

PLEASE DO NOT CIRCULATE BEYOND THE CLASS

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#### IV. General Strike

Instead of the rigid and hollow scheme of an arid political action carried out by the decision of the highest committees and furnished with a plan and panorama, we see a bit of pulsating like that of flesh and blood, which cannot be cut out of the large frame of the revolution but is connected with all parts of the revolution by a thousand veins.

—Rosa Luxemburg, “The Mass Strike” (1906)<sup>1</sup>

These questions about the mediated character of all agency are most directly addressed in Benjamin’s 1921 “Toward a Critique of Violence.” Although it has been read extensively, during the last three decades especially, it remains one of Benjamin’s most enigmatic and inscrutable essays.<sup>2</sup> One reason for its difficulty is that it is almost impossible to contextualize it either in relation to the nexus of texts to which it belongs—within Benjamin’s corpus but also beyond it—or in relation to the historical and political contexts to which it responds. The recent critical edition of the essay put together by Peter Fenves and Julia Ng is the most ambitious effort to date to address this difficulty. In addition to presenting a meticulous new translation of the essay, this edition provides the

most extensive textual apparatus we have for it. Nevertheless, as Ng notes in her “Afterword”—pointing to the elusiveness of the context in which Benjamin’s essay was imagined—the essay

belongs to a shifting complex of politically oriented writings in various stages of completion. The project on a “futuristic politics” that Benjamin first mentioned in June 1919 in conversation with Scholem had, over the years, taken on a number of guises, sometimes envisioned as a book with several articulated chapters, sometimes as a series of essays, sometimes simply designated within quotation marks as “Politics.” His final mention of the project as such occurred in 1927, when in July he wrote in a letter to Scholem that during his recent trip to Corsica, a “convolute of irreplaceable manuscripts” containing “years’ worth of preliminary studies pertaining to ‘Politics’” had gone missing.<sup>3</sup>

That Benjamin’s project continues to transform in time is not surprising, since the events and contexts to which he responds themselves keep shifting and changing. If he strives to find a language that can match what is always metamorphosing into something else, he imagines a text that would approach the complex entanglements that not only constitute and deconstitute the political domain but also make a critique of violence—the effort to differentiate different forms of violence and the possibilities for overcoming them—such a vexed task. Although his project shifts for the next several years, we can piece together different statements in his correspondence and surmise that “Toward a Critique of Violence” belongs—along with the now lost “The True Politician” (which was to be the

first part of his proposed trilogy), a planned consideration of the biological sciences and of Paul Scheerbart's 1913 *Lesabéndio*, and *One-Way Street*—to what he calls in a letter from January 24, 1926, the “arsenal” of his “political works.”<sup>4</sup>

Benjamin publishes *One-Way Street* in 1928—the same year as his *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, a book that could be said to further his critique of violence in the direction of an exploration of sovereignty, power, and political agency. At the same time, the concerns of his 1921 essay and, in particular, of his larger project on politics are referenced directly in, among other texts, his essays on the “Work of Art,” Eduard Fuchs, and the “Concept of History,” and in a text he writes on *Lesabéndio* during the last year of his life. That he continued to imagine an expanded critique of violence is confirmed by a bibliography to which he gave the title “Literature for a More Fully Developed Critique of Violence and Philosophy of Law,” and which was among the papers he carried with him when he fled Paris in June 1940. In what follows, we trace this ongoing concern through an entirely unexplored reference in his “critique of violence” essay—one which remains silent and displaced, not only in this essay but also throughout the rest of his corpus. Because he never leaves the question of the relation between violence and politics behind, all of Benjamin's writings—especially if we follow the function of this secret reference, along with the enduring traces of his proposed project on politics—can be considered a critique of violence.

In the wake of World War I, Benjamin scans the political landscape and registers the near impossibility of imagining justice. Everything around him is organized in relation to different forms of violence and power, and this even after the devastation these forces brought about during the war and its aftermath. If violence and power are critical to political and juridical discourse, it is increasingly difficult to overcome their

destructive effects, because law itself sanctions the use of violence, especially when it is a matter of securing particular political ends. Benjamin's critique of violence delineates a standpoint from which the legitimation of violence can be evaluated. That he can raise this question already suggests that the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence is not secure and that, instead, what is at stake is the possibility of differentiating, in his words, "the sphere of means itself, without regard for the ends they serve," of differentiating, that is, violence from its instrumentalization.<sup>5</sup> Recalling that "critique" does not simply mean a negative evaluation and that its etymological roots can be found in the Greek *krino*, which means to "divide" or to "judge," we can register the double gesture that governs Benjamin's essay, not only in terms of the intellectual debates it engages over violence, morality, and justice it engages (debates that are countersigned by, among others, Spinoza, Kant, Marx, Darwin, Georges Sorel, Hermann Cohen, Erich Unger, and Kurt Hiller), but also in regard to the complex and volatile political context in which he is writing.

If Benjamin aims to provide a prolegomenon to what he calls the "historico-philosophical" (*CV*, 41) critique of violence, it is because his essay works simultaneously in at least two registers—as a metaphysical enterprise on the model of Kant (and especially in relation to Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, and *Toward Eternal Peace*), and as a moral and political engagement with what he refers to as the "legal circumstances" of "contemporary Europe" (*CV*, 42) in the aftermath of World War I. This helps explain the perplexing experience of encountering at least two different texts superimposed on one another: what Anthony Auerbach has called "an almost parodic amalgam of philosophical, juridical, and theological abstractions"<sup>6</sup> and what we can see as a series of references, direct and

indirect, to the recent war, the failed revolution, the parliamentary crises and constitutional turmoil punctuating the contemporary political landscape, the figure of the great criminal, the right to strike, the death penalty, juridical capitalism, the violence of peace treaties, military violence and general conscription, and the omnipresence of the police state. While the latter matters are linked to socialist and anarchist debates on militarism, war, and violence that had appeared in various guises in the preceding decades, Benjamin's treatment of them belongs to his often idiosyncratic, but nevertheless political, way of proceeding. At every step, he gives us examples that confirm our intimate relation to violence of all kinds and, in particular, to violence that is sanctioned or unsanctioned by the law. While it is impossible to demonstrate this in every example Benjamin presents to us, we will trace in a moment the way in which his essay consistently offers "more and something different than may perhaps appear" (*CV*, 39).

It is important to present some of the background against which the essay is written in more detail. As Ng reminds us, Benjamin moved back to Berlin in 1920, "a little more than a year after the Spartacist and Bolshevik uprisings and their bloody suppression by government troops and the Freikorps and mere months before the Kapp Putsch and the government's call for a general strike in response. This was then quickly followed by the Ruhr uprising, the quelling of which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of revolutionary workers." "In short," she goes on to write, "it was a time of revolutionary and counterrevolutionary movement of government and countergovernment," during which different forms of violence were evident everywhere, both inside and outside the present legal order.<sup>7</sup> In Benjamin's words, what is needed in the face of all this violence, in all its various manifestations, is a "critique of all legal violence"—that is, a "critique of legal or executive power"—and this critique cannot "be accomplished with a less

ambitious program.” The legal order, he adds, must be challenged “root and branch” (*CV*, 46).

Benjamin begins his critique by suggesting the need to get beyond an impasse in legal, philosophical, and political debates over violence. These debates, he suggests—which help shape particular state formations and not only justify state violence in relation to the rhetoric of “just ends” or “just means” but also work to solidify state power through this justified violence—repeatedly mobilize contradictory terms and arguments and, in doing so, remain complicit with the violence they presumably attempt to overcome. Law must be understood to be inseparable from violence.<sup>8</sup> Violence is what makes the law the law (*CV*, 48). All law, however distant it claims to be from its violent origins and from the forces which maintain it, enacts its irreducible relation to violence. Violence itself decides what violence is justifiable for what ends; it becomes a calculus that, designed to justify its continuity, is brutal in its instantiation.<sup>9</sup> Just ends and just means are anything but just, and thinking beyond them demands a suspension of the causality that binds them together. As Ng notes, instead of considering “just ends as a way to ‘justify’ the means (as natural law does) or justified means to ‘guarantee’ the justness of ends (as positive law does),” a critique of violence—a critique of “violence as a principle” (*CV*, 39)—requires “a temporary suspension of the question of ends and their justness.”<sup>10</sup> What is clear is that the inability to articulate criteria for evaluating the justness of any violence requires a reconceptualization of the terms of the debates in which Benjamin intervenes. As part of this reconceptualization, he introduces a series of categories—natural and positive law, law-positing and law-preserving violence, political and proletarian general strikes, and mythic and divine violence—all of which will prove

to be as unstable as the circumstances in which he writes his essay, as each one works to formalize these same circumstances in order to move beyond them.

Having experienced military defeat, mass demobilization, and the toppling of its imperial ruler, postwar Germany found itself in a state of political confusion and pervasive violence. In November 1918 revolution broke out. Workers went on strike and into the streets. Workers' councils, on the model of the councils established by the Russian Revolution in 1917, emerged everywhere. Within a few days the entire country was in turmoil. Once the imperial order collapsed, Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated his throne on November 9, 1918, and the German military was compelled to negotiate for peace. Within hours, the first German Republic was called into existence twice, dividing along the lines that had fractured German socialists at the outbreak of the war in 1914 and initiating a violent struggle for state power. In an effort to preempt the revolutionary forces that might be moved to establish a constitutional council, and aiming, in particular, to secure the succession of the Socialist Democratic Party (SPD), Philipp Scheidemann announced the German republic from the balcony of the Reichstag. Karl Liebknecht soon after declared "a free socialist Republic of Germany" from the balcony of the Imperial Palace, pledging revolution. Unwilling to cede full control to the insurgent workers' movement, the German capitalist class united with the reformist SPD, which, with its leader Friedrich Ebert, promised to restore order. The SPD claimed it wanted a peaceful, democratic transition to socialism, but it soon revealed its counterrevolutionary ambitions—its desire to establish its rule and keep the previous order as intact as possible. Against the demand that, as in Russia, power be given to the workers' councils, it insisted that elections to the National Assembly take place in January 1919. It countered the momentum of the workers' movement with support from the imperial

regime's most reactionary quarters. It is in this context that the SPD's Gustav Noske formed the Freikorps, an armed militia composed mostly of former officers in the imperial army. One of its first tasks was to put down the uprising of militant workers in early January. The Spartacist uprising advanced with support from the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) and the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), and included the occupation of buildings by workers, mass demonstrations, and a general strike. The SPD blamed the uprising on the leaders of the newly formed KPD, particularly Rosa Luxemburg and Liebknecht, and Noske called in the Freikorps to crush the uprising, who carried out their extralegal police work with brutal violence and without effective regulation. Workers occupying the building of the main SPD newspaper *Vorwärts* were executed. On January 15, Luxemburg and Liebknecht were captured, tortured, and murdered.<sup>11</sup>

The SPD-led government signed the Treaty of Versailles in June 1919. Because the Treaty imposed harsh penalties on Germany for having started the war, including the loss of territory, reparations payments, and demilitarization, the government was blamed not only for the treaty's humiliating terms but for Germany's defeat itself. As Benjamin notes, "peace" treaties—he puts the word "peace" in quotations marks because he views it as a "correlative" of the word "war" and as a law-positing force (*CV*, 44)—simply replace the violence of war with that of peace. In Germany's case, the government—now subject to new laws—did not dissolve the Freikorps militias as the peace treaty required and continued to rely on them to suppress left-wing agitation. In 1920 the Freikorps staged its own coup d'état—the so-called Kapp Putsch. As Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings summarize, on March 13, a military brigade and the Freikorps



seized control of the government district in Berlin, declared an end to the Social Democratic government, and named Wolfgang Kapp, a right-wing civil servant, as the new chancellor....Deprived of the support of large parts of the army, the government countered in the only way it could, through the declaration of a general strike. This action, together with the refusal of much of the bureaucracy to follow the directives of Kapp, led to the collapse of the putsch.<sup>12</sup>

After the failure of the attempted coup, Freikorps militias continued to crack down on left-wing activities on behalf of the government but also on their own initiative.

Although Benjamin does not mention it explicitly, he certainly has the SPD's shifting political positions in mind when he notes that the corruption of law-positing violence becomes legible whenever such violence seeks to preserve itself. By turning away from its revolutionary origins toward self-preservation, the SPD turns against the communist forces whose own positing force it now views as hostile to its authority. It calls for a general strike but instrumentalizes it in order to interrupt the Kapp Putsch challenge to its government. It proves itself capable of counterrevolutionary violence and, in doing so, turns against the principle of law-positing violence to which it owes its existence. This is why, Benjamin notes, it must disintegrate—it must experience a process of decay and ruin, in its own internal self-destruction and its eventual replacement by another political formation, another legal structure. Like the violence on which it depends, all positing is “demonic-ambiguous” (*dámonisch-zweideutiger*; *CV*, 56). Every positing and every law is subject to a more powerful law that demands that it expose itself to another positing, and another law. This more powerful law is the law of

historical change—an act of self-preservation, a consolidation of power, dictated by the ambiguity, which is evident in the SPD's actions, of being both means and end.

Benjamin further elaborates this logic of the decay of political and legal forms—a decay that occurs when law-positing violence becomes law-preserving violence, when these two forms of violence prove to be mutually constitutive. He references the suppression of the mass Communist uprisings in the Ruhr region during the spring of 1920, again by the SPD's Freikorps, the “indeterminacy of the legal threat” evident in the death penalty, which, for him, confirms that there is something “rotten in law” (*CV*, 47), the SPD parliament, which has forgotten the revolutionary violence from which it was born, and the general strike, to which we will return and which can be mobilized either for or against the state, as is evident in the 1919 doctors' counterrevolutionary strikes, which can be seen as part of a broader series of strikes by members of the bourgeoisie against the Spartacist movement. But, he suggests, the mixing of these two forms of violence—positing and preserving—is perhaps most evident in the modern institution of the police and, in particular, in the “ignominy” (*das Schmachvolle*) of its authority (*ibid.*). As can be seen in the Freikorps—which, as an extralegal quasi-police force deployed by the state, already blurs the boundaries of the law and, in doing so, tells us what is true of all policial structures—the police do not restrict themselves to simply enforcing the law, to just preserving and protecting it. Instead, they dictate it, they make themselves “rechtsetzend,” “law-positing,” they destroy the pretense of distinction between these two kinds of violence. As Benjamin puts it,

with the police, the separation of law-positing and law-preserving violence is annulled....It is law-positing—for its characteristic function is not the

promulgation of laws but the adoption [*Erlaß*] of any given decree with the claim to legality [*Rechtanspruch*]*—*and it is law-preserving because it places itself at the disposal of these ends. The assertion that the ends of police violence are always identical with, or even connected to, the ends of the remainder of law is thoroughly untrue. Rather, the “law” [*Recht*] of the police basically denotes the point at which the state, whether from impotence or because of the immanent connections of every legal order, can no longer guarantee through the legal order the empirical ends it wishes to achieve at any price. Therefore, the police intervene “for security reasons” in countless cases where no clear legal situation exists. (*CV*, 48)

According to Benjamin, the police are everywhere the force of law exists: “The violence of this institution is shapeless [*gestaltlos*], like its nowhere-tangible, all pervasive, ghostly appearance in the life of civilized states.” But “though policing may, in specific respects, look everywhere alike,” he goes on to note—emphasizing a distinction between monarchies and democracies and therefore pointing to what he sees as an intensification of police violence with the SPD and its Freikorps—“there can ultimately be no denying that its spirit is less devastating in absolute monarchies, where it represents the ruler’s power [*Gestalt*], in which there is a unity of full legislative and executive power [*Machtvollkommenheit*], than in democracies, where its existence, elevated by no such relation, bears witness to the greatest conceivable degeneration [*Entartung*] of power [*Gestalt*]” (*ibid.*).

If, as Benjamin asserts, “the critique of violence is the philosophy of its history” (*CV*, 59), what appears “closest at hand” within this history—in particular, what Benjamin understands as the constantly shifting political contexts of “contemporary Europe”—is “a dialectical back-and-forth in the formations of violence into its law-positing and law-preserving kinds” (*CV*, 60). He elaborates this “law of its oscillation” by noting that “all law-preserving violence, in its duration, indirectly, through its suppression of hostile counterforces, weakens law-positing violence, which is represented in it.... This lasts until either new forms of violence or ones earlier suppressed gain victory over the hitherto law-positing violence, thereby founding a new law, with a new decay.” What is at stake is the possibility of “breaking through this cycle that spins under the spell of mythical forms of law” in order to imagine a revolutionary violence that would inaugurate “a new historical era” by “de-posing law together with all the forms of violence on which it depends, just as they depend on it, and finally, therefore, on de-posing state violence” (*ibid.*). This deposing of law and of state violence requires its own violence, but a violence that would open history onto a nonteleological temporal order.<sup>13</sup> It would break with the forms of law. In the wording of Pablo Oyarzún, it would not be,

in any sense of the word, a “legal” violence, a violence justified by law and by the ends that it might serve and secure. Unalloyed violence, pure violence, violence as a means that is neither justified nor unjustified, a means in itself as it were, a violence that is absolutely indifferent to ends and for this very reason is immediate—this is, in a word, violence “beyond the law” (*jenseits des Rechtes*). Here “beyond” does not imply an unattainable and unimaginable vanishing point, a sort of transcendence; it

is the work of deposing legal violence that opens this “beyond” in the first place.<sup>14</sup>

Benjamin explores the possibility of this revolutionary violence in his discussion of the general strike and, in particular, of the possibility for a certain type of strike—namely, the proletarian general strike—to exceed the limits of the right to strike, turning the right to strike against the law and its calculations. As he argues, the right to strike that is meant to protect the law against the possible violence of class struggles must be transformed into a means for deposing the law.

In order to make this case, Benjamin joins a discussion of the mediacy of language—linked to questions of massification and technological reproducibility—to that of the proletarian general strike. Benjamin's discussion of the strike may be viewed in the context of the strategic debates on the politics of striking which led in 1872 to the expulsion of the Anarcho-Syndicalists from the First International and whose most well-known political document was Luxemburg's 1906 *Mass Strike: The Political Party and the Trade Unions*. However, Benjamin explicitly refers only to Georges Sorel's 1908 *Reflections on Violence*. In a performative appropriation of Sorel's text, a text that is itself mediated by Luxemburg's writings on revolution and the mass strike, Benjamin distinguishes between the political general strike and the proletarian general strike. If the first works to reverse the relation of domination but, in doing so, still preserves and reinforces state violence, the second seeks to abolish the state altogether. Benjamin cites Sorel in his description of the supporters of the political general strike: “The strengthening of state power [*l'État / Staatsgewalt*] is the basis of their conceptions; in their present organizations the politicians (namely, the moderate socialists) are already

preparing the ground for a strong centralized and disciplined power [*pouvoir / Gewalt*] that will be impervious to criticism from the opposition, and capable of imposing silence and issuing its mendacious decrees....The political general strike demonstrates how the state will lose none of its force [*force / Kraft*], how power is transferred [*la transmission / Macht*] from the privileged to the privileged, how the mass of producers will change their masters.” “In contrast to this political general strike (whose formula, incidentally, seems to be that of the recently elapsed German Revolution),” Benjamin adds, “the proletarian general strike sets itself the sole task of annihilating [*Vernichtung*] state power [*Staatsgewalt*]” (*CV*, 52).<sup>15</sup> Annihilating state power altogether, this general strike strikes against any kind of end, any outcome that would reconstitute a particular political form or calculation.

