Anarchist All the Way Down

Walter Benjamin's subversion of authority in text, thought and action

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2014

In this paper, I will be describing how Walter Benjamin is "anarchist all the way down." By this, I mean that Benjamin is not only an anarchist by political temperament but in just about every other way possible as well. Although Benjamin tended to refer to himself as a communist, as I will try to show, his version of communism is anarchist through and through. In this paper I am going to focus on three ways in which Benjamin is anarchist: theologically, politically and linguistically. My argument throughout will be that Benjamin offers us a profoundly anarchist approach (even an anarchist method, as oxymoronic as that may sound) which encompasses not only what he says but how he says it. Theologically, Benjamin offers us a vision of God whose essential function in terrestrial matters is to destroy false notions that human beings project onto the divine. Rather than serving as a basis for the false models of political and legal authority that leads to what he calls "mythic violence," for Benjamin God manifests the failure of these projections to be true, leaving us radically and utterly on our own. Politically speaking, such a view enables us to act in ways that are not predetermined by myths, either of the divine or secular variety. When we fight the sense of an inevitable fate that comes along with mythic violence, for Benjamin, we become aware of the ways that human beings are capable of making their own decisions both as individuals and as members of a community. As I will argue further, this is a profoundly anarchist insight insofar as it both allows and invites the politicization of vast spheres of human life that are normally considered to be already, and invariably, determined. Finally, in terms of his linguistic practices, Benjamin's own writings perpetuate the anarchism he describes and promotes in his texts. As a writer, Benjamin is concerned above all with suspending and subverting figures of authority. This includes his own authority in his texts. For Benjamin, if an author speaks of decentering authority but retains a central authority as a writer in order to do so, he or she undercuts the inherent anarchism of that message. Benjamin avoids this problem by turning to techniques such as allegory and montage in order to make his own textual authority radically unavailable. In this way he repeats for the reader the position of the subject of divine acts of violence. As with that subject, Benjamin's reader too is left to her own devices, shorn of any hope for rescue or redemption by any authority figure. In this way, theologically, politically and linguistically, Benjamin offers something of a seamless web of anarchistic practices; hence he is anarchist all the way down.

To begin then, let me now get to the substance of the piece by spending some time describing how Benjamin's anarchism works in the three dimensions I described, beginning with his theology. Whereas the large bulk of anarchist writings and leftist writings more generally are staunchly atheist, Benjamin himself is just as adamant about the critical role that God plays in human existence. For Benjamin, however, the nature and actions of God function in ways that are utterly unlike the way more orthodox renderings of God's work in the Jewish and Christian traditions he engages with. For Benjamin, God is completely unavailable to us; any attempt to speak for or about God is inherently idolatrous; the promulgations of such idolatry leads to a completely false sense, not only of God but of reality itself, leading to the condition

that Benjamin (taking the term from Marx) calls the "phantasmagoria." For Benjamin, as already noted, God serves, not to tell us truths, since we can no longer have such knowledge, but rather enacts and demonstrates the failure of that truth in the world. For Benjamin, as far as human beings are concerned, God exists only as a wholly negative force that disrupts the falsities of the phantasmagoria.

This situation was not always the case. Benjamin tells us that in paradise, Adam (and the less often mentioned Eve) had a unique relationship to God and to the material reality of the world that God had created. In his essay "On Language as Such and the Language of Man," Benjamin writes that "of all the beings, man is the only one who names his own kind as he is the only one whom God did not name."[1] Given his ability to name (including naming Eve), for Benjamin, Adam is tasked by God to give a spoken name to the things of the world, a name that corresponded perfectly and unmediatedly to the true (but mute) name that God had already given them.[2] In this way, Adam had a direct relationship to reality; it lay displayed before him and he acknowledged its presence by a language that was not representational because it corresponded directly to the truth that it communicated.

