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# Liberal Violence: From the Benjaminian Divine to the Angels of History[1]

Brad Evans[2]

## Introduction

While the latter part of the 20th Century was defined by the great revival in liberal fortunes as it defeated its main ideological adversaries, the liberal wars of the past decade or so have put the project into evident crises. With claims to planetary peace inaugurating what turned out to be an unwinnable war upon local forms of autonomy[3], once held inhibitions to the liberal advance in the name of global security, peace and prosperity have been displaced by the veritable retreat from the zones of conflict and instability. Once held claims of universality as such now appears increasingly redundant. Indeed, not only does contemporary liberalism seem politically, ethically and economically bankrupt as a direct result of its attempts to forcefully impose upon unwitting populations a distinctly violent liberal way of establishing political rule[4], so many of its fundamental tenants are seemingly undone[5]. It would be incorrect however to imply the end of the violence of the liberal encounter. On the contrary, as liberal ways of violence increasingly takes place *at a distance,* most notably evidenced in the shift to unmanned aerial technologies for targeted assassinations, new justifications are put forward regarding these new modalities of violence, along with its political and philosophical rationalisations. This raises a number of pressing questions. Not least, how might we deconstruct these new modalities to provide a meaningful diagnostic of the changing political fortunes of liberal rule?

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[3] See in particular Michael Dillon & Julian Reid, *The Liberal Way of War: Killing to Make Life Live* (London: Routledge, 2009); Mark Duffield, Development, Security & Unedning War: Governing the World of Peoples (Cambridge, Polity 2007); and Brad Evans [ed.] "Against the Day: Liberal War" (*The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 110 (3) ISSN 0038-2876) 746-793

[4] Brad Evans, *Liberal Terror* (Cambridge, Polity press: 2013)

[5] Brad Evans & Julian Reid, *Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously* (Cambridge, Polity Press: 2014)

To map out the changing contours of liberalism as diagnosed through the violence carried out in its name, this paper turns to the work of Walter Benjamin. His work on violence has captured the attention of many great scholars and subsequently influenced some of the most important reflections by the likes of Hannah Arendt, Carl Schmitt, Jacques Derrida, Jurgen Habermas, Giorgio Agamben, Slavoj Zizek, Judith Butler and Simon Critchley to name a few. Benjamin's contributions are undoubtedly rich and complex in terms of its philosophical layering. This proves to be the source of great admiration and frustration alike for students of the work. His classical *Critique of Violence*[6], for instance, not only forces us to question how violence continues to be integral to the formation of modern political systems. As it triangulates politics, religion and violence to ask difficult questions regarding the all too theological nature of secular modernity, Benjamin situates the problematic of violence in much broader and more challenging frame. It is also an obscure provocation that remains open to interpretation and continues to be fiercely contested. Its principle message we can take here however is clear: *Since all violence brings us into moral relations, the critique of violence must address fundamental questions of political theology*.

Given the revolutionary spirit and personal tragedy associated with the life of Benjamin, it is easy to see why his analysis is often interpreted as a way to link violence to pedagogies for the oppressed. Confronting systems of illegitimate power, advocates have been thoroughly approving of the meaning and significance of the Benjaminian *Critique* in particular as a means for theorising why people continue to resist that which they find intolerable. This wagers the revolutionary spirit of what Benjamin termed "Divine Violence" against the "Mythical Violence" of established order. While these distinctions remain worthy of our attention, it is not sufficient to simply comport Benjamin into the 21st Century as if the structures of power and its logics of violence remain consistent. We live in a different political moment. So whilst there is still much to be gleaned from historical applications of Benjamin's text, there is also a need to both rethink and extend the narrative if it is to evidence contemporaneousness. While it can be argued, for instance, that orthodox readings of Benjamin's work allow for neat explanations of violence *within* the spatial framework

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[6] Walter Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence' in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz (Shocken Books: New York, 1986) 277-300

of Sovereign States, the global ambitions, adventures, and changing fortunes of liberal powers for the past few decades demand a new angle of vision. That is to say, as liberal forms of violence have increasingly taken place without the requisite Sovereign warrants as traditionally understood in any spatial sense, it is not satisfactory to start our analysis with some foundational Myth as defining of the political landscape (i.e. the myth of nationhood) or to equate divine violence simply with the "violence of critique" as often deployed today. With this in mind, this paper will address the following questions: How might we rethink Benjamin's legacy once we look to critique the lethality of liberal freedoms whose violence has worked by casting aside any pretence for sovereign integrity? How does this lethality demand a fundamental reassessment of the theological paradigms of the modern? And how may we further question the relevance of Benjamin as a critical theorist of violence as liberalism now faces what seems to be an irresolvable crisis of its own making and ambitions?

