

# Entsetzen

## Walter Benjamin and the Red Army Faction, Part One

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The true politician reckons only in dates. And if the abolition of the bourgeoisie is not effected by an almost calculable moment in economic and technical development (one signalled by inflation and poison-gas warfare), then all is lost. Before the spark reaches the dynamite, the lighted fuse must be severed. ('Fire Alarm', 1928)<sup>1</sup>

Between 1865 and 1875 a number of great anarchists each worked, without knowing of one another, on their infernal machine. And the astonishing thing is that they independently set its clock at exactly the same hour – and forty years later the writings of Dostoevsky, Rimbaud, and Lautréamont all simultaneously blew up in Western Europe. One might, to be more exact, single out one episode from Dostoevsky's entire work ...: 'Stavrogin's Confession' in *The Possessed*. This chapter ... contains a justification of evil. ... 'Hatred, to you I have entrusted my treasure,' [Rimbaud] writes in *Une saison en enfer*. ... Since Bakunin, Europe has lacked a radical concept of freedom. ('Surrealism', 1929)<sup>2</sup>

Is this dull multitude not waiting for a disaster great enough to strike a spark from its own inner tension: a conflagration or world-end, something that could suddenly convert this velvet thousand-voiced murmuring into a single cry, as a gust of wind suddenly exposes the scarlet lining of a cloak? For the piercing cry of terror [*des Entsetzens*], panic dread, is the other side of all authentic mass celebration [*Massenfeste*]. In the unconscious depths of mass

existence, conflagrations and celebrations are both only so much play, preparation for its coming of age, the hour when panic and celebration, now recognizing the other as a long-separated brother, embrace one another in the revolutionary uprising. ('Schönes Entsetzen' ['Fine Terror'], 1929–34)<sup>3</sup>

The course of history as represented in the concept of catastrophe has no more claim on the thinking man's attention than the kaleidoscope in the hands of a child. With each new twist, everything collapses into a new order. The image is thoroughly well-grounded [*hat sein gutes, gründliches Recht*]. The concepts of the rulers have always been the mirrors by which the image of an 'order' was established. – The kaleidoscope must be smashed. ('Central Park', 1938)<sup>4</sup>

Strength of hatred in Marx. Fighting spirit of the working class. Interlay revolutionary destruction and the idea of redemption. (Netschajev. *The Possessed*.) (Notes for 'On the Concept of History', 1939)<sup>5</sup>

### 'Dangerous relations'?

Benjamin and the Red Army Faction – is the subject even worth discussing? Its background, or underground, has, it is true, hardly been broached in the secondary literature. Yet both sides claimed that violence was needed to avert disaster; and Benjamin underwrote an ethics which did not shrink from the 'revolutionary killing of the oppressor'.<sup>6</sup>

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\* The present essay, to be published in three instalments, is a slightly revised version of one that appeared in the first of two collective volumes (*Der RAF und der linke Terrorismus*, Hamburg, 2006) edited by Wolfgang Kraushaar under the auspices of the Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung. These are a sequel to an invaluable three-volume study under the same editorship and auspices: *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung. Von der Flaschenpost zum Molotow-Cocktail 1946–1995* (Hamburg, 1998). The volumes on the Red Army Faction and present-day German 'reception' of the latter thirty years after the events constitute in large measure a case of what the Germans call 'historicization'; a case too, on occasion, of 'pathologization'. It is as if there existed an unspoken consensus to put the 'leaden years' in their place – that is, safely behind us. (There was considerably less agreement across the political spectrum about whether to release long-incarcerated terrorists one or two years early.) Some former members of the extreme or dogmatic Left have, it is true, given self-critical accounts of their past aberrations; but here too the purpose has been to settle accounts and lay ghosts. There is little doubt that the RAF was indeed a case of historico-political pathology. But from where – from what normality – do we call it that? The same one that the student movement originally rebelled against? Or one yet to be born? (And wouldn't the latter *require* a certain madness – though not that of the RAF?) Was the decade around 1968 merely the proverbial sowing of wild oats – the 'wild years', as a recent film called them, of Uschi Obermaier, who lived in a Berlin commune (*Kommune 1*) before becoming a fashion model? Why does

But a difficult question remains. Does any kind of fuse or trail lead from his words to their deeds? If so, it would mark a striking instance of the general problem: how responsible is a thinker for the fate of his/her ideas? Such questions were hardly foreign to Benjamin. He had, he wrote only a year before Hitler seized power, not yet considered what meaning might be extracted from Nietzsche's writings 'in an extreme case' (*im Ernstfall*).<sup>7</sup> But who, or what, determines, precisely when such a case obtains? Does the trajectory of the Red Army Faction (which will here henceforth be termed the RAF) raise in retrospect the question of the political meaning that might be wrested, in an extreme case, from Benjamin's writings – especially since such states of emergency were their common concern?

Marx, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Benjamin... Each 'case' requires its own elaborate assessment. But by whom, for whom, in the name of whose justice? In one of the texts to be discussed below, Benjamin claims that while 'justice' (*Gerechtigkeit*), in contrast to 'right' or 'law' (*Recht*), is 'generally valid', it is not 'susceptible to generalization'. It can only be done to a specific 'situation', never, as in the case of law, to a 'case' – unless each case be one unto itself.<sup>8</sup> This claim could equally hold for Benjamin's situations, those of the RAF, and relations, real or potential, between them.

Another of Benjamin's key concepts should be introduced here: the 'guilt nexus of the living' (*Schuldzusammenhang des Lebendigen*).<sup>9</sup> At the time he was considering joining the German Communist Party, he noted, in response to Gershom Scholem's (mis)apprehensions, that he had never been able to 'respond rightly (*richtig*) to false circumstances – that is, with something "right" (mit "*Richtigem*"), but only by way of a 'necessary, symptomatic, productive falseness'.<sup>10</sup> His decision to join the Party, had he ever made it, would have been of this nature: no quasi- or

pseudo-religious vow but a sober, provisional move of a productively false kind. Under false circumstances, thought and action certainly did not have to be false through and through, but they could not be completely *dans le vrai*. In Benjamin's case, they were often spatially and temporally on the verge.

'There is no right life in a false world': Adorno's dictum in *Minima Moralia* has been much quoted. Arguing from very different premisses, Jacques Derrida claims that there is no entirely innocent text.<sup>11</sup> All writing, seen from this 'deconstructive' angle, supervenes on, and intervenes in, a dense network of idioms that criss-cross one another and 'themselves'. If, as Benjamin claims, philosophy is confronted 'at every turn' by the problem of exposition (*Darstellung*), then, according to Derrida, each turn marks a decision within a specific discursive situation – a decision for which the writer is accountable. The 'critical' activity is – as Benjamin recalls in the very context at issue here – at once 'discriminating' (*scheidend*) and 'decisive' (*entscheidend*).<sup>12</sup> Doing justice to textual complications/implications and reaching a judgement on them is, for both Benjamin and Derrida, as difficult as it is necessary, notably in the face of important, controversial and 'dangerous' writings. A philosophical philology of this kind represents an immense, still largely neglected programme, not merely in the case of Benjamin's texts and contexts.

To live and think with and against danger: this was as critical to Nietzsche, who called himself 'dynamite',<sup>13</sup> as to Benjamin, who often gravitated to images of 'detonation' (*sprengen*).<sup>14</sup> Nor were their explosives safe. 'Danger', Benjamin observed, 'threatens both the stuff of tradition and its recipients'. Nietzsche was a case in point. Over his dead body, his work was – or allowed itself to be – truncated and annexed to the cause of National Socialism, whose 'inner greatness' his heir Heidegger briefly affirmed. Benjamin, who made certain 'dangerous' elements of right-wing

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the erstwhile Left need to throw out the baby with the bath water? Doesn't 'historicization' fall back behind Benjamin's critique of historicism? These are some of the questions behind the following essay. It is far from 'soft' on the RAF, if only because that episode has had the long-term effect of further demobilizing radical energies. But it also wants to see in the RAF the symptom of a *collective* pathology – a false, unconscionable answer to a true, massive, ongoing, urgent catastrophe of systemic, global injustice. Meanwhile, the Left has still further declined and its place has been partly taken by terrorisms beside which the RAF seems parochial. All this has created a new world disorder and complicated any contemporary discussion of terrorist violence. Under existing conditions, and given the all too foreseeable consequences, no one in his right mind would still want to justify it, at least in the Western context. But what mind is right without the demon which, unchecked, would lead us in that direction?