With the fall, all this changed. Benjamin tells us that:

> the knowledge to which the snake seduces, that of good and evil, is nameless. It is vain in the deepest sense...Knowledge of good and evil abandons name; it is a knowledge from outside, the uncreated imitation of the creative word.[3]

Here, we see that instead of the true knowledge of paradise, human beings have effectively chosen a false form of knowledge, "the uncreated imitation of the creative world." Ever afterwards, human beings have no recourse but to representation and an approach to language that cannot help but speak falsities. Benjamin tells us that as a result of this imitation, this attempt to replace God's truth with our own attempt to know the world, human beings "fell into the abyss of the mediateness of all communication, of the word as mean, of the empty word, into the abyss of prattle."[4] In other words, human beings have become idolaters one and all. Cut off from God and even from the reality of material objects, we live in a world marked by commodity fetishism, alienation and illicit forms of rule.

In the "Critique of Violence," as previously noted, Benjamin famously describes the authority structures of our time as consisting of acts of "mythic violence." They are "mythic" because they are based on false projections, misleading representations of

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[1] Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and the Language of Man," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Vol. 1, 19131926*, eds. Marcus Bullock, Michael W. Jennings, (Cambridge, MA Harvard University Press, 1996, 69.

[2] Ibid., 70.

[3] Ibid., 72.

[4] Ibid., 72.

truth that claim to be rooted in God, in nature or in other such sources of authority that are no longer available to us. Specifically speaking about the effects of mythic violence on human lawmaking, Benjamin tells us:

> The function of violence in lawmaking is twofold, in the sense that lawmaking pursues as its end, with violence as the means, *what* is to be established as law, but at the moment of instatement does not dismiss violence; rather, at the very moment of lawmaking, it specifically establishes as law not an end unalloyed by violence but one necessarily and intimately bound to it, under the title of power.[5]

In other words, under conditions of mythic violence, law itself cannot help but be violent, that is, an assertion with no basis for authority that nonetheless insists on being obeyed. It helps here to remember that the word Benjamin uses in German, *Gewalt*, means not only violence but force. Thus, even if the law does not literally cause people to be physically injured or killed (although it certainly does do that as well), for Benjamin it is always enacting a deeper form of violence, the violence of its own false imposition. Thus, for Benjamin, lawmaking does not eliminate violence in its manifestation (as it promises to) but rather preserves and enacts it in the heart of the legal and political process.

This is where God comes into the picture for Benjamin. He tells us that God answers the propensity of human beings to engage in mythic violence with a corresponding act of divine violence. Benjamin illustrates the story of divine violence by telling the story of Korah, a Levite priest who led a rebellion against Moses and his authority to speak for God. As a result of Korah's defiance, his insistence on pursuing idolatry over God's own spokesperson, God has Korah and his followers swallowed up into the ground, leaving no sign in the aftermath. Whereas acts of mythic violence require bloodshed in order to leave a visible sign of their existence and power, God's actions need no sign; they are not representative but serve only to abolish human acts of representation. Benjamin says of this:

> God's judgment strikes privileged Levites, strikes them without warning, without threat, and does not stop short of annihilation. But in annihilating it also expiates, and a profound connection between the lack of bloodshed and the expiatory character of this violence is unmistakable.[6]

The upshot of this story is that God brings no new truths into the world (and attempting to read God as doing so would only be a vehicle for further idolatry). Instead, God serves to destroy and unmake false truths. Yet this act of divine violence

[5] Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence" in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Vol. 1, 1913-1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock, Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996, 248.

[6] Ibid., 250.

works, not for God's sake but for our own, for Benjamin also tells us: "Mythic violence is bloody power over mere life for its own sake; divine violence is a pure power over all life for the sake of the living."[7]

How and why is it possible to read this story of divine retribution as being anarchist in any way? It is anarchist because, by turning to God, Benjamin is turning to the root of archism, the belief in an absolute truth, a manifestation of divine authority that has come to take an earthly form as the state. For all of its supposed secularism, even the modern state harkens back to religious principles; God's kinghood has transformed into modern secular nations but the eschatological principles are the same. By turning God from being a basis for mythic authority into a source of its undermining, Benjamin is performing a spectacular act of sabotage against the core of archist principles. He is removing the very center of that system, fighting the fire of the hidden theology of contemporary notions of legal and political authority with an answering theological fire of his own.