**From the Mythic to the Divine**

To do these questions justice there is a need to begin with Benjamin's *Critique,* which identifies two very distinct forms of violence, and whose literal interpretation appears to set them in strategic opposition. What Benjamin terms "Mythical Violence" relates to an original use of force that is necessary in the very constitution and unification of the political order. The famous cover that adorns Thomas Hobbes "Leviathan" provides the most obvious representation of this. Law is understood here as a manifestation of that mythic power that translates the will to collectivise into a distinct form of forced ordering. Such violence, for Benjamin, forces the human to remain imprisoned within a state of "natural life". It denies citizens more liberating ethical alternatives as the guilt of mere existence is continually reaffirmed by the spectre of violence law permits. Something Kafka understood all too well[7]. "Divine Violence", in contrast, Benjamin notes, constitutes a form of violence that is law breaking. If the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them. If mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine violence destroys in order to bring about the conditions of the new. While mythical violence therefore demands some original conception of guilt so that all must stand in obedience *before*

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[7] On this and for a excellent engagement with Divine Violence, more generally, see, James Martel, *Divine Violence: Walter Benjamin & the Eschatology of Sovereignty* (London: Routledge, 2011)

*the law*, divine violence challenges the power of Sovereign authority by virtue of the sanctity of the living: 'Mythical violence is bloody power over mere life for its own sake, divine violence pure power over all life for the sake of the living. The first demands sacrifice, the second accepts it.'[8]

Divine violence thus appears here as a form of violence that takes place *without Sovereign warrant*. It asks not of any authorities blessing for political action. It moves beyond any Schmittean notion of the Sovereign privilege, especially the claim to hold a monopoly over what can rightfully be killed in the name of that order. In doing so, divine violence represents a categorical denial of Sovereign claims to authenticity and its brutalising community at the moment of insurrection. As Benjamin explains, it 'strikes them without warning, without threat, and also does not stop short of annihilation. But in annihilating it also expiates, and a deep connection between the lack of bloodshed and the expiatory character of this violence is unmistakable'. This evidently influenced Jacques Derrida's thesis on the "Force of Law". For Derrida, while there is something mythical about forms of violence that can be traced back to the Apollonian Greek model, the genealogy of the divine is more in tune with anti-idolatrous Jewish scripture:

> There are two violences, two competing *Gewalten*: on the one
> side, decision (just, historical, political, and so on), justice
> beyond *droit* and the state, but without decidable knowledge
> [this is, the 'Jewish' divine violence]; on the other, decidable
> knowledge and certainty in a realm that structurally remains
> that of the undecidable, of the mythic *droit* of the state
> [Greek, mythic]. On the one side [Jewish] the decision
> without undecidable certainty, on the other [Greek] the
> certainty of the undecidable without decision.[9]

Giorgio Agamben provides a novel interpretation of these typologies in his canonical text *Homo Sacer*[10]. Foregrounding the originality of the mythical as being constitutive of the bounded realm of Sovereign order, Agamben highlights the

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[8] Benjamin, *Divine Violence* p. 297

[9] Jacques Derrida 'Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority' in *Deconstruction & the Possibility of Justice* Eds. Drucilla Cornell, Michael Rosenfeld and David Carson (New York, Routledge, 1992) 56

[10] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995)

paradigmatic importance of spatial figuration of the camp and its relationship to those lives that are denied all political quality (*zoe*). This provides the setting for rethinking divine violence as a pure form of outrage, which by definition is radically distinct from law. Importantly, for Agamben, divine violence is the very order of the political as it reveals a bloodless potentiality (i.e. the capacity to bring about new conditions on earth yet to be realised) unmediated without end: 'Here appears the theme-which shines only for an instant, and yet long enough to illuminate the text in its entirety-of violence as "pure means", which is to say, as the figure of a paradoxical "mediality without end": i.e., a means that, while remaining such, is considered independently of the ends it pursues'[11].

