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pö Here I stand, I can do no other : Politics, Violence
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2013

pö Minkkinen , P 2013 , ' Here I stand, I can do no other : Politics, Violence
in Themselves ' , Law and Literature , vol. 25 , no. 2 , pp. 226-243 . <https://doi.org/10.1525/lal.2013.25.2.226>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/42044>

<https://doi.org/10.1525/lal.2013.25.2.226>

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“Here I stand, I can do no other”: Politics, Violence, and Ends in Themselves

Panu Minkkinen*

Abstract: This essay explores the political theory of the so-called early Walter Benjamin in light of James Martel's two recent books on the subject. The essay asks whether Max Weber would qualify as a “plotter” in the “Benjaminian conspiracy” that, for Martel, is at the heart of his anarchist politics. It does so by close reading Benjamin's posthumously published fragment “Capitalism as Religion” from 1921 that specifically draws on Weber. A theoretical kinship is identified between Benjamin's idea of pure means, which Agamben also considers as a key element in the redefinition of politics, and Weber's notion of capital and violence as “ends in themselves” in economic and political action, respectively. Violence as the “end in itself” or the Selbstzweck of politics represents the Nietzschean undercurrent of Weber's politics, to which Benjamin may well have felt an affinity.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin / Max Weber / capitalism / religion / politics / violence / instrumentality / ethics

THE POLITICAL CONSPIRACY

If you look at the table of contents of James Martel's recent book *Textual Conspiracies*,¹ you might be able to conclude that it consists of close readings of Walter Benjamin—first bringing Benjamin together with more familiar bedfellows like Kafka, but then proceeding to seemingly more distant ones like Machiavelli or Tocqueville. But the book is not worth engaging in more detail because of its choice of literary and political bedfellows, original as they may be, rather, it is the delicate way in which Martel brings his protagonists together. Instead of following the usual (and often tedious) route of verification *qua* “in an unpublished letter to Scholem

Law & Literature, Vol. 25, Issue 2, pp. 226–243. ISSN 1535-685X, electronic ISSN 1541-2601. © 2013 by The Cardozo School of Law of Yeshiva University. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website, at <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo.asp>. DOI: 10.1525/lal.2013.25.2.226.

dated then and then," Martel lures the bedfellows into his own constellations with inspired readings that suggest the protagonists are plotters in a conspiracy, rather than historically verifiable intellectual kin: literally, as Martel points out, as thinkers—or perhaps more precisely as writers—who "breathe together," who "conspire" in the constellations of possible worlds.

"Conspiracy" is the keyword here. It transforms Martel's seemingly well-mannered and tempered scholarship into radical politics. Because, at heart, this is a book about the political despair of the left and about a possible way out. It is about the carefully thought out anarchist politics that conclude both this book and Martel's other recent book on Benjamin,² and that he calls here a "Benjaminian conspiracy."³

Political action by plotting and conspiring, historical understanding through constellations, recuperating us from our own darkness—Martel does not shy away from Benjamin's unique language. And yet, he embraces the poetic vocabulary because it comprises a "method," rather than using it for mere aesthetic effect. This is a method that, I would suggest, Benjamin himself develops as he distances himself from Hermann Cohen and is gradually drawn under the influence of Franz Rosenzweig.⁴ This is what is elsewhere rather cheaply boxed as the "early" Benjamin, before the 1924 trip to Capri where he read Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* (1919–1923) for the first time,⁵ and met Asja Lācis, the "Bolshevik actress."⁶ So, on the face of it, this is not yet a properly Marxist Benjamin—if he ever was one⁷—although Martel might argue that even the so-called early Benjamin already conspires with Marx. Perhaps this could be a "messianic" politics, methodologically critical of Cohen's neo-Kantian emphases and gravitating toward Rosenzweig's eclecticism, but without the usual defeatist connotations.

Martel reminds us that quite a few political thinkers already belong to Benjamin's conspiracy, like Hobbes.⁸ But not all do. In this essay I would like to look into the political conspiracy that Martel suggests by reading Benjamin's fragment "Capitalism as Religion." It doesn't play a central role in either of Martel's books, and there are many good readings of the fragment elsewhere, for example, Samuel Weber's in *Benjamin's abilities*.⁹ But I'm interested in another Weber, namely Max, who is mentioned in the fragment itself. How would Max Weber fare in the conspiracy? Could he be included? And if not, why? In this way we may be able to say something more general about Martel's conspiracy and what its theoretical underpinnings might be.