Furthermore, by decentering God's authority, Benjamin also decenters the very notion of ends, the idea that our world is ultimately structured by first things, by self-moving entities, be it God or reason or some other transcendent truth that determines who we are and what we must do in advance. In conceiving of God as he does, Benjamin does an end run around both religion and metaphysics, denying those practitioners anywhere to smuggle in their own (inevitably idolatrous) suppositions about God and truth. For Benjamin, the notion of a God who is true but utterly unknowable—and where any attribution of truth is inherently idolatrous—serves to safely place all notions of truths and universality out of the reach of human beings. In doing so, he safeguards us from thinking that we have access to these truths. Rather than allowing any predetermined or predetermining judgments about truth, about law or even the nature of reality, Benjamin's view of God undetermines all of these things, leaving human beings very much on our own in terms of what decisions we make.

A great example of how Benjamin effectively uses God to unmake and unpack all forms of authority—including God's own—comes in the "Critique of Violence" when Benjamin argues that even a divine commandment as apparently clear as "Thou Shalt not Kill" does not confer the kind of moral and legal clarity that it might seem to. Because even this commandment is a representation of God, and therefore subject to idolatry, it cannot serve as an absolute font of truth. On the contrary, it serves, as with every divine manifestation for Benjamin, as a source of questioning, of turning the question of judgment back onto human actors. Thus he writes:

> neither divine judgment nor the grounds for this judgment can be known in advance. Those who base a condemnation of all violent killing of one person by another on the commandment are therefore mistaken. It exists not as a criterion of judgment, but as a guideline for the actions of persons

[7] Ibid., 250.

> or communities who have to wrestle with it in solitude and, in exceptional cases, to take on themselves the responsibility of ignoring it.[8]

In German, the last point is even more powerful than this standard English translation would have it. The word that is translated as ignore is "*abzusehen*" which literally means to look the other way.[9] Thus, in our struggles with divine commandments, our stance is not so much of indifference (as the term ignore suggests) but actually abandoning or turning our backs on what passes for God's law. In this way, Benjamin is giving human agents the freedom to decide for themselves. Effectively this move, as already noted, politicizes a great deal of what is ordinarily thought to be definitively settled. It radically unmoors human actors, forcing them to engage with their own responsibility.

This leads to the second way that Benjamin is anarchist, in terms of his politics. Given the opening for politics that divine violence allows—that is the possibility for human decision, rather than our immersion in the predetermined falsities of the phantasmagoria—Benjamin looks to a notion of what he calls "pure means" as a political response to the aporias left behind by God's destruction of idolatry and phantasm. He describes the notion of pure means once again in the "Critique of Violence." There, he describes how human beings can engage politically without partaking in violence at all. He writes:

> To induce men to reconcile their interests peacefully without involving the legal system, there is, in the end, apart from all virtues, one effective motive that often enough puts into the most reluctant hands pure instead of violent means: it is the fear of mutual disadvantages that threaten to arrive from violent confrontations, whatever the outcome might be...We can therefore point only to pure means in politics as analogous to those which govern peaceful intercourse between private persons.[10]

For Benjamin, we are not only all idolaters but we are also all instrumentalists. We engage with means, in order to work towards the phantasmic ends that each and every one of us pursues (those very same ends that acts of divine violence help to disrupt). Yet, at the same time, Benjamin here is reminding us that even under conditions of phantasm, our means are not always inevitably violent. He tells us that we practice acts of anarchism every day, of non-violent decisions and processes that work out many conflicts without resorting to law or sovereignty. These actions partake in "pure" means insofar as they function without the teleological necessity of ends. When our means strive towards ends, they share in the violence of those ends. There are no ends that are

[8] Ibid., 250.