Such is perhaps the most intimate reason for our *Entsetzen*. This verbal noun, which is as untranslatable as *das Unheimliche* (or indeed the latter's English counterpart: 'the uncanny'), means, on the one hand, horror and dread to the point of de-rangement (*Ent-setzen*); it thus marks, or so one of the opening epigraphs would have it, the reverse side of ec-stasy. On the other hand, it signifies the displacing or deposing (*ent-*) of what has been legally instituted (*setzen, gesetzt, Gesetz*). If Benjamin argued in 1921 for the *Entsetzung* of Law and State, this was because the prospects for a new world-historical epoch which would break the cycle of myth did not then seem so 'inconceivably remote' as to reduce such talk to insignificance [*daß ein Wort gegen das Recht sich von selbst erledigte*]. Today this prospect does seem that remote: how remote the RAF's attempt to force it involuntarily proved. Benjamin, however, held the prospect out even and precisely in the darkest hour – 1940 – as the only real chance for survival. This claim has not been disproved and, for better or for worse, perhaps cannot be disproved.

thought his own, opted for, and for many years struggled with, Soviet Communism.<sup>15</sup> Much 'remains to be deciphered'<sup>16</sup> on both left and right. The question posed in the present essay is part of this wider 'context of guilt'.

This context affords no immunity, no place safe from guilt, violence or danger, no situation devoid of complexities and perplexities.<sup>17</sup> 'We are all embarked' (Pascal), all variously and differently implicated. Today's common wisdom has it that such implication can be avoided by identifying right- and left-wing extremism as two sides of the one and the same totalitarian coin.<sup>18</sup> The allegedly neutral ground from which this claim is usually made is, however, the radical middle out of – and against – which the extremes grew in the first place.

If danger was Benjamin's element, this was not because he wanted to 'live dangerously' in some neo-romantic way, but because he found himself caught up in shifting 'constellations of danger'.<sup>19</sup> In the general economy of his thought (he wrote in response to well-meaning warnings concerning his allegedly dangerous closeness to Brecht), a select number of relationships had always allowed him to 'affirm a pole utterly opposed to that of my original being'. His life, like his thought, moved in extremes:

The breadth it thereby stakes out, its freedom to juxtapose things and thoughts usually considered incompatible, gains its complexion only from danger – a danger that in general also appears to my friends in the guise of such 'dangerous' relationships.<sup>20</sup>

Only through exposure to danger can thinking perform its task. The positions this involves can even be reclining ones, as in the case of Proust, whose achievement has its place 'in the heart of the impossible, at the centre – and also at the point of indifference – of all dangers'.<sup>21</sup>

To return to the original question: is there really some kind of relation between Benjamin and the RAF? The question is full of pitfalls. To answer in the affirmative was at the time to risk playing into the hands of the hardened right-wing ideologues who tried to incriminate the Frankfurt School for the real and alleged excesses of the 1968 student movement and the terrorism of the 1970s. From such smear campaigns it is only a short step to *Sippenhaft*: the Nazi incarceration of an entire family for the misdeeds of a single member. But this danger harbours another, contrary one to which the Left has in the past, when it still existed, been particularly vulnerable: that of claiming a doctrinal monopoly on the truth. Positions

do not have to be wrong because the right defends them, even when it falsifies them in the same breath by its tone and intent.

In historical retrospect, the events that took place between 1965 and 1969 look to this particular eyewitness more or less as follows. Relations between the Frankfurt School and the emerging student movement were marked by a Hegelian 'cunning of reason' which, whatever their theoretical familiarity with the concept, operated as usual behind everyone's back. It fell to Adorno, the author of a programmatic essay, 'Education after Auschwitz', to play a public role which Benjamin, in some respects *his* educator, had never known – a thankless and barely dischargeable task for which he was barely equipped. That no life, thought or teaching can be right in a false world would be painfully confirmed in his own case by a sequence of events which may well have shortened his life. Every attempt to break out of the 'administered world' of late capitalism was, so his pedagogy implied, almost inevitably doomed; yet – and here something quasi-religious came to the rescue – this could not be all there was. A whole generation of students was unable to accept this conclusion – one of unresigned resignation – and the meagre recommendations that accrued from it: reformist politics, retreat to sublime areas of resistance, notably art, hibernation in the iron cage in hopes of a better day. Under the impact of the Vietnam War, the sense of powerlessness and frustration fostered by Adorno's philosophy of history erupted into a political activism that was at once theoretically top-heavy, short-sighted and false – yet productively so in many respects. The *unproductively* false aspects of this situation included both the virulent denunciations of the student movement mounted notably by the Springer press conglomerate and its own skewed 'anti-authoritarianism', fixated as it was on its father figures.

As long as right-wing demagogues made the teachers' theory directly responsible for their students' acts, it was clear that this was not the time to reflect in public on the real but easily misunderstood and misappropriated connections between the Frankfurt School and the German student movement. Important though it still may be to make up for that missed chance, which raises still-relevant questions about the relation between theory and praxis in the context of political protest, the moment for this may meanwhile have passed – for in matters of timing there may indeed be, as one of the opening epigraphs to the present essay claims, 'rightness in the false'. Much of the '68 generation seems, with age, to have yielded to

the resignation, and accepted the analyses, for which it once indicted Adorno; and today's 'fragile' generation, confronted as it is with problems of survival to which their predecessors were far less exposed, has no need or time for rebellion. It struggles instead for a place in the system that its elders had once dreamt of overturning. Between these generations lies the RAF episode – a desperate lunge at 'direct action' (the name, this, of its French counterpart) whose excesses help explain the 'dull thousand-voiced' inertia that rules today: the reverse, this, of what Benjamin dreamt of in one of the epigraphs to this essay. The RAF episode is a disaster from which the German Left has failed to recover.

Let us return to the narrower focus of our initial question. The reasons why the RAF was eager to enlist Benjamin into its cause are not hard to find. Even and especially parricides need father figures. Once the other mentors of the German student protest movement (Habermas, Marcuse and Negt in particular) had refuted the RAF's analysis and methods and had been denounced as traitors to the cause, there remained, apart from Marx himself, only *one* German 'authority figure' with whom the RAF could identify – one who, being dead, could not object to what they did with him. The way they not merely used but instrumentalized his thought was, moreover, in complete contradiction to its fundamental impulse. Instrumental rationality is the defining feature of *bourgeois* thought and action: this was as clear to Benjamin as it was to Max Weber. Hence the uncompromising rejection of all means–end relations at the heart both of his theory of language and his critique of violence – a nexus to which we will shortly return.

Benjamin was all the more valuable a prize for the RAF, because their intellectual (ex-)fathers, notably Adorno and Marcuse, themselves appealed to his authority. In claiming to be his only legitimate political heir, the RAF drove a wedge between the living and the dead. Benjamin thus represented symbolic capital and pedigree. But there were also other reasons for their preference. However slender the RAF's actual acquaintance with his thought, it cannot have escaped them that he had staked out a bolder position vis-à-vis the question of violence than their teachers had done. Already the student movement had played off Benjamin's 'historical materialism' against their Frankfurt teachers out of frustration with their political timidity and the withdrawal of 'the critical theory' (as it called itself) from its original positions. The RAF polarized the fronts still further. While Benjamin (compared with Marx, Che Guavara, Gramsci, Frantz Fanon,

Carlos Marigella and others) had little to offer them in the way of revolutionary strategy, there was nothing to prevent them from wrenching a whole series of motifs from the body of his thinking and casting themselves as its political executor. Nothing, that is, except its complexity.

