

GOD THE REVOLUTIONIST ON RADICAL VIOLENCE OVER THE FIRST ULTRA-LEFTIST

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Initially, to justify one more reading of Benjamin's "Critique of Violence," I will immediately assume where the source of his reception comes from and the reasons behind the rich history of his reconstructions from Scholem and Löwenthal all the way to Honeth, Žižek, and Butler. The "deconstructive power" of this short and complex collage of numerous differing texts is not solely created by the author's striking montage; I think it also stems from the fantastic "misunderstanding" concealed by Benjamin's surprising analogy, found in the alternative title of my text: "Benjamin's 'Divine Violence' and the case of *Korah*." I would like to add to this "connection" between divine violence and the name *Korah* two annotations which should limit and complicate every further interpretation: (a) unlike Leo Löwenthal,¹ I agree to treat Benjamin's writing as a collection of messianic categories and figures, and analogous to this, (b) I follow Scholem's famous qualification of Benjamin's purely Jewish text [*ein rein jüdischer Text*], as a manifestation of "positive nihilism" or "noble and positive violent destruction" [*die edle und positive Gewalt der Zerstörung*].² These two elements (messianism and positive nihilism) could double the power of my "intervention" in Benjamin's text and perhaps negate the advantage the title of this text enjoys over his alternative subtitle ("The Rebellion against Moses as the First Scene of Messianism [Numbers, 16]"). In that case, the alternative title of this text, which refers

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¹ L. Löwenthal, "Gewalt und Recht in der Staats- und Rechtsphilosophie Rousseaus und der deutschen idealistischen Philosophie" (1926, Staatsexamensarbeit), *Philosophischen Frühschriften*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1990, p. 174.

² G. Scholem, "Im Gespräch über Walter Benjamin (1968)," *Sinn und Form*, 2007, no. 4, p. 501, 502.

to yet another of Benjamin's montages, concerning the connection between "divine violence" and the name *Korah*, would fall into the background and be dominated by Benjamin's amazing suggestion or intuition, and which I formulated in the alternative subtitle of this text: that the first great rebellion (or revolution) in the histories of justice (the final within myth³ or right) evokes or provokes something messianic; that an important episode within the life of one nation, initiated by *Korah* and a handful of rebels, represents the beginning of the construction of the messianic theatre.

But, conversely, if we attempt to find signs of messianism within the rebellion as such⁴ if, for example *Korah*, "contrary to" but always "together with" Benjamin, is the "first left oppositionist in the history of radical politics,"⁵ then the final and divine violence carried out by God would, in fact, be Benjamin's pure revolutionary violence perpetrated precisely against this first revolutionary. The circulation of the alternative title of this text within the subtitle, and conversely, is an accurate description of the "misunderstanding" in connection to the understanding of revolution in Benjamin, because the one who carries out revolutionary violence is not found where we, all this time, had expected him to be. Is it precisely this betrayed expectation that constantly brings us back to Benjamin's "Critique of Violence"? But, before dealing with this, what exactly do we expect? Do we expect a final violence of catastrophic proportions negating every future violence and time of expectation? Do we expect the subject of this positive violence – the noble [*edle*] subject of the revolution? Do we expect justice?

Here now is Benjamin's famous fragment about the difference between mythic violence and divine violence that forms the culmination of this text.

This fragment is preceded by several sentences of double meaning in which, referring to Hermann Cohen, Benjamin speaks of rebellion as the main characteristic of the fight against the spirit of mythic legislation (thus reducing the importance of the "rebel" figure) and about our – perhaps most important – task. The harmful role the mythic demonstration of immediate violence (that is, the violence of right [*Rechtsgewalt*]) has in history re-

³ Ernst Bloch writes about *Korah* after World War II. Contrary to Benjamin, *Korah*, as *die mythische Reflexe*, is opposite to what is in the hierarchy above [*oben*]. *Atheism in Christianity*, *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 14, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1959–1978, p. 108–109.

⁴ Here I again follow Bloch, from his post-war book *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, where he writes of rebellion as a messianic idea *par excellence*. Within Moses' rebellion against the Egyptians is the foundation of the messianic idea. Cf. Chapter "Moses oder das Bewußtsein der Utopie in der Religion, der Religion in der Utopie," *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 5, p. 1453.

⁵ M. Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, New York, Basic Books, 1985, p. 111.

quires its destruction [*deren Vernichtung damit zur Aufgabe wird*], according to Benjamin:

This very task of destruction poses again, ultimately, the question of a pure immediate violence [*einer reinen unmittelbaren Gewalt*] that might be able to call a halt to mythic violence. Just as in all spheres God opposes myth, mythic violence is confronted by the divine. And the latter constitutes its antithesis in all respects. If mythic violence is law-making [rightmaking; *mythische Gewalt rechtsetzend*], divine violence is law-destroying [right-destroying; *die göttliche rechtsvernichtend*]; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythic violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine [*göttliche*] power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood [*so diese auf unblutige Weise letal*]. The legend of Niobe may be contrasted with God's judgment on the company of Korah [*Gewalt Gottes Gericht an der Rotte Korah gegenübertreten*], as an example of such violence. God's judgment strikes privileged Levites [*Es trifft Bevorrechtete, Leviten*], strikes them without warning, without threat, and does not stop short of annihilation [*trifft sie unangekündigt, ohne Drohung, schlagend und macht nicht Halt vor der Vernichtung*]. But in annihilating it also expiates, and a profound connection between the lack of bloodshed and the expiatory character of this violence is unmistakable. For blood is the symbol of mere life [*das Symbol des blossen Lebens*]. The dissolution of legal violence [*Auslösung der Rechtsgewalt*] stems (as cannot be shown in detail here) from the guilt of more natural life, which consigns the living, innocent and unhappy, to a retribution that "expiates" the guilt of mere life – and doubtless also purifies the guilty, not of guilt, however, but of law. For with mere life, the rule of right over the living ceases [*die Herrschaft des Rechtes über den Lebendigen auf*]. Mythic violence is bloody power over mere life for its own sake; divine violence is pure power over all life for the sake of living [*die göttliche reine Gewalt über alles Leben um des Lebendigen willen*]. The first demands sacrifice; the second accepts it [*Die erste fordert Opfer, die zweite nimmt sie an*].⁶