THE HOST AND THE PARASITE

"Capitalism as Religion" was only posthumously published in the mid-1980s.¹⁰ Two English translations are available. The earlier, from 1996, is in the first volume of the *Selected Writings*, and the second in a collection on the Frankfurt School from 2005.¹¹ According to the editors of the *Gesammelte Schriften*, the fragment was written by the summer of 1921, but some have calculated that it was more likely composed toward the end of the year, if not even later.¹² It was written more or less immediately after "Critique of Violence," and perhaps it can even be regarded as an annex to it.¹³ It is barely three pages long, the last page being a sketchy bibliography that Benjamin apparently intended for an expanded study. It includes literature that was also central in "Critique of Violence," like that of Georges Sorel¹⁴ and Erich Unger.¹⁵ Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption* was published the same year,¹⁶ as was the book version of Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that Benjamin includes in his bibliography.¹⁷ Weber's "Politics as a Vocation" had also been published just a few years earlier.¹⁸ The title of Benjamin's fragment is apparently from Ernst Bloch's book on Thomas Münzer, which also draws on Weber, and was published the same year.¹⁹

The fragment begins with the type of categorical opening sentence that you might find in Schmitt: "Im Kapitalismus ist eine Religion zu erblicken." (KaR, 1; CaR-I, 288; CaR-II, 259). Literally: "A religion is to be seen in capitalism." Both English translators have decided to temper the claim. The earlier one suggests that "a religion may be discerned in capitalism," as if it were optional, if one wanted to. The more recent one translates *erblicken* as the rather archaic-sounding "behold": "One can behold." Both translations lose Benjamin's urgency: "Capitalism must be seen as a religion." A few lines down, Benjamin restates this urgency more explicitly.

So why is capitalism a religion?

To begin with, both share common functions. Both address the same concerns, both satisfy the same needs—Benjamin uses the word *Befriedigung*, "satisfaction". Furthermore, we can easily identify structural similarities. This is where Weber enters the text. Benjamin claims that Weber has shown how religion has given shape to capitalism. We still have two separate phenomena, but one (capitalism) is structurally dependent on the other (religion). Finally—and this is where we are clearly leaving Weber

behind—Benjamin actually claims that the phenomena of capitalism and religion have become identical. Further in the fragment, he clarifies this with a striking metaphor:

In the West, capitalism has developed parasitically from Christianity, and this must not only be shown in relation to Calvinism [note the reference to Weber] but also in relation to the other orthodox Christian denominations. So much so that in the end its [Christianity’s] history is essentially that of its parasite, of capitalism. (KaR, 102; CaR-I, 289; CaR-II, 260)

Benjamin specifies, then, that the religious characteristics of capitalism are not generic, but specifically Christian. The relationship between the two has been parasitical, and eventually there has been a reversal of the symbiosis. Christianity may have first allowed capitalism to establish itself and to grow, but the parasite has now taken on parasitoidal features. It has become next to impossible to tell the two apart, and the religious host survives merely as hollow liturgy. Further down, Benjamin continues:

The Christianity of the Reformation period did not advance the appearance of capitalism [perhaps another reference to Weber] but, instead, it transformed itself into capitalism. (KaR, 102; CaR-I, 290; CaR-II, 261)

Benjamin is clearly taking the argument further than Weber, and he qualifies this view with three further observations: that capitalism is a cult, that capitalism demands ceaseless worship, and that it is a religion of guilt.²⁰

THE CULT AND THE CALLING

Capitalism is, then, a pure cult:

Within it things [capitalist practices] have meaning only in immediate relation to the cult, and it acknowledges no particular doctrine or theology. From this perspective utilitarianism acquires its religious overtones. (KaR, 100; CaR-I, 288; CaR-II, 259)

And further down:

Capitalism is a religion of pure cult, without dogma. [Leaving no ambiguity about the opening claim.] (KaR, 102; CaR-I, 289; CaR-II, 264)

Investment, speculation, financial transactions: the devotee of capitalism engages in all these as ritualized cults, as externalized utilitarian practices without an overarching doctrine or belief system. Benjamin's capitalist is a utilitarian without the Benthamian "greatest happiness principle." Weber's parallel would be the Calvinist-turned-entrepreneur's devotion to capitalism, as he responds to his calling with

an obligation which the individual is supposed to feel and does feel towards the content of his professional activity, no matter in what it consists, in particular no matter whether it appears on the surface as a utilization of his labour, or only of his material possessions (as capital).²¹

This devotion is earlier described in relation to Benjamin Franklin's "ethos," as "the idea of a duty of the individual toward the increase of his capital, which is assumed as an end in itself [*Selbstzweck*]."²² And further down again:

It [the acquisition of wealth] is thought of so purely as an end in itself [again, *Selbstzweck*], that from the point of view of the happiness of, or utility to, the single individual, it appears entirely transcendental and absolutely irrational. Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life. Economic acquisition is no longer subordinated to man as the means for the satisfaction of his material needs.²³

So what has happened here? For the textbook Weber, the purposive or instrumental rationality of means and ends, *Zweckrationalität*, is the "natural" starting point of economically motivated social action.²⁴ The bourgeoisie earns money to buy security and comfort. But the devotion to capitalism marks a conversion—Weber uses the word *Umkehrung*—after which the instrumental relationship between means and ends has been distorted. The acquisition of wealth, the means, is the only remaining end. The devotion to the *Selbstzweck* is capitalism's transcendental irrationalism, its leitmotif and religion, if you will.