In so doing, they did it violence. The RAF freely incorporated quotations from Benjamin into their own delusional system. But they could thereby claim – or might have claimed – to be doing far greater justice to the driving impulse of his work than anything that the sophisticated exegeses of Benjamin philology had to offer. Did not his own method of citation enact a theory and practice of violence?



Only one who despairs discovers in citation the power not to preserve but to purify, tear out of context, destroy: the only power in which hope still lies that something might survive this time and place – because that hope has been hewn out of it.<sup>22</sup>

The RAF were themselves despairers, indeed desperados, who tore Benjamin's writings out of context (and in so doing, like Brecht, dropped his 'Judaisms'). They could, moreover, have made further interesting finds, such as his praise for the Surrealists' 'frenetic will' to 'escape the stage of endless discussion and come, at any price, to a decision'.<sup>23</sup> On the strength of their claim to be no longer discussing but doing, they practised ideological blackmail on their more vulnerable sympathizers. For a variety of reasons, Benjamin could hardly have endorsed the reckless decisions to which they 'at any price' came. That he had felt compelled to do a certain calculated 'violence' to his original way of thinking was not, in his eyes, a matter of internalized blackmail but, as he put it, of solidarity with the experiences of his generation. The task was 'not to decide once and for all, but to decide every moment. But indeed to *decide*'.<sup>24</sup> And to do so, in his own case, without reducing 'the entire

contradictory fund' of his thinking to a mere 'credo'.<sup>25</sup> 'Always radical, never consistent', especially in the face of a party line whose motto was practically the reverse – this would remain Benjamin's circuitous, tortuous, but by no means allogical or equivocal strategy, one that had, as in chess, to be worked out anew with each new move.<sup>26</sup> To be of the Left also meant improvising 'with the left hand'. By contrast, the line taken by the RAF, while no less improvised, was radical in a compulsively, suicidally consistent way.

In short, the RAF fatally parodied Benjamin's decisions and positions. 'Hear me! For this precisely is who I am. Do not, above all, confuse me with another!'<sup>27</sup> Thus spoke the author of *Ecce Homo*, whose alter ego, Zarathustra, warns in turn against being 'confused and confounded' with the socialists.<sup>28</sup> It is true that Benjamin could on occasion *champion* 'falsification' and 'being misunderstood'.<sup>29</sup> But such 'new barbarism' had to be done 'the right way'.<sup>30</sup> Which meant among other things: *without* falsification or misunderstanding.

In a dense letter to Martin Buber written in 1916, Benjamin anticipates the move from his essay of the same year 'On Language in General and the Language of Man' (1916) to his 'Critique of Violence' (1920–21), to both of which he will remain faithful throughout. The letter rejects all political language that aims to motivate, influence and activate others; the essay likewise rejects the prevailing ('bourgeois') reduction of language to a debased, powerless, merely external 'means' of communication directed towards equally debased activities (*Mittel, Mittelbarkeit*). What Benjamin invokes in their place is the intensive, 'im-mediate' (*un-mittel-bare*) action of a 'poetic prophetic objective' language; the notion of a 'matter-of-fact (*sachlich*) yet highly political' style; and a 'sphere of the wordless' that yet marks the 'crystal-pure elimination of the unsayable', one where 'the magic spark' is generated that 'overleaps' the distance between word and deed.<sup>31</sup> In the 'Critique of Violence' this sphere will be called that of 'pure means' and exemplified by the 'general strike'. At this point, however, the politics implicit in this quasi-mystical conception of language can barely be made out. Two aspects nevertheless begin to emerge. This other politics somehow emerges from the depths of language; and it is worlds apart from the – interrelated – spheres of individual psychology and instrumental rationality.

What relevance did this seemingly esoteric train of thought have to the issue at hand?

1. It points to the immense gulf between Benjamin's politics ('"my" politics', he once called them) and everything we normally consider such, be it left-wing

activism or right-wing realpolitik, both of which are, from his standpoint, based on the debased, instrumental language of everyday communication. (Benjamin's universe is equally remote from that of George Orwell, who, in his essay 'Politics and the English Language', holds out clean plain English prose as the antidote to corrupted political language.)

2. Benjamin's 'very particular stance' on the philosophy of language<sup>32</sup> thus raises at least two questions in the present context. First, whether the actions of the RAF weren't, contrary to appearances, closer to the 'bourgeois' politics of impure, instrumental means than to the other, communist politics of 'pure means';<sup>33</sup> but, second, what, besides the model of the pure general strike, such a politics might conceivably look like.

3. The question remains whether a not-so-magic spark might have 'overleapt' another gulf – the one between Benjamin's words (or Word) and the RAF's actions. Would he have seen in their leap into action his own theory of the 'leap' (*Sprung*)?<sup>34</sup> Or rather its parody?

This brings us back to the original problem: under the pressure of a 'critical' situation (*im Ernstfall*), did the RAF, by its actions, do justice to, or pass unwitting judgement on, Benjamin's politics? Or was it a mockery of such justice?

## Clues to a possible encounter

These questions do not in principle depend on there having been an actual relation between the RAF and Benjamin. It would be enough to establish a virtual dialogue. Did, however, the elements of a real dialogue exist? In lieu of the circumstantial investigation that would have been needed to decide this question, here are a few shreds of documentary evidence concerning the RAF's intermittent contact with Benjamin's thought.<sup>35</sup>

1. On 13 September 1985, Karl Dietrich Wolff, the then chairman of the Association of German Socialist Students (SDS), published an 'Open Letter' in the *Tageszeitung* entitled 'Anything would be better than to go on murdering this way', written in response to two attacks committed by the RAF the month before which had resulted in the death of three American soldiers. He here recalls having discussed Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' in 1969 with Gudrun Enslin in the Preungshiem Women's Prison, where she had just been incarcerated following her conviction for participation in arson attacks on two department stores in Frankfurt; and adds that he has recently reread Benjamin's essay. He then goes on:

With your murder of Edward Pimenthal, and the cynical bad faith of your public statement [of 25 August 1985], you have betrayed whatever once motivated the West German terrorist movement. Your 'war' contains no image of liberation. Your violence has become 'part of the problem', not its solution. Is it nevertheless possible even now – after this murder and this statement – to call on you to turn back? Yes, nevertheless.

The final paragraph of the letter reads:

Betrayal of terrorism? War without an image of liberation? Violence as part of the solution? Questions upon questions.

Wolff draws the line here between arson and murder – more precisely, the premeditated abduction and killing of an American soldier for the purpose of



obtaining his uniform and ID card.

Violence against things, yes; violence against human beings, no. On the strength of this or similar distinctions, many former sympathizers sooner or later severed all links with the RAF. The issue to which Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' had addressed itself was, however, a quite different one.<sup>36</sup> Neither side could here plausibly appeal to the precise wording of this very difficult text. Wolff's sense of its spirit did not, however, deceive him. It could not have been used – or only have been *used* – to justify the murder in question.

Benjamin had there written:

[The commandment 'Thou shalt not kill'] stands not as a standard of judgement, but as a guideline for the actions of persons or communities who have to

wrestle with it in solitude and, in awful cases [*in ungeheuren Fällen*], to take upon themselves the responsibility of disregarding it. This is how it was understood in Jewish tradition, which expressly rejected the condemnation of killing in self-defence.<sup>37</sup>

The RAF was embroiled in a political logic of means and ends that Benjamin's essay unequivocally rejects. Its members also laid claim, however, to a certain expanded notion of self-defence and convinced themselves that they were standing at a world-historical turning point. Now according to the 'Critique of Violence' the imminent prospect of a 'new world-historical era' may indeed, as in antinomian messianism, allow or require the transgression of legal rights and holy commandments. Nor is it always possible to identify in what 'awful' cases such 'expiatory' violence has actually taken place:

It is less possible and also less urgent ... to decide when pure violence [*reine Gewalt*] became real in particular cases. For only mythic, not divine, violence will be recognizable with certainty as such, unless it be in incomparable effects, because the expiatory power of violence is not apparent to men.<sup>38</sup>

If men cannot know when 'pure' violence has taken place, it follows that they cannot appeal to it to justify their actions. It is, on the other hand, difficult to avoid the conclusion that the violence championed by the RAF was and is 'recognizable with certainty' as being not of the 'expiatory' but of the 'guilt-incurring' (*verschuldende*) kind which, far from breaking the ancient mythic cycle, perpetuates

it. How to break this *Schuldzusammenhang* through a pure violence that, as Benjamin variously presents it, is as powerful as it is powerless: this is the enigma with which the 'Critique of Violence' leaves us.