Agamben's focus on the *pure means* allowed for a *non-violent* interpretation of the divine. The violence is merely the expression of an open-ended *critique* deemed to be pure insomuch as it operates free from structural and bounded constraints. It puts itself on the side of life against the exceptionalism of Sovereign power, which can only bring violence to life in order to politically authenticate the true meaning of subjectivity *contra* the most violent forms of disqualification and abandonment from the realms of civility. Mythical violence is thus exposed as the hidden foundation of Sovereignty. It is a normalising force, whose very "order of being" wages continual violence upon the internal order in the name of security, protection and identity formation.

This different sacralisation of the mythical referent in Agamben's interpretation demands a radical rethink of the relationship of law in respect to its claims over life. In particular, it is only by exposing the necessity of the divine as a pure form of critique that Benjamin allows us to bring the violence of law and order making into critical question. Moreover, since the mythical is always confronted with the very possibility of insurrection due to the capacities for critique that exists in any given political system, Benjamin's violent framework also points more affirmatively towards the formation of alternative subjectivities whose forms-of-life are pure potentiality (*potenzia*). As Agamben writes elsewhere, this formulation 'defines a life – human life – in which the single ways, acts, processes of living are never simply

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[11] Agamben, *Homo Sacer* p. 105

*facts* but always and above all *possibilities of life*, always and above all power'[12]. Importantly, for Agamben, this *potenzia* begins in the imaginary: 'I call *thought* the nexus that constitutes the forms of life in an inseparable context as a form of life... only if, in other words, there is thought – only then can a form of life become, in its own factness and thingness, form-of-life, in which it is never possible to isolate something like naked life'[13]. Critical thinking is thus conterminous with the divine as it constitutes a direct challenge to the possibilities of reducing life to the mere biological fact of being – life in a naturalised form - what Agamben (in)famously terms "bare life".

Judith Butler follows this non-violent reading of divine violence to develop her earlier concerns with the (dis)qualification of lives through the powers of mourning. Reading Benjamin this way allows her to conceive of an alternative "non-violent violence" which can be 'invoked and waged against the coercive force of law.'[14] Highlighting Benjamin's messianic-Judaic heritage, in particular, Butler "unleashes" divine violence 'against the *coercive force* of that legal framework, against the accountability that binds a subject to a specific legal system and stops that very subject from developing a critical, if not revolutionary point of view on that legal system.' Central to Butlers interpretation is the claim that its violence *explicates* forms of violence that are depended upon establishing the foundational nature of guilt as identified by Benjamin's earlier provocation. The divine is thus appears as a strategic form of ethical and political intervention, which embracing the idea that critique is the order of battle, willingly enters into an intellectual conflict with all too real forms of violence, moral entrapments and forceful unifications as enshrined in juridical systems. It is as she writes:

> The desire to release life from a guilt secured through
> legal contract with the state – this would be a desire that
> gives rise to a violence against violence, one that seeks

[12] Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End* (Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press : 2000) p.4.4
[13] Agamben, *Means Without End* p 8, 9
[14] Judith Butler 'Critique, Coercion & Sacred Life in Benjamin's "Critique of Violence"' in *Political Theologies* eds. de Vries & Sullivan, p. 201

> to release life from a death contract with the law, a
>
> death of the living soul by the hardening force of guilt[15].

This "non-violence violence" reading has less convinced Slavoj Zizek. Focusing instead upon the distinction between the realm of the "subjective" (i.e. headline violence such as 9/11) and the hidden yet objective "symbolic" realities of everyday violence, Zizek demands an account of the divine that remains grounded in the concrete reality of revolutionary moments that history shows to be far from "bloodless"[16]. As he explained in response to a question on the relationship between violence and politics:

> This question is particularly confused on the Left. Let's take
> the use made of two authors, Carl Schmitt and Walter
> Benjamin, for example. I don't have any problem with
> Schmitt. But Schmitt's concepts of "decision" and
> "exception" function precisely to erase the crucial distinction
> governing Benjamin's "Critique of Violence", namely the
> distinction between "mythical" and "divine" violence. For
> Schmitt, to put it quite simply, there is no divine violence. For
> him there is an illegal violence that is a foundation, a violence
> of the exception that gives rise to law. Many Leftists who flirt
> with Benjamin want to speak of some "spectral" violence that
> never really happens, or they adopt an attitude like Agamben
> and simply wait for some magical intervention. I'm sorry, but
> Benjamin is pretty precise. An example he gives of divine
> violence is a mob lynching a corrupt ruler! That's pretty
> concrete.[17]