As Jameson explains, emphasizing Benjamin’s attraction to the proletarian general strike:

violence only appears as a nameable and thereby theorizable issue after the fact. It is only after the “violent” act has taken place that we are able to identify it as an example of the pseudo-universal called “violence”: indeed the “critique” of violence announced in Benjamin’s title is meant to warn us that it is, in this sense, violence itself which performs its own auto-critique and unveils itself as ideological in the very moment in which its concept is then able to appear in time as though it had always been present. Benjamin seeks—and it is a radical move which may not at first be apparent in its consequences—to suspend and bracket any consideration of ends as such. He thereby neutralizes all of the judgments

on violence which seek, either positively or negatively, to defend or denounce it in terms of ends, results, overarching values and the like, in order to examine what is called violence as pure means, in its own internal structure. (*BF*, 141-42)

According to Jameson, Benjamin's essay begins in the conviction that violence can only be a means of overcoming end-oriented violence, a means of justice, if it is pure means—if it is nothing but mediation, a force of impersonality that constitutes subjects as mediated, and therefore no longer as subjects, either individual or collective. For Benjamin, the proletarian strike is pure political violence, pure means without any determinate end beyond the strike itself, or beyond its force of annihilation—something Benjamin identifies with the criticality of violence itself. It retains the risks and promises of its violent incalculability. Directed toward the annihilation of state violence—but itself positing *nothing*—the strike suspends all positing violence. Without intention, entirely noninstrumental, “a teleology without final purpose” (*GS*, 2.3:943), a political event that shatters all determinations of the political, it scans as nonviolent. In Benjamin's words, “a nonaction, which after all is what ultimately constitutes a strike, cannot be described as violence at all. Such a consideration doubtless made it easier for state power [*Staatsgewalt*] to concede the right to strike once it was no longer avoidable. The validity of this statement, however, is not unrestricted because it is not unconditional. It is true that omitting an action or even a service can be a pure means wholly lacking in violence if it amounts simply to a ‘severing of relations’” (*CV*, 43). The strike appears in all its unmediated mediacy. It enacts a hope in the midst of hopelessness (or, as Benjamin puts it at the end of his essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, even if it were to take place

“[o]nly for the sake of the hopeless ones” in the name of whom we have “been given hope”<sup>16</sup>), and does so in order to reveal the revolutionary possibilities that open up through the sheer mediacy of all social relations. If Benjamin associates the proletarian general strike with what he calls “divine violence”—pure, unmediated violence—it is because God is another name for mediacy. This mediacy has its extrahuman analogue in language, whose linguistic essence is, like God, unutterable. Language moves toward what cannot be expressed, working to intensify this expressionlessness by multiplying its directionality and by refusing to be directed or instrumentalized. This can be confirmed by reading Benjamin’s 1916 language essay in relation to his later “Critique of Violence” essay, since each—taking its point of departure from a desire to imagine a conception of language or a form of violence that would be noninstrumental—can be read as the political complement of the other. Both language and the proletarian general strike are means of effecting a force of deposition—not as means to an end but as sheer means.

#### V. Rosa’s Casket

So now Red Rosa has also passed away.

Where she lies none can say.

—Bertolt Brecht, “Epitaph 1919” (1919)

*Hic Rhodus, hic salta!*

*Here is the rose, here dance!*

—Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852)<sup>1</sup>



If Benjamin's language moves toward what cannot be expressed, if the pure mediacy of language that he places at the center of his critique of violence works to suspend the possibility of expression and action, to enact a linguistic version of the proletarian general strike—if it is a means of interruption and fragmentation—it is because his essay is itself a *critical strike*. We already have begun to suggest the various elements of violence that are its target. We need to remember that Benjamin is not against all forms of violence—his argument is not a pacifist one—but only against those that remain bound to the law, those that can be given a determinate form and are instrumentalized either in order to posit law or to preserve it. But the essay also enacts a different kind of strike, one that can only be read as a deliberate effort to refuse to name the figure most directly associated with the general or mass strike, Rosa Luxemburg. It is surely one of the great mysteries of the essay that Luxemburg is not mentioned explicitly even once. By the time Benjamin writes his essay, she was the best-known theorist of the proletarian mass strike, and her writings had been critical to the Marxist project in Germany and, in particular, in Berlin for many years already. Along with Liebknecht, Clara Zetkin, and Franz Mehring, Luxemburg founded the group Die Internationale (The International), which became the Spartacus League in January 1916, and in December 1918 she helped found the Communist Party of Germany. Together with Liebknecht and Zetkin, Luxemburg also had initiated the communist newspaper *Die Rote Fahne* (*The Red Flag*) right after her release from prison in November 1918, a newspaper devoted to the theory and practice of socialist mass movements. Only Lenin exerted the same degree of influence over Marx's reception in the aftermath of his death. But, while Lenin viewed the revolution as merely a "means to an end," a means for the overcoming of capitalism and the installation of

socialism, Luxemburg sees revolution—appearing in the formlessness of a mass strike that is realized only when it disappears into a sociopolitical network of shifting forces—as the embodiment of a socialist practice that coincides with ceaseless movement and that has no other end than abolishing ends altogether. Her understanding of revolution resonates with Benjamin’s own demand for a politics of pure means and is closer to his view of revolution than Sorel’s is. He also would have shared her stance against the war, her view of the inhumanity of capitalism and the corruption of social democracy, and would have appreciated her effort to invent a political language and strategy linked to Marx but deeply inflected by the wars, mass strikes, and armed revolutions she had experienced in the previous decades.

We know that she was on his radar. Scholem had introduced Benjamin to Luxemburg in 1915 as they engaged in antiwar activities, distributing prohibited writings.<sup>2</sup> His brother, Georg, had given him a copy of Luxemburg’s prison letters as a birthday present in 1920—which he read before writing his essay and which he praised in a letter to Scholem at the end of December 1920 for their “incredible beauty and significance” (*C*, 171). But perhaps most critical to her visibility for Benjamin is the fact that, after her dramatic assassination on January 15, 1919, Berlin was besieged by the largest mass demonstrations and funeral processions in its history, all in response to the murders of Luxemburg and Liebknecht, and to the deaths of others who participated in the Spartacist uprising. These events could not have gone unnoticed by Benjamin and would have affected him deeply. Given Georg Benjamin’s own relations to the Spartacists, to the USDP and then the KPD,<sup>3</sup> and the extralegal violence with which Luxemburg was murdered, it would have been impossible for Benjamin not to have her close to him as he wrote his essay. Since she is not named in the essay explicitly,

however, we are compelled, in the words of Hugo von Hofmannsthal, “to read what was never written”<sup>4</sup> (a task that Benjamin associates with that of the historical materialist). Benjamin’s omission—an omission that ensures that Luxemburg functions *sub rosa* throughout the essay—is itself part of his critical strike. This “nonaction”—which, as a strike, “cannot be described as violence at all” (*CV*, 43)—corresponds to his wish not to instrumentalize her. At a moment in which she has been entirely instrumentalized—by the left as an iconic martyr and by the right as an extremist and terrorist—Benjamin abstains from mentioning her in order to minimize the risk of his contributing to her further instrumentalization (in this he anticipates Trotsky’s own effort to minimize her instrumentalization, especially by Stalin, in his 1932 “Hands Off Rosa Luxemburg!”<sup>5</sup>). Refraining from naming her, Benjamin engages in a militant negativity that he values philosophically as well as politically. At the same time, he massifies and multiplies her by incorporating shifting traces of her throughout his essay and, because of this dispersal and massification, she remains indeterminate and unnamable. As he puts it in a fragment titled “Death,” written around 1920 if not earlier, when “the *individual* dies...there occurs a shattering. The individual is an indivisible yet inconclusive unity; death is in the realm of individuality only a movement.”<sup>6</sup>

Within Benjamin’s essay, Luxemburg functions as what Werner Hamacher calls an “affirmative strike”: she does not appear in a determinate way, but only as a series of “ellipses, pauses, interruptions, and displacements” with which she at the same time can never be fully identified.<sup>7</sup> As an absent figure, she cannot be presented; she remains a displaced ellipsis. Yet because of this deposition and negation, she becomes an absent figure capable of containing—functioning like one of the many boxes in Benjamin’s corpus—the enigma of the role of violence in politics. Her absence already had been

monumentalized in the January 25 funeral procession that memorialized the thirty-three revolutionaries killed during the Spartacist uprising and buried in a mass grave in the Berlin-Friedrichsfelde cemetery. The dead included Liebknecht, but, because Luxemburg's body, having been thrown into the Landwehr Canal in Kreuzberg after her assassination, had not yet been recovered, only an empty casket was buried in her stead. Benjamin's entire reflection on violence takes the form of an afterimage of Luxemburg's murder and could be said to be another empty casket—a casket in a modernist “mourning play” that entombs not Luxemburg but her missing body.<sup>8</sup> This afterimage condenses all the forms of violence he seeks to differentiate even if, in the end, they demonstrate and enact their irreducible entanglement and complicity. With Luxemburg, Benjamin can point, in the most discreet of ways, to what she represents—the abolishment of the state and its violence, which had been so forcefully directed against her. As a figure of the proletarian general strike, it is not surprising that she had to be neutralized or annihilated by the state and, in this instance, by a state with presumably socialist origins. In Benjamin's taxonomy, she is a figure for the “great criminal” precisely because, in defying the law, she reveals the violence of the legal system itself.

The mass-like challenge Luxemburg embodies prompts a violent and gendered assassination—a femicide that is simultaneously law-preserving and law-destroying since, among other things, she is assassinated by the Freikorps.<sup>9</sup> Benjamin observes this very degeneration in the practice of the Social Democratic state during the bloody repression led by Noske against the Spartacist insurgency. These historical events persuade him that the democratic “police” bear witness to “the greatest conceivable degeneration [*Entartung*] of power [*Gewalt*]” (*CV*, 48). For Benjamin, however, Luxemburg cannot be annihilated altogether. On the contrary, beyond any determinate

position that would instrumentalize her, she survives as an inexpressible and unrepresentable force. Benjamin echoes this strategic modality of silent survival, safe from further instrumentalizations, in *One-Way Street*. There, in a passage referencing Karl Kraus and titled “Monument to a Warrior,” Benjamin makes an argument for the necessity of keeping a name silent. If we replace the masculine pronouns he uses to refer to Kraus with feminine ones, the sentences read: “Nothing more desolating than [her] acolytes, nothing more godforsaken than [her] adversaries. No name that would be more fittingly honored by silence” (*OWS*, 469). As he puts it in his early essay “The Metaphysics of Youth,” it is “the silent one” who “is the unappropriated source of meaning.”<sup>10</sup>

This insistence on silence is legible throughout Benjamin’s writings and perhaps has its most extended elaboration in his 1936 essay “The Storyteller.” There he writes about the silence and muteness that follow historical convulsions like World War I and, in particular the way in which soldiers returning from the war can be read as embodied emblems of the speechless transmission of violence and trauma. In her essay on the place of silence in Benjamin’s writings, however, Shoshana Felman points to an earlier encounter with death, also related to the war, and one that led Benjamin to encrypt another missing body in this other text (as he does in his essay on violence). According to Felman, Benjamin’s most emblematic silence may be the one organized around the mourning of his friend, the poet Fritz Heinle, who, with his fiancée Rika Seligson, committed a double suicide in protest of the German invasion of Belgium in 1914. Benjamin recounts the event eighteen years later in his 1932 *A Berlin Chronicle*, in an account that retreats from the event as much as it mentions it. In Felman’s words, the text “cannot go directly either to the proper name of the dead friend or to the actual story of

his death. Temporally as well as spatially, the story keeps moving in circles, as though around an empty, silent center.” But Benjamin encrypts his dead friend more discreetly in an unpublished essay he writes between 1914 and 1915 in which he presents a reading of two poems by Friedrich Hölderlin (another F. H.). Benjamin’s text on Hölderlin’s lyric poetry is an “implicit dialogue with Heine’s work, a dialogue with Heine’s writing as well as with his life and with his death.”<sup>11</sup> Focusing on “The Poet’s Courage” and “Timidity,” as two dissonant versions of the same poem in which, as he puts it, “the rhyme words themselves are not named,”<sup>12</sup> Benjamin silently references the “courage” of Heine’s suicide and what he perceives as the “timidity” of his own survival. As Felman notes, “the underlying, understated evocation of the dead is present and can be deciphered everywhere.” All of Benjamin’s writings, she suggests, can “be read as a work of mourning, structured by a mute address to the dead face and the lost voice of the young friend who took his own life in desperate protest in the first days of the First World War.”<sup>13</sup>

Benjamin’s encryption of Heine in his essay on Hölderlin is a precedent for his encryption of Luxemburg in his later essay on violence. The earlier essay is a testament to what he calls “the plastic structure of thought... a plasticity which is, as it were, buried and in which form becomes identical with the formless.” This plasticity effectively dissolves the borders between the two versions of the poem, overcoming the difference between the cowardly and the courageous, and ensuring the survival of the dead in those who are left to mourn them. Heine’s memory is finally registered—without mentioning his name—as “the center of this world [which] by rights belongs to another,” a reminder that the past survives in the present and that the movements of language and thought involve the transits from one mind to another and can never be said to belong to a single

person.<sup>14</sup> If Benjamin's textual crypt for his dead friend works to preserve his memory, his inability to name him directly—to name him only through the similarly initialed avatar Friedrich Hölderlin—marks the trauma he experiences because of this death. In Luxemburg's case, her anonymity within his violence essay is a means of memorializing her but also of protecting her from instrumentalization. Her encryption in the essay is itself a political event—an event that destroys any determination of the political even as it deranges what we think of as an event, since it takes place inside and outside a text at the same time, at the border that inevitably connects the text to violence, even as it seeks to exceed this same violence. This reconceptualization of the political occurs because of the mediums in which it takes place. In Benjamin's essay, these mediums are language and, in particular, the suspension of language's capacity to name, which, as we have suggested, is a linguistic analogue to the proletarian general strike and its force of interruption. Benjamin's language could be said to enact Luxemburg's theory and practice of the mass strike at the level of his sentences—as they activate, disperse, interrupt, and massify any attempt to conceptualize either violence or the emergence of the strike. The ceaselessly changing and altering form of mass movements has its counterpart—finds a transient form—in the movements of Benjamin's writing.<sup>15</sup>

The singularity of Benjamin's textual crypt lies in its failure to conform to any law and order. It comes in the form of a *strike* that targets the traditional oppositions that govern political discourse, something he registers in the force of Luxemburg herself. Within the orbit of *this* strike, Luxemburg is a phantom limb—and within an essay that is more than simply divided, and that may only grant us access to its secrets through routes that are not just topographical but plurally marked by different overlapping and sedimented histories and temporalities. Its effects are perhaps most legible in the

retranscription of the concepts that Benjamin explores in his essay and that work to “de-signify” any monosemic understanding of violence. In his outline for a never-completed development of an extended critique of violence, he changes the title of his essay to “A Dismantling of Violence” in order to suggest a critical decomposition of violence. This decomposition has its complement in the fragmentation and decomposition of Luxemburg herself—something that happens both inside and outside Benjamin’s essay. If the essay’s notorious difficulty and abstraction disguises and hides a female body, it also obscures its disguise in this encryption. It hides Luxemburg as it holds and preserves her by constructing a series of partitions—between divine and mythic violence, law-positing and law-destroying violence, the political and proletarian general strikes, and different instrumentalizations of natural law—that eventually unravel around her missing body, a body whose clandestine inclusion calls into question these very partitions. In other words, the crypt that Benjamin’s essay is can only keep its secret by fragmenting itself—like the body it wants to protect and preserve. In order to register the effects of this gesture, we have to gather the various traces it leaves behind and decipher them through a forensic act of readerly interpretation. As we will see, Luxemburg’s body and work get dispersed across other names and figures—minimally, she appears in the guise of the “great criminal,” Sorel, Niobe, and, in another kind of plurality, the company of Korah and as a counterpoint to Kurt Hiller—and, in doing so, she becomes a shifting frame through which we can read Benjamin’s simultaneously abstract and concrete but always elusive treatment of violence.<sup>16</sup>

One of the most ingenious ways in which Benjamin enciphers Luxemburg in his text is by inscribing her within Sorel’s text, or, more precisely, by evoking her language alongside his discussion of Sorel—and sometimes in it—as if to recall to us the fact that



Sorel's text is already in proximity to her, is already inhabited by her.<sup>17</sup> Although Sorel only explicitly cites Luxemburg's *Reform or Revolution*, he surely knew her *Mass Strike* and, at different moments, he simply ventriloquizes her views on the mass strike and revolution without mentioning her. At the same time, there are differences between Luxemburg and Sorel that get accented by the way in which Benjamin contextualizes his evocations (in the case of Luxemburg) and citations (in the case of Sorel) of their writings. In the end, he is closer to Luxemburg than to Sorel and this becomes increasingly legible the more we recall not only the specific arguments made by these two thinkers of the strike but also the argument that Benjamin makes. If Sorel becomes a mask for Luxemburg—it is impossible not to register that “Sorel” is an anagram of “Rose L”—Benjamin uses Sorel's language neither to silence her nor to exemplify the loss of her voice.<sup>18</sup> Instead, he inscribes her now suppressed and silenced voice into Sorel's text in order to have us hear it, as if we were listening to a secret—a secret that eventually unravels Sorel's text. As he notes in *One-Way Street*, “[c]riticism is a matter of correct distancing” (*OWS*, 476). Evoking Luxemburg through Sorel permits him to distance himself from the Spartacists in an auratic play between distance and proximity that facilitates his critical task—as it walks a tightrope between philosophical abstraction and the extremity of Germany's political climate—and, in the long run, confirms his closeness to their means of political insurrection. Their own mode of resistance involves distancing themselves from different state forms that reiterate and reinforce violence, oppression, and capitalist inequalities in order to engage and dismantle them.<sup>19</sup>

If Benjamin draws his distinction between the political general strike and the proletarian general strike from Sorel—something that he also could have taken from Luxemburg's own distinction between a narrower or more general sense of the mass

strike—Luxemburg’s silent presence within Sorel’s text unsettles its certainties. In particular, it enables Benjamin to release the critical potential of her writings against the elements in Sorel that remain tied to direct action, instrumentality, and mythical violence, despite Sorel’s claims to the contrary, despite, that is, his own effort to complicate these concepts. While Sorel claims that the general strike is “the myth in which socialism is wholly comprised, i.e. a body of images capable of evoking instinctively all the sentiments which correspond to the different manifestations of the war undertaken by socialism against modern society”—that “the myth of the general strike dominates the true working-class movement in its entirety” (*RV*, 118 and 31)—Luxemburg resists the idea that a constellation of ideas alone can move the masses. Instead, like Benjamin—who also disputes the suggestion that a mythical affective image of the future can galvanize the masses—she insists that there is no formula, no myth or “recipe,” that can mobilize them. In her words:

Whether great popular demonstrations and mass actions really take place, in whatever form, is decided by an entire set of economic, political, and psychological factors...that are incalculable and which no party can artificially produce....The historical hour posits each time the suitable forms of popular movement and *itself* creates new, improvised, and previously unknown methods of struggle; it enriches and amasses the arsenal of the people without concern for any of the pronouncements of the parties.<sup>20</sup>

It is precisely Luxemburg's sense of the mass strike as pure means, as a movement without a determinate shape or end, that draws Benjamin's attention. For her, masses do not exist before they emerge as forms in movement—she refers to “*the method of motion of the proletarian mass*” (MS, 141). They may not even survive their success or their defeat, and therefore cannot be interpellated or directed in any determinate way without ceasing to be masses in their becoming. Luxemburg's insistence on plasticity and becoming as the essential features of the mass strike distance her from Sorel's penchant for strict oppositions—his confident assertions, for example, that myth distinguishes political and proletarian general strikes. The conceptual impurity of mass movements—because they emerge as multitemporal and multidirectional historical events—calls for a capacious formlessness capable of gathering and containing other forms. This plasticity can affect its origin as well: a movement can begin as a political strike and, in the course of its development, gather the force of a proletarian strike. While Luxemburg can contain all of Sorel's antagonistic pairings, Sorel cannot contain the formlessness that is at the core of her masses and that is the changing repository of their historical force. Very much like Benjamin, Luxemburg radicalizes Sorel's nominal anarchism by adopting a far more extensive understanding of formlessness as a force of deposition that breaks from a politics of ends. As she puts it, in a passage that resonates with Benjamin's own insistence on the strike's aleatory politics:

The mass strike, as the Russian Revolution has shown us, is so protean a phenomenon that all the phases of political and economic struggle, all the stages and moments of the revolution are reflected in it. Its applicability, its effectiveness, the moments of its origin—all are constantly changing. It

suddenly opens new and wide revolutionary vistas where the revolution seemed already at a dead end, and where it is impossible for anyone to count on it with any degree of certainty...it is a ceaselessly moving, changing sea of phenomena. And the law of motion of these phenomena is clear: it does not lie in the mass strike itself, not in its technical peculiarities, but in the political and social relation of forces in the revolution. (*MS*, 140-141)

If the strike suspends any politics oriented toward violently posited ends, it is because it is the sheer medium of the political: the only politics that, constantly in motion, cannot be instrumentalized. It anarchically unsettles every form of directionality, which is why the first part of *The Mass Strike* is devoted to extracting and distancing the concept of the strike from a narrow sense of anarchism, where it nonetheless has its origins. Returning to Engels's 1873 denunciation of Bakunin<sup>21</sup>—appropriating his “authority” for her cause—Luxemburg argues that the historical experience of the Russian Revolution, and the political training it embodies and offers, fundamentally alters the concept of the strike, transforming it into the most powerful political implement of socialism in its democratic struggle for rights. She differentiates her “mass strike” from that of the French and Italian “syndicalists” who instrumentalize it in order to achieve reduced, reformist goals—in this case, workers’ rights *in lieu of* democratic gains like universal suffrage—and who, not unlike a policial understanding of revolutionary formations, believe that leadership holds the key to a successful outcome. Recalling the lessons of the Russian Revolution, Luxemburg insists that her conceptualization of the mass strike follows the complex, multiple, and unpredictable gathering of the proletarian

masses—who are formed in the activity of the mass strike and not in accordance with any preconceived and abstract theoretical scheme. It is worth noting that, throughout her political and dialectical reading of the Russian Revolution, Luxemburg does not propose a theory of “spontaneity,” as often has been assumed, but instead a theory of political incalculability, of risk and potential. While she uses the language of spontaneity and direct action to speak about the sudden uprising of the proletariat, in each instance these mass movements arise in relation to historical experience—in relation to a multiplicity of unpredictably mediated relations. As she puts it, “It is absurd to think of the mass strike as one act, one isolated action. The mass strike is rather the indication, the rallying idea, of a whole period of the class struggle lasting for years, perhaps for decades...every one of the great mass strikes repeats, so to speak, on a small scale, the entire history of the Russian mass strike, and begins with a pure economic, or at all events, a partial trade-union conflict, and runs through all the stages to the political demonstration” (*MS*, 141 and 144). Unlike Sorel’s anarchist version of direct action, Luxemburg’s direct action is entirely mediated by historical forces that influence “the action of the strike in a thousand invisible and scarcely controllable ways” (*MS*, 141), in “a fight in the midst of the incessant crashing, displacing, and crumbling of the social foundation” (*MS*, 148) that proceeds not “in a beautiful straight line but in a lightning-like zig-zag” (*MS*, 168). This is why “strike action itself does not cease for a single moment. It merely alters its forms, its dimensions, its effect. It is the living pulse of the revolution and at the same time its most powerful driving wheel...[it is] *the method of motion of the proletarian mass*, the phenomenal form of the proletarian struggle in the revolution” (*MS*, 141).<sup>22</sup> Insisting on the political training necessary for transformation, Luxemburg argues that the historical experience of the strike amounts to a “living political school,” an “actual school of

experience,” that is part and parcel of the “high degree of political education” that revolutionary change demands and implements (*MS*, 130). The lessons of this political education system are cumulative and transmitted across generations and nationalities in an “endless series of ever-spreading and interlacing economic struggles,” in “a series of preparatory insurrections” (*MS*, 133 and 139), that no single myth would be able to name or fully contain, which is why they remain a source of revolutionary potentiality.<sup>23</sup>

In contrast to Luxemburg’s oceanic mass strike, Sorel conceptualizes the proletarian strike as a myth, as a quasi-military strategy that relies on direct action and on what he calls “a will to act” (*RV*, 28), a subjectivist vitalism that—in Sorel’s case, originating in the writings of Henri Bergson—would soon be appropriated by fascist discourse. Like Sorel, fascism also understood myth as the great motive force behind its political aestheticism, an aestheticism that, as we already have seen, is one of Benjamin’s targets in his artwork essay. Although it would be misleading to suggest that this vitalist myth enters fascist rhetoric solely by way of Sorel, his work greatly influenced the former syndicalists-turned-fascists Georges Valois and Enrico Corradini, both of whom embraced myth as a means of intensifying the revolutionary zeal of the proletariat—the means whereby the proletariat would ready itself for the coming revolution. Benjamin’s choice of Sorel as Luxemburg’s masculinist cover is therefore rather remarkable, since it introduces her many refusals of myth in all its various guises as covert forces hiding within the certainties of Sorel’s authority as a writer and as an activist anarcho-syndicalist whose insistence on the force of the general strike—and the corresponding violence of its mythic action (something both Benjamin and Luxemburg contest)—is often militaristic, and even muscular, in tone. It is hard to imagine prose that would be less Benjaminian than Sorel’s! Luxemburg’s antiwar and antimilitaristic stances—“present” simply by

virtue of her inscription in Sorel's text—serve Benjamin well as a subtle counter to this masculinist strain in Sorel's writing. The traces of Luxemburg's language cast a shadowed light on the interplay in Sorel between his professed revolutionary practice and his nevertheless at times legibly reactionary theories. She becomes a means of accenting the fragments from Sorel that can be reclaimed for a revolutionary project, while at the same time exposing the elements that need to be left behind, or at least require this textual intervention. She enables Benjamin to work between the lines of Sorel's text and to take advantage of its contradictions in order to remap it in a more revolutionary manner. Emphasizing that no text can follow a single line—that the language of a text moves in several directions, something that is true for his text as well—Benjamin draws our attention to his effort to signal a sinuous path through what, because of Luxemburg's intercession, we might call the “ruins” of Sorel's text, if not of his “masculinity.”<sup>24</sup>

That Benjamin presents Luxemburg through the mediation of a male other interrupts and fissures all traces of Sorel's masculinity from within. At the same time, this act alienates her from herself, permits her to appear in this alienation—and from the distance at which death has now put her. But, if Luxemburg and Sorel deconstitute one another precisely in their relation, this exchange of sexual identities, this textual crossdressing, would itself have been a recognizable feature of Weimar culture, and one in which Benjamin himself participated. Beyond the sexual experimentation and fluidity of gender identity that characterized the period—and that was given institutional support by the Institute for Sexual Science (Institut für Sexualwissenschaft) inaugurated in Berlin in July 1919—writers and artists explored different sexual orientations, often at the same time, and took on different pseudonyms and alter egos as part of these experiments. Benjamin himself posed for a photograph with his friend Alice Croner in 1921 dressed in

drag and, in the same year, Marcel Duchamp famously took on the persona of “Rose Sélavy” (another Rose) in order to mark not only the role of eros and sexuality in our everyday life but also the instability of identity, the performativity of gender, and the possibility of embodying more than one sex simultaneously. “Rose Sélavy” first appears in New York in 1920 as the author of Duchamp’s sculpture “Fresh Widow,” and then adds an additional “r” to her name when she signs Francis Picabia’s 1921 collage *L’Oeil Cacodylate* (*The Cacodylic Eye*). When Duchamp is photographed by Man Ray in 1921 as “Rose Sélavy,” Rose’s hands are those of Germaine Everling, then Picabia’s girlfriend. Drawing on established drag conventions in an era when drag performances were very much in vogue in France but also elsewhere (crossdressing was for a time legal in Weimar), Duchamp’s performance also pluralizes the concept of authorship, something that is further intensified when the surrealist poet Robert Desnos later writes under the Rose Sélavy alias. In regard to Luxemburg in particular, in his 1919 eulogy for her and Liebknecht, “A Requiem for Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg,” Trotsky already had used gender-bending tropes in his description of the “complementary” nature of the two Spartacists. As he puts it, “If the intransigent revolutionary Liebknecht was characterized by a feminine tenderness in his personal ways then this frail woman was characterized by a masculine strength of thought.”<sup>25</sup> The pluralization and multiplication of identity, the impersonality of a writer’s language, is something we have seen before, but the specificity of this Luxemburg-Sorel “couple” permits Benjamin to delineate, in this performative way, the various complicities and antagonisms not only between these two writers—both of whom claim to be heirs of Marx—but also between their different political stances.



Intensifying Luxemburg's presence within Sorel's text, Benjamin confirms the multiplicity of voices that inhabit any writer's language and, in this particular case, this pluralization signals the clandestine circulation and massification of Luxemburg's voice itself. Luxemburg's voice is always massified—it is mediated, transformed, ventriloquized in distorted forms, even if it at times was violently silenced. But, if it is not just hers, it is also because—beyond the archive of all the leftist, Marxist writings she read, of all the literature, philosophy, economics, and anthropology she absorbs, of all the experiences and relations she lives that leave their traces in her—it already is that of the masses themselves. As Trotsky notes in his eulogy for Luxemburg and Liebknecht—written immediately after their assassination—she is “the personification of the proletarian revolution.”<sup>26</sup> This personification gets enacted when, in the last text she writes, “Order Reigns in Berlin,” written the day before her death, she joins her “I” to that of the revolution and has it speak through her. Declaring that Berlin's “‘order’ is built on sand,” that “the revolution will ‘raise itself up again clashing,’” the revolution, speaking for her, proclaims “to the sound of trumpets: *I was, I am, I shall be.*” It is moving that these are Luxemburg's last written words, since they are themselves archivally massified. “Raise itself up again clashing” is a line from a poem by Ferdinand Freiligrath, a close friend of Marx, entitled “Abschiedswort” (A word of farewell). Marx published the poem in the final issue of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* after the defeat of the 1848 revolution; the entire issue was printed in red ink. “*I was, I am, I shall be*” is a line from another of Freiligrath's poems, “Die Revolution” (The revolution), written in 1851, in which the line is spoken by the Revolution itself. Inscribing her own farewell in the words of Freiligrath—speaking her last words, her own farewell, through the farewell of a journal devoted to democratic rights and in the aftermath of both the 1848 defeat and

the recent defeat of the Spartacists—Luxemburg not only ventriloquizes her voice through the voice of another but also through the more impersonal voice of the Revolution itself. The defeat of the Spartacist uprising—one in a series of historical defeats—does not mark the end of the revolution, which is why it can announce its future. As Luxemburg puts it,

the individual fights of the revolution formally end with a defeat. But revolution is the only form of “war”—this, too, is its particular life principle—in which the final victory can be prepared only by a series of “defeats”....The whole path of socialism, as far as revolutionary struggles are concerned, is paved with sheer defeats....Where would we be today without those “defeats” from which we have drawn historical experience, knowledge, power, idealism!....How does the defeat in this so-called Spartacus Week appear in light of the above historical question? Was it a defeat due to raging revolutionary energy and a situation that was insufficiently ripe, or rather due to frailties and halfway undertakings?

Both!....The leadership failed. But the leadership can and must be created anew by the masses and out of the masses. The masses are the crucial factor; they are the rock on which the ultimate victory of the revolution will be built. The masses were up to the task. They fashioned this “defeat” into a part of those historical defeats which constitute the pride and power of international socialism. And that is why this “defeat” is the seed of the future triumph.<sup>27</sup>

Luxemburg's mobilization of defeats, of their accumulation as constitutive elements of historical experience, is the closest she ever comes to a political prognosis. The secret of international socialism is that accumulated defeats are the necessary sediment and unspoken hope that conjure "the seed of the future triumph." Benjamin appropriates this logic, already present in Marx, and matches it with an incipient love of secrecy and encoding as the means for a clandestine mode of preservation and activism. His treatment of Luxemburg in "Toward a Critique of Violence" presents us with an early version of this counterintuitive and future-oriented revolutionary logic—one that gets enacted in the language of his text—as well as an example of secrecy as an act of safekeeping, as a gesture in the direction of a future that might inaugurate and even realize a "*new historical era*" (CV, 60).

## VI. Panoramas of Violence

What might be the relationship between experiment in language and the violence of the modern world, between a truncated sentence and a truncated life? What drives syntax askew, makes language stall completely or spill over its proper borders...?

—Jacqueline Rose, *On Violence and on Violence against Women* (2021)<sup>1</sup>

In Benjamin's essay, Luxemburg is inscribed in a series of allegorical transformations and figures that prevent any simple or univocal identification between her and a determinate name, whether it be individual or collective. Putting aside Benjamin's own

penchant for pseudonyms and alter egos, we might note that Luxemburg and the Spartacists often took on different names—especially when engaged in clandestine activities—including Spartakus and Junius as collective and historical names, respectively.<sup>2</sup> Within Benjamin’s essay, Luxemburg is encrypted in his discussion of the Greek myth of Niobe, something that becomes more legible when the myth is put in relation to a letter she writes in 1917 while she is in prison and that Benjamin reads just before writing his essay. Benjamin evokes the Niobe myth—a myth about violence, numbers and massification, and the mutual instantiation of borders and the law—in order to illustrate what he calls “mythical violence,” a form of violence that, for him, involves the violent imposition of law. Like that of Luxemburg, Niobe’s fate highlights the excessive violence that—responding to a perceived threat or strong challenge, especially one made in the name of equality—erects legal limits, separations, and demarcations that, in turn, enable the sovereign state to declare who is inside or outside the law. In the mythical story, Niobe is accused of boasting that she had more children than the goddess Leto, mother of Apollo and Artemis. In retaliation for her claim—which is factually correct since she had twelve children, the so-called “Niobids” (the exact number of her children varies from one version of the myth to another, but it is always a matter of proliferation and massification)—Leto orders Artemis and Apollo to kill all of Niobe’s children in front of her and to leave them unburied for nine days. After their burial, Niobe is returned to her native Mount Sipylus and transformed into a stone, a stone that eternally mourns and weeps over her dead children. In Benjamin’s reading of the myth, Niobe’s fate cannot be understood as a punishment for a crime or transgression; it must be seen as the establishment of a boundary stone “marking the border between men and gods” (*CV*, 55) that did not exist previously. Niobe’s transgression only exists

retroactively, according to the perverse logic of a self-positing law, as the gods' violence "establishes a law far more than it punishes the transgression of an existing one" (ibid.). Accordingly, the law does not put an end to violence. It maintains and preserves violence as its foundational force. As Benjamin puts it, law-positing violence establishes "not an end that would be free of, and independent from, violence but, on the contrary, an end that, under the name of power, is necessarily and intimately bound up with it" (*CV*, 56). This cruel and excessive violence is revealed as the founding act of the law, as its bloody birth against the background of innocent deaths. The law behaves like a border staked on the violent exclusion of those it does not protect: in this instance, Niobe's children. One could say that Luxemburg's violent murder is used in a similar manner and functions primarily as a reminder that communists like her cannot expect protection from the law because, declared to be outside the law and therefore a threat to the state, they can be executed with no consequences. Indeed, despite being identified, Luxemburg's murderers were never held accountable for their crime.<sup>3</sup>

With the example of Niobe, Benjamin's critique of the relationship between violence and the law extends to those whose existence the law acknowledges but does not protect, making them more vulnerable to further violence and terror.<sup>4</sup> As the myth of Niobe demonstrates, murder is not alien to the law. It creates the law and is considered foundationally necessary whenever the designation and demarcation of illegal subjects suits the state and its legal system. The myth of Niobe must be understood as a conceptual extension of Benjamin's critique of violence, and as a mythical formalization of the history and structure of the law, a reminder that in his materialist thinking history and critique cannot be disentangled.

At this point in his difficult and multifaceted argument, however, Benjamin further qualifies the resilience and impregnability of legal borders when he adds that “when boundaries are laid down, the adversary is not utterly annihilated” (*CV*, 56). He leaves open the possibility that the “adversary” (be it a Niobe or a Luxemburg) may persevere in her plight, even when condemned to be “an eternal, mute bearer of guilt”—the one who must relentlessly and silently mourn the dead and memorialize the violence that led to this death, who becomes a sign that marks the violent act that inaugurates the law as a gravestone for justice. Furthermore, if Niobe’s fate enacts a separation and border between gods and humans under the coercive threat of violence, at the same time, once she is metamorphosed into a weeping stone, she also endures as the marker of an extended grief for the violence against her children. A monument to what violence “leaves behind” (*CV*, 55), to the force of mythical violence, Niobe is stripped of her human form and transformed into a thing-like state that remains capable of animation and signification, even if she remains mute. As Michelle Ty puts it, “[b]y force, Niobe is silenced, no longer able to represent herself in speech, while further being made to testify—univocally yet without uttering a word—to the history of violence to which she has been subjected. Though mute, tearful Niobe is not released from the economy of signification but is deposited fixedly within it.” Embodying the division between hierarchically differentiated realms, her tale confirms that mythic violence “leaves behind a residuum of what it destroys.”<sup>5</sup> Niobe becomes a figure that binds the natural world with that of human sentience, and specifically in relation to the pain and loss to which they are fated under the onslaught of violence.