Therefore, Benjamin uncovers "divine violence" as a force possessed by

⁶W. Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," *Selected Writings*, Volume 1, Cambridge, MA., Harvard University Press, 1996, pp. 249–250; "Zur Kritik der Gewalt," *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band II-1, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1991, p. 199–200. In the first edition of Benjamin's text from 1921 (*Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, Band 47), this fragment is found on page 829.

God or as violence carried out by God while judging *Korah* and his band. That is his only example. This syntagma (frequent in theological texts and imprecise) already encompasses several of the alternative formulations with which Benjamin in his text opposes the violence of right, that is, violence created and kept by right. "Divine violence" is at once – "pure and immediate violence" – Sorel's "proletarian strike" [*grève prolétarienne*] which is in fact not violent but destroys – and "pedagogical violence" [*erzieherische Gewalt*] which is similarly apart from the law. "Divine violence," which according to Benjamin happened long ago, along with the crisis of mythic legal norms, together establish "a new historical epoch" [*ein neues geschichtliches Zeitalter*]. At the beginning, Benjamin announces the arrival of something "new," something that is no longer distant from us (this is certainly not a "new right"⁷). Afterwards he confirms that "revolutionary violence" is no longer impossible, and in the end, he proclaims a completely new and secretive violence that has yet to unfold and seems to possess all the messianic and sovereign characteristics.⁸ "Divine violence" is, it seems, constantly present, as it can occur in every imaginable (war, capital punishment, etc.) and unimaginable form. At the end of his text Benjamin insists that this violence is completely unclear and incomprehensible to all of us.

It is well known that the second fragment, which I have just cited, is the most important and perhaps most original part of the "Critique of Violence." Benjamin attempts to formulate his argument by differentiating the kind of violence with which Niobe and *Korah* were punished. He differentiates the violence in order to mark and "institutionalize" a new kind of violence and in order to strongly oppose revolutionary and radical pacifism, as well as Kurt Hiller's Judaism and his understanding of life.⁹ It seems to me that this frag-

⁷ Franz Rosenzweig uses the phrase "new right" in an excerpt from the book *Der Stern der Erlösung* ("Coercion in the State"), published in the same year as Benjamin's text. "The point of all violence is to institute new law [right; *neues Recht gründe*]. It is not the denial of law as one might think under the spell of its cataclysmic behavior; on the contrary, it lays the basis for law. But a paradox lurks in the idea of new right. Right is essentially old right. And now it is clear that violence is: the renewal of old right [*die Erneuerin des alten Rechts*]. In the violent act [*gewaltsamen Tat*], the right constantly becomes new right." *The Star of Redemption*, New York, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970, p. 333; *Der Stern der Erlösung* (1921), Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1996, p. 370.

⁸ "Divine violence, which is the sign and seal but never the means of sacred dispatch, may be called 'sovereign' violence" [*Die göttliche Gewalt, welche Insignium und Siegel, niemals Mittel heiliger Vollstreckung ist, mag die waltende heißen*]. "Critique of Violence," p. 252; "Zur Kritik der Gewalt," p. 203.

⁹ Hiller's text "Anti-Kain. Ein Nachwort zu dem Vorhergehenden," which Benjamin read in the journal *Das Ziel* (1919), is preceded by Rudolf Leonhard's short text

ment is especially complex because Benjamin is now reading and arranging all the elements of his text once more in light of this difference and the new violence he recognizes in the case of *Korah*.

I wish to quickly note these elements and perhaps mention several possible sources and reasons for Benjamin's introduction of *Korah* in his text. It is my intention to find the reason behind the fact that almost none of the readers of Benjamin's text have concerned themselves with this analogy¹⁰ in the assumption that the "clues" which concern *Korah* and his band have been carefully removed and/or are still inaccessible to us.

These "elements" are in fact the texts that Benjamin uses during the composition of his text. It is relatively easy starting with the numerous texts that are referred to or not in our cited fragment, or indeed the whole "Critique of Violence," to reconstruct the histories of their receptions and readings.

The first group is comprised of texts Benjamin explicitly cites. Their authors are Kant, Erich Unger, Sorel, Cohen,¹¹ and Hiller.

Next is a group of books or texts or ideas which are known to have in-

"Endkampf der Waffengegner Hillerovom!" dealing with the Spartacist strike. It ends with a call for a fight against arms (*Kampf gegen die Waffe!*, p. 23). Hiller's text attacks Bolshevism in the name of a revolution without arms and terror. He says, on page 27, that it is better to remain a slave than instigate an armed uprising [*gewalttätige Rotte*]. Benjamin mentions this when he cites Hiller on page 25. The sentence in its entirety is: "Brutalisiere ich nicht, töte ich nicht, so errichte ich nimmermehr das Weltreich der Gerechtigkeit, des ewigen Friedens, der Freude – so denkt der geistige Terrorist, so denk der edelste Bolschewik, so dachten die von ebertreuen Millitars vorsätzlich und heimtückisch erschlagenen Spartacusführer. Wir aber bekennen, daß höher noch als Glück und Gerechtigkeit eines Daseins" (p. 25).