The terminology is, of course, misleading. An "end in itself," a *Selbstzweck*, is not really an end at all. It is a means caught in a loop, employed for no other purpose than the mere fact of employing it. In Weber's notion of the *Selbstzweck*, the end of purposive action has been replaced by the very means that were perhaps formerly employed for different purposes. The acquisition of wealth is still motivated by a purpose, even if that purpose is

nothing other than acquiring wealth itself. The capitalist’s devotion to the acquisition of wealth for its own sake is his irrational and transcendental doctrine, and the end of his socio-economic action is employing capitalist practices in an environment where capital has been disconnected from its exchange value. The idea of capital as an end in itself is not Weber’s own. In his *Philosophy of Money*, Georg Simmel had already argued that money in financial capitalism detaches itself from the purposive relations of means and ends, and contributes toward a certain capitalist cultural identity:

Money is an end in itself [*Selbstzweck*] in the purely bilateral financial operation not only in the sense that it has suspended its qualities as a means, but also in the sense that it is, from the outset, the self-sufficient centre of interest, which also develops its own distinctive norms and, at the same time, completely autonomous qualities and a corresponding technique. Under these circumstances in which money possesses its own colouring and specific qualifications, a personality may be expressed more readily in the management of this money than when it is the colourless means to altogether different ends.²⁵

By comparison, for Benjamin, the capitalist acquisition of wealth is a cultic practice, an externalized form of worship. It is a religious ritual that is complied with mechanistically without knowing what is being worshiped or, indeed, if anything is being worshiped at all. A bit later in the fragment, Benjamin gives us a hint about what the object of worship might be, because the purity of the cult is apparently protected by a prohibition:

... its God must be concealed and may be addressed only at the zenith of his guilt. The cult is celebrated before an immature deity, and every image and every idea about it betrays the secret of its maturity. (KaR, 101; CaR-I, 289; CaR-II, 260)

As a second specific observation, Benjamin claims that the cultic religion of capitalism is also relentless:

Capitalism is the celebration of a cult *sans trêve et sans merci*. It has no “weekdays,” no day that is not a feast day in the terrible sense that all its sacred pomp unfolds each day becoming the ultimate harness of the worshiper. (KaR, 100; CaR-I, 288; CaR-II, 259)

This aspect of capitalism’s relentlessness can also be detected in Weber:

... the religious valuation of restless, continuous, systematic work in a worldly calling as the highest means to asceticism, and at the same time the surest and most evident proof of a reborn man and his genuine faith, this must have been the most powerful conceivable lever for the expansion of that attitude toward life which we have here called the spirit of capitalism.²⁶

But there is a difference. The vocational devotion to the “transcendental” and “irrational” acquisition of wealth has attained a near-religious value, and this normative and persuasive significance has enabled capitalism to expand beyond the limits of the working day and week. So for Weber, the issue is perhaps more about a work that colonizes everything, and the Sabbath as the exceptional day of “rest.” But for Benjamin, the nature of capitalist practices has much less to do with the requirement of rest and more with “liturgy.” It abolishes the distinction between work and worship, between the profane and the sacred, between the parasite and its host. Finally, we only have an endless succession of days of worship completely dedicated to the ritualistic adoration of capitalism and its practices by engaging in those very practices. If for Weber capitalism is continuous work to which we are dedicated in a near-religious manner, for Benjamin capitalism is continuous worship in which we engage through work.

GUILT AND DISENCHANTMENT

The third and most delightfully ambiguous observation from Benjamin is that capitalism is a cultic religion of guilt:

... this cult engenders guilt. Capitalism is probably the first instance of a cult that does not engender expiation but guilt. (KaR, 100; CaR-I, 288; CaR-II, 259)²⁷

The two verbs that Benjamin uses here are *verschulden* and *entsühnen*, to assign guilt—or debt—and to expiate, to absolve.²⁸ Because capitalism is a very particular religion, the element of guilt has to be typical of Christianity. Perhaps Benjamin is alluding to Judaism here as a religion of expiation, a view that might be supported with Rosenzweig’s personal *Umkehr*, “reversal,” in 1913.²⁹

This religious system of guilt called capitalism is apparently part of an accumulative historical movement that, in the end, does include a breaking point of sorts:

An enormous consciousness of guilt that doesn't know how to atone for itself takes hold of the cult, not so that it could expiate this guilt through it, but to make it universal, to hammer it into the consciousness, and finally and most importantly to include God himself in this guilt, to finally awaken his interest in atonement. (KaR, 100–1; CaR-I, 288–89; CaR-II, 259)

Perhaps there is something Weberian about this? Consider reading the “iron cage” metaphor through John Bunyan's allegory in *The Pilgrim's Progress*:

God hath denied me repentance. His Word gives me no encouragement to believe; yea, himself hath shut me up in this iron cage; nor can all the men in the world let me out.³⁰

Weber projects his pessimism into this “mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance.”³¹ Capitalism is a mechanistic adherence that no longer requires a spiritual justification from either religion or from the Enlightenment, its “laughing heir.”³² Even Benjamin has an “iron cage” of sorts. The antidote to capitalism as the cultic religion of guilt is expiation, but expiation cannot be provided by participating in the cultic practices of capitalism itself or by reforming it. But neither can we find it by renouncing—even attempting to renounce—a capitalism that engulfs everything. Expiation seems to be possible only in a “constellation,” if you will, that accelerates the capitalist logic until it collapses, and the God of capitalism has reached full maturity in his guilt:

It is in the essence of the religious movement that capitalism is to endure until the end, until God has finally taken on guilt totally, to reach the state of despair still only *hoped* for. Therein lies what is historically unprecedented about capitalism, that religion no longer reforms being but crushes it to pieces. The expansion of despair into a religious state of the world where despair may lead to salvation. (KaR, 101; CaR-I, 289; CaR-II, 260) (emphasis in the original)

“Aus dem die Heilung zu erwarten sei.” Not really redemption or salvation as *Erlösung*, which the translations imply, but a healing that can't

be expected, perhaps only waited for. And a few lines further down we encounter something that looks like an odd theodicy:

God's transcendence has ended. But he is not dead. He has been included in human fate. (KaR, 101; CaR-I, 289; CaR-II, 260)

"Ended," *gefallen*—not only has God's transcendence ended, but God himself has lapsed, fallen.

So amidst all the darkness, what are we offered in terms of possible resistance? Or are we just doomed to wait in despair? Benjamin first sketches our options with three proper names. Freud's psychoanalysis is through and through capitalistic, and Benjamin quickly dismisses it as nothing more than the dominance of capitalism's priests:

The repressed, the representation of sin, is at bottom an illuminating analogy of a capital to which the hell of the unconscious pays interest. (KaR, 101; CaR-I, 289; CaR-II, 260)

For the Benjamin who hasn't yet read his Lukács, Marxism, too, remains trapped within the all-engulfing cults of capitalism:

... a capitalism that has not converted [*umkehren*] becomes socialism with interest and interest on interest which are functions of guilt (note the demonic ambiguity of this concept) [*Schuld* is both guilt and debt]. (CaR, 101-102; CaR-I, 289; CaR-II, 260)

Benjamin is certainly no social democrat!¹³³

Nietzsche seems to be the only one going in the right direction, but in the end he suffers the same fate as Marx. The *Übermensch* is "the first who knowingly begins to realize the capitalist religion" (CaR, 101; CaR-I, 289; CaR-II, 260), but he can intensify capitalism only in a seemingly continuous way. Because his interventions are sporadic, they can only preserve the guilt:

The *Übermensch* is the historical man who arrived without converting [*ohne Umkehr*], who grew out of the heavens. (KaR, 101; CaR-I, 289; CaR-II, 260)

So only a complete conversion, an *Umkehr*, can produce the reversal that would finally release mankind from the harnesses of guilt and bring about expiation, the *Sühne* that capitalism as religion denies.

What type of "revolution" would this *Umkehr* be?

Michael Löwy has traced the term to the socialist anarchist and Jewish mystic Gustav Landauer that Benjamin lists in his bibliography. According to Löwy, then, the *Umkehr* would be the new beginning of life in utopian socialist communes, the escapist breakaway from the "iron cage." The work of an anarchist mystic is the kind of literature to which this "early" Benjamin would probably have been drawn.³⁴

VIOLENCE AS AN END IN ITSELF

But why does Benjamin treat Weber so generously while dismissing Freud, Marx, and even Nietzsche in such open terms? Does he view Weber as some sort of "co-conspirator"? This treatment cannot be the general affinity between capitalism and religion, because Benjamin takes the argument so much further than Weber does.

Perhaps it has to do with the incompatible way in which Weber's devoted Calvinist—and by extension all of us—commits himself to capitalism and its practices. He has a calling, a *Beruf*, and he responds to it with a fundamentally transcendental and irrational devotion to acquiring wealth for its own sake. The *Selbstzweck*, the "end in itself" to which he is devoted, contradicts the very rationality of purposiveness on which capitalism is supposedly built. The irrational devotion may also mark a conversion, an *Umkehr*, after which capitalism, as Weber understood it, carries the seed of its own destruction.

We can see something similar going on in Weber's politics. In *Economy and Society* we are told that the political nature of social action cannot be defined in terms of its ends. Politics pursues all conceivable ends, and no single end is involved in all politics. Therefore, with a typical Weberian reduction, we are forced to conclude that politics can only be defined through the means it uses, that is, violence. The English translation often says "force," but here it's not *Zwang*, "coercion," as in the beginning of the section, but *Gewaltsamkeit*. Weber then continues that violence as the means of politics "is even, under certain circumstances, elevated into an end in itself."³⁵ Again, *Selbstzweck*.