2. In a 'Letter to the Prisoners' (1978), the RAF's leader Andreas Baader repeatedly cites Benjamin's Theses 'On the Concept of History' (hereafter the *Theses*) on

the question of how we may achieve the particular, historically possible form of revolutionary violence that matches the institutional use of power, this through the notion of a revolutionary break and a definition of the reactionary forces at work in Europe, in relation to which mass action can be meaningful only if it absorbs the experience of the front lines of armed struggle worldwide.<sup>39</sup>

In conclusion he cites Thesis XII:

The subject of historical knowledge is the struggling, oppressed class itself. In Marx's writings it appears as the last enslaved, the avenging class that completes the work of liberation in the name of generations of the beaten [*Geschlagener*]. This consciousness, which briefly came back into its own in the Spartacus League, was offensive to Social Democracy from the outset. Within three decades it managed to extinguish almost completely the name of Blanqui, whose iron ring had caused the previous century to quake. It found it congenial to cast the working class as a redeemer of *future* generations. Thereby it severed the sinews of its best strength. It taught the working class to unlearn both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice. For both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than by the ideal of liberated grandchildren.<sup>40</sup>

Baader's comments here are not merely wooden but somewhat garbled:

this point is essential, for the project of a utopia held out as socialist can only be the attempt to make the revolution look as if it were attractive and thus to await its conjuncture. The revolution is real only as the negation of the existing state of things, as its destruction.<sup>41</sup>

*In lingua veritas*, said Victor Klemperer. It is Baader's language that gives his politics away. Its critique is partly contained in a passage from Benjamin's Surrealism essay (which Baader is unlikely to have read) which rejects the 'as-if' rhetoric typical of social-democratic party programmes, predicated as they are on an attitude of vague, indefinite waiting for a utopian never-never land. The optimism they profess is in fact defeatism: the despairing capitulation of socialist thought to bourgeois modes of thought. Benjamin's analysis of social-democratic phraseology could be partly adapted to that of the RAF. What both diametrical opposites have in common is a programmatic, self-alienated rhetoric that strenuously masks an inner despair. Both are equally remote from Benjamin's alternative: the 'organisation of pessimism'.<sup>42</sup>

Since Baader had no wish to be thought an intellectual, one might hardly have expected him to pay much attention to Benjamin's *Theses*, especially since, even on a less than careful reading, they lend little credence to his attempt to cast the RAF as the only legitimate heir of a revolutionary tradition, notably that of Blanqui and the Spartacists, that social democracy had repeatedly betrayed. But the idea of carrying off such booty must have been very tempting. The *Theses*, Benjamin's political testament, had meanwhile been practically canonized by the German student Left and

were honoured, if also misread and disregarded, on all sides. It thus represented a coup – a putsch – to claim them as one's own. Among their quotable revolutionary phrases was the one about 'blasting' texts out of their original context and saving certain splinters as citations 'à l'ordre du jour'.<sup>43</sup> This clearly was, or could have been, how the RAF thought it was reading them. But was the *Communist Manifesto* still, as it had been for Benjamin from 1929 until the day of his death, the 'order of the day'?<sup>44</sup> If so, how, exactly?

3. This letter of Baader's, along with its quotations from Benjamin, forms part of a rambling, more than 300-page declaration entitled *Erklärung zur Sache*, which Baader, Ensslin, Meinhof and Raspe read at the court in Stuttgart–Stammheim on 13 and 14 January 1976.<sup>45</sup> This declaration of war against the world capitalist system itself had something of a paranoid world-system about it.<sup>46</sup> In the second Exposé (of 1939) to his Arcades Project, Benjamin had noted something seemingly similar, but ultimately antithetical, in Blanqui's last text.<sup>47</sup>

The Stammheim trial was, on both sides, a continuation of the struggle by other means. As such, it provided confirmation for Benjamin's analysis in the 'Critique of Violence' of the violence exerted by the law (*Rechtsgewalt*). The court refused to recognize the accused as political prisoners; they in turn tried to transform the occasion into the 'tribunal of history'.<sup>48</sup> In so doing, they cited three of Benjamin's Theses as witnesses for the defence.

(a) Thesis XII. The phrases already cited from Baader's letter are amplified here by a few partially incomplete sentences:

the more capital organizes itself and coordinates (its cycle) in the state, the experience that power only comes from the barrel of a gun brings with it the problem: how to develop forms of action which accelerate this development ... and political-military action on the part of the revolutionary avant-garde, which directly intervenes in the crisis and determines its course and resolution for the offensive.<sup>49</sup>

The 'political-military action' of an urban guerilla force – the 'revolutionary avant-garde' – is here conceived as the alarm or fuse which will set off revolution throughout Europe.

According to one of the preparatory notes for the *Theses*, the defining trait of the materialist historian is a sharpened consciousness of the crisis in which the 'subject of history' – namely, the 'struggling and oppressed class in its most exposed situation' – finds himself.<sup>50</sup> Already here the notion of a collective

subject is on the verge of becoming a wishful, exhortatory belief, a ‘consummation devoutly to be wished’, even if the Proletarian International still existed at the time. Forty years later, the RAF will believe, against all the evidence, that *they* now represent the most exposed European vanguard of this universal subject. They derive their political-military strategy from their allegedly sharpened consciousness of a situation which pits the international proletariat against global capital. The connection with the above-quoted note and with Benjamin’s *Theses* is as compelling as it is deluded. Thesis XII still invoked, in Marxian, biblical and already somewhat apocryphal fashion, the ‘struggling and oppressed class’ as the ‘last enslaved, the avenging’ one. Meanwhile, however, the Arcades Project had increasingly focused on a ‘dream collective’<sup>51</sup> intent on *not* waking up. In the RAF’s court declaration, the class which, in Marx’s scheme of things, had represented a theoretical but still plausible and substantive construction has become an object of rhetorical, emptily self-fulfilling belief. Amidst the endlessly abstract and inflexible phraseology of the *Erklärung*, one unclear turn of phrase casts a sudden shaft of light: ‘class is merely strategy’.<sup>52</sup> It is thus still to be constituted. Already in George Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), class was the empirical bearer of a non-empirical, ‘imputed’ (*zugerechnet*) consciousness. Fifty years later, such imputation cannot withstand the facts without arming itself against them – without, that is, wanting to exchange the people for another one (as Brecht said of the rulers). According to another late note of Benjamin’s, every moment brings with it ‘its own revolutionary opportunity’.<sup>53</sup> The task was, and is, to find out what the remaining post-revolutionary opportunity is. Measuring it against reality would have meant, at least in the West European context, abandoning a desperate, dogmatic belief in armed struggle. But that, as the RAF would have been the first to object, leaves us back where we are and can only be a – very unpromising – beginning.

Baader’s observations on Thesis XII in his ‘Letter to the Prisoners’ are pursued in the *Erklärung*:

the destruction, the shattering of the capitalist relations of production – in economic, military, cultural, and ideological terms. Experience tells us that the function of utopia is a kind of arrangement with the badness of the present, a way of enduring the bad conscience that arises from our own inactivity.

This gesture, which recalls Lukács’s low remark that the Frankfurt School had taken up quarters in the ‘Grand Hotel Abyss’ – Adorno would in turn entitle his article on Lukács ‘Extorted Reconciliation’ – is

calculated to take the entire ‘inactive’ left hostage. In the ‘Critique of Violence’, on the other hand, blackmail is opposed to ‘pure’ violence and said to perpetuate the existing order.