¹⁰ Kurt Anglet mentions *Korah* and his rebellion in the book *Messianität und Geschichte. Walter Benjamins Konstruktion der historischen Dialektik und deren Aufhebung ins Eschatologische durch Erik Peterson*, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1995, p. 35. Jacques Derrida also mentions *Korah* only once in the Post-Scriptum of the book *Force la loi* (Paris, Galilée, 1994, p. 145). Eric L. Jacobson includes *Qorah* in his doctorate thesis concerning Benjamin and Scholem, presented in 1999 in Berlin (p. 234). The only text which has as its theme divine violence and has a short analysis of Benjamin's use of *Korah's rebellion* is Brian Britt "Divine Violence in Benjamin and Biblical Narrative," presented in October 2006 at the conference in Berlin and which will be published in German in "Suhrkamp Verlag." I am indebted to him for letting me have the manuscript of the text.

¹¹ I would like to draw attention to two exquisite texts by Günther Figal which deal with the problem of pure will and pure means in the example of the influence of Kant and Hermann Cohen on Walter Benjamin: "Recht und Moral als Handlungsspielräume," *Zeitschrift für Philosophische Forschung*, 1982, no. 36, p. 361–377, and "Die Ethik Walter Benjamins als Philosophie der reinen Mittel," Günter Figal, Horst Folkers: *Zur Theorie der Gewalt und Gewaltlosigkeit bei Walter Benjamin*, Heidelberg, Texte und Materialien der FEST, 1979, p. 1–24.

fluenced Benjamin's writing in one way or another: this includes Hugo Ball's *Kritik der deutschen Intelligenz* from 1919 (besides the identical use of the word "critique," it seems to me that Benjamin recalled Ball's analysis of Dante's *De Monarchia*, Chap. 1.1, very well); followed certainly by Ernst Bloch's *Geist der Utopie* from 1918 and *Thomas Münzer, als Theologe der Revolution* from 1921, and Baudelaire whom Benjamin read and translated before writing this text (the notions "*frappe*," "*choque*,"¹² or "*catastrophe*"¹³ are found quite often in Benjamin).

A group of texts which is almost never mentioned, but which definitely played a significant part in the construction of Benjamin's own text consists in Rickert's 1920 book *Die Philosophie des Lebens*,¹⁴ David Baumgardt's text from the same year concerning the problem and concept of the possible¹⁵ (and impossible), and of course Hegel's writings without which Benjamin's text could not exist. In question is not Benjamin's repetition of some of Hegel's motifs and figures of violence, for example the violence of the hero or "pure violence,"¹⁶ nor is Benjamin's copying and correction of some of Hegel's syntagma¹⁷ in doubt, but rather Benjamin's entire thematization of the relations between right and violence is completely taken from Hegel, from the "mystic of violence" [*eines Mystikers der Gewalt*].¹⁸

¹² Marcuse writes about shock in 1964, in an afterword to Benjamin's early texts. W.B., *Zur Kritik der Gewalt und andere Aufsätze*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1965, p. 105.

¹³ "Catastrophe" is of course present in Scholem, but in Erlich Unger as well, at the very beginning of the text "Politik und Metaphysik" (...jede unkatastrophale Politik ist unmetaphysisch nicht möglich). Cf. *Politik und Metaphysik*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 1989 (1921), p. 7 (3).

¹⁴ H. Rickert, *Die Philosophie des Lebens, Darstellung und Kritik der philosophischen Modeströmungen unserer Zeit*, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr, 1920.

¹⁵ Dr. D. Baumgardt, *Das Möglichkeitsproblem der Kritik der reinen Vernunft, der modernen Phänomenologie und der Gegenstandstheorie*, Berlin, Reuther & Reichard, 1920. This book was published as "Ergänzungshefte" in the journal *Kant-Studien*, no. 51. It could be very important in an imaginary theory of the (im)possible which would together with Faust and Hartman encompass the latter Jacques Derrida.

¹⁶ *Die reine Gewalt*. Cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *Jenaer Schriften. 1801-1807*, Band 2, Hamburg, Felix Meiner, 1970, p. 474-475.

¹⁷ For example, in Benjamin's extraordinary differentiation of two kinds of violence: "The first demands sacrifice; the second accepts it" [*Die erste fordert Opfer, die zweite nimmt sie an*] we recognize in the addition § 70 Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: "Hence if the state claims life, the individual must surrender it. But may a man take his own life?" [*Wenn der Staat daher das Leben fordert, so muß das Individuum es geben, aber darf der Mensch sich selbst das Leben nehmen?*]. *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, Band 7, 1970, p. 152.