That Luxemburg’s fate resembles that of Niobe is confirmed in her prison letters, which Benjamin read with great interest. In her numerous letters to friends and

collaborators, Luxemburg establishes a series of connections and transferences among the violent exploitation of the natural world, the destruction of life under capitalism, and the state violence complicit with it. A selection of her correspondence with Sophie Liebknecht, written while in Breslau prison, was published shortly after her assassination. Their publication and editorial success quickly countered the myth of “bloody red Rosa” that was circulated and leaned on in order to justify her murder. Like many other Germans at the time, Benjamin read the letters. Greatly moved by them, he continues to reference them in the 1930s. In addition to her already influential political pamphlets, and her volumes on capitalism, revolution, colonialism, and violence of all kinds, Luxemburg’s correspondence exhibits a wide range of complicities and an inspiring alertness to the smallest details of her surroundings. Her love of nature and her frequent identifications with birds, her commentaries on literature and music, her heartfelt belief in friendship and collaboration, and her commitment to the liberatory possibilities of mass movements are truly striking.<sup>6</sup>

Among the letters, the one most directly related to the myth of Niobe is the letter she writes to Sophie Liebknecht on December 24, 1917. In the letter, included in the selection of letters that Benjamin reads, Luxemburg—if not turned into stone, certainly imprisoned within Breslau’s stone walls<sup>7</sup>—weeps, in echo of Niobe’s own mournful tears for her children, as she registers the cruelty and violence of Europe’s Great War. After offering an incisive assessment of the Russian October Revolution, reflecting on her third Christmas in prison, describing the sounds she hears at night while lying awake in her cell, speculating on the kind of flowers that could compose the bouquet she knows Sophie had picked up in Steglitz Park, and discussing poems by Stefan George,

Luxemburg's letter, smuggled out of prison and therefore uncensored, takes a sudden and poignant turn:

Oh, Sonyichka [Sophie Liebknecht], I've lived through something sharply, terribly painful here. Into the courtyard where I take my walks there often come military supply wagons, filled with sacks or old army coats and shirts, often with bloodstains on them....They're unloaded here [in the courtyard] and distributed to the prison cells, [where they are] patched or mended, then loaded up and turned over to the military again. Recently one of these wagons arrived with water buffaloes harnessed to it instead of horses. This was the first time I had seen these animals up close. They have a stronger, broader build than our cattle, with flat heads and horns that curve back flatly, the shape of the head being similar to that of our sheep, [and they're] completely black, with large, soft, black eyes. They come from Romania, the spoils of war....The soldiers who serve as drivers of these supply wagons tell the story that it was a lot of trouble to catch these wild animals and even more difficult to put them to work as draft animals, because they were accustomed to their freedom. They had to be beaten terribly before they grasped the concept that they had lost the war and that the motto now applying to them was "woe unto the vanquished" [*vae victis*]... There are said to be as many as a hundred of these animals in Breslau alone, and on top of that these creatures, who lived in the verdant fields of Romania, are given meager and wretched feed. They are ruthlessly exploited, forced to haul every possible kind of



wagonload, and they quickly perish in the process. —And so, a few days ago, a wagon like this arrived at the courtyard [where I take my walks].

The load was piled so high that the buffaloes couldn't pull the wagon over the threshold at the entrance gate. The soldier accompanying the wagon, a brutal fellow, began flailing at the animals so fiercely with the blunt end of his whip handle that the attendant on duty indignantly took him to task, asking him: Had he no pity for the animals? "No one has pity for us humans," he answered with an evil smile, and started in again, beating them harder than ever.... The animals finally started to pull again and got over the hump, but one of them was bleeding....Sonyichka, the hide of a buffalo is proverbial for its toughness and thickness, but this tough skin had been broken. During the unloading, all the animals stood there, quite still, exhausted, and the one that was bleeding kept staring into the empty space in front of him with an expression on his black face and in his soft, black eyes like an abused child. It was precisely the expression of a child that has been punished and doesn't know why or what for, doesn't know how to get away from this torment and raw violence....I stood before it, and the beast looked at me; tears were running down my face—they were his tears. No one can flinch more painfully on behalf of a beloved brother than I flinched in my helplessness over this mute suffering. How far away, how irretrievably lost were the beautiful, free, tender-green fields of Romania! How differently the sun used to shine and the wind blow there, how different was the lovely song of the birds that could be heard there, or the melodious call of the

herdsman. And here—this strange, ugly city, the gloomy stall, the nauseating, stale hay, mixed with rotten straw, and the strange, frightening humans—the beating, the blood running from the fresh wound....Oh, my poor buffalo, my poor, beloved brother! We both stand here so powerless and mute, and are as one in our pain, impotence, and yearning. —All this time the prisoners had hurriedly busied themselves around the wagon, unloading the heavy sacks and dragging them off into the building; but the soldier stuck both hands in his trouser pockets, paced around the courtyard with long strides, and kept smiling and softly whistling some popular tune to himself. And the entire marvelous panorama of the war passed before my eyes.<sup>8</sup>

In this extraordinary passage, Luxemburg offers her own critique of violence, giving us a glimpse into the ellipses around which Benjamin's essay is written. It is not that Benjamin does not engage what is not said in his text directly—he does, as we already have demonstrated—but Luxemburg goes further into the details of a singular and contingent experience of violence. This incident is at once familiar and quotidian, but is intensified and expanded by the state of emergency of a war that provides the historical context for Luxemburg's reflections. More than the stories of Niobe or the Korah, Luxemburg's letter goes to the heart of the experience of the endlessly entangled brutality that underlies war and capitalism and that reverberates—even in “quiet times,” as she often reminds us<sup>9</sup>—in the experiences of class, labor, the prison system, immigration, and the constant plunder of nature, but of a nature that is intimately bound to us.

The passage begins with the blood of soldiers soaking the garments that are sent in military supply wagons to the prison for mending, one form of conscripted and brutal labor seeping into another—in perfect continuity, however different they are—and as part of a barbaric cycle with no end in sight. In one single sentence, Luxemburg transforms the prison courtyard where the scene takes place into an allegory of life under capitalism. Before our eyes, she literally materializes her argument against Germany’s imperialist war as yet another aftereffect of capitalism’s relentless plunder. The passage, raw as it appears, is also a condensation of Luxemburg’s life-long study, analysis, and criticism of the ruthless logic of capitalism. The Romanian buffaloes that carry the loads of military supplies are “the spoils of war” but also the immigrants that, upon crossing a border, become the “draft labor” that fuels capitalism’s greed, a modality of economic conscription. The loving patience and observational detail of Luxemburg’s description of the black buffaloes is typical of the treatment of nature exhibited throughout her prison letters, with nature becoming a reservoir of beauty, freedom, and life capable of undoing the logic of imprisonment because it ignores the enforcement of captivity. In this instance, however, the freedom of the buffaloes grazing the Romanian prairies is merely an imagined and mournful memory lost long before the beginning of her narration of the prison yard scene. The violence of the border is enacted not only allegorically but also physically by the soldier beating the buffalo to press him across the threshold of the prison gate. The soldier’s brutality, which is only superficially an act of personal sadism, is one more instance of the transmission of violence through the compromised agency of the conscripted soldier, an instrumentalization moving against another instrumentalization, and even within it. When the soldier exclaims, justifying his abuse of the animals, “no one has pity for us humans,” he identifies with the broken skin of the

buffalo. At once subject and object of violence, his “agency” echoes and reverberates with his own unfreedom. Luxemburg’s “woe unto the vanquished”—a phrase that should be understood in all its depth and that Benjamin variously incorporates more than once into his writing, especially in his notes to his late essay on the concept of history—is the red thread woven into the entire passage. It can refer to any of the characters involved in the scene, including the soldier, the buffalo, and Luxemburg. That she refers to the sad eyes of the buffalo as those of “an abused child” underscores the future violence inscribed in every single act of violence, not only because it appears as an act of transmission but, above all, because it forecloses the possibility of a different future. Like the myth of Niobe, Luxemburg’s is a story of cruel violence against children, here in the form of the buffalo, and, also like Niobe’s, it is a story of witnessing and mourning. In another instance of displaced, compromised and vicarious agency, Luxemburg’s tears are not her own but the buffalo’s, yet the buffalo’s tears are not just his own, for he is the allegorical figuration of the shared fate of the vanquished, who are “powerless and mute, and are as one in [their] pain, impotence, and yearning.” Niobe’s children become proleptic figures of Luxemburg’s children of the revolution, the vanquished with whom she identifies and in whose name she writes, the vanquished for whom, like Niobe, she weeps. In the world of Luxemburg’s letter—in perfectly Benjaminian fashion—the prison courtyard becomes a capitalist panorama. In her words, “the entire marvelous panorama of the war passe[s] before [our] eyes.” Not for nothing, the Spartacists’ well-known motto would be “socialism or barbarism.”<sup>10</sup> Luxemburg’s letter stands as a powerful indictment of capitalism’s pervasive barbarism and plunder but also as an instance of the revolutionary empathy that, identifying with the vanquished masses, gestures in the direction of another way of being in the world, one that is simultaneously

relational and impersonal, even as it takes its point of departure from a singular instance of the violence against which it stands. Like Niobe, Luxemburg's imprisonment—her confinement in stone—confirms the inextricable relation between violence and the law, a violence whose mythical reach can only be interrupted by another violence, but one that, having no relation to the law, would strike in the name of justice, in the name of a new historical era. It is to the possibility of this other violence that Benjamin next turns.

## VII. Depositions

This is the divine violence that moves, like a storm, over humanity to obliterate all traces of guilt.

—Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (2012)<sup>1</sup>

It is because of what Benjamin calls the “perniciousness” of the historical function of mythical violence that, for him, the most urgent task is its annihilation. In his words, “[p]recisely this task introduces once again and for the last time the question of a pure, immediate form of violence that might be capable of putting a halt to mythic violence” (*CV*, 57). His “once again and for the last time” suggests not only that he again imagines the possibility of a violence beyond all legal and mythical violence but also that, although he will gesture in the direction of this possibility, it must necessarily be his last effort in the face of this gesture’s inevitable failure, or at least the unpredictability of its success. It is as if he already alerts us to the fact that he will simply once more suggest the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of achieving justice, or of providing us with a determinate path toward it. As we will see, in the same way that his critique of violence can never be finished—it is because violence is everywhere that he can only move “toward” such a critique—the violence he imagines beyond violence can only be “pending” (*CV*, 60), waiting for its moment, still to come. Nevertheless, in the final pages of his essay, Benjamin erects yet another demarcation; polemically, that is, since it will soon implode,

like all the other previous terms he sets against each other, and this because of the explosive semantic violence of his sentences. He extracts justice from the law in order to imagine the possibility of a justice that can be neither entirely instrumentalized nor beholden to the violence of the law and its ends. A violence beyond human and legal violence, the violence of justice would presumably be a “bloodless” violence that promises a different historical order. He conceptualizes this “violence beyond violence,” this pure means without ends, by turning, as he so often does throughout his more political writings, to religious figures, in this instance to the figures of Korah and “divine violence.”

It is not surprising that Benjamin sets a biblical story against the myth of Niobe, especially since the story to which he turns—that of Korah and his horde, the Israelites who, having been freed from oppression in Egypt, challenge the authority of Moses and Aaron as they journey to take possession of the promised land—is, like the Niobe myth, also a story of numbers and massification, violence and punishment, and equality and inequality. The Korah story belongs to the fourth of the five books of Moses, to the book titled Numbers because of its relation to the counting of the people in the twelve tribes of Israel—before and along their thirty-eight-year journey across the desert to the promised land.<sup>2</sup> The story is obsessed with counting. It contains not just population counts but also statistics, tribal and priestly figures, and other numerical data. For a story devoted to counting, what is of interest to Benjamin is what cannot be counted, who counts and who does not, and what remains unaccounted for and even incalculable. In other words, if Benjamin is drawn to the story of Korah, it is surely because it falls within one of the most enigmatic, poetic, miscellaneous, and contradictory books in the Bible—with one of

the longest and most complicated histories of conflicting interpretations (what we receive are the shards of a story because the story already has been shattered in its transmission). It is also because it furthers his exploration of violence against the backdrop of his encrypted references to Luxemburg and the Spartacists, who demanded that everyone count, even as they knew that counting within the sphere of politics—where every number, enumerating who belongs and who does not, bears something uncountable within it—demonstrates the uncertainties of counting. Benjamin’s critical reading of biblical materials is often inverted and ironic, even heretical in its exegesis. It is not unusual, we will see, for him to recontextualize these materials in a series of reflections that, clearing a path for different interpretive possibilities, enable him: (1) to reconceptualize what the political is or may be, especially in relation to religious and theological figures; (2) to register the communal work and play in Talmudic study<sup>3</sup>; and (3) to demonstrate that his relation to Judaism takes place within activities of reading and writing rather than through an active faith—activities that, in each instance, enact a mode of distancing that, in a counterattack, permits him to gesture in the direction of what, for him, is most urgent and most at stake in any given context.

The book’s first four chapters consist of a detailed census of the tribes of Israel conducted in the wilderness. The generally used Hebrew title for the book, Bemidbar, simply means “in the wilderness,” and we can imagine that Benjamin finds this wilderness of interest—not simply as a description of the context in which the events in Numbers take place but as a figure for the “wilderness” that is biblical language, the wilderness of numbers, and the wilderness of the story of Korah itself. The story of Korah’s rebellion against the leadership of Moses and Aaron in chapter 16 is the focus of



Benjamin's retelling of the story, although he neglects many of the story's details, especially those elaborated in chapters 17 and 18. In the biblical story, Korah and 250 Levites—"community chieftains," "men of renown"—assemble against Moses and Aaron and declare: "You have too much! For all the community, they are all holy, and in their midst is the LORD, and why should you raise yourselves up over the LORD's assembly?" Moses responds by telling them that they should acknowledge everything that they have. Not understanding what they already have received by having been chosen by God, he goes on to say, and not accepting the authority God has granted him and Aaron, they have offended God, demonstrating that it is they who "have too much," not him and Aaron. He declares that God himself will make clear who is holy and who is not. He instructs them to gather their fire-pans and to bring them to the tabernacle in the morning and to burn incense as an offering to God. Their ongoing complaints and challenges, however, anger Moses, and he tells God not to "turn to their offering." When God appears, He tells Moses and Aaron to separate from the rest of the community so that He can "put an end to them in an instant." They plead with Him not to manifest His rage against the entire community if only some have offended Him. God then asks Moses and Aaron to separate and divide the community, and Moses turns to them and, encouraging them to distance themselves from the offending members of the community, says:

"By this shall you know that the LORD has sent me to do all these deeds, that it was not from my own heart: If like the death of all human beings these die, and if the fate of all human beings proves their fate, it is not the

LORD who has sent me. But if a new thing the LORD should create, and the ground gapes open its mouth and swallows them and all of theirs and they go down alive to Sheol, you will know that these men have despised the LORD.” And it happened, just as he finished speaking all these words, the ground that was under them split apart, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their households and every human being that was Korah’s, and all the possessions. And they went down, they and all that was theirs, alive to Sheol, and the earth covered over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly. And all Israel that was round about them fled at the sound of them, for they thought, “Lest the earth swallow us.” And a fire had gone out from the LORD, and consumed the two hundred fifty men bringing forward the incense.<sup>4</sup>

This double annihilation still does not prevent further complaints, since “all the community of Israelites murmured on the next day, saying, ‘You, you have put to death the LORD’s people.’” God again decides to eradicate all the complainers, this time by means of a plague, and, again, Moses and Aaron intervene: “And Moses said to Aaron, ‘Take the fire-pan and place fire upon it from the altar and put in incense and carry it quickly to the community and atone for them, for the fury has gone out from before the LORD, the scourge has begun.’” Aaron follows Moses’s instructions and, standing “between the dead and the living,” he holds the scourge back with his offering and by atoning for the people, but not before another 14,700 people are killed (Numbers, 17:1-17). As David Lloyd notes, “it is not God's violence that is expiatory but

Aaron's....Expiation appears as the prerogative of the lawful priest, who establishes a boundary between the worthy and the unworthy, the saved and the doomed, rather than as a quality of divine violence."<sup>5</sup>

In Benjamin's reading, the story exemplifies the difference between divine expiatory violence and retributive mythical violence, between incalculability and calculus. If, we will suggest, the story's details would seem to belie this reading, they point to a relation rather than to an absolute break between these two forms of violence. What seems at first inconsistent eventually reveals itself to be a rather extraordinary rereading of the biblical story in terms of questions of privilege, class, wealth, inheritance, and the circulation of capital—all in the name of a revolutionary annihilation of all the laws that support these capitalist traits, and of the lexicon with which we speak about violence, since, for Benjamin, divine violence can be neither manifested nor represented. Unlike mythical violence, it cannot be "disclosed to human beings" (*CV*, 60). It proceeds not through the unfolding of a natural order but rather through "the introduction of a *creative caesura*"—in Moses's words, "a new thing the LORD should create"—that, interrupting "the regular succession of things," points to the invention, the conditions, of a new era.<sup>6</sup> The features of this new era can be deduced from several of the story's details, but we can perhaps begin with Benjamin's own response to the story. As he puts it:

Just as God is opposed to myth in all spheres, so divine violence runs counter to mythic violence. 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 them; 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. The legend of Niobe may be contrasted by way of example with God's judgment on Korah's horde. The judgment strikes privileged ones, Levites; it strikes them unannounced, without threat, and does not stop short of annihilation. At the same time, however, precisely in annihilating, it is also de-expiating, and one cannot fail to recognize a profound connection between the bloodless and the de-expiating character of this violence. For blood is the symbol of mere life.

*(CV, 57)*

Setting aside the distinctions he makes between mythical and divine violence—we will return to them in a moment—Benjamin claims that “[t]he legend of Niobe may be contrasted by way of example with God's judgment on Korah's horde.” Since the distinctions he makes in these sentences—as with all the others in the essay—are not sustainable, this claim suggests that the example in question here is nothing but an example of contrast and, in particular, of the way in which contrasts do not hold. Reminding us that all contrasts are relational—that opposing terms inhabit one another and cannot be altogether distinguished—it is significant that the one trait with which he identifies Korah and his horde is that of privilege, which also depends on distinctions. Korah's interest is to minimize the distinction between him and Moses and Aaron in

order to maintain the one between his and his horde's privilege and the rest of the community. If Korah challenges the authority of Moses and Aaron—if he challenges their privilege—it is not in order to eliminate privilege, but instead to achieve parity with it. As Fenves notes, the fact that Moses, Aaron, and Korah are all privileged “indicates that they are willy-nilly exponents of law in accordance with the recently articulated theorem ‘all law [*Recht*] was the privilege [*Vor-recht*] of kings or grandees’ (*CV*, 56).” “Privilege equals law,” he goes on to say, “even in the case of the grandee named Korah, who expresses the identity of one with the other, *Recht* with *Vor-recht*, through an appeal to the supposed sanctity of ‘the whole community’” (Numbers, 16:3).<sup>7</sup> Korah's challenge is less a rebellion or insurrection than an appeal made in the name of a system of laws and privilege—in the name of protecting and keeping the privilege he and his horde already enjoy. It is an appeal for the protection of wealth, property, nobility, and power—not really for *all* the community, since Korah's wealth and property have depended on enslaved labor and different forms of exploitation, all legalized under the laws of the privileged—but, in particular, for the propertied elite who wish to maintain their privilege and who refuse to be subject to, to be different in status than, Moses or Aaron. The exchange between Moses and Korah—with each mirroring the other's accusation, with each stating that the other already has “too much”—casts in relief the stakes of their argument, not the least of which, and this beyond the particulars of their own interests, is a reconceptualization of what wealth means and which wealth is more valuable—material or spiritual wealth. It is because their discussion does not threaten the state but rather insists on privilege within it that it is a discussion about how, in Sorel's words, power can be “transferred from the privileged to the privileged” (*RV*, 171). This mirror effect

between Moses and Korah is interrupted by God's violence because He privileges Moses over Korah and this because Moses favors spiritual wealth over material wealth.