Despite their differences here in terms of conceptualising violence – intellectual or physical, each of these authors nevertheless starts their analysis from the dominance of a mythical paradigm. Each also accepts that what makes the divine politically appealing is the way in which it offers a pure means for challenging the violence of established order, unbinding the forces of tyranny without asking for sovereign

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[15] Butler, *Critique, Coercion & Sacred Life* p.211
[16] Slavoj Zizek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London, Profile Books: 2008)
[17] Slavoj Zizek, *Divine Violence & Liberated Targets*. Online at: http://www.softtargetsjournal.com/web/zizek.php

permission, thereby explicating itself from the monopolised forms of violence in the name of the living. The Mythical then is collectively read here as the embodiment of a forced unity, whereas the Divine appears to be an unmediated revolutionary potential capable of bringing about the conditions of the new. If the Mythic retains its Sovereign integrity, the Divine opens a rupture in the field of internal oppression as the various systems of ordering integral to Sovereign authority are brought into critical question. Here's the problem. In order to sustain this analysis, the *Critique's* structural and juridical frames must still be accept as the dominant paradigm for political power and oppression in the 21$^{st}$ Century. The State, in other words, along with its constituted forms of juridical power, remains the principle referent object for political analysis. Such a reductionist approach to political analysis is no longer satisfactory. Not only has the sanctity of the modern nation state (understood as being the principle source of authority) been undermined by forces beyond conventional territorialities, liberal regimes of power have openly operated in the global space of flows for some considerable time, notably detaching themselves from traditional Sovereign moorings and claims to geo-spatial integrities. This is not simply a question regarding the contingency of the political environment. It takes us to the heart of our understanding about what actually constitutes liberalism in terms of its ambitions for bio-political control.

Liberal theorists and practitioners often validate their actions by pointing to universal commitments to the shared "values" of freedom, the rule of law, justice and inalienable rights. Even the most orthodox of theorists should appreciate however that each of these terms remains deeply contested, masking in fact the most contingent abuses of political power. Indeed, there is an alterative and no less real history of the liberal encounter, which is marked by violence, racial subjugation, forceful intervention, and the persecution of those deemed to be of a different kind[18]. Crucially, for our purposes here, if we are to tease out the singularity to liberalism, there is a need to engage more critically with its effects at the level of power and not abstract idealisms. From this perspective, as argued elsewhere, there is a compelling case to define liberalism by the bio-political imperative of "making life live". Operating within a global imaginary of possibility and endangerment, liberalism from this perspective posits the life of the political subject as central to its political

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[18] Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter History* (Verso: New York, 2011)

strategies and ambitions. Such a reading allows us to acknowledge the forced compromise with the structural limitations imposed by the world of Nations, while appreciating how liberal ambitions, Immanuel Kant onward, have sought to create a planetary system that incorporates all life within its strategic orbit. Liberalism as such appears in this guise as *promissory* insomuch as it is predicated upon a political system already in waiting but yet-to-be-revealed; while *providential* insomuch as every subject is taken to be a liberal subject needing to be freed from whatever contemporary shackles.

There is as such no foundational "myth" underwriting the liberal will to rule. It destroys in fact the very idea that politics may be grounded in set foundation truths or principles as related to fixed notions of identity i.e. myth of religion or myth of Mother/Fatherlands. Governing instead through a state of on-going emergency, crises and catastrophe to condition the possibility for the furtherance of its political rule, liberal forms of subjectivity undergo continual adaptation and change in relation to a number of complex political, socio-economic, technological and cultural factors. From the perspective of the subject, such factors focus in upon the changing ontological and epistemological accounts of life in terms of its potentialities and problematics[19]. If there is then a mythical dimension to liberalism, it is an always-deferred end-state that can only be realised, ultimately, through the wars, battles, conflicts and victories fought in its name. Liberalism as such is not self-evidently recognisable. We are not born appreciative of its value and moral systems (which in itself is impossible from the perspective of life due to their contingent and fleeting nature). It is a productive and all together politically economising will to rule planetary life that demands uncompromising forms of intervention upon the souls of the living.

