

*The Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence*  
Vol. II, Issue 2/2018  
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Available online at <http://trivent-publishing.eu/>



## BOOK REVIEW:

Moran, Brendan & Salzani, Carlo (eds.). *Towards the Critique of Violence: Walter Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben*.  
London: Bloomsbury, 2015. 251 pp.

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The PJCv Journal is published by Trivent Publishing.

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Moran and Salzani are to be commended for bringing these thirteen essays together under one cover. The title of their essay announces the theme they all share: “On the *Actuality* of ‘Critique of Violence’” (1–14). They show how many different interpretations have been provoked by Walter Benjamin’s short essay. Before it has been “rediscovered” by Agamben, others had already responded to it, including Herbert Marcuse, Jürgen Habermas, and Jacques Derrida. More recently Judith Butler has entered the fray, as have Axel Honneth, and Slavoj Žizek.

For Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), violence is woven into every code of law, even if that violence appears to be held in abeyance at any given moment. This point is emphasized in Bettine Menke’s essay, “Techniques of Agreement, Diplomacy, Lying” (19–37). Law-makers encode certain social advantages for an in-group. Then, whenever the need arises, they count on law-enforcers to make social control work by means of violence (21). Diplomacy differs from law in that it relies on the spoken word rather than a written code. The spoken word allows for greater flexibility, which diplomacy needs if it is to open up realms of agreement between nations. Yet this very flexibility can also open the door to deception. A long tradition in moral philosophy, St. Augustine and Kant spring to mind, regards lying as a form of violence. Indeed, lies do corrode trust between people and nations, but would we accept diplomatic lies with more equanimity if we thought they might prevent the violence of war?

To come to a better understanding of “The Ambiguity of Ambiguity in Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence’” (38–56), Alison Ross proposes a detour through Benjamin’s essay on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*. In this essay, Benjamin analyzes ambiguity in a schema of oppositions: bourgeois “free” choice/the moral decision; the semblance/the expressionless; bourgeois civility/critical violence; silence/articulation; myth/revelation; fate/decision (45). What we gain from this detour is an appreciation of the power of ambiguity to probe certain social and political arrangements. When the beauty of the bourgeois life is held up as the only ideal available to us, we might be left with the tyranny of conformity. When instrumental language replaces authentic speech, the possibility of truth is suspended (53). Ambiguity might be the key to interrogating these problematic situations.

“Benjamin’s Niobe” (57–71), by Amir Ahmadi, illuminates Benjamin’s concept of “mythic violence.” In Greek myth, Niobe is the wife of King Amphion of Thebes. She is in perpetual mourning, having lost seven sons and seven daughters. Why did it happen? Because in a moment of hubris, she dared to interrupt the sacred liturgy devoted to Leto, so she could point out that the goddess had only two children, while she herself had fourteen. So, Leto sent Apollo and Artemis to slay them. Did the punishment fit the crime? No. And this is why Benjamin regards it as a paradigmatic example of mythic violence. For him, the story of Niobe illustrates the arbitrary nature of law and the penalties it imposes.

Brendan Moran’s essay is “Nature, Decision, and Muteness” (72–90). Benjamin knows that state-founding violence and state-protecting violence are both formidable, but he is nonetheless hopeful that those forms of violence might be overcome and that a more just order might be established. And if this new law happens to be tainted by bloodshed, what then? Benjamin is critical of pacifism, the refusal to rise up against an oppressive

government. In extreme situations, says Benjamin, it might be necessary to set aside the Biblical injunction against killing (77).

Benjamin's reading of Greek and Spanish drama is unpacked in "Variations of Fate" by Antonia Birnbaum (91–108). Sophocles shows us how Oedipus attempts to escape from a dark prophecy, but his actions only serve to bring the prophecy to fulfillment. In Spanish drama, especially in the plays of Calderon, the would-be hero has incurred some form of guilt. There is a path that he must follow, but there is very little chance that he will find redemption at the end of it (92). The proliferation of laws can have a similar effect (95). A thicket of laws can stand in the way of human flourishing, so that we might be tempted to give up the struggle for justice. Only we should not stop there. If we can discern the pattern of closure, we might be able to find a way to break it open again.

Agamben's descriptions of "bare life," a life unprotected by law and therefore extremely vulnerable, has an honored place in the lexicon of recent political philosophy. Carlo Salzano does not object to that, but in "From Benjamin's bloßes Leben to Agamben's Nuda Vita: A Genealogy" (109–124), he does ask us to dig a little deeper into the origins of this phrase. Agamben borrowed "mere life" from Walter Benjamin's essay, "Critique of Violence," but for Benjamin it had a very different range of meaning. When Benjamin spoke of "mere life," it was in a polemical context. Darwin and Nietzsche had argued that human beings are completely embedded in nature, creatures of immanence without remainder. Benjamin believed they were mistaken about that. We are not "mere life." Human beings do have a spiritual nature. He was thinking especially of a sense of justice, and in his own life that came from Judaism (112).