¹⁸ Letter to Scholem from January 31, 1918. W. Benjamin, *Briefe I*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1978, p. 171. About right and violence in Hegel, see Add. § 432 and

Texts written by jurists and texts concerning jurisprudence represent a special source of Benjamin's inspiration. There is no reason to assume that Benjamin was unaware of Stammmler's works, which concerned the theory of anarchism or the right of the stronger [*das Recht des Stärkeren*], nor that he was unaware of a series of studies on differing values published annually from 1909 in French, and concerning the relationship between right and force (some of the authors including Daniel Lesueur, Edgard Milhaud, Jacques Flach, Raoul Anthony). Conversely, it is clear that Benjamin could not, before writing his work, have read the most systematic book on the same theme, as it was published in the same year as the "Critique of Violence." Here I am referring to Erich Brodmann's *Recht und Gewalt*.¹⁹ Nonetheless, the direct motive for writing his text could be the jurist Herbert Vorwerk's text "Das Recht zur Gewaltanwendung," published in September 1920.²⁰ I would assume that this text and the debate it stirred led Benjamin to quickly write a short text in response to the problem of right and the legitimacy of the use of violence. Benjamin's notes on Vorwerk's work might be a true sketch of the "Critique of Violence." Simultaneously, the "Critique" could perhaps represent the perfect *résumé* of several of Benjamin's contemporary lost texts, sketches, and projects concerning politics. If it is at this point that I must find the connection between these three "hands" (Vorwerk's one and Benjamin's two hands, because he writes notes and a text within the span of a few months), then I would choose, in Vorwerk's text, a moment which fundamentally distances Benjamin from right and the violence of the right (or state violence). On page 15 Vorwerk writes:

§ 433 *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse III*, Band 10, 1970, p. 221, 223.

¹⁹ E. Brodmann, *Recht und Gewalt*, Berlin und Leipzig, Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1921. The considerable increase of books concerning this subject would cause, in the following years, a sharp reaction and negation that there was any connection between right and violence. In his *Vorlesungen über praktische Philosophie* (Erlangen, Verlag der philosophischen Akademie) from 1925, Paul Natorp maintains that right does not force [*zwingt nicht*] and that violence does not create right [*Gewalt schafft nicht Recht*] (§ 180 p. 457, 458). "There is the violence of law [*rechtliche Gewalt*] [*Gewalt, die selbst aus dem Rechte fließt*], but there is no law of violence or right to violence; right which emerges from violence [*ein Recht der Gewalt*] [*Recht, das aus Gewalt fließt*]. Violence does not shape right. Similarly power [*Macht*] does not shape right" (§ 197 p. 492, 493).

²⁰ At the request of the editor of the journal *Blätter für religiösen Sozialismus*, Carl Mennicke and his friend Paul Tillich, Vorwerk published the text in issue 4, from 1920. The work is quite short (1.5 pages) and is followed by the editor's comments, which are nearly a page in length. Mennicke completed the discussion in issue 6, from 1921.

The “right to a revolution,” as jurists have taught for hundreds of years, is conceptually impossible [*Ein Recht auf Revolution*], wie es noch die Staatsrechtslehrer vor hundert Jahren lehrten, ist begrifflich unmöglich].

This “concept” does not exist, or to be more precise there is no right that leads to revolution or a revolution within the law is impossible. The syntagm “right to a revolution” is simply worthless. At the very end of the “Critique of Violence” Benjamin seems to find another space for violence and revolution:

But if the existence of violence outside the right [*jenseits des Rechtes*], as pure immediate violence, is assured, this furnishes proof that revolutionary violence, the highest manifestation of unalloyed violence by man, is possible [*die revolutionäre Gewalt möglich ist*], and shows by what means.²¹

For Benjamin’s answer to be possible, to make the conceptually impossible possible, a complete change of register is necessary, as is the complete separation of right and violence. Only violence which can be completely separated and isolated from right can be called revolutionary violence (divine, absolute, pure, sovereign, etc.). This strict separation is the precondition for discovering a completely new space (and time) outside of right. In his note and first reactions to Vorwerk’s text, that is to say, several months before the “Critique,” Benjamin opposes the coercion of right or “the intensive efforts of right to become real” [*intensive Verwirklichungstendenz des Rechts*]. His intention is to limit the urgency and impatience of right to occupy the “world.” It seems that his reservations about right are an introduction to something completely different:

What is at issue is violent rhythm of impatience [*Um den gewalttätigen Rhythmus der Ungeduld*], in which the right exists and has its temporal order, as opposed to the good <?> rhythm of expectation [*Rhythmus der Erwartung*] in which messianic event unfold [*in welchem das messianische Geschehen verläuft*].²²

The question mark found after the adjective “good” [*guten*] is Benjamin’s

²¹ W. Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” p. 252; “Zur Kritik der Gewalt,” p. 202.

²² W. Benjamin, “The Right to Use Violence,” *Selected Writings*, Volume 1, p. 231; *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band VI, p. 104.

own intervention, and is the subject of this sentence. What is in question is not a simply latent uncertainty, or Benjamin's delaying in the hope of finding a more precise adjective, but rather the same uncertainty and ignorance before an event announced as the final and divine. The question mark does and does not break the horizon of a predictable event which is already occurring²³ and which is, at the same time, consistently late [*die Verzögerung*]. A messianic event,²⁴ as an event which is supposed to break (and which breaks) the violence of right, as a final act of violence which ends any future violence, determines and structures expectation [*Erwartung*]. Only expectation will make real what is completely impossible.

Benjamin's reading of Vorwerk's text and the manifestation of his resistance to the violence of right leads us to the final and most important group of texts and observations "composing" the "Critique of Violence." This is the endless and complicated "text" of Benjamin's friendship with Scholem, which is still unable to be reconstructed. Here I am not only referring to the difficulty in classifying the influence Scholem and the "Benjamin-Scholem relationship" had on Benjamin's text,²⁵ but also to Scholem's secret and unclear archival strategies. I will delay and put aside several questions that cannot stop with Scholem or Adorno or Buber without opening up a far vaster issue regarding the "use" and "manipulation" of twentieth-century archives, in order to concentrate on Benjamin's text and "divine violence." It seems to

²³This fragment becomes clear with one still unpublished text by Gershom Scholem: "Walter a dit une fois : Le royaume messianique est toujours là. Ce jugement [*Einsicht*] contient la plus grande vérité – mais seulement dans une sphère qui, à ma connaissance, personne après les prophètes n'a atteint" (1917). The citation is taken from a text by Michael Löwy, "Le messianisme hétérodoxe dans l'œuvre de jeunesse de Gershom Scholem," J.-C. Attias, P. Gisel, and L. Kennel (eds.), *Messianismes. Variations sur une figure juive*, Geneva, Labor et Fides, 2000.