In this book of counting, that is, Korah miscounts because what counts for him is the privilege of wealth, class, property, and inheritance, all of which are intimately connected to his declared wish to be equal in power to Moses and Aaron. God's strike against Korah and his horde is, among other things, a strike against their insistence on the relations between capital and religion—a strike that Benjamin himself will repeat more generally in his short 1921 essay, “Capitalism as Religion,” arguing that religion would not have been able to become capitalist if capitalism had not already been essentially religious.<sup>8</sup> The target of God's strike becomes legible in the consequences of His divine violence: he strikes the Levites “unannounced, without threat, and does not stop short of annihilation.” The medium of His destruction is the earthly world, which opens its mouth, swallows Korah and his horde alive, together with all their possessions, and, closing its mouth, seals them inside Sheol, as Fenves notes, “without ever breathing a word or marking the site.”<sup>9</sup> The implications of this gesture are far-reaching in the context of Benjamin's encryption of Luxemburg, since, in many respects, this act of divine violence makes way for precisely the potential destruction of capital and its system of privilege and wealth that was Luxemburg's ambition. Indeed, the moment Korah and his horde are buried with their property, it can no longer circulate; it no longer belongs to the logic of capital. The burial of their possessions also ensures that their surviving children will inherit not material wealth but, instead, something different and not quantifiable. Assuming they can learn from this example of God's “educative violence” (*CV*, 58), they will inherit spiritual wealth from the ruins of Korah's capitalist religion. This

transformation of material wealth into spiritual wealth has its most tangible manifestation in God's directive to Moses shortly after. There God asks Moses to tell Aaron's son to gather all the fire-pans whose ruins have been left behind by His conflagration and, because they have now become holy, to "make of them hammered sheets as plating for the altar" as "a sign for the Israelites," in remembrance of them, and as a warning that no one should become like Korah and his community (Numbers, 17:1-5). If Korah becomes a sign (26:10), he is the sign of what needs to be annihilated in the name of a potentially new order. To the extent that it obliterates law and privilege, divine violence moves in the direction of a revolutionary cause.

If the earth erases the traces of the devastation left in the wake of this violence, it is because divine violence cannot be represented or manifested. In this, it is an analogue not only to Luxemburg's ideas of the general strike and the revolution, since they too cannot be represented, but also to Luxemburg herself, since, even if she appears as the embodiment of both the general strike and the revolution, she also cannot be represented. Within the logic of Benjamin's essay, she must remain hidden, if not buried. Sheol keeps what cannot be represented. As a figure of the void, it recalls Luxemburg's position within Benjamin's essay. It is a space of illegibility, of negativity and indistinction, where there is no clear border between the living and the dead. In some versions of the story, the voices of Korah and his horde can still be heard from below the ground. In both Benjamin and Luxemburg, this illegibility is a principle, what Jacqueline Rose calls a "revolutionary creed."<sup>10</sup> In the essay, as in Sheol, we cannot know what, if anything, can or should survive, and this uncertainty is at the heart of what Benjamin means by revolution. In this, he pays homage to Luxemburg's own sense of revolution, and the

mobility of his language corresponds to the shifting movement of the Spartacist's masses. This mobility also adds to the meaning of the German word *Streik* and brings it in relation to its more ambiguous English "strike." As Hamacher notes, "it should be kept in mind that the origin of the German word *Streik* in the English word *strike* would have been more widely remembered in the 1920s than it is today; in the nineteenth century it was still common in German texts to use the word *strike* in its English spelling. Engels's works are one of numerous examples. Benjamin would have been familiar with this spelling and with the meaning of the English word."<sup>11</sup> When God strikes against Korah and his horde—when His rage opens up and effects their transfer to Sheol—this transcendental strike does not simply expose the conditions of historical action but also suspends its previous forms and inaugurates the possibility of another history, one no longer dominated by capital and its monied distinctions and privileges, but rather by the promises of Luxemburg's mass strikes, in all their deposing force.

This deposing force—also an effect of the mobility of Benjamin's language—is at work even within the distinctions he draws between mythical and divine violence, since, in the end, the example of the story of Korah undoes each of these distinctions, dividing them along different lines and refracting them in multiple directions. None of them continue to stand, which can be registered very easily if we just consider the story's details. If, for example, unlike mythical violence, divine violence annihilates law and abolishes boundaries, it nevertheless also depends on several law-preserving gestures, especially those of Moses, and on innumerable distinctions and borders—between who is included or excluded from God's chosen people, who is holy and who is not, who is devoted to God and who strays from Him. This force of dissolution annuls all the other



distinctions Benjamin makes. The divine violence of God is not immediate or “unannounced” since it passes through the mediation of Moses—first in a negotiation, when he asks God not to annihilate everyone but only those who have offended Him, and then in his prophecy of the earth swallowing Korah and his horde, which is the script God follows. Within the story of Korah, no one speaks in their own voice, not even God. Everyone’s voice is mediated by another, if not by several others, with the result that everyone’s agency is scattered. As Ariella Azoulay puts it, God Himself is “the very paradigm of an absence of agency.”<sup>12</sup> Unlike mythic violence, which “inculcates and expiates at the same time,” divine violence “de-expiates.” It de-poses the logic of opposition because, annihilating agency by scattering it, it obscures the distinction between the guilty and the guiltless, between agency and its duplication, revealing the complicity between them. If Moses—who is identified with the law, minimally with Mosaic law—threatens Korah and his horde, when God strikes after Moses’s intervention, his strike is not without threat (he cites Moses, as it were). Finally, if mythical violence is “bloody,” divine violence is never simply on the side of “bloodlessness,” since, within the story, 250 Levites are burned to death. Within the logic of Benjamin’s reading, “bloodness” is never just “bloodless” but, instead, the sign of what never belongs simply to “mere life,” of what exceeds what is just human—the impersonal and even the extrahuman. The more closely one considers the examples and traits Benjamin attributes to mythical and divine violence, the more the distinctions between them break down—the more they point to the destructive, unsettling, and deposing force of his language, and of the essay’s own critical strike. In each instance, it is the movement of Benjamin’s language that destroys the possibility that any word,

concept, or, in our context, act of violence could ever be monosemic or calculable, which is why the essay in turn enacts a linguistic violence. The dismantling of each word, concept, or act of violence becomes synonymous with the act of reading the essay performs and also demands.

As Benjamin announces in the very first sentence of his essay, “[t]he task of a critique of violence may be described as the presentation of its relation to law and justice” (*CV*, 39). While he associates violence with both law and justice, he nevertheless distinguishes them, suggesting that violence can only be a means of justice if it is pure means. It can only be just if—striking in a medial way, and with an impersonal force—it annihilates the law and its end-oriented violence. This force of mediation circulates throughout the entirety of Benjamin’s essay and can be traced, even if in encoded and displaced ways, in the appropriations, refractions, exchanges, and allusions that constitute the movement through which his text opens onto history—and confirm that his voice and agency are thoroughly differential and dispersed. In order to close our reading of Benjamin’s essay, we want to demonstrate this point “once again and for the last time”—at least here—by tracing the relation of his language to that of two of his contemporaries, the first his longtime friend and interlocutor Gershom Scholem, and the other the pacifist and activist Kurt Hiller. The first is unnamed in the essay but mediates Benjamin’s discussions of fate, time, myth, law, and justice, and the second enables Benjamin to reinforce his encryption of Luxemburg in a further enactment of the critical strike his essay is.

While the story of Korah carries most of the weight of Benjamin’s discussion of divine violence, his understanding of justice is indebted to a 1919 essay by Scholem that,

only published posthumously, he reads in draft form with great admiration in October 1918.<sup>13</sup> In the essay, entitled “On Jonah and the Concept of Justice” (“Über Jona und den Begriff der Gerechtigkeit”), Scholem argues that in the story of Jonah prophecy functions as a pedagogical means of transmitting the idea of justice, and that it is Jonah’s failure as a prophet that ironically teaches him the truth about justice.<sup>14</sup> Jonah misunderstands prophecy because he conflates prophecy with fate. He believes that prophecy is a script that is actualized in the unfolding of human history. He believes it predicts the future. Scholem, however, insists that “*all* prophetic concepts are concepts of distance,”<sup>15</sup> and, in particular, they mark the distance between the present and an unpredictable future. A prophesied future can change from one moment to the next, especially when a judgment that would realize the prophecy alters in relation to changed and unpredictable circumstances and, in this way, distancing itself from the prophecy, simultaneously opens onto a responsibility toward the political (this is why Scholem can state that, in the end, what Jonah does “is essentially politics”<sup>16</sup>). That a judgment can change suggests that a judgment is suspended endlessly across time; from the point of view of justice, the present is eternal, and therefore never present. This duration and suspension constitute the structure of justice. Justice must be understood here as a deferral of the execution of judgment—especially in relation to a judgment about punishment, since punishment is a matter of law. Justice is instead a form of suspension and delay that interrupts the law’s causality, undoes the distinction between guilt and guiltless, and breaks down the logic of the relation between a doer and a deed, which supports all forms of positing, indebtedness, and violence that can be instrumentalized.<sup>17</sup> It corresponds to a deed without a determinate fated agent behind it. In Scholem’s words: “The deed void of

meaning is the just deed. To act in deferral implies to eliminate meaning. The meaningful deed is the mythical one and answers to Fate. *Justice eliminates Fate*. Isaiah 65:19-24 not only indicates the elimination of Fate in messianic time but also provides the method of this elimination in the idea of deferral.”<sup>18</sup>

The resonances of the passage with Benjamin’s effort to differentiate mythic from divine violence are striking. They illuminate the political and religious stakes of Scholem’s and Benjamin’s shared denunciation of the role of fate in myth (which Benjamin explores directly and more fully in his 1919 essay “Fate and Character”). If justice must remain without meaning, and thus illegible, it is because it is a figure of suspension and postponement that, rather than merely negating the deed, interrupts it so that it becomes, as in Benjamin, detached from its ends. According to both Scholem and Benjamin, justice can only be just if, like divine violence, it is pure means—if it is read as a question that cannot be answered but that in its very positing effectively suspends and deposes the logic of ends, which sustains the worlds of myth and law. Because of this, justice—again like divine violence—has the power not just to annihilate life, but above all to annihilate the laws that govern life and thereby reduce it.

The medial character of prophecy, which is the source of its distancing effects, reverberates with Benjamin’s expansive understanding of the activity of reading—as the creation of a distance through linguistic mediation. As Marc Caplan reminds us, prophecy is a linguistic performance capable of transforming even the divine deed into a “replication of an event that had been textually foretold in the language of its own revelation.”<sup>19</sup> As Benjamin would have it, this divine power “acquires attestation” through “religious tradition” and is therefore not only already mediated but cannot even

be acknowledged without precedent and without indebtedness (*CV*, 58). There is, however, an even more striking resonance between Scholem's text and Benjamin's essay, one that references not only justice but also the "just ones" and, in particular, their death. "[T]he circle of events completes itself in the unsaid," he writes, adding that "the death of the just ones is hidden."<sup>20</sup> These two sentences bear on our present reading. Benjamin's concealment of Luxemburg—a necessity that, at once rhetorical and political, relegates her to the "unsaid"—becomes, via Scholem, a means of referencing her justness. Scholem's lines become events in Benjamin's essay; they reinforce his valuation of Luxemburg's ethico-political force. Benjamin's silent evocation of both Scholem and Luxemburg is intensified with the suggestion that the realm of justice must remain detached or distanced from the certainty of ends—only in this way is it unable to be instrumentalized and made legible by myth.

As we already have noted, besides its being a force of instrumentalization, this mythical legibility is defined by a structure of guilt and retribution that identifies a doer with a deed. Justice, on the other hand, requires a forgiveness that, suspending judgment, eliminates the dividing line between the guilty and the guiltless—and, in doing so, demonstrates its strike against the system that, organized around the creation and attribution of guilt and debt, we call "capitalism." For both Scholem and Benjamin, this reconceptualized forgiveness hinges on a temporality that remains exterior to human history, since human history—bound to legal and religious structures of all kinds—relies on retribution, guilt, punishment, and sacrifice. If, as Benjamin remarks, forgiveness finds "its most powerful figuration in time" (*GS* 6:98), it is because time becomes the condition that makes justice possible by embracing delay, retraction, and refusal. This

negative understanding of time as delay—as the retraction of both the deed and its punishment—announces the “storm of forgiveness” that “is not only the voice that drowns out the criminal’s scream of terror” but also “the hand that expunges the traces of his misdeed—though the earth be laid to waste thereby”; it becomes “the thunderously loud oncoming storm of forgiveness before the ever-approaching court.”<sup>21</sup> This “ever-approaching court” appears in Scholem under the guise of the “Last Judgment,” an essential theological figure in several of Benjamin’s texts. This impending judgment can only be counteracted by a forgiveness that follows from justice as an act of infinite deferral. In Scholem’s words:

Justice is the idea of the historical annihilation of divine judgment, and just is that deed which neutralizes divine judgment upon it. Justice is the indifference of the Last Judgment; this means that justice unfolds from within itself the sphere in which the coming of the Last Judgment is infinitely deferred. Messianic is that realm which no Last Judgment follows. Therefore the prophets demand justice, in order infinitely to eliminate the Last Judgment. In just actions, the messianic realm is immediately erected.<sup>22</sup>

According to Scholem, the force of justice lies in its strike against the very principle of action that subtends the law. If the law assumes that every action can be traced back to an intentional subject, and if this assumption is what enables it to assign guilt and retribution, what preserves its judicial and law-positing power, justice suspends

judgment, action, and execution altogether. It annihilates the entire legal order by deactivating and disabling the law's reliance on matters of agency, causality, calculability, and judgment, and, in its force of interruption and delay, it ensures a distance between judgment and its execution, between cause and effect. Its neutralization and deferral of action rhymes with the force of Benjamin's revolutionary strike, which, in the end, is the most important political figure in his essay. In its final paragraph, he declares that, if "pure immediate violence" could be "secured beyond law," this would "prove that, and how, there is a possibility of revolutionary violence, which is the name reserved for the highest manifestation of pure violence through human beings" (*CV*, 60).

We will turn to Benjamin's quasi-secular appropriation of messianism later—to his insistence that messianism cannot be reduced simply to a religious or theological concept, to his conception, that is, of a time that, in its delay, in its nonarrival, inaugurates historical time, or, more precisely, initiates a time that begins with forgiveness—but here we only wish to note that the constellation of justice, Last Judgment, messianism, and delay emerges from an encounter between Scholem and Benjamin that leaves its traces in Benjamin's essay. That Benjamin's language can be shown to be entirely mediated, and not just by Scholem, is just one more indication of its impersonality, one more confirmation that Benjamin is never a single "doer" behind any of his sentences. The impersonality of his language moves in accordance with what he calls in his 1916 essay on language the "continua of transformation." "[W]hat is communicated in language," he writes, "cannot be externally limited or measured" because "all language contains its own incommensurable, uniquely constituted infinity,"<sup>23</sup> an infinity that is inseparable from its

“method of movement.” We can see how this method of transformation works in our next example—an example that again demonstrates that Benjamin never writes alone.

Like Benjamin and Scholem, Hiller in his 1919 essay “Anti-Cain” writes against the background of innumerable indices of the violence that characterized the early Weimar period.<sup>24</sup> He writes in favor of an uncompromising pacifism, arguing that an absolute refusal of all violence is the only means of achieving peace. Benjamin read earlier texts by Hiller with admiration, but here he goes against what he perceives to be Hiller’s naïveté in relation to the inescapable ubiquity of violence; indeed, much of his essay incorporates traces of Hiller’s anti-violence tract.<sup>25</sup> As Lisa Marie Anderson notes in the preface to her recent translation of Hiller’s essay, “[t]he thoroughgoing critique of violence Benjamin wanted to carry out was necessitated at least in part...by the talk of ‘pacifists and activists’ like Hiller about militarism and compulsory military service—talk that utterly failed to account for the ‘law-preserving’ function of legal violence,” not to mention the violence within all legal forms, including peace treaties.<sup>26</sup> There would be more to say about the ways in which Hiller’s text circulates in Benjamin’s essay, but, in regard to our interests, we will focus on their respective stances on Luxemburg and the Spartacists, with Hiller’s stance explicitly stated and Benjamin’s, not surprisingly, taking the form of an ellipsis.

We will begin with the final sentences of Hiller’s text and then move to the passage in which he directly references the Spartacists and their leaders. Hiller closes his essay with a reference to the biblical commandment against killing. He writes: “Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not kill even for the sake of an idea. For no idea is more sublime than the living.”<sup>27</sup> Hiller advocates for the extension and secularization of the biblical



commandment to Germany as a whole; Benjamin responds by noting that Judaism permits violence in instances of self-defense, adding that “[n]o judgment of the deed follows from the commandment....[T]hose who base the condemnation of every violent killing of a human being by fellow human beings on the commandment are wrong” (*CV*, 58). Recalling Scholem’s essay on justice, Benjamin goes on to say, in a sentence that emphasizes the commandment’s ethico-political dimension, that “[t]he commandment exists not as a standard of judgment but as a guideline of action for the agent or community that has to confront it in solitude and, in terrible cases, take on the responsibility of disregarding it” (*CV*, 58).<sup>28</sup> Criticizing Hiller for his belief in what Benjamin calls the “dogma of the sanctity of life” (*CV*, 59), he cites an excerpt from another passage of Hiller’s essay:

If I do not brutalize, if I do not kill, then I will never establish the empire of justice, of eternal peace, of joy. This is the reasoning of the intellectual terrorist, of the noblest Bolshevnik; this was the reasoning of the Spartacist leaders who were deliberately and treacherously slain by military officers loyal to Ebert. We profess, however, that higher still than the happiness and justice of an existence—stands existence itself. We demand that no one be permitted to take the life of one brother in order to bring freedom to another.<sup>29</sup>

Ventriloquizing the perspective of the “intellectual terrorist”—whom we can assume is represented not simply by “the noblest Bolshevnik” but also by Luxemburg and

Liebknecht—Hiller condemns any argument that justifies violence in the name of justice and peace. Reversing the equation, he argues that violence is exactly what prevents justice and peace since, in his view, these can only flourish when the sanctity of “existence itself” is revered and protected. For him, such existence can only be preserved through an absolute pacifism, which is why the violence of the Spartacist uprising is no more acceptable than the violent murders of Luxemburg and Liebknecht.