So, in certain circumstances, violence as a means specific to politics has become a *Selbstzweck*, an "end in itself," just like the acquisition of wealth in capitalism. The argument about violence as the means of politics is then

restated in “Politics as a Vocation,” which was published two years before Benjamin’s fragment was written. First, reaffirming the essay’s opening claim credited to Trotsky, Weber states, “The decisive means for politics is violence.”³⁶ Who engages in this violence? The professional politician responds to his calling, to his *Beruf*, by devoting his life to politics, by living a life *for* politics. And the politician’s devotion can be just as irrational as the capitalist’s:

Either he enjoys the naked possession of the power he exerts, or he nourishes his inner balance and self-feeling by the consciousness that his life has meaning in the service of a “cause.”³⁷

The professional politician’s devotion either involves a “cause” (*Sache*) that gives meaning and justifies the use of the violent means, or he simply takes pleasure in the use of the violent means in itself. In either case, power is exerted as violence.

Weber gives us three heuristic depictions of who the professional politician of capitalism might be. The first is simply the “soulless” bureaucrat whose vocation calls him only to dutiful administration. The end of his formal compliance is merely the efficient functioning of capitalism, to which he feels no specific attachment, and this lack of attachment and the rhetorical reservedness that follows apparently make him a rather poor politician, too:

To weigh the effect of the word properly falls within the range of the lawyer’s tasks; but not at all into that of the civil servant. The latter is no demagogue, nor is it his purpose to be one. If he nevertheless tries to become a demagogue, he usually becomes a very poor one.³⁸

The second ideal type of the professional politician is a “demagogic species” that involves the characteristics of the statesman, the journalist, and the party official. The demagogue is already informed by an ethic of responsibility that requires the politician to acknowledge the consequences of his actions. But his responsibility resembles the legal advocate’s commitment to his client. The commitment that justifies the use of the violent means is an empty carrier that can take on any meaning from the ever-changing needs of an imaginary other, be it the client or the subject.³⁹

Weber’s third and final ideal type, apparently the terminal point in this analysis of the professional politician, is *der Boss*, a caricature modeled on the ruthless American industrialist:

The typical boss is an absolutely sober man. He does not seek social honor; the "professional" is despised in "respectable society." He seeks power alone [again, power exerted as violence], power as a source of money, but also power for power's sake [*um ihrer selbst willen*, i.e. the German expression for the *causa sui*].⁴⁰

The boss's sobriety stems from his social isolation and the resulting autonomy. He "works in the dark," as Weber says. To him, power and capital are one and the same, and neither has any other end than itself. They are interchangeably *Selbstzwecke*: power for power, power for capital, capital for capital, capital for power. All the same *Selbstzwecke*.

Despite the difference in tone, I think that with the *Selbstzwecke* Weber may be in the vicinity of Benjamin's notion of "pure means" that in many accounts provides the red thread to this, his "early" period. For example, after concluding that it is neither possible to justify a means through the justness of an end nor to guarantee the justness of an end by its means, we arrive at this famous passage in "Critique of Violence":

How would it be, therefore, if all the violence imposed by fate, using justified means, were of itself in irreconcilable conflict with just ends, and if at the same time a different kind of violence arose that certainly could be either the justified or the unjustified means to those ends but was not related to them as means at all but in some different way?⁴¹

A divine violence, then, freed from the idolatry of ends. Weber approaches the question of justification much more conventionally:

From no ethics in the world can it be concluded when and to what extent the ethically good purpose "justifies" the ethically dangerous means and ramifications.⁴²

Here, Weber denounces an ethic of ultimate ends where the noble purpose could somehow provide the ultimate justification for even the most dubious of means. And violence as the means of politics is always dubious. In German, this is a *Gesinnungsethik*, so perhaps more literally an ethic of conviction. Can a devoted professional politician, then, be guided by an ethical conviction? Well, basically, no. For Weber, politics as the use of violence can only be justified by taking responsibility for whatever consequences follow. This is a point that Weber also reiterates in relation to war in the short article "Between Two Laws": pacifism as an ethic of conviction

only makes sense if it is complied with unconditionally, like Tolstoy did. As anything short of that, it is a luxury that fate won't allow us.⁴³

Weber's reasoning here may also seem a bit forced. One ethic has to be chosen, not because it is preferable, but because fate makes the other impossible. This may be the type of occasional decisionism for which Löwith criticized Schmitt.⁴⁴ On Weber's own terms, only a charismatic politician can carry the full weight of such an ethic of responsibility. And charismatic politics, in turn, implies the autonomy of someone unrestrained by conventional rationality. This radical autonomy is what a devotion to violence as an "end in itself," as a *Selbstzweck*, provides.⁴⁵

AT THE LIMIT

But how far is Weber willing to go on this evening stroll with Nietzsche?