(b) Thesis IV:

The class struggle, which a historian schooled in Marx always has before him, is a struggle for the crude and material things without which there are no refined and spiritual ones. The latter are nevertheless differently present in the class struggle than as a vision of the spoils that fall to the victor. They are alive in this struggle as confidence, courage, humour, cunning and perseverance and have effects that reach far back into the past. They will forever call into question each victory that fell to the rulers. As flowers turn their heads to the sun, so, by virtue of a secret heliotropism, the past turns toward the sun that is rising in the sky of history. The historical materialist must know about these, the most inconspicuous of changes.<sup>54</sup>

Baader introduces this quotation with the remark: ‘Benjamin says of bourgeois values in the proletarian revolution’ and follows it with the comment: ‘Gramsci said the same thing in a few words: the proletariat represents the heritage of classical German philosophy.’<sup>55</sup> But it is precisely *not* the ‘heritage’ or ‘spoils’ of bourgeois ‘values’ that interest Benjamin here, but rather a bundle of revolutionary virtues which might have rescued the RAF from its demons – notably, his equation of revolutionary consciousness with attention to imperceptible changes. Baader, on the other hand, parades the *Theses* as a trophy – that, perhaps, of ‘rising’ would-be rulers.

(c) Thesis VIII. The court declaration cites this Thesis – to which we will return – in full and adds the following garbled commentary:

to be the protagonist of the class struggle in the major urban centres, from the history and defeats of the proletariat, here from its subjection to the imperialist state through social democracy which is in the hands of US capital and the CIA-controlled trade unions [*sic*] – the motor of the revolutionary proletarianization of society.<sup>56</sup>

Of all the *Theses*, the eighth seems to lend itself most easily to a ‘terrorist’ reading. In the ninth, history contracts – before the terrified eyes of the Angel of History as he is borne away from Paradise by Progress – into a ‘single catastrophe’. In the eighth, it is polarized between an *immemorial* state of emergency and the *unprecedented* one needed to end it. The only remedy against Self-Sameness is the wholly Other: one *Entsetzen* is pitted against the other.

The Angel and the RAF hardly constitute a well-matched pair. But they have at least one thing in common: the will to arrest the continuum of history.<sup>57</sup> ‘Since he is himself exposed to fright’ (*Schrecken*), Benjamin writes, ‘it is not unusual for Baudelaire to occasion it.’<sup>58</sup> To quell terror by terror – to derange derangement: this is the classic, apotropaic answer to the gaze of the Medusa. The petrified stare of Benjamin’s Angel is of that order. It petrifies a Medusa-like History into an arresting wide-angled image – a violent act of non-violence that, in turning the world’s violence against itself, transforms it beyond recognition. The RAF too wanted, in Hegelian fashion, to ‘enter the enemy’s strength’. Against the great infernal machine of the world they built some of their own. They took the language of exploding (*sprengen*) history literally. It was no longer a matter of quotation but of bombs.

To sum up, there indeed exists, over their dead bodies, a whole complex of conflicted connections between all four elements: the Frankfurt School, Benjamin, the German student movement and the RAF. The hard evidence for the Benjamin–RAF connection is scanty; the soft evidence – the social and intellectual climate (*Umfeld*), the web of intervening figures, real and rhetorical – is considerable. There is no longer any need, if there ever was, to deny it. But the links are difficult, often tenuous, always delicate and easily misstated, misunderstood and misappropriated. The Angel of History could, after all, hardly figure on a wanted list. This whole field of tensions, as Benjamin might have called it, is not the night in which all differences lose their contours, but that of an epoch in which everything depended upon making critical distinctions and decisions.

A preceding volume documenting the historical reception of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was subtitled *From the Message in the Bottle to the Molotov Cocktail: 1944–1975*. This formula neatly summarizes the problematic relation of word and deed at issue here. Published in Amsterdam in 1947 and widely circulated in ‘auratic’ pirate editions during the 1960s, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*<sup>59</sup> has been described as a ‘time bomb’ that lay dormant for twenty years.<sup>60</sup> By casting their ‘philosophical fragments’ as a ‘message in a bottle’, Adorno and Horkheimer had, however, effectively defused the other ‘bomb’ wrapped up in theirs: Benjamin’s *Theses*. Both the SDS and the RAF aimed, in very different ways, to reactivate the bomb that had been consigned to the philosophers’ bottle. It was here that the crucial distinctions/decisions had to be made.

## Between the message in the bottle and the Molotov cocktail: Benjamin, Marcuse, Negt

Herbert Marcuse’s ‘Afterword’ to a collection of essays published in 1965 by Suhrkamp under the title *The Critique of Violence and Other Essays* constitutes a plausible link between Benjamin and the RAF. This small volume marked an important moment both in the initial reception of Benjamin’s work and the emergence of the student movement. Here for the first time the inner connection between the early ‘Critique of Violence’ and the late *Theses* – and thereby the latter’s politically explosive character – was brought to the fore.

But the ‘Afterword’ also contains tacitly cautionary words from its mentor-to-be for the emerging movement – potentially the most serious addressees of these texts. He writes:

The writings of Walter Benjamin collected here originated in the historical period that began with the outbreak and end of the German revolution (the two dates almost coincide) and ended with the Second World War. They belong to that ‘image of the past which threatens to disappear with every present that fails to recognize itself as intended in it’. Words appear here, perhaps for the last time, which can no longer be seriously uttered without taking on a false content or resonance: words such as ‘culture of the heart’, ‘love of peace’, ‘redemption’, ‘happiness’, ‘spiritual things’, ‘revolutionary’. Their interrelations and the form their truth takes in the present are the stuff of Benjamin’s work.<sup>61</sup>

Marcuse reads Benjamin’s texts the way they want to be read: in the ‘Now’ of their ‘recognizability’ (*Erkennbarkeit*).<sup>62</sup> The present can, they both claim, recognize itself even, and perhaps above all, in texts that belong to an irretrievable past. It can do so, however, only from a – by no means safe – distance which leaves none of their content unchanged. In the present case, that content is the common cause; and Marcuse, who had decades before taken sides with the short-lived German Revolution, here ventures to ask whether that cause can still be called the ‘revolutionary’ one. Benjamin’s critique of social democracy is, he writes, not primarily that of a party that has come to be an underpinning of the status quo, but ‘the (not yet despairing) memory of the truth and actuality of revolution as a historical necessity’.<sup>63</sup> From the further distance of our present, Marcuse’s parenthesis – ‘(not yet despairing)’ – prompts the question whether the RAF wasn’t desperately clinging to a version of the common cause whose hollowness it was both putting

to the test and unwilling or unable to concede.<sup>64</sup> ‘The angry man’, Benjamin said of Baudelaire, “‘will not listen’.”<sup>65</sup> What Benjamin had called the ‘revolutionary chance’ inherent in every moment might, in short, now best survive in a certain abandonment of ‘the’ revolution.

Benjamin’s *Theses*, Marcuse goes on,

were written at the outbreak of the Second World War, at a time when Fascism was triumphing. The present no longer belongs to the same historical period: it has put an end to the age when the open or covert struggle against Fascism still seemed capable of exploding the continuum of history. This continuum has once again closed over. Real developments thus stand as a bloody testament to Benjamin’s truths.<sup>66</sup>

*Weitermachen* (Keep on): so reads the inscription on Marcuse’s Berlin grave. The struggle goes on (as Rudi Dutschke, a student leader opposed to the RAF, called out at the graveside of Holger Meins, an RAF member who died in prison after a hunger strike). But it cannot do so, according to Marcuse, in its past guise. The terms which rang false in his ear already in 1965 included not merely ‘redemption’ and ‘culture of the heart’, but also ‘Fascism’, ‘the class struggle’, and so on – in short, the typical later phraseology of large sections of the SDS and of the entire RAF.<sup>67</sup> And yet, Marcuse argues, the struggle for which Benjamin’s name stands draws its ‘strength’ and ‘weakness’ from the fact that he was unable to ‘compromise the concept of revolution – even at a time when compromises still seemed to further its cause’.<sup>68</sup>

Marcuse expounds the uncompromising argument of the ‘Critique of Violence’ in a few broad strokes,<sup>69</sup> sides with it, raises the unavoidable question of how an interruption of the existing order can be effected when the class struggle is ‘not acute’<sup>70</sup> and concludes, in suddenly Adorno-like fashion, by appealing to great art as the repository of homeless radical impulses. In contrast to his long-standing Frankfurt associates, however, Marcuse was ready and willing to become publicly involved in the ensuing turbulence.<sup>71</sup> Combining political radicality, youthful anger, sane judgement and long experience, he openly supported the ‘Extra-parliamentary Opposition’ (APO), clearly distinguishing its theory and praxis of counter-violence from that of the RAF and remaining faithful to the revolutionary idea without overestimating its existing chances of realization.