Benjamin declares Hiller’s thinking here “false and lowly” (*CV*, 59) and suggests that his conceptualization of existence is naive, especially since it does not understand that “mere life” is not the same as life. We will return to this distinction in a moment, but what is most remarkable here is that, when Benjamin quotes this passage, he omits the phrase “of eternal peace, of joy” in its first sentence and, more significantly, in its second sentence, the phrase “of the noblest Bolshevik” and the second part of this sentence, “this was the reasoning of the Spartacist leaders who were deliberately and treacherously slain by military officers loyal to Ebert.” He omits, that is, a likely reference to Lenin and more specifically the reference to Luxemburg and Liebknecht. Within the context of our argument that his essay is organized around the missing body of Luxemburg, what is important is that he deliberately transports her—along with her two comrades—into what we could even call the “Sheol” of his text, but in a manner that deepens the stakes of his encryption of her. This gesture puts a spotlight not only on his refusal to name Luxemburg directly—for all the reasons we already have given—but also on his refusal even to reference her. Removing the Spartacists and displacing them into the void of his text, he hides them and, in doing so, he reiterates what we already have seen in Scholem—that “the death of the just ones is hidden.” Extracting Hiller’s reference to

Luxemburg and the Spartacists, Benjamin preserves them at a distance and in relation to his argument against Hiller, suggesting that, despite whatever violence Hiller attributes to them, they are the “just ones.” His extraction is itself a form of critical strike; putting Luxemburg in a differentiated space, he indicates that she cannot be contained in Hiller’s formulation. She exists outside it, since, among other things, her definition of “life” cannot be circumscribed within Hiller’s. Hers is “aggregate,” more expansive and mass-like, and, because of this, moves beyond the moralism of Hiller’s pacifism and, in particular, his narrow conception of life as existence. The very omission of Luxemburg and the Spartacists in his citation not only returns their force of deposition to them but also provides a rather astonishing example of the way in which Benjamin enacts politics at the level of not simply of his sentences but also of his citations.

His omission signals his defense of revolutionary violence against its suppression. His militant reading of Hiller furthers his essay’s critical strike, something that is legible in the sentences that precede his own discussion of the commandment “Thou shalt not kill.” Speaking of what he calls the forms of “educative violence,” he writes:

These forms are thus not defined by God immediately exercising divine violence in miracles but rather through moments of bloodless, striking, de-expiating implementation [*Vollzug*]. Through the absence, in the end, of all positing of law. To this extent, it is doubtless justified to also call this violence annihilating; but it is annihilating only in a relative sense, with regard to goods, law, life, and the like, never absolutely with regard to the soul of the living.—Such an extension of pure or divine violence will

certainly, and especially today, provoke the fiercest attacks, and one will respond to this extension by saying that, directly in accordance with its justification [*Deduktion*], it unleashes lethal violence on human beings against one another under certain conditions. This is not to be conceded. (*CV*, 58)

It is impossible to draw out all the connections between this passage and the details of our argument here, but, somewhat telegraphically, the passage can be coordinated with at least three neuralgic points, each of which can be read in relation to Benjamin's covert references to Luxemburg: (1) although he associates divine violence with a force of annihilation, this annihilation is not total. Instead, it targets all the features related to the live burial of Korah and his horde—"goods [property, that is], law, life, and the like"—but does not annihilate "the soul of the living." If the valence of Luxemburg's burial within Benjamin's text runs counter to that of the burial of Korah and his horde, it is not only because of its anticapitalist register but also because it suggests that Luxemburg's existence is not entirely annihilated by the extinguishing of her material body (this is just one trait of the difference between Luxemburg's conception of life and Hiller's conception of "existence" or "mere life"—and one that requires a reconceptualization of "life" itself—with the other being her sense, and Benjamin's, too, that life is aggregated and more than just human). Besides its insistence that Luxemburg's annihilation and murder cannot silence her, that the "soul" of everything she represents remains living, the passage also demonstrates that Benjamin's language can never be taken at face value; his differential characterization of the word "annihilation" is part and parcel of his political

strategy here; (2) that Benjamin's discussion of divine violence is not restricted to biblical exegesis, that "pure or divine violence" can be extended into the present—as he puts it, "especially today"—and this can be seen in the way he extends the story of Korah into a story about the Spartacists, with the Spartacists more closely aligned with the anticapitalist gesture of God's striking annihilation. Bringing together the strike of divine violence with that of Luxemburg's masses, he offers a context in which the deposing force of both God and the Spartacists, or God and the revolutionary masses, provokes "the fiercest attacks," as is evidenced by the crushing of the Spartacist uprising by the Freikorps and the sheer brutality of Luxemburg's murder. It is always what is most threatening to the state and its capitalist structures of privilege, wealth, and power, he suggests, that unleashes the greatest violence; and (3) the greater and more forceful the justification of divine and revolutionary violence becomes, the more it unleashes incalculable violence against calculated violence. In recalling the cycle of violence that divine violence and the revolutionary strike are meant to interrupt, he nevertheless suggests that certain conditions—no doubt at least the ones in which he is writing—require violence, and even lethal violence. This point "is not to be conceded." It is here that he turns more directly to his criticism of Hiller, and to the nonapplicability of the commandment "Thou shalt not kill"—"especially today."

For Benjamin, Hiller's strict prohibition of violence is rooted in an impoverished understanding of existence. In the same way that he alerts us to the multiple valences of the word "annihilation," he notes that the word "existence" itself has to be read in at least two registers—he refers to the word's "double sense"—and suggests that, in the lines he cites from Hiller, the word "existence (or better, life)" must not be reduced, as Hiller

understands it, to “mere life.” It should instead mean “the unshakeable aggregate of the ‘human being.’” He reinforces his point by insisting that “[u]nder no condition does the human being coincide with the mere life of a human being, just as little with the mere life in this being as with any of its states and qualities, indeed not even with the uniqueness of its bodily person” (*CV*, 59). Hiller’s proposition, he suggests, “owes its plausibility to this ambiguity” (*ibid.*); it can only make sense if the word “life” is more than “mere life.” For Benjamin, the only “life” worthy of its name is a life that exists in the process of aggregated becoming and is not reducible either to the singularity of a body or to just being human. In both instances, bodies and humans are more than just bodies and humans. They are archives that—like language’s “incommensurable, uniquely constituted infinity”—bear the traces of several worlds, superimposed or overlaid upon one another. Benjamin again makes his argument by analyzing language, in this instance the words “life” and “existence,” and he reconceptualizes what these terms mean. In the process, we experience a writer whose language, never just his, becomes, as he will put it years later, “something living,” something that lives “in the rhythm, in which sentence and countersentence displace themselves in order to think themselves” (*GS* 5:526). It is because his engagement with language is meant to develop weapons against all forms of legal violence that his activities of reading and writing do not require a political practice; they are in every instance a political, and even militant, practice. He turns every concept against itself by means of sentences that move relentlessly toward negation, toward an active critical strike that is at the same time a revolutionary one. What is remarkable is that the force of this strike becomes increasingly legible in an intensified and accelerated manner in the essay’s last paragraphs—as if they themselves acquire an irresistible and

unstoppable momentum of their own through a “mimetic contagion” of the force of deposition that dominates the closing moments of his essay. By the time we reach the end, nothing is left standing, since nothing has been left untouched by the destructive force of his language. The pure violence of the revolutionary strike, the human extension and counterpart of divine violence, must recoil from itself, must itself go “on strike,” must be “pending” (*waltende*) (*CV*, 60). Contra Hiller, this pending violence does not merely oppose or negate violence but rather deposes it because only in this way can it announce the end of all mythical violence and, in particular, the end of state violence, the very concrete and urgent target of Benjamin’s essay. In his words, “only the idea of its ending [*Ausgang*] makes possible a critical, incisive, and decisive attitude towards its temporal data” (*CV*, 59-60). Only by imagining, even prophesying, the end of violence can we imagine the possibility of moving beyond the oscillating rhythms of law-preserving and law-positing violence, of moving beyond the law and into the uncharted territory of “a new historical era.” If it is only through the revolutionary strike of pure means that the cycle of violence spinning “under the spell of mythical forms of law” (*CV*, 60) can be interrupted, this interruption has already been taking place “here and there” (*ibid.*). The Spartacist uprising and the militancy of a Rosa Luxemburg stand as the most recent glimpses into what a total deposition might look like, as it opens and announces this new historical epoch. As Benjamin knows, the task now is to extend these brief moments into a temporal duration that takes the form of a revolutionary, even a messianic, waiting that is simultaneously an act of radical refusal.

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<sup>1</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, “The Mass Strike,” trans. Patrick Lavin, in *The Essential Rosa Luxemburg: Reform or Revolution and The Mass Strike* (Chicago: Haymarket Books,

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2008), 140. Further references to this essay are to this edition and will be noted parenthetically in the text by *MS* and page number.

<sup>2</sup> From our perspective, the most significant works on the essay are those by Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority,’” trans. Mary Quaintance, in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3-67; Werner Hamacher, “Affirmative Strike,” trans. Dana Hollander, *Cardozo Law Review* 13 (1991-1992), 1133-1157; Judith Butler, “Walter Benjamin and the Critique of Violence” and “Flashing Up: Benjamin’s Messianic Politics,” in *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 69-98 and 99-113; Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), especially Part Two; David Lloyd, “Rage against the Divine,” in *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 2 (Spring 2007), 345-372; and, most recently, Peter Fenves, “Introduction,” and Julia Ng, “Afterword: Toward Another Critique of Violence,” in Walter Benjamin, *Toward the Critique of Violence: A Critical Edition*, ed. Peter Fenves and Julia Ng (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), 1-37 and 113-160, respectively.

<sup>3</sup> Ng, “Afterword: Toward Another Critique of Violence,” 116.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, vol. 3: 1925-1930, ed. Christoph GÖdde and Henri Lonitz (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1997), 9. From his correspondence, we know that, in the fall of 1920, Benjamin planned a study on politics whose working title was *Politik*. He first mentions the project in a letter to Bernhard Kampffmeyer from September 1920, in which he asks for “bibliographical information” for a “line of political studies” that he



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is developing (part of which he refers to as “Der Abbau der Gewalt,” [The dismantling of violence]): Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, vol. 2: 1919-1924, ed. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1996), 101. Although he will change his mind later, in a series of letters to Scholem he describes the initial arc of the project. On December 1, 1920, he writes that it would consist of three main sections. The first part would be called “Der wahre Politiker” (The true politician). The second part (on which he was working at the time) would be called “Die wahre Politik” (The true politics), and would be divided into two parts, “Der Abbau der Gewalt” and “Teleologie ohne Endzweck” (Teleology without final purpose). Finally, the third part would be a philosophical critique of Paul Scheerbart’s 1913 “asteroid novel,” *Lesabéndio*. On December 29, 1920, he writes that the first part has been completed and that he hopes to see it soon in print. In January 1921 he mentions “Zur Kritik der Gewalt,” which he was asked to write by Emil Lederer for the latter’s journal *Weißes Blätter* and which is now assumed to be “Der Abbau der Gewalt,” for the first time (ibid., 109, 119, 130, 111n.). In the end, Lederer decides the essay is too long and difficult for the journal and publishes it instead in the journal *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, founded in 1904 by Max Weber, Werner Sombart, and Edgar Jaffé, which Lederer also edited. The piece finally appears on August 3, 1921, followed by the “Leipzig Council” section of Marx and Engels’s posthumously titled *The German Ideology*, and by other essays on economics, socialism, religion, and revolution. “Der wahre Politiker” is now considered lost altogether and Benjamin later changes his mind again and divides the second part of “Der wahre Politiker,” “Teleologie ohne Endzweck,” into two sections, the first focusing on the biological sciences and the second on *Lesabéndio*. Having moved Scheerbart’s

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novel from the project's third part to the second part of its second section, he decides to close his three-part project with a series of "aphorisms, jokes, and dreams" that would serve as, in Ng's words, "a pendant to the essay on the critique of violence." This "pendant," she goes on to note, will be *One-Way Street*. See Ng, "Afterword: Toward Another Critique of Violence," 117.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Toward the Critique of Violence," trans. Julia Ng, in Benjamin, *Toward a Critique of Violence: A Critical Edition*, 39. Further references to this essay are to this edition and are noted parenthetically by *CV* and page number.

<sup>6</sup> Anthony Auerbach, "Remarks on Walter Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence,'" delivered at the "After 1968" seminar, led by Katja Diefenbach, at the Jan Van Eyck Academie, Maastricht, in 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Julia Ng, "*Rechtsphilosophie* after the War: A Commentary on Paragraphs 4-6 of 'Zur Kritik der Gewalt,'" *Critical Times* 2, no. 2 (August 2019), 240. Part of our argument about Benjamin's "Violence" essay is that it encrypts several references to contemporary events and historical figures, one in particular. As Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings observe, "There is not a single reference in Benjamin's correspondence to the highly charged atmosphere in which he and Dora must have found themselves on their return. But from this point forward, the composition of his 'Politics' was accelerated. In April 1920 he drafted a note, now lost, called 'Life and Violence' (see *C*, 162). And at some point in the fall he composed 'Fantasy on a Passage in *The Spirit of Utopia*,' which has not survived either. He continued to read widely, not just in political theory but in related fields as well." See Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 130.

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That Benjamin is silent on particular matters does not mean they do not permeate his writings; in this instance, they intensify his interest in his projected book on politics.

<sup>8</sup> Beyond his explicit references to figures involved in these legal debates, Benjamin also implicitly engages two conservative political theorists, Thomas Hobbes and Carl Schmitt, both of whom—one baroque and the other contemporary—view the relationship between law and violence as foundational for the state, and as the key to its longevity and stability: Thomas Hobbes and Carl Schmitt. Both figures also will loom large in Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel*. In his *Leviathan*, for example, Hobbes states that “Covenants, without the Sword, are but Words, and of no strength to secure a man at all” (Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996], 117). Here he points to the interdependence of legal order and force in consonance with Benjamin’s critique of violence and Schmitt’s later insistence on the “state of exception” as a means of justifying violence. For a discussion of the role and place of Hobbes and Schmitt in Benjamin’s essay, see Horst Bredekamp, “From Walter Benjamin to Carl Schmitt, via Thomas Hobbes,” trans. M. Thorson Hause and J. Bond, *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (Winter 1999), 246–66.

<sup>9</sup> Denise Ferreira da Silva’s *Unpayable Debt* makes exactly this claim when she points out that anti-Black violence relies on a retroactive juridico-economic justification for legitimation, one that effectively blames the victim (we will address this logic more directly in our chapter “The Hammer of Social Revolution”). As we will see, legal violence and total racial violence are always the effect of a brutal calculus that uses the logic of causality as its cover. In Da Silva’s words,

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a logical pattern still operates today that, virtually every time the explanation or justification for deployment of otherwise unacceptable total violence, renders the person killed the *cause* of their own killing, whether they seemed to be holding a gun (which turned out to be a wallet, in the case of Amadou Diallo) or they moved in a threatening way (even after being shot, in the case of Michael Brown). From where, one must ask, does blackness derive such a powerful connection to truth, so strong that it alone sustains the validity of an explanation/justification (by the police officer or non-black person) against any actual (spatiotemporal) evidence to the contrary? My argument here is that this force resides in the particular way in which the racial dialectic transubstantiates what is politically constituted (by the colonial juridico-economic structure of slavery) into expressions of an organically determined moral deficit (in the case of police shootings) produced by the sight of black skin color (an expression of a moral and intellectual deficit).

See Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Unpayable Debt* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2022), 124.

<sup>10</sup> Ng, “*Rechtsphilosophie* after the War,” 240.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin’s attention to the way in which the SPD betrayed its own revolutionary origins in the name of preserving its sovereignty, even with the greatest violence, echoes Trotsky’s own accusation against the SPD in his eulogy for Liebknecht and Luxemburg:

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The best leaders of the German Communist Party are no more—our great comrades are no longer amongst the living. And their murderers stand under the banner of the Social-Democratic party having the brazenness to claim their birthright from no other than Karl Marx! What a perversion! What a mockery! Just think, comrades, that “Marxist” German Social-Democracy, mother of the working class from the first days of the war, which supported the unbridled German militarism in the days of the rout of Belgium and the seizure of the northern provinces of France; that party which betrayed the October Revolution to German militarism during the Brest peace; that is the party whose leaders, Scheidemann and Ebert, now organize black bands to murder the heroes of the International, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg! What a monstrous historical perversion!

See Leon Trotsky, “Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg” (1919), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/profiles/rosa.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> Eiland and Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*, 130.

<sup>13</sup> As we will see when we turn to a discussion of the general strike in Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction*, abolition could very well be another word for deposition.

<sup>14</sup> Pablo Oyarzún, “Law, Violence, History: A Brief Reading of the Last Paragraph of Walter Benjamin’s ‘Toward the Critique of Violence,’” *Critical Times* 2, no. 2 (August 2019), 334.

<sup>15</sup> For the citations from Georges Sorel, see his *Reflections on Violence*, trans. Thomas Ernest Hulme and Jeremy Jennings, ed. Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge: Cambridge

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University Press, 2012), 162 and 171; translation modified. All further references to this text will be noted parenthetically *RV* and page number. For an extended reading of the several valences of the word “Gewalt,” see Étienne Balibar’s essay “Reflections on Gewalt,” trans. by Peter Drucker, in *Historical Materialism* 17 (2009, 99-125).

<sup>16</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*,” trans. Stanley Corngold, in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1: 1913–1926, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 356.

## V. Rosa’s Casket

<sup>1</sup> Bertolt Brecht, “Epitaph 1919,” in *The Collected Poems of Bertolt Brecht*, trans. and ed. Tom Kuhn and David Constantine, with the assistance of Charlotte Ryland (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2019), 364; and Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, trans. Daniel De Leon (New York: International Publishers Co., Inc., 1963), 19. Marx here references Erasmus’s Latin translation, “Hic Rhodus, hic saltus!” of a line from Aesop’s fables—in its original Greek, “Ἀὐτοῦ γὰρ καὶ Ῥόδος καὶ πηδημα”—in which, in response to an athlete who boasts about the great jump he made in a competition on the island of Rhodes, a bystander proclaims that, if what he is saying is true, he should prove it: “Here is Rhodes, jump here!” Marx’s translation of Erasmus’s phrase—“Hier ist die Rose, hier tanze!”—replaces “Rhodus” with “die Rose” and implicitly changes the Latin *saltus* (the noun “jump”) to *salta* (the singular imperative of *saltare*, which can mean either to “dance” or to “jump,” hence Marx’s German “tanze”),

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a translation he gets from the preface to Hegel's *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*.

There, after citing the Greek and Latin versions of the line, Hegel notes that “with hardly an alteration, the proverb just quoted would run: ‘*Here is the rose, here dance.*’” If Hegel uses the line in order to reinforce his claim that “[i]t is just as foolish to imagine that any philosophy can transcend its contemporary world as that an individual can overleap his own time or leap over Rhodes,” Marx evokes it in order to suggest that, when “a situation has been created which makes all turning back impossible,” proletariat revolutions must overcome their constant self-criticism and self-doubt, must exceed their own conditions, and simply take a leap into an unknown future, without any guarantee of success. (G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, ed. Allen W. Wood [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991], 21-22; for the Marx citation, see Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 107). This is why, when Marx “cites” the line, he enacts a movement between different texts and languages that, in Jan Mieszkowski’s words, “no one—Aesop, Erasmus, Hegel, or Marx—can claim to control.” “Marx’s mobilization of Aesop, Erasmus, and Hegel,” he goes on to say,

reveals Hegel’s citational practice to be a challenge to the possibility of ever knowing if the language one is speaking is a discourse of the past, present, or future.

*Hic Rhodus, hic saltus/salta* is a battle cry of proletarian revolutionaries, the moment at which they do, contra Hegel, go beyond their own place and time. In uttering it, one follows Aesop’s athlete and makes a daring leap, springing forth from one language without

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necessarily being able to return to it or to land safely in a new one, much less coordinate the old with the new. Indeed, having jumped one cannot be sure that what one was jumping from was one's own language in the first place. In this respect, *hic Rhodus, hic saltus/salta* is what Marx in various texts terms a *salto mortale*. [see Jan Mieszkowski, "Romancing the Slogan," in *European Romantic Review* 28, no. 3 (2017), 365.]