After the three heuristic approximations of the devoted professional politician, Weber finally provides a fourth character, namely, the genuine politician. His adjective *echt*, with its thoroughly juridical etymology "lawful," indicates that this is no longer an approximation, or a heuristic ideal type, but the real thing. So who is Weber's genuine politician? He is someone who arrives at a limit realizing that this is, indeed, what has happened:

... it is immensely moving when a mature man—no matter whether old or young in years—who is really aware of the responsibility for the consequences feeling it with heart and soul and acts according to an ethic of responsibility, reaches the point somewhere where he says: "Here I stand; I can do no other." That is something genuinely human and moving. Every one of us who is not internally dead must realize the possibility of finding himself at some time in that situation. In so far, an ethic of ultimate ends and an ethic of responsibility are not absolute opposites but rather supplements which only together constitute a genuine man—a man who can have the "calling for politics."⁴⁶

"Hier stehe ich, ich kann nicht anders." This is, of course, not Weber, but Luther, and a historically inaccurate Luther at that.⁴⁷ When Luther is brought before the Diet at Worms and is requested to renounce his beliefs, he can only stand. The strength of his conviction paralyzes him, and he

would rather sacrifice himself in the hands of his oppressors than betray that conviction.

For want of a better word, perhaps we can shorthand the politics of the early Benjamin as "messianic." It attempts, amongst many other things, to undo the supposedly necessary relationship between means and end, to perhaps find the beginning of a politics of pure means, of "means without end" with which Agamben wants to rethink the whole domain of the political:

*Politics is the exhibition of a mediality: it is the act of making a means visible as such. Politics is the sphere neither of an end in itself nor of means subordinated to an end; rather, it is the sphere of a pure mediality without end intended as the field of human action and of human thought.*⁴⁸

Although Agamben here explicitly denies the possibility of politics involving an end in itself, the idea of a *Selbstzweck* as a means caught in a loop would still fit within the limits of a mediality, because it disrupts the relationship between means and end irreversibly. More recently, and referring specifically to "Capitalism as Religion," Agamben calls the political resistance to capitalism "profanation," a strategy that dislocates politics from the religious stranglehold of consumerism and spectacle, returning it to public use. The dislocation can only take place by intervening with the relationship between means and end:

The freed behavior still reproduces and mimics the forms of the activity from which it has been emancipated, but, in emptying them of their sense and of any obligatory relationship to an end, it opens them and makes them available for a new use.⁴⁹

Martel is certainly no stranger to this Agambenian take on Benjamin, and I would like to think that it also plays a part in his idea of anarchist politics: "Anarchy is the one form of politics that resists idolatry; we might say that it is what politics is when it is not overdetermined and overwritten by anything else."⁵⁰

The politician's ethic of responsibility will take Weber far along this line of argument, where politics is not preconditioned by the idolatrous ends for which it supposedly aims—all the way to the *Selbstzweck*, where violence becomes the "end in itself" of all politics. And it may very well be that Benjamin recognizes a certain kinship in this Nietzschean idea of an end in

itself. But there is a limit, and on its other side Weber's politician must convert—perhaps *umkehren*—to the tragic heroism of his conviction. It paralyzes politics. Here he stands, and he can do nothing else. Not even wait. So it is not a messianic politics, but a tragic politics of pure ends, of ends without means.

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1. James R. Martel, *Textual Conspiracies: Walter Benjamin, Idolatry, and Political Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011).
2. James R. Martel, *Divine Violence: Walter Benjamin and the Eschatology of Sovereignty* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012).
3. There is a strategic kinship here with Carlo Salzani, *Constellations of Reading: Walter Benjamin in Figures of Actuality* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), 13–36.
4. On Benjamin's early affiliations and intellectual development, see, e.g., Nikolas Lambrianou, "A Philosophy and Theology of Hyperinflation": Walter Benjamin, Weimar and the New Thinking," 5 *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 78 (2004). On the European Jewish intelligentsia of the period in general (including Benjamin), see Michael Löwy, "Jewish Messianism and Libertarian Utopia in Central Europe (1900–1933)," 20 *New German Critique* 105 (1980); and Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe: A Study in Elective Affinity*, trans. Hope Heaney (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).
5. Surprisingly little has been written on Benjamin and Lukács. See, however, Jennifer Todd, "Aesthetic Experience and Contemporary Capitalism: Notes on Georg Lukács and Walter Benjamin," 7 *The Crane Bag* 101 (1983). Gyorgy Markus, Lukács's one-time student in Budapest, has, however, written an illuminating essay on reification and commodification. Gyorgy Markus, "Walter Benjamin, or: The Commodity as Phantasmagoria," 83 *New German Critique* 3 (2001).
6. Susan Ingram makes a compelling argument about how an inaccurate and pejorative depiction of Lācis has contributed to the canonized view of Benjamin as a tragic Jewish intellectual. See Susan Ingram, "The Writing of Asja Lācis," 86 *New German Critique* 159 (2002).
7. One argument would be that Benjamin was always, at best, a "romantic anti-capitalist." See, e.g., Michael Löwy, "Walter Benjamin and Romanticism," 18 *New Comparison* 165 (1994); and Robert Sayre & Michael Löwy, "Figures of Romantic Anti-Capitalism," 32 *New German Critique* 42 (1984).
8. Martel would be compelled to say so. See James R. Martel, *Subverting the Leviathan: Reading Thomas Hobbes as a Radical Democrat* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
9. Samuel Weber, "Closing the Net," in *Benjamin's -abilities* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 250–80.
10. Walter Benjamin, "Kapitalismus als Religion," in *Gesammelte Schriften, Band VI* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 100–102 [hereinafter, KaR].
11. Walter Benjamin, "Capitalism as Religion," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1 (1913–1926), trans. Rodney Livingston et al. (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 1996), 288–91 [hereinafter, CaR-I]; Walter Benjamin, "Capitalism as Religion," in *Religion as Critique: The Frankfurt School's Critique of Religion*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta, trans. Neville Plaice et al. (New York: Routledge, 2005), 259–62 [hereinafter, CaR-II]. My own translations are consolidations of both, as well as modifications