[9] Walter Benjamin, "Zur Kritik der Gewalt" in *Gesammelte Schriften Band II.1*, Frankfort: Surkamp Verlag, 1980, 201. I am grateful to Marc de Wilde for pointing this out to me.

[10] "Critique of Violence," 245.

pure in our world for Benjamin; there is only fetishism and idolatry. But for Benjamin our instrumentalism can turn its back (*abzusehen*) on those ends. We may initially engage in these local anarchist practices for self-serving reasons; in the example above, Benjamin speaks of people acting in order to avoid having violence brought down onto themselves. Yet, for Benjamin, such acts can become the basis of a far wider ranging form of resistance to phantasm. He follows this discussion of "peaceful intercourse between private citizens" with a turn to larger political questions and, in particular, to class struggle.

Benjamin tells us that the main instrument of class struggle is the strike but that not all strikes are the same. He writes that only under "certain conditions [may we see strikes] as a pure means." Benjamin employs Sorel's critical distinction between a political strike and a proletariat general strike. The first example, the political strike, is generally reformist; it does not break with capitalism but simply seeks an accommodation for some group of workers. The proletariat general strike, on the other hand, is truly radical; it makes no accommodation with capitalism and demands its cessation. Benjamin tells us that of the two forms, only the latter, the proletariat strike is truly non violent. He writes:

> Whereas the first [political] form of interruption of work is violent, since it causes only an external modification in labor conditions, the second, as a pure means, is nonviolent. For it takes place not in readiness to resume work following external concessions and this or that modification to working conditions, but in the determination to resume only a wholly transformed work, no longer enforced by the state, an upheaval that this kind of strike not so much causes as consummates.[11]

Here, again, we see that pure means can be obtained only by breaking off from idolatrous ends. Because the revolutionary proletariat have abandoned capitalism entirely, their means no longer serve capitalist ends either. As a result, their means no longer condemn the strikers to continuously engage in violence. The political strikers, in contrast, are still violent. Benjamin says that they are basically engaged in extortion; they are trying to counter state violence with a violence or force of their own, at least temporally, in order to get a place at the table. The revolutionary strikers, by breaking with idolatry, have transformed their means into something that is pure. Their means become uncanny, familiar on the one hand but also strange and new.[12] They represent the shards and remnants of what once seemed clear and useful. In the rubble of their original purpose, these strikers have the ability to decide for themselves what they

[11] Ibid., 246.

[12] In stating that the general strike is non-violent, Benjamin probably is not excluding the possibility of some acts of what we would ordinarily in English call violence. But each such act of such violence would be on the doer; it could not be explained or rationalized by an appeal to justice or truth. It would be an individual decision for which the individual would bear full responsibility.

will and won't do. Without the certainty of violence and fate (the latter of which is Benjamin's term for the seeming inevitability of capitalism and commodity fetishism), the proletariat general strikers are embarking upon a different political territory. In naming that politics, Benjamin goes on to write that: "For this reason, the [political strike] is lawmaking but the [proletariat strike] anarchistic."[13]

Anarchism, then, is the name that Benjamin applies to a nonviolent politics, a politics of "pure means." As we have already seen, this politics is not brand new; it has always existed alongside "archism" the politics of violent means, the politics produced by mythic violence. Benjamin goes on to say that "the means of nonviolent agreement have developed in thousands of years of the history of states."[14] The aforementioned "peaceful intercourse between private persons" is one example of this possibility. He cites the practice of diplomacy as another. He tells us that "fundamentally [diplomats] must, entirely on the analogy of agreement between private persons, resolve conflicts case by case, in the name of their states, peacefully and without contracts."[15] Here, even while representing entire states (and thus serving, in a sense, as the acme of archism), these diplomats engage in fundamentally anarchist practices, resolving disputes without recourse to law, "wrestling in solitude" as with the case of the sixth commandment discussed earlier, with legal implications and working things out on their own, according to their own decisions.