(Jan Mieszkowski, "Romancing the Slogan," *European Romantic Review* 28, no.3 [2017], 365.) When Marx cites and revises Hegel, even if just slightly, his revision belongs to a revolutionary insistence that his language is not just his and it is in the enactment of this acknowledgment that his political gesture becomes legible. As we will see, the language of Benjamin's essay on violence also does not belong just to him. Nevertheless, it is in this movement without any determinate agency that the possibility of thinking differently—for Rosa Luxemburg, the possibility of freedom—demonstrates its force. Here the "Rose" becomes the necessarily unstable signifier for the freedom of revolution. Here is indeed the Rose and, in Benjamin, we must learn how to dance with it—something Marx does with the language he inherits and transforms.

<sup>2</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), 7.

<sup>3</sup> For an account of Georg Benjamin's political affiliations and activities, see Bernd-Peter Lange, *Georg Benjamin, Ein bürgerlicher Revolutionär im Roten Wedding* (Berlin: Verlag Walter Frey, 2019). We thank Peter Fenves for directing us to this book.



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<sup>4</sup> Benjamin cites Hofmannsthal in his “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History,’” trans. Edmund Jephcott and Howard Eiland, in Benjamin, Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4: 1938–1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 405. See Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s *Der Tor und der Tod* (1894), in *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Herbert Steiner (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1952), 3:220.

<sup>5</sup> Leon Trotsky, “Hands Off Rosa Luxemburg,” Leon Trotsky Internet Archive ([www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org)), 2005. Written on June 28, 1932, this text was first published in the August 6 and 13, 1932 issue of the Socialist Workers Party newspaper, *The Militant*.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Death,” trans. Peter Fenves, in *Walter Benjamin: Toward the Critique of Violence, A Critical Edition*, ed. Peter Fenves and Julia Ng (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), 78.

<sup>7</sup> Hamacher, “Affirmative, Strike,” trans. Dana Hollander, *Cardozo Law Review* 13 (1991–1992), 1139, fn. 12

<sup>8</sup> The Berlin magistrate refused to let the Communist Party of Germany bury the dead in the historic cemetery that had been created for the victims of the March Revolution of 1848 in the Berlin district of Friedrichshain. Instead, he assigned them a rear area in the remote Berlin-Friedrichsfelde cemetery. This area was intended for common criminals and was called the “criminal corner.” The USPD and KPD organized a joint funeral service there, turning the cemetery area into a permanent pilgrimage destination. Over 100,000 people took part in the funeral procession. For Luxemburg, an empty coffin was buried next to Liebknecht’s grave because her body had not yet been found. A body was found in Berlin’s Landwehr canal on May 31 and, assumed to be that of the murdered

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revolutionary, it was subsequently buried in Friedrichsfelde on June 13, which has been widely recognized as Luxemburg's final resting place.

A mystery emerged in May 2009, however, when Dr. Michael Tsokos, head of the Berlin Charité hospital's Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences discovered a torso—with no head, hands, or feet—stored for decades in the cellar of the hospital's medical history museum that he believed to be that of Luxemburg. It was an autopsy report that originally led to speculation that Luxemburg's body had never left Berlin's Charité hospital in June 1919 in the first place. When examining the medical examiner's report associated with the corpse—dated June 13, 1919—Tsokos noticed a number of suspicious irregularities in both the details of the report and the way one of the originally examining physicians added an addendum in which he distanced himself from the conclusions of his colleague, which Tsokos called “a very unusual occurrence.” Tsokos had a number of elaborate tests, such as carbon dating and computer tomography exams, performed on the corpse. The tests determined that the body “showed signs of having been waterlogged...that the body had belonged to a woman who was between 40 and 50 years old at the time of death and that she had suffered from osteoarthritis and had legs of different lengths.” As Tsokos told *Der Spiegel*, he concluded that the corpse bore “striking similarities with the real Rosa Luxemburg.” According to his account, as reported in *Spiegel*, Luxemburg, who died at the age of 47,

suffered from a congenital hip ailment that left her with a permanent limp, which in turn caused her legs to be of different lengths. And after her violent death at the hands of right-wing paramilitaries, her body was

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thrown into Berlin's Landwehr Canal...Her body was only recovered almost five months later after the winter ice had melted. Then, after an autopsy at the Charité hospital, she was allegedly buried in the Friedrichsfelde Cemetery....Surprising inconsistencies from the report on the original autopsy, performed on June 13, 1919 on a body said to be that of Rosa Luxemburg, seem to lend credence to Tsokos' hypothesis. On the one hand, forensic examiners at that time reported details that did not agree with the anatomical peculiarities of Luxemburg's body....The autopsy explicitly noted the absence of hip damage and also said there was no evidence that the legs were of different lengths. The autopsy also revealed no traces on the upper skull of the two rifle-butt strikes soldiers reportedly inflicted on Luxemburg. Regarding the gunshot to the head that killed Luxemburg, the original medical examiners did note a hole in the corpse's head between the left eye and ear, but they did not find an exit wound nor did they note the presence of a bullet in the skull. Furthermore, rumors had long been circulating at the Charité that the body of Red Rosa never actually left the hospital. Some say that Luxemburg's head was preserved in the Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences. Even the missing hands and feet fit with Tsokos' theory. When the revolutionary was thrown into the canal, eyewitnesses say weights were tied to her ankles and wrists with wire. During the months her corpse spent under water, they could have easily severed her extremities. The remains that were once placed in that grave could not be used in resolving the mystery

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because they disappeared after virulently anti-communist Nazis attacked and plundered the grave in 1935. (“Berlin Hospital May Have Found Rosa Luxemburg’s Corpse,” in *Spiegel International*, May 29, 2009).

(“Berlin Hospital May Have Found Rosa Luxemburg’s Corpse,” *Spiegel International*, May 29, 2009.) It is doubtful that Benjamin would have been aware of the possibility that Luxemburg’s body might never have been found in the aftermath of her death, but he certainly knew that the casket in the initial funeral in January 1919 had been empty. We can only assume that he would have found it perfectly appropriate to learn that Luxemburg’s missing body had become the object of several burials, and that the annual ceremonies in remembrance of her would have been organized around the absence of her remains. This would have been particularly the case because, as Shoshana Felman notes in her account of the trauma Benjamin experienced in the aftermath of the suicide of his friend Fritz Heinle,

the most traumatic memory that Benjamin keeps from the war is not simply this unnarratable epiphany—this sudden overwhelming revelation of youth as a corpse—but the added insult, the accompanying shame of the impossibility of giving the beloved corpse a proper burial, the shame of the incapability of taking leave of the dead bodies by giving them the final honor of a proper grave. It is because the bodies cannot be appropriately buried that the corpse...becomes a ghost that never will find

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peace. The grave, symbolically, cannot be closed. The event cannot be laid to rest.

See Felman, “Benjamin’s Silence,” *Critical Inquiry* 25 (Winter 1999), 223. There would be much to say about the repetition of this story of a grave’s absence, since, as we know, after Benjamin’s own suicide—itsself a repetition of Heine’s suicide—the money left in his pocket at his death was only enough to “rent” a grave. As Felman adds, “[a]fter a while, the body was disinterred and the remains were moved to a nameless collective grave of those with no possessions” (ibid., 228). In the same way that Benjamin’s critique of violence is organized around the missing body of Luxemburg, we could say that his own missing body circulates in the vast body of writings about him and his work.

<sup>9</sup> It is essential to refer to Luxemburg’s death as a femicide in order to evoke the unbearable toll of gendered violence that has continued its course up to the present. This violence has been particularly galvanizing in Latin America and led to the *Ni una menos* demonstrations in Argentina in 2015 and the feminist strikes since then across the continent, and especially in Chile, Peru, Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Presenting themselves as a “collective scream” against “*machista* violence,” these demonstrations and strikes have brought together hundreds of thousands of women in the largest actions many of these countries have ever seen. These mass movements have together contributed to a renewed interest in Luxemburg, one that takes a distinctively feminist slant. The stature of Luxemburg in relationship to feminism has grown exponentially in the last decade. It is also notable that these feminist mass strikes have for the very first time included indigenous and non-waged workers. For a recent

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history of these movements—and their inspiration in Luxemburg, in particular—see Verónica Gago, *Feminist International: How to Change Everything* (London: Verso, 2020). These movements have now had their reverberations across the globe—from Mexico to the United States, from Brazil to Spain, from India to Iran, from Afghanistan to Turkey, and beyond.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Metaphysics of Youth,” trans. Rodney Livingston, in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1: 1913–1926, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 6.

In a letter dated May 10, 2023, Gerhard Richter reiterates “Benjamin’s aversion to direct modes of presentation, especially when it comes to ‘the political.’” Reinforcing the importance of secret names in Benjamin, he points to a rather remarkable passage in Benjamin’s preliminary notes and drafts for his Kraus essay: “speaking of Kraus’s writerly strategy with regard to the political, Benjamin likens Kraus to the fairytale character ‘Rumpelstilchen,’ the one whose name nobody supposedly knows, and who will lose his magical powers once his name is revealed to the public (which happens at the end of the fairytale). Benjamin writes: ‘Bei Kraus ist folgende Überschneidung üblich: Reaktionäre Theorie begründet revolutionäre Praxis...Kraus als ein Rumpelstilzchen: ‘Gott sei Dank daß niemand weiß / daß ich Marx und Engels heiß.’ (With Kraus, the following overlap is common: Reactionary theory justifies revolutionary practice...Kraus as a Rumpelstiltskin: ‘Thank God nobody knows / that my name is Marx and Engels’).” In the Grimms’ version, the character’s well-known rhyme goes as follows: ‘Ach, wie gut ist, daß niemand weiß, daß ich Rumpelstilzchen heiß.’ This weird

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Benjaminian idea that Kraus is a Rumpelstilzchen whose real (but secret) name is Marx and Engels—is this not fascinating?” Benjamin’s note can be found in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7 vols., ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972–1989), 2.3:1092. We are grateful for this reference.

<sup>11</sup> Felman, “Benjamin’s Silence,” 218.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin,” trans. Stanley Corngold, in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 1:29.

<sup>13</sup> Felman, “Benjamin’s Silence,” 215 and 218. Benjamin himself identifies mourning with silence in his 1916 essay on language. There, he writes: “[i]n all mourning there is the deepest inclination to speechlessness, which is infinitely more than the inability or disinclination to communicate.” See Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” trans. Edmund Jephcott, in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 1:73.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin, “Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin,” 31 and 32.

<sup>15</sup> Already in a letter to Martin Buber from July 1916—in a passage that imagines “a relationship between language and action in which the former would not be the instrument of the latter”—Benjamin suggests that the politics of his writing can be measured in relation to its fidelity to what remains unsaid, something we argue is evidenced by his silent encryption of Luxemburg. As he puts it:

My concept of objective and, at the same time, highly political style and writing is this: to awaken interest in what was denied to the word; only where this sphere of speechlessness reveals itself in unutterably pure power can the magic spark leap between the word and the motivating

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deed, where the unity of these two equally real entities resides. Only the intensive aiming of words into the core of intrinsic silence is truly effective. I do not believe that there is any place where the word would be more distant from the divine than in “real” action. (C, 80)

<sup>16</sup> While we are presently tracking Benjamin’s encryption of Luxemburg within his essay, it should be noted that, in the aftermath of his engagement with this feminist political icon, he incorporates the thoughts and writings of a number of politically active female figures that, from our perspective, transform his intellectual trajectory in fundamental ways—even when they are not always documented extensively or even acknowledged. Among them, perhaps the two most significant are the Latvian Asja Lacis and the French Claire Démar.

Benjamin met Lacis on the island of Capri in the summer of 1924 and starts an intermittent affair with her that later took him to Moscow and Riga in 1926 and 1927, and results in his *Moscow Diary*. He also dedicated *One-Way Street* to her by renaming his book *Asja Lacis Street* and registering the entanglement of her voice with his. While living in Weimar Germany, Lacis, a director of agitprop and proletarian children’s theater, introduced Bertolt Brecht, Erwin Piscator, and Fritz Lang to Mayakovsky’s avant-garde theories. She also shared firsthand accounts of mass spectacles staged by the “Theater of October,” including the re-enactment of the storming of the Winter Palace in 1920, and of Sergei Eisenstein’s cinematic experiments. She directly intervened in the media literacy of a number of Weimar intellectuals, well beyond just Benjamin. She often



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is mistakenly credited for introducing Benjamin to Marxism, but, as we have demonstrated, his engagement with Marx began much earlier.

In addition to **Lacis**, Benjamin became familiar with the work of the nineteenth-century Saint-Simonian revolutionary Claire Démar (1799-1833), pseudonymous author of *Appel d'une femme au peuple sur l'affranchissement de la femme* and of the posthumously published *Ma loi d'avenir*, while researching and writing his unfinished *Arcades Project*. He references Démar's emancipatory pamphlets as archives full of passionate power and as yet untapped revolutionary potential. Among other things, Démar called for the abolition of patriarchy as the basis for the laws of inheritance that sustain both property and the oppression of women through legalized prostitution (i.e. marriage) and childbearing, what she will call the "law of blood." See Claire Démar, *Appel au peuple sur l'affranchissement de la femme: aux origines de la pensée féministe*, ed. Valentin Pelosse (Paris: Albin Michel, 2001), 211. By the time Benjamin cites her in his *Arcades Project*, Démar's work had been almost completely forgotten after her suicide in 1833; he reactivated her and transformed her presumed obsolescence into a resource for addressing the present.

It would be important to trace the influence of such politically active women in Benjamin's political life. As we will see, something similar happens with Marx. In the last years of his life, he is introduced to pre-capitalist communal organizations in Russia and also to Lewis Henry Morgan's anthropological studies of indigenous collective forms by the Russian activist Vera Zazulich. We will explore the effects of this late turn in Marx in "A Red Common-Wealth."

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<sup>17</sup> Besides the fact that Sorel surely read Luxemburg's *Mass Strike*—it is interesting that he does not cite it directly, but, in accordance with a logic he could have gotten from Nietzsche, she is perhaps too close to him to mention—he quotes her directly in a passage in which he accuses the Social Democrats of abusing the idea of justice, suggesting that this is why Luxemburg called the idea of justice “this old post horse, on which for centuries all the regenerators of the world, deprived of surer means of historic locomotion, have ridden; this ungainly Rosinante, mounted on which so many Quixotes of history have gone in search of the great reform of the world, bringing back from these journeys nothing but black eyes” (*RV*, 220). The Luxemburg citation is from her *Reform or Revolution*, parts of which already had appeared in 1899. See, in a different translation than that offered in the Sorel translation, Rosa Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution*, in *The Essential Rosa Luxemburg: Reform or Revolution and the Mass Strike*, ed. Helen Scott (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008), 84.

<sup>18</sup> We are indebted to David Lloyd for pointing out this anagram to us.

<sup>19</sup> That Benjamin never left this moment behind—a moment in which, in the aftermath of the war, he writes his violence essay—is legible in his longstanding interest in the Spartacists. In addition to his explicit return to them in his late essay on the “Concept of History,” their presence is most strongly in evidence in his 1937 essay on Fuchs, “Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian,” an essay that shares language with Benjamin's artwork essay and with his theses on the concept of history, a detail that connects it to his late writings. A friend of Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Franz Mehring, and many other prominent figures during the Weimar period, Fuchs was a founding member of the Spartacists and a longtime leftist activist. He shared a disillusionment with the German

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Social Democratic movement with many of his friends and colleagues, among them Liebknecht, Luxemburg, Franz Mehring, and Clara Zetkin. When the war broke out, inspired by the Bolsheviks, together they formed the Spartakusbund, the Spartacus League. This splinter organization of the SPD would eventually become the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands or KPD (Communist Party of Germany) in late 1918.

During the war, he was the general plenipotentiary for the welfare of Russian prisoners of war in Germany and played a central role in pursuing amnesty for political prisoners in both Germany and Russia. He was part of Liebknecht's and Luxemburg's inner circle and, because of the trust the Russian government had in him, he was often a mediator between Lenin and the German revolutionaries and helped facilitate the establishment of the Third International. In November 1918, he drove Luxemburg from Breslau to Berlin on her release from prison and he also ensured Liebknecht's safe travel to a banquet in the leader's honor at the Russian Embassy in Berlin. In late December, he carried a letter from Luxemburg to Lenin, which was accompanied by the draft program of the Spartacists, entitled "What does the Spartakusbund Want?" A supporter of innumerable communist projects, Fuchs was referred to by Lenin himself as "Der Mann im Schatten" ("The Man in the Shadows"): see Ulrich Weitz, *Der Mann im Schatten: Eduard Fuchs* (Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag, 2014), 17.

Beyond his political work, Fuchs's critical and scholarly work—especially his work on caricature, which he read through Marxist cultural theory—was inseparable from his political activities, as Benjamin makes clear in his essay on him. It should also be noted that many of the ideas that make their way into Benjamin's artwork essay—

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especially in regard to the relation between artworks and technological reproducibility—come directly from Fuchs’s own writings, as is evident in the passages Benjamin cites from Fuchs (see, for example, Walter Benjamin, “Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian,” in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3: 1935–1938, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings [Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002], 283) In addition, Benjamin’s famous assertion that “[t]here is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” can be traced to Fuchs’s own reflections on the pillage and plunder of cultural artifacts by the English and French empires. One of the great collectors of European and East Asian art—watercolors, paintings, lithographs, drawings, posters, and objects—Fuchs housed his collection in the Villa Fuchs, which was built for him by Mies van der Rohe in Berlin-Zehlendorf in 1911. On behalf of the Communist Party, Fuchs later commissioned the architect to build the Monument to the November Revolution, often referred to as the Rosa Luxemburg memorial.

It is rather remarkable that Benjamin devotes one of his late major essays to Fuchs, that is, to a central Spartacist. This suggests the significance the Spartacists had for him not simply because of his brother’s political activism but also because of how impacted he had been by the example of Luxemburg and by the violence of her assassination. There is much more to trace here, but what is important for us in this context is simply to emphasize the endurance of Benjamin’s incorporation of Spartacist strategies for doing politics. That he does this through the activities of writing and reading is perhaps justified further if we recall what Luxemburg’s biographer J. P. Nettl says about the role of writing in the Spartacist uprising: “Rosa laid down as immediate

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tasks the reissue of their daily paper, the production of a more theoretical weekly, special papers for youth and for women, a soldiers' paper, syndication of leading articles to be offered to other newspapers—shades of Sozialdemokratische Korrespondenz; finally, the creation of a special department for propaganda in the army. Never had a revolution had such a paper base.” See J. P. Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg*, Vol. 2 (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 724.

<sup>20</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, “Die Krise der Sozialdemokratie,” in Luxemburg, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 4, *August 1914 - January 1919*, ed. Annelies Laschitza and Günter Radczun (Berlin: Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, 2000), 148-149.