Michel Foucault's bio-political intervention appears in this light to be much more than an attempt to provide new tools for critiquing power. It takes us to the heart of the political rationalities of liberalism by foregrounding the crucial question of what happens when power takes planetary life to be its object? And in turn, what happens when the destiny of the species as a whole is wagered on the successes or failures of its own political strategies? Not only do these questions demand reproaching violence

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[19] See Brad Evans, *Liberal Terror* (Polity: Cambridge, 2013)

outside of a Sovereign/mythical frame. They force us to rethink the Benjaminian "divine" as perhaps being more apt in describing the all too real forms of violence which have taken place in more recent times, devoid of any need for Sovereign claims of integrity and non-interventionism as enshrined in the Westphalia peace. Might the divine in other words allow us here to gain a real tangible purchase of the theological nature of liberal power and its forms of violence that take leave without Sovereign warrant?

## A Liberal Theology?

At the beginning of the *Critique*, Benjamin argued that 'a cause, however effective, becomes violent, in the precise sense of the word, only when it enters into moral relations'. Morality as it appears for Benjamin here is inextricably linked to questions of political theology. Indeed, it is only by focusing more intently on the relations between morality, violence, and political theology that the *Critique* holds any conceptual value for us. That the idea of Sovereignty reveals powerful theological traces akin to the mythological contours put forward by Benjamin is now well established. As Carl Schmitt asserted 'All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularised theological concepts'[20]. Such appreciation has led James Martel to observe that 'Schmitt articulates exactly how this notion of a break itself disguises the crucial (and theological) continuities with medieval and Christian notions of sovereignty… In this way, modernity has a new "political theology", one that serves to disguise both the more traditional Christian inheritance of the modern state as well as the fact that the modern sovereign, like the Christian God, continues to decide upon the exception'.[21] This concern with sovereignty as a political extension or sophisticated adaption of theology (both as a metaphysical and ontological phenomenon) equally resonated with Jacques Derrida. Sovereignty, he argued, evidences a kind of "ipsocentric[ism]" which points to a long cycle of political theology that is at once paternalistic and patriarchal, and thus masculine, in the filiation of father-son-brother'[22]. Such ipsocentricism is 'revived or taken over' by a newer version of itself, moving from the overtly religious and monarchic forms of sovereignty to 'the unavowed political theology… of the sovereignty of the people,

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[20] Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006) 36

[21] Martel, *Divine Violence* p. 23

[22] Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005) 17

that is of democratic sovereignty'. The implications being, as Leo Strauss once observed, 'What presents itself as the "secularisation" of theological concepts will have to be understood, in the last analysis, as an adaptation of traditional theology to the intellectual climate produced by modern philosophy or science both natural and political'[23]. So if 'modern politics is a chapter in the history of religion'[24] as John Gray maintains, how are we to grapple with the complexity and meaning of the term "political theology" without simply referring to something that is altogether elusive or beyond apprehension in any verifiable sense of the term? And how may we further link this to our concern with the theological dimensions to contemporary liberal violence?

Although the theological is profoundly metaphysical as it connects questions of the infinitely unknowable with worldly redemption, it only gains tangible political purchase if it manages to reconcile ideas of salvation with the normative question of what it means to live authentically. While it should be apparent that salvation is central to all monotheistic religions, which offer heavenly reward for earthly obedience, it has proven to be no less compatible with secular visions of the "good life". Political theology doesn't simply relate in this regard to a belief in the omnipotence of God and its unitary demands of "Oneness". It is actually possible to trace the remnants of theological reasoning to earthly/secularised conceptions of the politics, sovereignty, and justice. What is more, as Agamben points out in his *The Kingdom and the Glory* (whose cover image detailing the apse mosaic at *Basilica Papale di San Paolo furore le Mura, Rome* projects the unsettling image of the empty throne), while sovereignty represents important conceptual reworking of a distinct theological paradigms of the modern, it is also possible to reveal a different theological genealogy of the modern that is more economic – hence dynamic and productive in its *modus operandi*: 'our concept of history has been formed according to the theological paradigm of the revelation of a "mystery" that is, at the same time, an "economy", an organisation, and a "dispensation" of divine and human life… [What is more] from the beginning theology conceives divine life and the history of

[23] Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953) 317
[24] John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion & the Death of Utopia* (London: Penguin, 2011) 1

humanity as an *oikonomia*, that is, that theology is itself "economic" and did not simply become so at a later time through secularisation.'[25]