In an essay fragment called "the Right to Use Force," written just one year before the "Critique of Violence" Benjamin further extends our understanding of his notion of the practice of anarchism. In that essay he describes what he calls "ethical anarchism" the idea that neither the state nor the individual has the right to violence. Benjamin acknowledges that this response is "fraught with contradiction" yet he defends it as a valid response to the violence of the world. He offers us a concrete example of this practice, writing:

> When communities of Galician Jews let themselves be cut down in their synagogues without any attempt to defend themselves, this has nothing to do with "ethical anarchism" as a political program; instead the mere resolve "not to resist evil" emerges into the sacred light of day as a form of moral action.[16]

Such a response to violence is clearly different from the proletariat general strike; Benjamin tells us that the action of the Galician Jews is not itself a "political program." Yet this example too offers a way for an individual or a community to avoid violence, even against overwhelming odds. While the image of the Galician Jews being

[13] "Critique of Violence," 246.

[14] Ibid., 247.

[15] Ibid., 247.

[16] Walter Benjamin, "The Right to Use Force" in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Vol. 1, 1913-1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock, Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,1996, 233.

slaughtered in their synagogues appears completely passive, it suggests that their act, even if not itself political, serves to break the sense of inevitability and absolute power that are the hallmarks of the phantasmagoria. It is, along with the proletariat general strike, part of a set of options that always lie open to even the most oppressed subjects, a way to ensure that they never need to resort to the very same violence that is being used against them. In this way, they can avoid the trap that for Benjamin has caused one leftist revolution after another to fail; by resorting to violence, to illicit projections of truth and authority as a way of resisting the false projections of capitalism, leftist movements have, one after the other, succumbed to the same fate, ultimately becoming part of what they oppose. Because anarchism is built on avoiding violence (as Benjamin has defined it), it can be said to be the one form of politics that thereby avoids repeating this cycle.

For Benjamin anarchism itself must thus always seek to avoid becoming an ism or a dogma, yet another claimant for ends. He concludes "The Right to Use Force" by writing: "a truly *subjective* decision [in terms of the response to force] is probably conceivable only in the light of specific goals and wishes."[17] In other words, rather than give us one formula for the proper political and moral response to violence, Benjamin once again throws that responsibility onto his readers; each case is to be "wrestled with in isolation." Our responses can only be subjective, local and temporary. In this way too, Benjamin is not only anarchist in terms of his message but also in the way that this message refuses to become an authoritative, one size fits all answer.

This leads to the third and final way that Benjamin practices his anarchism "all the way down," - in terms of his techniques as a writer. As already noted, Benjamin is concerned that the message of his text does not get overridden by his own authority as the author. Generally speaking, Benjamin does this by employing in his texts the same anarchist methods that he seeks in the political world; rather than look for truth and answers, Benjamin seeks out the failure of representation, the disruption of ends and the employment of "pure means." Rather than engaging in traditional techniques of persuasion and illumination, Benjamin elicits misreading and opacity. He seeks to make the text yet another site in which the reader or subject must confront particular questions on a case-by-case basis, with no firm ground for judgment but their own decision.

In his essay "The Author as Producer," Benjamin writes that:

> the best political tendency is wrong if it does not demonstrate the attitude with which it is to be followed...What matters, therefore, is the exemplary character of production, which is able, first, to induce other producers to produce, and, second, to put an improved apparatus at their disposal.

[17] Ibid., 234.