²⁴Cf. G. Bensussan, "Messianisme, messianicité, messianique. Pour quoi faire, pour quoi penser ?," Jocelyn Benoist and F. Merlini (eds.), *Une histoire de l'avenir*, Paris, Vrin, 2004, pp. 26–27.

²⁵Apart from several letters without which an analysis of the "Critique of Violence" cannot begin (the most important being Benjamin's letter to Scholem written in January 1921), I also refer to Scholem's work on Jewish sources and his continual exchange with Benjamin; on Scholem's early studies of apocalyptic messianism and catastrophe; on his brilliant manuscript "Bolshevism" [*Der Bolschewismus*] which speaks about the Jewish revolution, messianic kingdom, blood, rebellion, and the famous "dictatorship of poverty" [*die Diktatur der Armut*], *Tagebücher 1913-1917*, Frankfurt am Main, Jüdischer Verlag, 1995, p. 556–558; on those unforgettable notes from 1915 concerning the revolution: "*Unser Grundzug: das ist die Revolution! Revolution überall!*", *ibid.*, p. 81; on Benjamin's "theses of concept of justice" which were published in Scholem's journals (classified in 1916), and on the capital difference between *mischpat*, *Recht* and *zedek*, *Gerechtigkeit*, *ibid.*, p. 401–402.

me that Benjamin's mention of *Korah* and his band would be a lot more transparent if, for example, Scholem's letter, which Benjamin refers to on August 4, 1921 were "found."²⁶ It would be much simpler to thematize Benjamin's intentions if Scholem's "diaries" or his "letters" (from 1918 to 1922) were available to the public. The reception of Benjamin's text is a similar case. I hope that we can all agree on how different the "Critique of Violence" would be if we were to have before us the interpretation of the greatest thinker of violence of the past century – and Benjamin's good friend – Hannah Arendt?

Three texts or three of Benjamin's experiences in post-war Germany are at the root of Benjamin's analogy in the alternative title of this text:

- a) Hermann Bahr's 1919 novel *Die Rotte Korahs*, which deals with the fate of an Austrian baron who suddenly discovers that he is the son and heir of a notorious Jew and war profiteer. Bahr's research on the confrontation of blood and environment, that is, the relationship between biology and culture, in the determination of one's race, followed by the relationship between law and money, morality and corruption, as well as his hysterical anti-Semitism, and, paradoxically, the belief in the regeneration of the Jews are elements which almost certainly caught Benjamin's attention²⁷;
- b) In Kant, whom he devotedly read for several years, Benjamin could have found an important fragment in the book *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. In the second edition of the book (1794), Kant supplants his usual formulation: "a human being ought to leave behind [*herausgehen soll*] in order to enter (into a politico-civil state [*um in einen politisch-bürgerlichen zu treten*])."²⁸ In the first sentence, a pleonasm is supposed to increase the effort: "the natural human being ought to endeavor to leave behind" [*der natürliche Mensch [...] herauszukommen sich befleissigen soll*]. The second sentence indicates urgency, "human being ought to endeavor to leave behind as soon as possible" [*so bald wie möglich herauszukom-*

²⁶ "Of course I was excited by everything that you wrote about the 'Critique of violence.' The text will be published in the coming days" (Heidelberg, 04. 08. 1921). W. Benjamin, *Briefe I*, p. 270.

²⁷ The novel was published in 1919 by the publisher p. Fisher (Berlin, Vienna). Benjamin closely followed the works of the fairly prolific Bahr and mentions him in many places in his texts. However, *Die Rotte Korahs* is not mentioned in the list of books Benjamin owned.

²⁸ I. Kant, "Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason," *Religion and Rational Theology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 132; *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft, Kants gesammelte Schriften*, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1969, Band VI, p. 97.

men sich befleißigen soll]; the third indicates that “man cannot leave alone,” because this task does not concern him alone but is the task of the human race as a whole [*eine Vereinigung derselben in ein Ganzes*], more precisely, this task “requires a union [*Vollkommenheit*] [...] a system of well-disposed human beings [*System wohlgesinnter Menschen*] [...] totality.”²⁹ The great task [*die Pflicht*] “of coming out” which differs from all others, presupposes two more conditions Kant immediately mentions: he “requests for assuming the idea of one moral superior being, that is, the idea of God” (which enables Kant to call the community which manages to emerge the “people of God”) and the existence of one further idea which would oppose that first idea and community: “the idea of a band under the evil principle.”