In "Agamben's Critique of Sacrificial Violence" (125–137), J. Colin McQuillan traces the theme of sacrifice in *Homo Sacer* and *The Kingdom and the Glory*. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben says the sovereign power can decide that the inhabitants of the camp are to be excluded from the protections of the law. From that point on, they are extremely vulnerable to violence. In *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Agamben shows that the proper function of government is to limit the destructive power of the sovereign, even if it cannot hope to eliminate violence altogether. If more people embodied St. Francis' spirit of child-like play, we might see a more peaceful world, as Agamben suggests in *The Highest Poverty*. But can Franciscan ideals change this world, or are they better suited to a messianic age yet to come?

Agamben's discussions of the state of exception and the bare life of the camp are meant to challenge the moral indifference of the bystander. William Watkins focuses on this theme in "Agamben, Benjamin, and the Indifference of Violence" (139–152). "Left to their own devices," says Watkins, "human beings will resort to violence due to indifference: the natural indifference of one animal to another when it comes to their own concerns" (151). However, Slavoy Zizek's *Violence* goes too far in the other direction. Zizek's unrestrained anger at injustice would mercilessly sweep away the old political order (149). Agamben resists that option. He still has faith that there is a *symbolic* form of divine violence that can shatter the pitiless logic of the sovereign power.

Paolo Bartolini's essay is "Suchness and the Threshold between Possession and Violence" (153–168). What Benjamin and Agamben share, according to Bartolini, is a vision of life that runs "contrary to established norms of competition, antagonism, possession and privatization" (153). In *The Highest Poverty*, Agamben focuses on four different attitudes to property as outlined by St. Bonaventure in *Apologia pauperum*: ownership, possession, usufruct, and simple use. "The Franciscans based their practice and *habitus* on the renunciation of all forms of ownership, possession and even usufruct. Their relation to things was to be entirely predicated on the simple use, necessary and indispensable for life-nurturing and survival and yet removed from legal claims and demands. They only asked to use the things that were made available to them (buildings, food, books) but declined the

ownership and property of such things” (164). But what about the main premise of this argument? Does ownership lead to violence?

Medieval law may have been founded on natural law, but modern law is understood to be nihilistic, stretched out over a void. Thanos Zartaloudis examines this difference in “Violence Without Law? On Pure Violence as a Destituent Power” (169–186). Do we want to overturn a law? In the name of what, a higher law? But if it is true that human beings have no essential substance, destiny, or vocation (172), what can we invoke as a valid reason for protest?

In *Homo Sacer*, stateless persons do not appear to have the resources needed to mount meaningful resistance to the sovereign power. But in “The Anarchist Life We Are Already Living: Benjamin and Agamben on Bare Life and the Resistance to Sovereignty” (187–200), James Martel turns to *The Highest Poverty* for help. That is where Agamben identifies a set of anarchist practices already at work in the lives of the Franciscan friars. Their fidelity to the Sermon on the Mount sets them apart from a bureaucratic and acquisitive Church, yes. But they also offer an alternative to a society based on buying and selling, a society that is always ready to deploy military power to defend its business interests (197–198).

Vivian Liska’s contribution is “Benjamin and Agamben on Kafka, Judaism, and the Law” (201–214). *The Trial* and Kafka’s short stories “Before the Law” and “In the Penal Colony” can be approached from legal, political, and religious perspectives. In Kafka’s world the Law is ever-present, a network of obscure procedures that ensnare the citizen and block the way forward. While Agamben proposes a form of anarchism inspired by what St. Paul says about being “free from The Law,” Benjamin’s critique of law is just as dark as Kafka’s: “Even the people in power are so lawless that they appear on the same level as those at the bottom of the pile; without any distinctions creatures of all realms teem together” (206). Still, Benjamin is unwilling to jettison The Torah, because even in “the swamp” of a Kafkaesque world, we still need a standard of justice (211).

Agamben’s critical engagement with Kantian ethics is most explicit in *Opus Dei: An Archaeology of Duty*. But he has also been carrying on a long conversation with Kantian aesthetics. Alex Murray brings this ongoing dialogue to light in “Expropriated Experience: Agamben Reading Benjamin, Reading Kant” (215–230). Kant wanted to eliminate subjective illusion from our experience of art, which him to emphasize the disinterestedness of beauty and to assert that the norms of the community as the center of aesthetic judgement. Agamben accepts Nietzsche’s critique of Kant, and embraces instead the solipsistic, passionate interest in art from the perspective of the artist (216). As for Kant’s interpretation of history, it is characterized by reason and steady progress. From Walter Benjamin, however, Agamben learned to focus on what might come after the breakdown of a political order, and the significance of Messianic expectation.

The last essay is one written by Agamben himself in 1970, “On the Limits of Violence” (231–238). The profound impact of Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” on Agamben’s thinking is clear. Although the scale of war’s violence had already grown far beyond what Benjamin could have imagined in 1921, Benjamin’s essay helped Agamben see the nexus between law, violence, and politics. Greek reflection on the polis attempted to found the City on the word rather than violence (231). Today, however, we are more conscious of the many ways violence comes into play between nations, races, classes, and religious faiths. Seeing that this is so, let us become as wise as serpents, as harmless as doves.

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