> And this apparatus is better, the more consumers it is able to turn into producers—that is, readers or spectators into collaborators.[18]

In other words, for Benjamin, a text or any other form of intellectual production, should subvert its own location in class hierarchies, as well as the production of commodity fetishism. It should seek to draw the reader, not into a community of agreement, but rather into an alliance in a common struggle. What should be communicated in a text is not "meaning" but rather a model of political behavior that is disruptive to existing authority. As with his discussion of the political vs. the proletariat general strike, Benjamin argues here that intent is not important. He describes well-meaning and left-leaning liberal authors as being ultimately no better than openly reactionary ones. He writes: "a political tendency, however revolutionary it may seem, has a counterrevolutionary function so long as the writer feels his solidarity with the proletariat only in his attitudes, not as a producer."[19]

In terms of the actual techniques he wields, I will discuss just a few for the sake of time. One technique that he employs is the use of what he calls allegory. For Benjamin allegory goes far beyond what we normally mean by that term, that is, tales or images that illustrate clearly legible moral points. For Benjamin, allegory is rather a way to acknowledge the fact that the material objects that convey fetishism for us, the signs, images, texts, the objects that serve as commodities, are always resisting that fetishism; each of these objects is both a site where fetishism is presented and a site in which the failure of that fetish to be true is legible. Thus, in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama,* his study of German Baroque plays, Benjamin tells us that: "The language of the baroque is constantly convulsed by rebellion on the part of the elements which make it up."[20] Allegory could be said to be Benjamin's name for this rebellion. In this regard, Benjamin sees his job as author as serving to help foment this rebellion, to make the reader more aware of the materiality of the language they are engaging with. He tells us that although the baroque dramatists were themselves wholly bought into phantasms of sovereign power, their clunky and awkward writing, the costumes, lines of dialogue, sometimes even their stage props served to undermine the playwrights' intended message. Rather than making plays that successfully extolled the absolute authority of kings (as did contemporaries in other countries such as Calderón in Spain), these playwrights made plays that inadvertently revealed monarchs as being unable to decide on anything at all. That indecision is inherent, Benjamin suggests, even via the very physical letters the playwrights used to write with. For example, he tells us that: "with the baroque the place of the capital letter was established in German orthography. It is not only the aspiration to pomp, but at the same time the disjunctive, atomizing

[18] Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 2: 1927-1934*, eds. Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999, 777.

[19] Ibid., 772.

[20] Walter Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama,* Verso: New York, 1998, 207.

principle of the allegorical approach which is asserted here ... In its individual parts fragmented language has ceased merely to serve the process of communication."[21] In other words, even as the capital letter aspires to describe the "pomp" and display of the monarchy, it also undermines that assertion by drawing the eye to it's own competing ornateness. This points to the fact that the symbol does not meekly convey the message it is intended to but actually has an agenda of its own. Benjamin elsewhere speaks of hieroglyphics and rebuses, generally reminding readers, and perhaps especially those who are reading his own text, that letters are not merely conveyers of truth but serve to obstruct and resist that truth.

Another example of allegory that Benjamin offers comes in the *Arcades Project*, where he quotes a passage from G.K. Chesterton's book *Dickens* (which in turn cites directly from Dickens himself), writing:

> On the allegorical element. "Dickens...mentions among the coffee shops into which he crept in those wretched days, one in St. Martin's Lane, [had] 'a glass plate with COFFEE ROOM painted on it, addressed towards the street. If I ever find myself in a very different kind of coffee room now, but where there is such an inscription on glass, and read it backwards on the wrong side, MOOR EEFFOC...a shock goes through my blood.' That wild word, 'Moor Eeffoc,' is the motto of all effective realism."[22]

Seeing the reversal of the letters as forming "a wild word," Chesterton (and Dickens) alerts us to the way that the letters and signs that we take for granted as conveying meaning can suddenly be read as strange and uncanny. While we might see these backwards letters over and over without any effect, Benjamin is alerting us to the possibility of a different, and anarchist, type of reading. By seeing the individual letters standing as if alien signs, Benjamin shows how any text can be seen as allegorical, how any moment of fetishism can be its opposite. It also shows how we can read language and letters as pure means, shorn of the false truth we seek for them to convey to us. Although, in all of these cases, it may seem as if Benjamin is describing allegory rather than employing it himself, we can see that insofar as he is writing text, and we are reading it, he is in fact always in the process of engaging in allegory, potentially disrupting our reading and his authority over that reading in the process.