It is pointless to speculate about the political positions that Benjamin might have taken if he had lived to see the 1960s and 1970s and could have intervened in, among other things, his own reception. But it may

plausibly be suggested that on the question of violence he would have been close to the eminently militant and eminently reasonable line argued by such elder statesmen of the student movement as Marcuse and Negt in a series of fraught dialogues with Horkheimer, Adorno, Habermas, Dutschke, Krahl and others.<sup>72</sup> There were other ways of reading Benjamin’s *Theses* ‘in earnest’ than by appealing to the ‘language of the gun barrel’<sup>73</sup>. That a ‘certain circumspection and caution’ is called for, especially in matters of ‘destruction’, if historical materialism is to prove a ‘match for all comers’,<sup>74</sup> was not something that the RAF was capable of hearing. Its ultra-radicalism stood ‘to the left of the possible’.<sup>75</sup> Our present stands far to its right.

**Translated by Nick Walker and Irving Wolfarth**

## Notes

1. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* (henceforth *GS*), ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1972–89, IV, 1, p. 122; ‘Fire Alarm’, in *One Way Street*, in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings* (henceforth *SW*), ed. Michael W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1999, vol. 1, p. 470. In what follows, extant English translations are often amended.
2. *GS*, II, 1, pp. 305–6; ‘Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia’, in *SW*, vol. 2, pp. 214–15.
3. *GS*, IV, 1, pp. 434–5.
4. *GS* I, 2, p. 660; ‘Central Park’, trans. Lloyd Spencer with Mark Harrington, *New German Critique* 34, Winter 1985, p. 34.
5. *GS*, 1, p. 1241.
6. *GS*, II, 1, p. 201; ‘Critique of Violence’, in *SW*, vol. 1, pp. 250–51.
7. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe* (henceforth *GB*), ed. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1995–2000, IV, p. 100, letter to Gershom Scholem of 1 June 1932; English translation: *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910–1940*, trans. R. and E.M. Jacobson, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1994, p. 394. The materials of the Arcades Project contain the following jotting: ‘There is a draft where Caesar, rather than Zarathustra, appears as the bearer of Nietzsche’s doctrine.... This is of some importance. It underscores the fact that Nietzsche sensed something of the complicity of his own doctrine with imperialism’ (*GS*, V, 1, p. 175).
8. ‘For ends that for one situation are just, universally recognisable and universally valid, are so for no other situation, no matter how similar it may be in other respects’ (*GS*, II, 1, p. 196; ‘Critique of Violence’, in *SW*, vol. 1, pp. 247–8).
9. *GS*, II, 1, p. 175; ‘Fate and Character’, in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 204.
10. *GB*, IV, pp. 24–5, letter to Gershom Scholem of 17 April 1931; *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, p. 385.
11. Cf. Derrida’s contribution to the controversy provoked by certain disturbing remarks in the wartime writings of the young Paul de Man, *Mémoires: For Paul de Man*, trans. C. Lindsay, J. Culler and E. Cadava, Columbia

- University Press, New York, 1986.
12. *GS*, II, 1, p. 202; 'Critique of Violence', in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 251.
  13. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (henceforth *KG*), ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, De Gruyter, Berlin, 1969, VI, 3, p. 363; *Ecce Homo*, trans. A.M. Ludovici, Dover, New York, 2004, 'Why I Am a Fatality', p. 131.
  14. George Orwell's dismissal of intellectuals who, for lack of any other outlet, indulge in violent thought and language may be countered by Georges Bataille's claim (on behalf of the Marquis de Sade) that the worst violence usually shelters behind a facade of bureaucratic euphemism.
  15. The differences are nonetheless decisive. Can one legitimately play off Brecht's and Benjamin's relations to communism against Heidegger's to Nazism by claiming, as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe does, that they were all 'taken in' (*floués*)? Cf. *La fiction du politique*, Bourgeois, Paris, 1987, p. 43; *Heidegger, Art and Politics*, trans. Chris Turner, Blackwell, Oxford 1990, pp. 61f.
  16. Cf. the title, taken from Benjamin, of the collection of critical essays edited by Burkhardt Lindner, 'Links hatte noch alles sich zu enträtseln' ... *Walter Benjamin im Kontext*, Syndikat, Frankfurt am Main, 1978.
  17. 'Have not all railings and bridges fallen into the water?', asks Zarathustra. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, III, 'Von alten und neuen Tafeln', *KG*, VI, 1, p. 248; *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Part III, 'On Old and New Tablets', section 8, trans. Walter Kaufmann, Penguin, New York, 1966. Hannah Arendt – the first to dare, rightly or wrongly, to link Heidegger and Benjamin – similarly called for a 'thinking without railings', H. Arendt, *Denken ohne Geländer*, Piper, Stuttgart, 2005.
  18. Cf. Norbert Bolz, *Auszug aus der entzauberten Welt. Philosophischer Extremismus zwischen den Weltkriegen*, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, Munich, 1989.
  19. Cf. *GS*, I, 3, p. 1242 (notes and materials for 'On the Concept of History').
  20. *Walter Benjamin, Gretel Adorno. Briefwechsel 1930–1940*, ed. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2005, p. 156.
  21. *GS*, II, 1, p. 311; 'On the Image of Proust', in *SW*, vol. 2, p. 237.
  22. *GS*, II, 1, p. 365; 'Karl Kraus', in *SW*, vol. 2, p. 455.
  23. *GS*, II, 1, p. 295; 'Surrealism', in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 207. Benjamin is thinking here – in 1929 – of the surrealists' 'highly exposed position' between 'anarchistic Fronde and revolutionary discipline'. André Breton aimed to break with 'a praxis that presents the public with the literary precipitate of a certain form of existence while withholding that existence itself. To put it in a nutshell: The realm of literature was exploded (*gesprengt*) from within' (*GS*, II, 1, 295–96; 'Surrealism', in *SW*, vol. 1, pp. 207–8). Like Nietzsche's 'dynamite', such explosive is clearly metaphorical; yet it partakes, in however sublimated a way, of the non-metaphorical kind; otherwise it would be a merely metaphorical 'as-if'. The leap from literature to life here remains a literary act this side of the border; but what this act invokes is, precisely, the leap beyond that border – the drawing of practical consequences from a verbal commitment to the revolution. True, the anarchists' *machines infernales* referred to above are all literary texts. But they are not merely literary, inasmuch as the 'real' ones are all mediated through and through by language.
  24. Benjamin's letter to Adorno of 10 November 1938, *Adorno–Benjamin Briefwechsel 1928–1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main; *Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, The Complete Correspondence 1928–1940*, trans. Nicholas Walker, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1999, p. 284. Cf. Benjamin's response in his letter of 9 December 1938 (*Briefwechsel*, p. 379; *The Complete Correspondence*, pp. 291f.). This exchange epitomizes their different relations to the question of violence.
  25. *GB*, IV, p. 408, letter to Gershom Scholem of 6 May 1934; *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, p. 439.
  26. *GB*, III, p. 159, letter to Marcel Brion of 2 September 1935. If, as Jürgen Habermas claims, Benjamin's thought should not be confronted with 'facile demands for consistency', this is because, in and through all its leaps and tangents, it has, contrary to that claim, another, more radical consistency. Cf. *Zur Aktualität Walter Benjamins*, ed. Siegfried Unseld, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1972, p. 176; J. Habermas, 'Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique', in *On Walter Benjamin*, ed. Gary Smith, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1988, p. 92.
  27. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 'Foreword' I, *KG*, VI, 3, p. 255, also pp. 363–4; *Ecce Homo*, trans. Duncan Large, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007, pp. 3f. and 88f.
  28. 'There are those who preach my doctrine of life, and are at the same time preachers of equality, and tarantulas'. *KG*, VI, 1, p. 125; *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. Thomas Common, New York 1999, Part II, ch. XXIX, p. 66.
  29. Cf. *GS*, II, 1, p. 297 ('Surrealism', in *SW*, vol. 2, p. 208); *GS*, II, 2, p. 621 ('Dream Kitsch', in *SW*, vol. 2, p. 4); *GS*, IV, 1, p. 397 ('The Destructive Character', in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 542).
  30. *GS*, II, 1, pp. 217–19; 'Experience and Poverty', in *SW*, vol. 2, pp. 732 and 735.
  31. *GB* I, 325–7, letter to Martin Buber of 17 July 1916; *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, p. 80.
  32. A certain form of 'mediation, however fraught and problematic', he claims, links his philosophy of language 'to dialectical materialism ... , but none whatsoever to the bloated character of bourgeois knowledge' (*GB*, IV, p. 18, letter to Max Rychner of 7 March 1931).
  33. Given its situation as a would-be urban guerrilla movement bereft of any support from the general population, including its left-leaning segments, the RAF was reduced to endless strategies of self-preservation and bogged down in what Benjamin's early essay on language had termed *Mittelbarkeit* – an endless means–ends nexus that was the fallen antithesis of all divinely inspired language and revolutionary action. For a discussion of its members' 'autistic' fixation on their own activities and the logic of exchange underlying the release of prisoners, see Wolfgang Kraushaar, 'Die Schleyer-Entführung: 44 Tage ohne Opposition', in *Revolte und Reflexion. Politische Aufsätze 1976–87*, Frankfurt am Main, 1990, pp. 81–3. 'Entering into the adversary's strength' – Hegel's postulate for effective combat – thus meant – or resulted in – assuming the features of the 'monster' (p. 83) that the would-be liberators were fighting. But how avoid this dilemma under modern conditions and in such unequal combat? Beyond the particular case of the RAF, this vast problem remains. It confronts apologists of the status quo with the question whether even legitimate violence