To such a *people* of God we can oppose the idea of a *band* under the evil principle [*die Idee einer Rotte des bösen Princips entgegensetzen*] a union [*Vereinigung*] of those who side with that principle for the propagation of evil [*zur Ausbreitung des Bösen*]. It is in the interest of evil to prevent the realization of the other union [*jene Vereinigung nicht zu Stande kommen zu lassen*], even though here too the principle battles [*anfechtende Princip*] the dispositions of virtue resides in our very self and is only figuratively represented as an external power [*in uns selbst liegt und nur bildlich als äußere Macht vorgestellt wird*]³⁰;

- c) Goldberg’s seminar and Benjamin’s encounters with people from Goldberg’s surroundings (I have already mentioned Unger and Baumgardt), whom Scholem found particularly objectionable, could perhaps be the most important influences in Benjamin’s thinking of sacrifice, blood, and violence carried out against *Korah*. The only argument for this assumption, for now, can be the relatively lengthy fragments from Goldberg’s book, published in 1925.³¹ Oskar Goldberg views *Korah*’s rebellion (he names it *Korah-Aufstand*, but also “an endeavor,” “venture,” *Korah-Unternehmen*), as a threat to the metaphysical core [*metaphysischen Zentrums*]. The reaction [*eine Reaktion*] to this rebellion, which is not understood from a “theological” standpoint, says Goldberg, is similar to

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 133; *ibid.*, p. 98.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 134; *ibid.*, p. 100. In the same year, in the text “The End of All Things” (*Religion and Rational Theology*, p. 225; *Kant-Werke*, Bd. VIII, p. 332), Kant reveals that the band he mentioned is in fact *Korah*’s band [*der Rotte Korah*].

³¹ *Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer. Einleitung in das System des Pentateuch*, Erster Band, Berlin, Verlag David, 1925. Goldberg works on the problems of holiness, destruction, sacrifice, blood (p. 98, 99, 160–163). He mentions “Unblutige Opfer” in the context of sacrifice to the Goddess Kali (p. 139).

the reaction of a body [*Körper*] when one of its vital organs is attacked [*wenn ein lebenswichtiges Organ empfindlich angegriffen wird*].³²

All three potential sources of Benjamin's analogy are of unequal value and belong to differing textual regimes. Nonetheless, if we put aside Hermann Bahr's obscure allegory, with both Kant and Goldberg the band of rebels is reduced to a small "part" which opposed the "whole." The evil "part" cannot constitute an entity or community that can successfully resist. In other words, the "part" cannot succeed as a part within a "whole," therefore the reaction of the whole is horrific and the destruction of the rebels becomes necessary. It is interesting that in both Kant and Goldberg this "evil principle" is internalized and figuratively presented – as a part of "ourselves" and within "us" in Kant, and as an attack on an organ of our organism or our "body" in Goldberg.

To repeat Benjamin one more time:

This very task of destruction poses again, ultimately, the question of a pure immediate violence [*einer reinen unmittelbaren Gewalt*] that might be able to call a halt to mythic violence. Just as in all spheres God opposes myth, mythic violence is confronted by the divine. And the latter constitutes its antithesis in all respects. If mythic violence is lawmaking [rightmaking; *mythische Gewalt rechtsetzend*], divine violence is law-destroying [right-destroying; *die göttliche rechtsvernichtend*] [...] The legend of Niobe may be contrasted with God's judgment on the company of Korah [*Gewalt Gottes Gericht an der Rotte Korah gegenübertreten*], as an example of such violence. God's judgment strikes privileged Levites [*Es trifft Bevorrechtete, Leviten*], strikes them without warning, without threat, and does not stop short of annihilation [*trifft sie unangekündigt, ohne Drohung, schlagend und macht nicht Halt vor der Vernichtung*].

The harmony between Benjamin's intervention and Kant's and Goldberg's interpretation is confirmed through the idea that "divine violence" opposes "mythic violence" in everything, in all respects [*in allen Stücken*]; there is no "punishment" for this band, conversely, there is the judgment [*Gericht*] of God which protects the whole – God's action or "divine violence" destroys and saves at the same time (that is why this violence brings justice and not right³³); God does not warn or threaten those whom he destroys in advance

³² *Ibid.*, p. 194–195.

³³ Benjamin's use of the word "judgment" [*Gericht*] implies a differentiation between right [*mishpat*] and justice [*sedaqa*]. If God is the subject of an action that brings and

(he warns only those who hear him). But that is not enough, nor is it everything. It seems to me that Benjamin's ambitions are higher and that his use of *Korah* surpasses the three moments I have discussed, as well as the two I mentioned and kept aside. Namely, I initially insisted upon a surprise which appears in Benjamin's text, when someone who seems to be a leftist and revolutionary *par excellence* (the rebel *Korah* in Walzer's mind), and it is of revolution that Benjamin speaks of throughout his text, is himself, concurrently destroyed through "divine violence." Later, I will add another problem, one that deals with Benjamin's exchange with Scholem, and which supposes the influence holy texts and rabbinic analysis could have had on Benjamin's opinion of *Korah*. Therefore, in contrast to Goldberg or Kant, Walzer, and Scholem, Benjamin attempts to think together an incomprehensible "theological" point of view [*theologische Gesichtspunkte*] and a revolutionary gesture of rebellion. Only in this intersection of theology and revolution (not politics) is the impossible possible: the messianic event.

Korah is an extraordinary example of a pseudo-messiah and a false revolutionary, but also the first initiator of the messianic theatre and the world to come.

But why is *Korah* a false revolutionary?