A related technique that Benjamin does not only describe but also employs is montage. Here, the idea is that by juxtaposing unlike things, a text and photographs for example, barriers between conventions are broken down, leading to a larger diffusion of categories and taxonomies. Often this effect can be achieved even without the use of different forms of media. Once again in the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin explains his strategy of what he calls literary montage. He writes:

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[21] Ibid., 208.

[22] *Arcades Project*, 233.

> Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't *say* anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse-these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.[23]

Here, we see quite explicitly the desire to avoid "saying something" as an author. The "rags, the refuse," that is to say the allegorical remnants of language can simply be displayed (not inventoried), lain forth in such a way as to interrupt the reader's expectations and experience. In both the *Arcades Project* itself and in his book *One Way Street*, we see Benjamin using this method himself. Both books (the former perhaps in part because Benjamin may never have gotten to complete it) have jettisoned a straightforward narrative and appear to us as a series of relatively unrelated aphorisms, quotations and so forth. In these texts, the author has not so much disappeared as become radically unavailable to us. We are left, as with the subject of divine violence, to pick up the fragments of meaning that are left, to make our own judgments, assert our own forms of textual authority.

Perhaps most critically of all, for asserting a kind of textual anarchism, Benjamin employs his own version of "pure means" as author. He does so in quite a few of his essays by beginning the essay sounding as if he himself subscribes to an ends orientation and, leading the reader along with him, suddenly switching tacks and abandoning those ends—and with it, the reader's slavish to devotion to his textual authority— leaving the reader to her own devices.

Thus, in the "Critique of Violence," for example, Benjamin starts the essay out sounding very much like a conventional legal theorist. We are initially led through a lengthy discussion of various conventions including the highly canonical question of natural vs. positive law. He writes, for example that:

> This thesis of natural law, which regards violence as a natural datum, is diametrically opposed to that of positive law, which sees violence as a product of history. If natural law can judge all existing law only in criticizing its ends, then positive law can judge all evolving law only in criticizing its means. If justice is the criteria of ends, legality is that of means. Nothwithstanding this antithesis, however, both schools meet in their common basic dogma: just ends can be attained by justified means, justified means used for just ends.[24]

Here, we seem to be in a kind of dead-end so far as any solution is concerned: the endless cycle of ends leading to means and means leading to ends seems like a self enclosed moral system, leaving no room for alternatives or subversion. But it is at that point that Benjamin introduces his discussion of mythic vs. divine violence. All the law

[23] *Arcades Project*, 460.
[24] Ibid., p. 237.

we have been considering up till now we suddenly discover is revealed to be mythic. Our instrumental reading of the text in order to get "the answer" from the author is abandoned (*abzusehen*) by the author himself. We are left in a peculiar position. Initially, it might seem as if Benjamin, against the false ends of mythic violence, is proposing the true ends of divine violence (and in that case, we would be back in familiar terrain, replacing one set of truths and violences with another), but Benjamin effectively shuts the door to that possibility by telling us that we have absolutely no access to divine ends, leaving us truly (and thankfully) bereft, on our own as readers.

Another essay in which this occurs is Benjamin's well-known "Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility." In that essay, Benjamin begins by seeming to be a rather conservative, even cranky, art critic (albeit one with Marxist leanings). He complains about the "loss of the aura," the authenticity of an object as it is depicted in traditional art forms vs. the way an object is endlessly reproduced by new technologies such as film.