- may not be monstrous (in which case, distinctions between forms of monstrosity become unavoidable). And it asks Benjamin how ‘pure’ violence can exist (or from where it can intervene) in the enveloping ‘guilt nexus’ he describes. Doctrines of racial, ideological and other purity have spawned the impurest violence (genocide, ethnic cleansing etc.). Purity is a much-contaminated, reactive notion. This is, however, no reason to lump all doctrines of purity together. The motives for doing so are themselves ‘impure’.
34. Cf., among other relevant places, *GS*, I, 2, p. 701; ‘On the Concept of History’, Thesis XIV, in *SW*, vol. 4, p. 395.
  35. The following material was made available to the author by Wolfgang Kraushaar.
  36. Between private individuals, Benjamin observes, countless cases exist in which conflicts find non-violent solutions. These are, however, usually of a ‘mediate’, objective nature ‘by way of things’ (*GS*, II, 1, p. 191; ‘Critique of Violence’, in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 244).
  37. *GS*, II, 1, pp. 200–201; ‘Critique of Violence’, in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 250.
  38. *GS*, II, 1, p. 202–3; ‘Critique of Violence’, in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 252.
  39. Cited from *Texte der RAF*, Stockholm 1977, pp. 177–207; partially reproduced in ‘Dokumente zur Rezeptionsgeschichte Andreas Baaders’, *Schattenlinien* 6–7, Berlin 1993, pp. 83ff.; and Reinhard Markner, ‘Walter Benjamin nach der Moderne. Etwas zur Frage der Aktualität angesichts der Rezeption seit 1983’, *Schattenlinien* 8–9, Berlin 1994. The text of the ‘Declaration to the Court’ (*Erklärung zur Sache*), which has never been published in its entirety, is housed in the archives of the Hamburg Institute for Social Research. In the following discussion it is cited as ‘Typescript’.
  40. *GS*, I, 2, p. 700; ‘On the Concept of History’, Thesis XII, in *SW*, vol. 4, p. 394. The last sentence tells us precisely where the ‘image of liberation’ mentioned in Wolff’s letter is to be looked for.
  41. Typescript, p. 14.
  42. *GS*, II, 1, pp. 308–9; ‘Surrealism’, in *SW*, vol. 2, pp. 216–17. Benjamin proceeds to contrast (dialectical) ‘image’ with (social-democratic) ‘metaphor’, to insist on the necessity of ‘expelling moral metaphor from politics’, and to equate the revolution with a process of ‘dialectical destruction’.
  43. *GS*, I, 2, pp. 694 and 703; ‘On the Concept of History’, Theses III and XVII, in *SW*, vol. 4, pp. 390 and 396.
  44. In this connection, cf. the concluding remarks of the essay on ‘Surrealism’ (*GS*, II, 1, p. 310; *SW*, vol. 2, pp. 217–18).
  45. See note 39 above.
  46. Freud pointed to the affinity between paranoid and philosophical systems. How both might be disentangled is a question also raised by a text of a quite different calibre that belonged to the theoretical underpinnings of the German student Left, namely *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Anti-systematic though they are, these ‘philosophical fragments’ constitute a closed system of their own.
  47. *GS*, V, 1, pp. 75–7; *Paris, Capital of the 19th Century*, 1939 Exposé, in *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2002, pp. 25–6.
  48. Cf. *GS*, V, I, p. 459 (notes and materials on Baudelaire).
  49. Typescript, day I, p. 14.
  50. *GS*, I, 3, p. 1243 (notes and materials for ‘On the Concept of History’).
  51. *GS*, V, I, pp. 493ff. In the second 1939 outline of the Arcades Project, Benjamin no longer refers, as he had in the first 1935 one, to a ‘historical awakening’ (*GS*, V, I, p. 59; *Paris, Capital of the 19th Century*, 1935 Exposé, p. 13).
  52. Typescript: ‘with reference to I (2), 2.’
  53. *GS*, I, 3, p. 1231 (notes and materials for ‘On the Concept of History’).
  54. *GS*, I, 2, p. 694–5; ‘On the Concept of History’, Thesis IV, in *SW*, vol. 4, p. 390.
  55. Typescript 4.
  56. Typescript 2, day 7.
  57. *GS*, I, 2, p. 667 (‘Central Park’, in *New German Critique* 34, 1985, p. 39); *GS*, I, 2, pp. 702 and 703 (‘On the Concept of History’, Theses XVI and XVII, in *SW*, vol. 4, pp. 396–7).
  58. *GS*, I, 2, p. 616; ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’, in Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, trans. H. Zohn, Verso, London, 1997, p. 117.
  59. ‘If [this message] can be addressed to anyone today, it is neither the so-called masses nor the individual, who is powerless, but rather an imaginary witness to whom we bequeath it so that it does not entirely go under with us’. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1969, p. 273; *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. E. Jephcott, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2002, p. 213. At the time, Marcuse had objected to the image of a ‘message in the bottle’ (in a letter to Horkheimer of 11 November 1941; cited in Willem van Reijen and Gunzelin Schmitt Noerr, eds, *Vierzig Jahre Flaschenpost: ‘Dialektik der Aufklärung’ 1947–87*, Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1987, pp. 8–9).
  60. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
  61. Walter Benjamin, *Zur Kritik der Gewalt und andere Aufsätze*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1965, p. 99 (henceforth *Zur Kritik*). Benjamin suspects even the ‘recent German revolution’ of having amounted to a ‘political’ general strike – the type in which, according to Georges Sorel, ‘the masses change their masters’ – rather than a ‘proletarian’ one directed against the masters (*GS*, II, 1, p. 194; ‘Critique of Violence’, in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 246). The latter exercises ‘pure’, the former ‘impure’ violence. According to the *Theses*, such pure revolutionary consciousness briefly re-emerged with the Spartacus League (*GS*, I, 2, p. 700; ‘On the Concept of History’, Thesis XII, in *SW*, vol. 4, p. 394). The latter would thus have represented the ‘struggling, oppressed class in its most exposed situation’ (*GS*, I, 3, p. 1243, notes and materials for ‘On the Concept of History’).
  62. *GS*, I, 3, p. 1237 (notes and materials for ‘On the Concept of History’).
  63. *Zur Kritik*, p. 101.
  64. In two late essays Adorno explicitly links student ‘actionism’ to ‘desperation’. ‘Where experience is blocked, or altogether absent, praxis is damaged and therefore longed for, distorted, desperately overvalued’ (T.W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1977, vol. 10.2, p. 760; *Marginalia to Theory and Praxis*, in *Critical Models*, trans. H. Pickford, p. 260). ‘Desperation which, finding the exits blocked, blindly leaps into praxis joins forces with catastrophe – with the purest of intentions’