- based on the original. The same applies to all quotes where both a German and an English source are given.
12. For a general contextualization of Benjamin's political writings from this period, see, e.g., Uwe Steiner, “The True Politician: Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Political,” 83 *New German Critique* 43 (2001).
 13. Caygill claims that the fragment is “pivotal in the development of Benjamin's thought.” Howard Caygill, “Non-Messianic Political Theology in ‘On the Concept of History,’” in *Walter Benjamin and History*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London & New York: Continuum, 2005), 216. Agamben regards it as “one of Benjamin's most penetrating posthumous fragments.” Giorgio Agamben, “In Praise of Profanation,” in *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 80.
 14. Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, trans. Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). See also Jan-Werner Müller, “Myth, Law and Order: Schmitt and Benjamin Read *Reflections on Violence*,” 29 *History of European Ideas* 459 (2003).
 15. Erich Unger, *Politik und Metaphysik* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1989). See also Margarete Kohlenbach, “Religion, Experience, Politics: On Erich Unger and Walter Benjamin,” in *The Early Frankfurt School and Religion*, eds. Margarete Kohlenbach & Raymond Geuss (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 64–84.
 16. Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara E. Galli (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005). See also Stéphane Moses, “Walter Benjamin and Franz Rosenzweig,” in *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, ed. Gary Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 228–46.
 17. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London, New York: Routledge, 2006).
 18. Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. Hans Heinrich Gerth & C. Wright Mills (Abingdon: Routledge, 1991), 77–128.
 19. Ernst Bloch, *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution: Gesamtausgabe, Band 2* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1969). On Weber and Bloch, see Éva Karádi, “Ernst Bloch and Georg Lukács in Max Weber's Heidelberg,” in *Max Weber and his Contemporaries*, eds. Wolfgang J. Mommsen & Jürgen Osterhammel (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987), 499–514. On Benjamin and Bloch, see Anson Rabinbach, “Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse: Benjamin, Bloch and Modern German Jewish Messianism,” 34 *New German Critique* 78 (1985). On Benjamin, Weber, and Bloch, see Warren S. Goldstein, “Messianism and Marxism: Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch's Dialectical Theories of Secularization,” 27 *Critical Sociology* 246 (2001); and Warren S. Goldstein, “The Dialectics of Religious Rationalization and Secularization: Max Weber and Ernst Bloch,” 31 *Critical Sociology* 115 (2005).
 20. For a similarly “sympathetic” radicalization of Weber's observations, see also Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 115–27.
 21. Weber, *supra* note 17, at 19; Max Weber, “Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus,” in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie, Band 1* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr/Siebeck, 1986), 36.
 22. Weber, *supra* note 17, at 17; Weber, “Die protestantische Ethik,” *supra* note 21, at 25.
 23. Weber, *supra* note 17, at 18; Weber, “Die protestantische Ethik,” *supra* note 21, at 35–36.
 24. Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, vol. 1 (1920–1921), trans. Ephraim Fischhoff et. al. (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 1978), 24–26; Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriss der Sozialökonomik, Band 1* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr/Siebeck, 1980), 12–13.
 25. Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. Tom Bottomore & David Frisby, 3rd enlarged ed. (London, New York: Routledge, 2004), 309; Georg Simmel, *Philosophie des Geldes* (Berlin: Duncker & Humbolt, 1907), 328.