For all of this complaint, at some point in the essay, Benjamin begins to distinctly change his tune. Indeed, film and other highly reproducible forms of artistic representation turn out to be an ideal technique for montage, for blurring the boundaries between artists and the viewing public. Here, we are told that due to the high turnout and the widespread access to publication (which is vastly more true today than it was in Benjamin's own time), "the distinction between author and public is about to lose its axiomatic character."[25] In this way, hierarchies and barriers between human actors are overcome, once again, by what is normally understood to merely be a medium of communication. Benjamin also speaks of the "human being's legitimate claim to being reproduced," offering that while authenticity is impossible, there are ways to inhabit our false world that does not merely capitulate to phantasm.[26]

Here, again, we are left in a strange position. Our author has abandoned his role as leading us to the truth we thought we were heading towards. We are left with "pure means," with an alternative to the violent assertion of untruth in the face of the general failure of truth that constitutes our world.

At the beginning of the Work of Art essay, Benjamin writes: "In what follows, the concepts which are introduced into the theory of art differ from those now current in that they are completely useless for the purposes of fascism. On the other hand, they are useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art."[27] This is a good summation of what Benjamin's textual anarchism accomplishes.

His methods, what I would call an anarchist method, are always to disilluminate, to reveal the failure of truth to appear. In doing so, Benjamin employs techniques that couldn't possibly "fall into the wrong hands." Were they to be employed by someone devoted to liberalism or fascism (for Benjamin there is not as much of a difference

[25] "The Work of Art," 262.
[26] Ibid., 262.
[27] Ibid., 252.

between these ideologies as many liberals would like to think) they would remain agents that undermined authority; that decentered the author and their message in favor of a greater textual anarchy. In this way, such devices could not serve any agenda that sought to promote violence, false truths and fetishisms. Instead, they once again serve to resist and subvert the dominant phantasms of our time.

In speaking of these various aspects of Benjamin's anarchism, I want to especially highlight the way they work together. Benjamin's theology makes his politics possible. His use of textual anarchism ensures that his expressions of political anarchism do not fall subject to ways in which his authorship itself is fraught with archist politics. By thinking of these various elements of Benjamin's work in tandem, we see better evidence of the ways his anarchism is not just stated but enacted, how this famously opaque thinker offers us a highly consistent and coordinated set of anarchist practices.

Of all of the major figures of western thought, I think Benjamin has few rivals for the degree to which he practices this kind of thoroughgoing anarchism, what I have been called his being anarchist all the way down. Nietzsche is probably the only thinker who may even be his superior insofar as Nietzsche manages to anarchize even the human soul, leaving no site, no place for archist tendencies to definitively take hold of. Other thinkers can be aligned with Benjamin on various points. I think Franz Rozensweig's theology comes very close to Benjamin's own. When he speaks of God's "ever-new will of revelation," Rozensweig offers a notion of a deity who is the source of all that is contingent and unpredictable in the world, the exact opposite of the ordering God that most religious writings depict (at least in the Jewish and Christian traditions).[28] This God, like Benjamin's, cannot be pinned down, cannot be contained by dogma or any human contrivances. Jean Luc Nancy has a very similar - albeit entirely atheistic - political view to Benjamin's in terms of the ways that human agents can engage with contingency in such a way as to battle for their own power of decision. Authors ranging from Virginia Woolf to Franz Kafka have their own techniques for resisting their textual authority (as does Nietzsche). Yet, I would maintain that Benjamin is perhaps unique in that he covers all the bases, he engages in various dimensions of anarchism in such a way that they all correspond. These elements work together to give us a model for anarchism that is, to use his own words once again, "useless for the purposes of fascism." This is a model that cannot be coopted because it engages only in failure, only in the certainty that human actors are radically on their own and must make their political and legal judgments accordingly.

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[28] Quoted in Leora Batnitzky, *Idolatry and Representation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig Reconsidered*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000, 225.

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Walter Benjamin's subversion of authority in text, thought and action
2014

Parrhesia, Number 21, 2014, 3-12.
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