- (*Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 10.2, p. 766; *Critical Models*, p. 265). ‘People who are locked in desperately want to get out’ (*Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 10.2, p. 796; ‘Resignation’, in *Critical Models*, p. 291). Adorno, who himself once said with a smile ‘Open Sesame: I want to get out’, did not reflect, at least in print, on the possibility that what he called the ‘actionism’ of the students might in some measure be an unintended consequence of his own teaching and thus a bitter instance of his dictum: ‘However one does it, one does it wrong.’
65. *GS*, I, 2, p. 642; ‘Some Motifs in Baudelaire’ Section X, p. 143. In the penultimate strophe of the fourth ‘Spleen’ poem in Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal*, howling church bells furiously leap at the sky, followed in the final strophe by a slow, silent funeral procession in which the ‘sable banner’ of ‘terrifying, despotic Fear’ – which thus has the same colour as the flag of anarchy – is planted on the defeated subject’s skull. Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres Complètes* (henceforth *OC*), ed. Y.-G. Le Dantec, Gallimard, Paris, 1968, p. 71. Benjamin links the poem to the *coup d’état* of Napoleon III and Blanqui’s surrender to the stellar system in *L’Éternité par les astres* (*GS* I, 3, p. 1139 [notes and materials for Charles Baudelaire]).
  66. *Zur Kritik*, pp. 106–7.
  67. See, by contrast, Marcuse’s letter to Horkheimer of 17 June 1967: ‘Allow me to express my view in the most extreme manner possible: I see today’s America as the historical heir of Fascism.’ *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung* (henceforth *Frankfurter Schule*), ed. Wolfgang Kraushaar, Rogner and Bernhard, Hamburg 1998, II, p. 262.
  68. *Zur Kritik*, p. 101.
  69. ‘The violence which is the object of Benjamin’s critique is not the one generally criticized, especially when those below use (or attempt to use) it against those above. This latter violence is precisely the one that ... Benjamin calls “pure” violence. ... The violence criticised by Benjamin is that of the existing order, which has acquired a monopoly of legality, truth and law, whose violent character has disappeared, only to reappear all more terrifyingly in so-called ‘states of emergency’ (which de facto are no such thing). For the oppressed, such a state of emergency is the rule; the task, however, is to bring about that “actual state of emergency” which can explode the historical continuum of violence’ (*Zur Kritik*, pp. 99–100). Roughly accurate though this summary of Benjamin’s argument is, it ignores its theological underpinnings and transforms his critique of violence into a militant version of Frankfurt ‘critical theory’: ‘The truth of critical theory has seldom been expressed in such exemplary form.’ *Ibid.*, p. 104.
  70. Marcuse responds to this problem at the end of *One-Dimensional Man* (Beacon Press, Boston MA, 1964, p. 257), where he interprets the ‘Great Refusal’ of unarmed marginal groups as a possible ‘chance’ for radical change – this in the spirit of Benjamin’s claim: ‘It is only for the sake of those without hope that hope is given to us’ (cited in *Zur Kritik*, p. 257).
  71. For his concrete differences with Adorno on the question of violence, cf. Marcuse’s letter to Adorno of 5 April 1969 and Adorno’s reply of 5 May 1969 (*Frankfurter Schule*, II, pp. 601–2 and 624–5). The correspondence between Marcuse, Adorno and Horkheimer in the 1960s takes up, in certain respects, Adorno’s exchange of letters with Benjamin in the 1930s. There Adorno voices reservations about Benjamin’s political sympathies. But he never comes to grips with the ‘Critique of Violence’, even though it belongs to the early theological phase of Benjamin’s thinking, in which, in their discussion of the Arcades Project, Adorno holds out against what he takes to be Benjamin’s dangerously Brechtian, insufficiently dialectical turn to Marxism.
  72. In this connection, cf. the following letters by Marcuse: ‘Letter to Max Horkheimer’ (17 June 1967); ‘The problem of violence in the context of political opposition’ (13 July 1967), and its continuation in ‘This terror is counter-revolutionary’ (11 June 1972); ‘The predicament of the revolutionary spirit’ (15 June 1972); ‘Murder cannot be a weapon of politics’ (16 September 1977); ‘I have never preached terrorism’ (19 July 1978). Cf. also the following letters by Oskar Negt: ‘Politics and protest’ (28 October 1967); ‘Politics and violence. On the assassination of Rudi Dutschke’ (18 April 1967); Negt’s ‘Introduction’ to ‘The Left Responds to Jürgen Habermas’ (1968); ‘The strategy of answering violence with violence’ (26 April 1968); ‘Student protest – liberalism – “Left Fascism”’ (June 1968); ‘On the Baader–Meinhof case’ (October 1971); ‘Socialist politics and terrorism’. All reprinted in: *Frankfurter Schule II*, pp. 261–3, 272–8, 297–303, 356–63, 366–7, 406–7, 417–25, 745–7, 752–7, 758–61, 806–7, 828–31. If these careful demarcations of the problem have lost much of their relevance for today, this is also because today has lost much of its relevance for them. It is in part because the Left has meanwhile lost so much ground that present-day discussion of the problem of violence has fallen behind the level reached in the 1960s and 1970s.
  73. *GB*, V, 248, letter to Adorno of 27 February 1936; *The Complete Correspondence*, p. 126.
  74. *GS*, I, p. 693; ‘On the Concept of History’, Thesis I, in *SW*, vol. 4, p. 389. Some sympathizers of the RAF, however, voiced doubts about its theoretical position. In 1967 there appeared a pirate edition of Benjamin’s *Theses*, along with two essays by Adorno, never officially published in his lifetime, which argued the current impossibility of revolutionary praxis (‘Reflections on the Theory of Class’ and ‘Theses on the Concept of Need’, in T.W. Adorno and W. Benjamin, *Integration und Desintegration*, Kritik Verlag, Hanover, 1976; reprinted in: A. Götz von Olenhausen, ‘Der Weg vom Manuskript zum gedruckten Text ist länger, als er bisher je gewesen ist’. *Walter Benjamin im Raubdruck 1969 bis 1996*, Lengwil am Bodensee 1997, pp. 96ff. There is no reference here to Adorno’s two published responses to the student movement: *Marginalia to Theory and Praxis and Resignation*). The editor’s ‘Foreword’, signed by ‘J. Peachum’, explains the purpose of this unauthorized edition. The West German Left is, it claims, currently retreating into a ‘re-privatization’ of politics’, is considering whether to establish a new party and is thereby acting ‘as if nothing at all had happened’. Its fear of contact with the RAF and other armed groups has led to ‘political impotence and intellectual sterility’. Theoretical clarification of the situation is needed. It is provided by the theoretical contributions of the student leader Hans Jürgen Krahl, Benjamin’s ‘indispensable’ reflections on the philosophy of history, and Adorno’s ‘uninhibited’ adoption of key concepts of Marxist theory.
  75. *GS*, III, p. 281; ‘Left-wing Melancholy’, in *SW*, vol. 2, p. 425.