sentence implies that far from being gone, the past exists, as if it walks the earth still.

If we again look at Putin's actions, the looting of museums, the destruction of Mariupol and then the plastering posters that say that it has always been a Russian city and that Pushkin loved it, we see what Benjamin feared made manifest.

For, he writes that that "even the *dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he [the historical Antichrist] wins" (Benjamin 1969 p. 255). Benjamin killed himself eight years before 1984 was published in 1948), but, as we know from George Orwell's dystopia, the past is constantly being re-written by Big Brother. The dead are not safe, pressed, as they were, into the service of the ideology manifest.

Thus, though Benjamin does not cite George Santayana's famous observation, that "Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it," he goes beyond it by underscoring that dictators make war not only on the present but on the past. Indeed, as Putin shows, dictators cannot make war unless they fancy themselves historians – or, to be more precise, for dictators, war is historicism by other means.

As the men and women at National Technical University of Ukraine "Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute" to whom I delivered via Zoom a shortened version of this essay via Zoom know much better than I, were Putin to be victorious, they and all other Ukrainians would be sentenced to a country-sized gulag. It's worth noting that Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute Sociology Department faculty have extensively been studying Ukrainian society response to the aggression and violence Russia has been waging against Ukraine for almost a decade, see for instance (Kutuev et al. 2018a, Kutuev et al 2018b, Fedorchenko-Kutuev et al 2023a, Fedorchenko-Kutuev et al 2023b) And they know, again better than I, that the war on their past would be ruthless. Were this unthinkable tragedy to occur, then, as Benjamin wrote, not "*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy."

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### **Грінфілд Н. Розпакування соціології насильства та війни Вальтера Беньяміна**

Конфлікт, насильство і, зрештою, війна займають центральне місце в соціології мови Вальтера Беньяміна. Використовуючи біблійну мову, його ранні роботи показують, що після гріхопадіння людини мова стає посудиною, яку заповнює узурпатор, інструментом, за допомогою якого він підкоряє інших своїй волі, як це робить Сатана у «Втраченому раю». Дослідження Беньяміном німецьких трагічних драм (Trauerspiels), траурних п'єс, подібних до «Гамлета» та «Річарда III», приводить його до висновку, що закон і конституційні структури в епоху бароко мають єдине значення для розуміння ролі конфлікту і насильства. У статті «До критики насильства» Беньямін наводить два ключові аргументи. Перший полягає в тому, що «загальний страйк робітників» є легітимною формою насильства, а реакція держави, часто військова, не є такою. Другий - що заповідь «Не вбий» розуміють неправильно, оскільки вона, по-перше, не містить покарання, а по-друге, не може бути всеохоплюючою заборонаю; єврейське законодавство, зазначає він, дозволяє самозахист. Його найвідоміші роботи, «Твір мистецтва в епоху механічного відтворення» та «Тези з філософії історії», написані після його повороту до марксизму, пов'язаного з Франкфуртською школою. У першій, окрім того, що він показує, як механічне відтворення руйнує «ауру» мистецтва, він занепокоєний тим, як фашистське мистецтво, наприклад, фільми Лені Ріфеншталь, що прославляють Гітлера, впливає на нього. Ці перформанси покликані «поглинути» або придушити глядача, зробити його спокійним, мовчазним учасником гри за владу, яка призводить до конфлікту і, зрештою, війни. Використовуючи квазірелігійну мову, тези деконструють «історизм», показуючи, як ранкіанська історія стає на бік переможців, Великих Чоловіків і Жінок історії за рахунок переможених. Він стверджує, що кожне покоління може спокутувати минуле, «розбираючи історію по зернятку» і використовуючи розриви, щоб показати насильство і конфлікти, які історики намагаються приховати.

**Ключові слова:** Вальтер Беньямін, конфлікти, війна, насильство, соціологія насильства, бароковий суверенітет, мова та насильство, Війна Росії проти України.

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