26. Weber, *supra* note 17, at 116; Weber, "Die protestantische Ethik," *supra* note 21, at 192.
27. For a very detailed reading of the theme of guilt in this fragment, see Werner Hamacher, "Guilt History: Benjamin's Fragment 'Capitalism as Religion,'" 26 *Cardozo Law Review* 887 (2005).
28. The first English translation translates *entsühnen* as "to atone," the second as "to repent."
29. Until 1913, Rosenzweig was not an observant Jew. However, following a correspondence with his friend Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy, who had earlier converted to Christianity, Rosenzweig's philosophy took the decisive turn to Judaism that, I would suggest, was a major influence on the "early" Benjamin, too. On the correspondence between Rosenzweig and Rosenstock-Huussy, see, e.g., Alexander Altmann, "Franz Rosenzweig and Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy: An Introduction to Their 'Letters on Judaism and Christianity,'" 24 *Journal of Religion* 258 (1944).
30. John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress: From This World, To That Which Is to Come* (London: Penguin, 2008), 38. On the Weberian metaphor itself, see, e.g., Peter Baehr, "The 'Iron Cage' and the 'Shell as Hard as Steel': Parsons, Weber, and the *Stahlhartes Gehäuse* Metaphor in the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*," 40 *History and Theory* 153 (2001).
31. Weber, *supra* note 17, at 124; Weber, "Die protestantische Ethik," *supra* note 21, at 204.
32. Weber, *supra* note 17, at 124; Weber, "Die protestantische Ethik," *supra* note 21, at 204.
33. See, e.g., Benjamin's thesis XI on history, once again invoking Weber. Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4 (1938–1940), trans. Edmund Jephcott et. al. (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 2003), 394. On the thesis and its relation to both "Capitalism as Religion" and Weber (and Schmitt) more generally, see Caygill, *supra* note 13.
34. See Michael Löwy, "Capitalism as Religion: Walter Benjamin and Max Weber," 17 *Historical Materialism* 60 (2009). The book included in Benjamin's bibliography has been translated as Gustav Landauer, *For Socialism*, trans. David J. Parent (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1978). On Landauer, see Eugene Lunn, *Prophet of Community: The Romantic Socialism of Gustav Landauer* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973). *Umkehr* is also one of Martin Buber's central notions, commonly translated as "turning." See, e.g., Martin Buber, *I And Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith, 2nd ed. (London: Continuum, 2004), 77–78. On Landauer and Buber, see Mahum N. Glatzer & Paul Mendes-Flohr, eds., *The Letters of Martin Buber: A Life of Dialogue*, trans. Clara Winston et. al. (Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 22–30.
35. Weber, *Economy and Society* 1, *supra* note 24, at 55; Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* 1, *supra* note 24, at 30.
36. Weber, *supra* note 18, at 121; Max Weber, "Politik als Beruf," in *Gesammelte politische Schriften* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr/Siebeck, 1988), 552.
37. Weber, *supra* note 18, at 84; Weber, "Politik als Beruf," *supra* note 36, at 513.
38. Weber, *supra* note 18, at 95; Weber, "Politik als Beruf," *supra* note 36, at 524.
39. Weber, *supra* note 18, at 95–96; Weber, "Politik als Beruf," *supra* note 36, at 524–25.
40. Weber, *supra* note 18, at 109; Weber, "Politik als Beruf," *supra* note 36, at 539.
41. Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1 (1913–1926), trans. R. Livingston et. al. (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 1996), 247; Walter Benjamin, "Zur Kritik der Gewalt," in *Gesammelte Schriften, Band II.1* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), 196.
42. Weber, *supra* note 18, at 121; Weber, "Politik als Beruf," *supra* note 36, at 552.
43. Max Weber, "Between Two Laws," in *Political Writings*, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 75–79; Max Weber, "Zwischen zwei Gesetzen," in *Gesammelte politische Schriften* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr/Siebeck, 1988), 142–46. This short and seemingly insignificant text is perhaps one of the most illuminating in terms of Weber's thoughts on international politics.
44. Karl Löwith, "The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt," in *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, trans. Gary Steiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 137–58.

45. On Weber and charismatic politics, see Andreas Kalyvas, “Charismatic Politics and the Symbolic Foundations of Power in Max Weber,” 85 *New German Critique* 67 (2002). On the “democratic” nature of Weber’s politics, see Tamsin Shaw, “Max Weber on Democracy: Can the People Have Political Power in Modern States?,” 15 *Constellations* 33 (2008).
46. Weber, *supra* note 18, at 127; Weber, “Politik als Beruf,” *supra* note 36, at 559.
47. See, e.g., Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York, Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950), 185.
48. Giorgio Agamben, “Notes on Politics,” in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti & Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 115–16.
49. Agamben, *supra* note 13, at 85–86. See also Benjamin Morgan, “Undoing Legal Violence: Walter Benjamin’s and Giorgio Agamben’s Aesthetics of Pure Means,” 34 *Journal of Law and Society* 46 (2007).
50. Martel, *supra* note 1, at 254.