The most precise answer is because *Korah* is not the Messiah. In the moment in which God destroys *Korah* and his followers Benjamin (this is another great surprise) defines them as privileged Levites. They are privileged, *die Bevorrechtete* ("Es trifft Bevorrechtete"; the adjective is *bevorrechtigt*). Despite the fact that this word points to them having been attacked and destroyed before they were judged, meaning, before judgment, threat, and warning, it seems that Benjamin's intention is completely different. Furthermore, how can those who oppose privilege and the "right to leadership" and the holiness of Moses and Aaron be privileged? How can only *Korah*, Moses' cousin, be privileged? How exactly is it that they are privileged? Benjamin does not use the common adjective *privilegiert*, rather he uses a word that has right, judgment, and judge (*Bevorrechtete*) in it. In doing so, Benjamin comes close to the "theological" interpretation in which they were destroyed because they were outside of the law. God protects the law and destroys all that is apart from it (the rebels or the "privileged"). Afterwards, Benjamin demonstrates that this rebellion is not a revolution but is rather a "product" of right or law. They were destroyed because they asked for privileges within already existing laws, and they were privileged because their position was already outside

fulfils justice, then his actions are not punished, but protected. That is the fundamental characteristic of the root *sdq*.

of law (this dilemma is signified as the difference between their rebellion against Moses and Aaron and their rebellion against God). The most important reasons for *Korah* being a privileged false revolutionary are his wealth and the influence he enjoyed amongst the people before the rebellion. He is not poor,³⁴ and so he is a politician, not a revolutionary. Even if Benjamin was not aware of the source of *Korah*'s ambition (*Korah*'s wife plays an interesting role in his career³⁵), the word *Bevorrechtete* is correctly used to show that the material privilege of this band is in question. Therefore, *Korah* and his band fight for leadership and acceding to Benjamin belong to the register of law and mythic violence which has nothing to do with revolution.³⁶ They must be attacked and destroyed because they cannot be constituted as an opposing community (Kant's "evil principle"), they cannot succeed as part of the whole or part of the community (like Shammai in his dispute with Hillel³⁷), and can never destroy right (law) because their intention is to replace it with a new right (that is, new privilege).

But why does this "reformist" rebellion "lead to" God carrying out his destructive violence? The "work" of the analogy and counter-analogy (here we should recall that during this time Benjamin wrote an important frag-

³⁴ "Only the judgment of the poor has revolutionary power" [*Urteil des Armen hat allein revolutionäre Macht. Die Arme ist vielleicht nicht gerecht, aber er kann niemals ungerecht sein*]. G. Scholem, "Der Bolschewismus", *Tagebücher 1913-1917*, p. 556.

³⁵ Cf. *Sanhedrin*, 109b-110a; "He was jealous because Moses chose another [...]" Rashi (*Commentary of Bamidbar*). Philon speaks of the "incomprehensible" ambition and pride of the rebels [*alogou fronématos*]. *De Praemiis et Poenis*, 13.74.

³⁶ Cf. 16.2 *Numbers*, begins with "to rise up against Moses." The phrase "*vayacoumou lifnei (Moshe)*" has a completely legal background and is used during trials when the opponent is spoken to (Deuteronomy 19:15-16; Psalms 27:12).

³⁷ In the text "*Sitra achra; Gut und Böse in der Kabbala*" (*Von der mystischen Gestalt der Gottheit*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1973 (1962), p. 68-69, Scholem evokes *Korah*'s rebellion in the context of a disagreement between two great doctors, Hillel and Chamaï. He cites a fragment from *Zohar*, I, 17 b:

"[...] left merged in right [*die Linke wurde in die Rechte einbezogen*], and peace prevailed over all [*und es war Harmonie im All*]. Similarly the conflict between Korah and Aaron was left against right [...] He (Moïse) endeavored to reconcile them, but the left was unwilling, and Korah stiffened his resistance [*verstreifte sich im Übermass*]. He said [...] Hell must certainly join in the heat of the conflict of the left, since he does not want to join above [*Oberen*], merging in the right [*in die Rechte einbezogen werden*], he will certainly descend below by the intensity of his rage. Korah did not want this conflict to be harmonized by Moses because it was not for the sake of heaven [*um des Himmels willen*] [...] A conflict arrayed as above, ascending, not descending, established rightly, is the conflict of Shammai and Hillel. The blessed Holy One mediated between them, harmonizing them. This was the conflict for the sake of heaven, so Heaven mediated the conflict, and upon this conflict the world was established." *The Zohar*, Volume I, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2004, pp. 130-131.

ment on analogy) helps Benjamin come to a consequential conclusion: absolute violence (destructive, divine, and revolutionary) destroys mythic and political violence or rebellion within law (always for privilege and benefit), as a culmination of the absolute hypocrisy of capitalism. In spite of this, *Korah* and his band's rebellion is simultaneously the most important precondition for the manifestation of this new and incredible violence as destructive. The false revolutionary announces the arrival of the real one. There is no revolution without false rebellion (or false rebels) and mythic violence or war.³⁸ In this way the paradigm of revolutionary practice is found in the violent intervention of God, or rather in the expectation of the non-violent Messiah:

The guiding principle [*der Grundsatz*] is here: authentic divine violence [*echte göttliche Gewalt*] can manifest itself other than destructively [*anders als zerstörend*] only in the world to come (the world of fulfillment) [*nur in der kommenden Welt (der Erfüllung)*] (direct divine intervention [*unmittelbarer göttlicher Einwirkung*]). But where divine violence enters in the secular world, it breathes destruction [*atmet sie Zerstörung*] [...] In this world, divine violence [*göttliche Gewalt*] is higher [*ist höher*] than divine powerlessness [*göttliche Gewaltlosigkeit*]; in the world to come, divine powerlessness is higher than divine violence.³⁹

But why is *Korah* a false Messiah? The most precise answer is because *Korah* is not a revolutionary. Despite the fact that his rebellion is, without a doubt, comprised of elements of a new, future justice and despite the fact that all the conditions for a messianic theatre are fulfilled, *Korah* himself is an *archconspirator*, a “deconstructor” and demolisher of an exiled community. He simultaneously begins four rebellions (the Levite against Aaron; Dathan and Abiram against Moses; the tribe leaders against Aaron; all together against Moses and Aaron⁴⁰) by “taking”⁴¹ and uniting 250 children of

³⁸ Cf. Scholem's differentiation of the bloody Bolshevik revolution, messianic empire, and the violence of World War I. “Der Bolschewismus,” *Tagebücher 1913-1917*, p. 556.