<sup>21</sup> See Frederick Engels, “The Bakunists at Work: An Account of the Spanish revolt in the Summer of 1873,”

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1873/bakunin/index.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> In his late “On the Concept of History,” Benjamin praises Luxemburg’s Spartacist League for its insistence on the violence and oppression of the past: for its refusal to forget the injustices of the past and to focus solely on the promise of the future, as was the usual practice of the Social Democrats of his day. In his words,

The subject of historical knowledge is the struggling, oppressed class itself. Marx presents it as the last enslaved class—the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of the downtrodden. This conviction, which had a brief resurgence in the Spartacus League, has always been objectionable to Social Democrats. Within three decades they managed to erase the name of Blanqui almost

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entirely, though at the sound of that name the preceding century had quaked. The Social Democrats preferred to cast the working class in the role of a redeemer of *future* generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This indoctrination made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than by the ideal of liberated grandchildren. (*CH*, 394)

That Benjamin returns to the Spartacists in this late text is another confirmation that he never left Luxemburg behind. Instead, he carries her with him until the very end of his life.

<sup>23</sup> Sorel makes a similar point when he writes:

Today the confidence of the socialists is much greater than it was in the past, now that the myth of the general strike dominates the true working-class movement in its entirety. No failure proves anything against socialism, as it has become a work of preparation; if it fails, it merely proves that the apprenticeship has been insufficient; they must set to work again with more courage, persistence and confidence than before, the experience of labor has taught the workers that it is by means of patient apprenticeship that one can become a true comrade at work; and it is also the only way of becoming a true revolutionary. (*RV*, 31)

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If Benjamin encrypts Luxemburg in his text in order to enable her to silently press Sorel in other directions—to emphasize certain elements of his argument but also to challenge others, to move his language from within (Sorel himself recalls Bergson’s claim that “we speak more than we think, as we are *acted upon* rather than act ourselves” [*RV*, 26], a line that beautifully describes the effects of Luxemburg inhabiting Sorel’s language)—it is important to register that there are elements of Sorel’s argument that correspond with Benjamin’s and Luxemburg’s conceptions of revolution. Like Luxemburg, Sorel here suggests that defeat can become a means of furthering the work of the revolutionary—since it can be a kind of preparation for future action. At the same time, his insistence on the mythic character of the general strike is something both Benjamin and Luxemburg would bristle at.

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin registers the link between Sorel’s insistence on myth and the violence of fascism in an interview that he conducts with Valois in 1927 and that he later reports. There, in a discussion on dictatorship, he declares that Sorelianist socialism is perhaps the best school for fascism. While there are moments in his violence essay in which he seems to believe that Sorel actually cautions against violence—as when he notes that “[w]ith thought-provoking arguments Sorel has explained the extent to which such a rigorous conception of the general strike is liable to diminish the deployment of violence in revolutions” (*CV*, 53)—his suspicion of Sorel’s insistence on the myth of both Marxism and the general strike is already legible in his earlier essay. In his report on his interview with Valois, he even wonders whether—departing from Sorel’s theorization of the mass strike, but still wanting the revolution to be a mass movement—Valois deploys the “trick” of the rhetoric of “bloodless revolution” in order to justify the “great upheavals of

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the postwar period,” a point that implicitly suggests that Sorel himself took advantage of this same rhetoric. Benjamin registers the possibility of Sorelian-inflected violence in tangible fashion when, during his interview, his “gaze falls upon a revolver that my discussant [Valois] has left lying in front of him on his desk,” and he quickly cuts his interview short. See Benjamin, “Für die Diktatur: Interview mit Georges Valois” (*GS*, 4:490-491).

<sup>25</sup> Trotsky, “A Requiem for Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg,”

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/profiles/rosa.htm>.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, “Order Reigns in Berlin!,” trans. Peggy Fallen Wright, in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, ed. Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 376-378.

## VI. Panoramas of Violence

<sup>1</sup> Jacqueline Rose, *On Violence and on Violence against Women* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 199.

<sup>2</sup> In two texts that Benjamin wrote in consecutive days in Ibiza in 1933—both under the same title, “Agesilaus Santander”—he develops a theory of secret names that resonates with his interest in Luxemburg here. Among other things, he suggests that names, secret or not, are always metamorphosing (they can never “remain the same and untransformed”), and that the identity of the person to whom they would refer is also



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constantly changing, undergoing a displacement, and becoming something else. Walter Benjamin, “Agesilaus Santander (Second Version),” in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2: 1927–1934, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 714–715. Indeed, in Benjamin’s violence essay, Luxemburg cannot be identified with a single name, since both her and any name used to refer to her are in constant metamorphosis—like the mass strike itself.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed reconstruction of the events of the night of the assassinations of Luxemburg and Liebknecht and of the subsequent efforts to protect the murderers, see Klaus Gietinger’s *The Murder of Rosa Luxemburg*, trans. Loren Balhorn (New York: Verso Books, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> We need only think of the millions of European political refugees that Benjamin will join at the end of his life or of the contemporary nomenclature of “illegal immigrant” or “*sans-papiers*.”

<sup>5</sup> Michelle Ty, “Benjamin on the Border,” in *Critical Times* 2, no. 2 (August 2019), 311–312.

<sup>6</sup> For a beautiful meditation on Luxemburg’s relation to both nature and politics, see John Berger’s “A Letter to Rosa Luxemburg,” in *The New Statesman* (September 18, 2015): <https://www.newstatesman.com/long-reads/2015/09/letter-rosa-luxemburg-0>.

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that the Monument to the Revolution that Fuchs commissioned Mies van der Rohe to build was constructed in 1926 in the Friederichsfelde cemetery in the outskirts of Berlin. It consisted of an unadorned horizontal, solid brick construction that, in its appearance, resembled a prison and an execution wall—Mies insisted that this was intentional. It was financed through the sale of postcards depicting a photomontage of a model for the monument, but was above all a nonhierarchical structure. The number of

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bricks and the number of revolutionaries buried on the site served as an architectural translation of the revolution that belied its failure by inscribing it in Berlin's collective memory—many of the bricks had been assembled from the bullet-riddled remains, in some places piled some twenty feet high, of buildings damaged or destroyed during the Spartacist uprising. The bricks also were meant to evoke labor and the process of massification, both concerns of the Spartacists. In his speech of June 11, 1926 Wilhem Pieck, the only communist leader to survive his arrest by the Freikorps, stated that “the monument rises simple, massive, imposing like the revolutionary power of the proletariat and in the spirit of Freiligrath's words: *I was, I am, I shall be.*” Nevertheless, the monument was still considered somewhat abstract. Because of this, both the red flag and Freiligrath's quote were often temporarily installed on the site or photomontaged in reproductions. It was heavily damaged in 1933 and the Nazi party ordered its demolition in 1935. It had to be demolished brick by brick because it was reinforced with cement and because blasting such a structure would have endangered the entire area. See Andrea Contursi, *Mies van der Rohe's Monument to the November Revolution in Berlin-Lichtenberg* (Bari: Ilios Editore, 2018), 59.

<sup>8</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, ed. Georg Adler, Peter Hudis, and Annelies Laschitza, trans. George Shriver (London: Verso, 2011), 456-458. For an account of the afterlife of this particular letter in the writings of Karl Kraus and Benjamin, see Lori Turner, “Kraus and Benjamin on Luxemburg: The Contemporaneous Reception of Luxemburg's Büffelhaut Letter,” in *Prometheus* (Spring 2021), <https://prometheusjournal.org/2021/03/17/kraus-and-benjamin-on-luxemburg/>.

Benjamin refers to the letter as late as 1934 in a letter to Scholem in which he defends his

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relation to communism against his friend's admonishment. That he returns to the letter suggests once more how affected he had been by it—and by Luxemburg herself.

<sup>9</sup> J. P. Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg*, abridged edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 250.

<sup>10</sup> While Luxemburg is associated with this slogan, she most likely borrowed it from Karl Kautsky. Nevertheless, in her 1915 *The Junius Pamphlet: The Crisis in German Social Democracy*, she misattributes the line to Engels. She writes (see *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, 321):

Friedrich Engels once said: "Capitalist society faces a dilemma, either an advance to socialism or a reversion to barbarism."... We have read and repeated these words thoughtlessly without a conception of their terrible import. At this moment one glance about us will show us what a reversion to barbarism in capitalist society means. *This world war* means a reversion to barbarism. The triumph of imperialism leads to the destruction of culture, sporadically during a modern war, and forever, if the period of world wars that has just begun is allowed to take its damnable course to the last ultimate consequence. Thus we stand today, as Friedrich Engels prophesied more than a generation ago, before the awful proposition: Either the triumph of imperialism and the destruction of all culture, and, as in ancient Rome, depopulation, desolation, degeneration, a vast cemetery; or, the victory of socialism, that is, the conscious struggle of the

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international proletariat against imperialism, against its methods, against war.

Scholars have been unable to find an equivalent line in Engels and, because Luxemburg is writing her pamphlet in prison, without her library, it is not surprising that she could have misremembered her source, which would seem to be Kautsky's 1892 *The Class Struggle (Erfurt Program)*. Although Luxemburg repeatedly criticizes Kautsky for his complicity with the worst elements of the Social Democratic Party, this book was one of the most widely read texts of socialism throughout Europe and she surely knew it. Kautsky's commentary was translated into sixteen languages before 1914 and it became the accepted account of Marxism at the time. In chapter 4 of his book, entitled "The Commonwealth of the Future," he writes: "If indeed the socialist commonwealth were an impossibility, then mankind would be cut off from all further economic development. In that event modern society would decay, as did the Roman empire nearly two thousand years ago, and finally relapse into barbarism. As things stand today capitalist civilization cannot continue; we must either move forward into socialism or fall back into barbarism." (See [https://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1892/erfurt/.](https://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1892/erfurt/)) Luxemburg's reanimation of this source in her famous Spartacist slogan resonates just as deeply today as it did during the first World War.

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## VII. Depositions

<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 81.

<sup>2</sup> Part of the Hebrew bible and the Jewish Torah, Numbers was not conceived as a book—even if it is traditionally referred to as one. What we have instead has a long and complex history and was most likely assembled and edited into its present form on the basis of various sources sometime in the early fifth century. The diversity of these source materials complicates the possibility of determining either its origins or its date. The text presents itself as an amalgam of literary genres—legal material, ritual prescriptions, historical narratives, poetic folk traditions, and different censuses—and simply takes its name from the first words of the text.

<sup>3</sup> Talmudic study here refers to the rabbinic debates on the teachings of the Torah, which, as we have noted, also includes Numbers. While Benjamin had little access to Hebrew, he would have been interested in the multiplicity of readings that were generated by the Torah, and of its companion texts in the Hebrew Bible.

<sup>4</sup> Numbers 16:28-35, in *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, vol. 1: *The Five Books of Moses*, trans. Robert Alter (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), 533-537.

Further references to this book will be noted parenthetically by chapter and verse.

<sup>5</sup> David Lloyd, “Rage against the Divine,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 2 (Spring 2007), 352.

<sup>6</sup> On this point, see Adam Y. Stern’s “On Zionism and the Concept of Deferral,” in *Critical Times* 5, no. 1 (April 2022), 34.

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Fenves, “Introduction,” in *CV*, 33.

<sup>8</sup> For an excellent and rather extended reading of this essay, see Werner Hamacher, “Guilt History: Benjamin’s Sketch ‘Capitalism as Religion,’” *Diacritics* 32, no. 3-4 (Fall-Winter 2002), 81-106.

<sup>9</sup> Fenves, “Introduction,” 56 and 34.

<sup>10</sup> Jacqueline Rose, “What More Could We Want of Ourselves!,” in *London Review of Books* 33, no. 12 (June 16, 2011). See <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v33/n12/jacqueline-rose/what-more-could-we-want-of-ourselves>.

<sup>11</sup> Werner Hamacher, “Afformative Strike,” trans. Dana Hollander, *Cardozo Law Review* 13 (1991–1992), 1155, fn. 44.

<sup>12</sup> Ariella Azoulay, “The Loss of Critique and the Critique of Violence,” in *Cardozo Law Review* 27, no. 3 (2005–2006), 1037.

<sup>13</sup> As Willem Styfhals has noted,

Some well-known concepts from Benjamin’s early writings—messianic time, fate, law, and justice—were actually developed dialogically in conversations between Benjamin and Scholem. These concepts that Benjamin used in essays such as “Fate and Character” or “Critique of Violence” can indeed be understood in relation to Scholem’s earlier use of them in his diaries, in his notes from his time in Switzerland, and particularly in the essay on Jonah. Claiming that the origin of these key concepts is dialogical neither suggests that Benjamin’s and Scholem’s concepts completely coincided in the 1910s and early 1920s nor that they

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continued using them in the same way in their later work. It only suggests that the *specific* ideas Scholem and Benjamin shared cannot be univocally attributed to either one of these thinkers but that their meaning arose in conversations, with each participant adding important conceptual layers.

See Willem Styfhals, “Predicting the Present: Gershom Scholem on Prophecy,” in the *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 28 (2020), 262-263. Unpublished during his lifetime, the German text of Scholem’s essay “Über Jona und den Begriff der Gerechtigkeit” can be found in Gershom Scholem, *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923*, ed. Herbert Kopp-Oberstebrink, Karlfried Gründer, Friedrich Niewöhner, and Karl E. Grözinger, vol. 2 (Frankfurt: Jüdischer Verlag, 1995), 522-532. That Scholem’s and Benjamin’s writings are often interwoven with one another, especially around ethico-theological issues, points to the difficulty of asserting originary authorship in any context, since reading and writing are always collaborative.

<sup>14</sup> Noting that Scholem’s essay “combines philosophical speculation with a biblical commentary on the book of Jonah,” Styfhals offers a concise summary of the biblical story. As he explains:

The book tells the story of the prophet Jonah who is supposed to prophesy to the citizens of Nineveh that God has decided to destroy their city because of its moral decadence....In Scholem’s interpretation, the book of Jonah indeed recounts the story of a failed prophet. Jonah initially attempts to escape his divine calling and refuses to bring the prophecy to

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Nineveh. He flees God by boat, but he is soon caught in a storm at sea. Realizing that Jonah is to blame for the storm, the sailors throw him overboard and he is eaten by a large fish. In the fish's belly, Jonah prays to God to save him and he promises to deliver the prophecy after all, whereupon the fish spits him out again. When Jonah finally prophesies in Nineveh about the imminent catastrophe, its citizens decide to repent and change their ways, hoping to avert the disaster that Jonah announced. God indeed changes his mind and decides not to destroy Nineveh after all. His judgment is deferred and Jonah's prophecy fails. Scholem's commentary attaches great significance to this moment of deferment (*Aufschub*) and failure, which he considered "structurally the center" of the book. Jonah, for his part, questions God's decision and becomes angry with him. Since God did not execute the judgment about Nineveh that he asked Jonah to prophesy about, Jonah feels that God has deceived him. But God responds that Jonah has no right to be angry and points out that he refused to show any concern for the citizens of Nineveh.

Ibid., 263-264.

<sup>15</sup> Gershom Scholem, "On Jonah and the Concept of Justice," trans. Eric J. Schwab, *Critical Inquiry* 25 (Winter 1999), 357.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 356.

<sup>17</sup> Here we invoke Nietzsche's famous passage about the need to always have a doer behind the deed, something he views as fictional: "Just as the popular mind separates the



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lightning from the flash and takes the latter for an action, for the operation of a subject called lightning, so popular morality also separates strength from expression of strength, as if there were a neutral substratum behind the strong man, which was *free* to express strength or not to do so. But there is no such substratum; there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; the ‘doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything.” See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 45.

<sup>18</sup> Scholem, “On Jonah and the Concept of Justice,” 358-359.

<sup>19</sup> Marc Caplan, “Arnold Schoenberg's Jewish Trauerspiel: Aesthetics, Allegory, and Ethics in *Moses und Aron*,” *Modernism/modernity* 28, no. 3 (September 2021), 565.

<sup>20</sup> Scholem, “Jonah and the Concept of Justice,” 355 and 360.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. On the figure of the “storm of forgiveness” in Benjamin, see Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*, 92-98, and Hamacher, “Guilt History: Benjamin’s Sketch ‘Capitalism as Religion,’” 101-105.

<sup>22</sup> Scholem, “Jonah and the Concept of Justice,” 357, translation modified.

<sup>23</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” trans. Edmund Jephcott, in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1: 1913–1926, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 70 and 64.

<sup>24</sup> These indices are the same for both Hiller and Benjamin; as Lisa Marie Anderson summarizes in her preface to her translation of Hiller’s “Anti-Cain,” they include the German Revolution and its deposing of Kaiser Wilhelm II, the splintering of

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revolutionary factions into either the more centrist Social Democrats or soviet-style councils, the counterrevolutionary violence of the Freikorps, mass strikes and demonstrations in Berlin that resulted in street violence, armed conflicts among the Social Democrats, the USPD, and the KPD, and the Spartacist uprising. See Lisa Marie Anderson, “Kurt Hiller, ‘Anti-Cain: A Postscript to Rudolf Leonhard’s “Our Final Battle against Weapons,”” Translator’s Preface,” in Walter Benjamin, *Toward the Critique of Violence: A Critical Edition*, ed. Peter Fenves and Julia Ng (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), 179.

<sup>25</sup> Because Hiller does not see a contradiction between his activism on behalf of gay rights and especially abortion rights and his activism against violence and murder of any kind in the name of the “sanctity of life,” he is an interesting figure to consider in relation to current debates over abortion and, in particular, the “right to life” movement.

<sup>26</sup> Anderson, “Kurt Hiller, Translator’s Preface,” 181-182.

<sup>27</sup> Kurt Hiller, “Anti-Cain: A Postscript to Rudolf Leonhard’s ‘Our Final Battle Against Weapons,’” trans. Lisa Marie Anderson, in *Walter Benjamin, Toward the Critique of Violence: A Critical Edition*, 193. It is worth noting that, while Hiller’s formulation defines “life” as more than an “idea”—as something that cannot be reduced to an idea—his language nevertheless depends on a dematerialized conception of “life.” It is precisely through this abstraction, determination, and reduction of life's simultaneously experiential and immanent complexities that Hiller signals his distance from Benjamin. Indeed, by contrast, Benjamin is always careful to avoid any manner of linguistic simplification or curtailment, and this because he knows that the political is hidden in plain sight in every sentence, if not in each word choice.

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<sup>28</sup> Despite the clear resonances between them, the different stakes of Scholem's and Benjamin's reading of the commandment as a "guideline" that demands personal interpretation and responsibility become apparent in Benjamin's use of the adjective "terrible." While Scholem stays within the parameters of faith and morality, never crossing the threshold of transgression, Benjamin takes the leap into the possibility of political violence, understanding the need, "in terrible cases," to disregard the commandment in response to contingent circumstances that transform the meaning of the violent deed. However, in a passage from Scholem's early diaries, the latter displays his ongoing dialogue with Benjamin, Hiller, and the political emergencies of his time in ways that are in keeping with the radicalized and anti-bourgeois context of Weimar intellectual circles. In a version of Marxist Zionism, Scholem writes:

We as Zionists are pure people and want nothing to do with the wickedness and the baseness of this universal slaughter [of the First World War]...the time can be called "great" only when the commandment "thou shalt not kill" is upheld...we will not be dazzled by the chatter of university professors, we, the agents of the proletariat of yearning!"

Cited in Amir Engel, *Gershom Scholem: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 38.

<sup>29</sup> Hiller, "Anti-Cain," 186.