³⁹ W. Benjamin, “World and Time,” *Selected Writings*, Volume 1, pp. 226–227; W. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band VI, p. 99.

⁴⁰ *The JPS Torah Commentary Numbers (Bamidbar)*, commentary of J. Milgrom, Philadelphia – New York, The Jewish Publication Society, 5750 / 1990, p. 129. Milgrom corrects Abrabanel who thinks there are three rebellions (p. 415).

⁴¹ “Now Korah, son of Izhar son of Kohath son of Levi, betook himself [...]” The use of the past simple verb “to take,” “betook” [*vayikach*] signifies that *Korah* has convinced and grouped some of the people's leaders, but that he has also separated from the community (“He has separated, separated from the community in order to instigate a conflict,” Rachi).

Israel. At the onset of the rebellion *Korah* says the following to Moses and Aaron (16:3):

You have gone too far! For all the community are holy [*kdschim*], all of them, and the Lord is in their midst. Why then do you raise [*tinaseu*] yourselves above the Lord's congregation?⁴²

Korah will not utter another word while still alive.⁴³ He thinks that not only the community is holy, but that both the community and every individual (part) in it is holy. This is a complete novelty, but also a serious blasphemy. It is the radical nature of this comment, bringing into question the devotion of the priest Aaron⁴⁴ and Moses as his first defender and intermediary between the people and God, that beginning horrors and great troubles. However, Benjamin's intervention (and intuition) opens the door to another interpretation of *Korah's* appearance and his destruction which, as we know, leads to a true catastrophe of people suffering in the wildness (apart from the aforementioned 250, their women and children are also wiped out, and another 14,700 follow). God's revolutionary violence or the "divine violence" of a Messiah who destroys without blood, does not "judge" only in Moses' or Aaron's or the law's favor; rather, it gives guidance in the desert and announces a future non-violent Messiah and probably a completely peaceful revolution. It is for this reason that this dreadful episode should be (1) the measure of every future expectation and arrival of the Messiah [*mashiah*] (messianism); (2) the sign of a possible change in someone's status and an act of God which chooses, reinforces, and anoints [*mašah*]; (3) the measure of every future strike [*mšh*] and rebellion; (4) the measure of every future speech [*meshiah*] and every sacrifice; and, finally, (5) the measure [*mashahu(m)*] of every future measure.

But is this truly possible? Is Benjamin's differentiation between two kinds of violence and his call to consider "divine violence" in the context of *Korah's* rebellion, gestures which lead to the thinking of a new and future world? Is Benjamin truly sketching the conditions for recognizing (the final) violence, for restraint from violence, for the expectation of violence or perhaps the unconditional conditions for the final act of violence? And is all of

⁴² The Jewish Study Bible, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 316.

⁴³ After all, it is completely uncertain if *Korah* ended up like the others, if he also vanished without a trace (*Sanhedrin* 110 a), and if he said the words which can be heard if we carefully listen to the voice coming from *Gehinom* (*Gehenna*; *Sheol*): "Moses and his Torah are the truth, we are liars" (*Sanhedrin* 110 b; *Baba Bathra* 74 b).

⁴⁴ Aaron is the "anointed priest" [*hacohen hamoshiyach*], Lev. 4:3, 5.

this done in order for violence to finally be destroyed, for social injustice to be eliminated, and for the sovereignty of the world (or Israel, as Maïmonide thinks) to finally be revealed?

Benjamin uses two equally important registers to determine if a violent act has been carried out by God (or Messiah), if it is “divine violence” and if God and the future world are manifest through it. Paradoxically, both registers disrupt and prevent the construction and fantasy on the basis of which God only appears through violence and catastrophic destruction. Similarly, both registers prevent the possibility of terrible violence and wars being justified by and attributed to fictitious ideal authors. Within the first register, Benjamin hesitates and examines the characteristics of one kind of violence using different synonyms for “divine violence” and examining, in detail, the relationship between right and violence. For violence, which has already been carried out, to be attributed to the Messiah or God, it must be both revolutionary, clean, absolute, pedagogical, and, at the same time, without any attributes; this sort of violence does not create right or order, does not bring privilege, creating nothing; this sort of violence completely destroys, is measured in victims, but it leaves no blood or other remains and “it is as if it never occurred.”

Afterwards, Benjamin recognizes this impossible violence and this impossible occurrence in a different scene and within a messianic register. As we have read, the false Messiah and pseudo revolutionary *Korah* was swallowed alive by the earth. This same earth opened its mouth to accept Abel’s blood in an attempt to eliminate Cain’s crime and delay Cain’s guilt.⁴⁵ For violence which has been carried out to be attributed to either God or the Messiah, and this is probably what the consequence of Benjamin’s suggestion is, it is necessary for the act of violence itself to simultaneously erase and protect (defend, hoard, keep in reserve) the revolutionary and negative moment of one community. The revolutionary removal of *Korah* and his band requires a reassessment of a community and a new measure. This measure is only possible in the shadow of a future world in which the Messiah awakens the entire community, including both the evil and rebellious,⁴⁶ from the earth. “For all the community are holy [*kdschim*], all of them, and in their midst is [...]”

⁴⁵ *Sanhedrin* 37 b.

⁴⁶ *Sanhedrin* 108 a.