Agamben traces here the idea of a "divine economy" back to a decisive moment in the history of Christian theology in which questions pertaining to the Holy Trinity found practical meaning. Hence, for Agamben, it is possible to derive from Christianity a 'political theology, which founds the transcendence of sovereign power on the single God, and economic theology, which replaces this transcendence with the idea of an *oikonomia*, conceived as an immanent ordering – domestic and not political in a strict sense – of both divine and human life'[26]. From this perspective, the economy is a 'synonym for the providential unfolding of history according to eschatological design'[27]. Such a divinity does not propose any natural foundation for being. It overcomes the history of being as a metaphysical praxis. What is therefore commonly termed biopolitics, he believes, especially today, remains concerned with the "divine governance" of peoples according to some interventionist plan for earthly salvation. As Agamben writes elsewhere, 'Rather than the proclaimed end of history, we are, in fact, witnessing the incessant though aimless motion of this machine, which, in a sort of colossal parody of theological *oikonomia*, has assumed the legacy of the providential governance of the world, this machine (true to the original eschatological vocation of providence) is leading us to catastrophe'[28]. According to Antonio Negri, this attempt to bring economy, political theology, and biopolitics into close relation is significant as it enables Agamben to nuance (indeed overcome) the limits of his juridical paradigm; 'showing how economy becomes a simple agency of theological-political power: an exercise, thus, in the worldly reproduction of social life'[29]. Echoing Agamben's theological concerns, what therefore becomes "the true problem" is 'not sovereignty but government, not the king but the minister, not the law but the police force, that is, the state machine that they form and keep in motion"[30].

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[25] Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy & Government* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011) 45, 3
[26] Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory* p.1
[27] Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory* p.44
[28] Giorgio Agamben, *What is An Apparatus?* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009) 23, 24
[29] Antonio Negri, *Sovereignty That Divine Ministry of Earthly Life.* Online at: http://www.jcrt.org/archives/09.1/Negri.pdf 97
[30] Negri, *Sovereignty That Divine Ministry* p. 99

Agamben's emphasis on the theological power of political economy seemingly contradicts his earlier instance that the camp is the defining paradigm of the modern. Indeed, whilst his spatial concerns with mythical violence moves him towards a positive embrace of the Benjaminian divine, this latest genealogy, which he now posits as the "truer" analytic of contemporary power, renders the divine altogether more problematic. Agamben it seems has become the victim of his own (arguably unwitting) spatial success – which although explained in terms of its ontological significance, nevertheless requires giving utmost allegiance to questions of Sovereignty and juridical ordering as foundational to political analysis. Following his later work, however, hence moving beyond this *camp as nomos* hypothesis, it becomes possible to recognise how the spatial figuration of the camp is more peripheral or should we say absorbed and subsumed within a broader *nomos of circulation*[31].

Agamben's insistence that the camp is paradigmatic also proves limiting when trying to interrogate the shifting contours of freedom as a violent condition of possibility, onto the ways this lethal account of freedom becomes moralised and governmentalized in the process of fulfilling the modernist demand of "making life live". Critically engaging with John Pocock's much celebrated *The Machiavellian Moment*[32], Michael Dillon espouses the modern notion of freedom as understood to be factical freedom, that is a 'condition of possibility' which operates though a 'radically contingent time without warrant'[33]. This account of freedom, as Dillon suggests, not only makes the decisionism of Sovereignty (central to theorisations of its mythical qualities as per Schmitt) possible in the first instance, it forms the basis, as Machiavelli understood, of a 'lethal violence' by 'constantly re-write the signs of the times via a continuous calculus of necessary killing'. Such calculative violence however is locked into a strategic predicament that is devoid of clear ethical coordinates in any universal sense. As Dillon writes, 'Factical freedom as semiotic battle space is continuously required to signify how much killing is enough. But it can never resolve this strategic predicament because the very contingency of evental time upon which its freedom relies denies it the possibility of ever securely computing the

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[31] See Brad Evans & Michael Hardt, "Barbarians to Savages: Liberal War Inside and Out" (Theory and Event, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2010)

[32] John G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought & the Atlantic Political Tradition* (Princeton, Princeton University Press: 1975)

[33] Michael Dillon, "Lethal Freedom: Divine Violence & the Machiavellian Moment" (Theory & Event Vol. 11 No. 2, 2008)

strategic calculus of necessary killing which ultimately defines its moment. When asked to say how much killing is enough, whatever it replies, factical freedom is equipped to give only one answer: more'. That is why, for Dillon, the performative enactment of facticity reveals both the contingency and lethality of modern conceptions of freedom such that it needs to drawn upon something of the order of the divine:

> If it cannot secure a strategic calculus of necessary killing, the Machiavellian moment becomes guilty of mere murder. It must therefore also deliver without being guilty of homicide; failing to establish the necessity of its killing. Its violence must therefore somehow expiate as it prevails. In want, however, of a strategic calculus of necessary killing which would do precisely that, by determining how much killing is enough, the only violence capable of meeting its requirement of 'cruelty well-used' is one so great that it will prevail without application; since any and every application, in practice, is subject to the fallibility of any and every strategic calculus in force. Such violence is the messianic violence which Walter Benjamin called 'divine violence'.

Freedom as presented here is a violent and productive condition of possibility. Cruelty well used becoming strategically virtuous if it can be aligned with freedom well served. Is this not exactly how the liberal violence (as justified in the name of the freedoms of the oppressed) operates in practice? As Foucault explained, the liberal conception of freedom does not refer to a state of affairs wherein the subject is simply allowed to "be free"; on the contrary, fearing autonomy, it designates the production of particular conceptions of freedom within a broader milieu of contested and conflicting circulations. Liberal freedom in other words is presented as virtuous insomuch as it claims to be the most enlightened and progressive discourse for human emancipation, while strategic insomuch as its all-inclusive understanding of freedom is dependent upon the necessity of forceful interventionism, along with a continuous

recourse to lethal calculations in the everyday policing of the flows of existence. What is more, taking Benjamin to be correct when he argues violence necessarily raises questions of morality, we might also add that protection against forms of violence as defined most notably by the security imperative also brings us into distinctly moral relations, perhaps as the most viable way of justifying interventions and bringing about forced change in the subjects behaviours. Like freedom, however, the liberal problematic of security is no mere static or foundational affair. It proposes an account of humanised security, notably globalised during the 1990's, which bring together into a consolidating strategic nexus matters of (under)development, catastrophe, and everyday states of unending emergency in order to promote forms of political governance that take direct aim at the productive life of globally endangered/endangering subjects[34].

Freedom well served in a liberal sense points directly to a deeply moralised terrain of regulated circulations. It manages to reconcile, without contradiction, universally endowed moral claims to security, justice and rights, with the contingent deployment of violence, forceful social transformation, and a continuous recourse to policing in the name of life necessity. Complimenting the strategic calculus of necessary killing, these violent contours of liberal rule also point to a distinctly moralised bio-political heritage, which begins with Immanuel Kant[35]. While Jean Jacques Rousseau was arguably the first to philosophically question whether it was possible to have a modern concept of evil by directly connecting concerns with human suffering to the realms of human action and behaviour, it is with Kant that sovereign theology is displaced by the eschatology of a living. The conception of radical evil Kant proposes leads to the abandonment of original sin, while still retaining something of a moral burden – albeit in a way that reworks the biblical story of the fall. As Kant would write, 'we may presuppose evil to be subjectively necessary to every man, even the best'[36]. The Kantian subject instead therefore suffers a productive fall from grace on account of his or her own deficiencies, fallibilities and inabilities in worldly behaviours. It is a subject burdened by the guilt of its own (un)making. As Sharon Anderson-Gold writes:

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[34] On this see in particular Mark Duffield, *Development, Security & Unending War: Governing the World of Peoples* (Polity: Cambridge, 2007)
[35] Evans, Liberal Terror
[36] Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* p.32

Kant's claim that evil was the "character of the species" was itself foundational for the way in which the moral life of the individual should be understood... Since historical progress is an attribute of the species, the source of this progress must be in some moral attribute of humanity that, for judgements of moral development, is the functional equivalent of the good will... Kant identifies the human predisposition to morality as a historical operative cause... That radical evil affects the entire species binds the destiny of each to all both as matter of global interdependence and as a matter of historical legacy[37].

Kant proposed a human-divine partnership through which salvation was tied to moral (re)generation. This is not simply grand theorising. It has reflected the empirical reality of the world in which liberal theorists and policy practitioners have been re-working the concept of rights on more progressive socio-economic lines for some considerable time. This non-foundational metaphysics evidences the more purposeful legacy of the Kantian project. For whenever we say that something is "unnecessary", we are stepping directly towards the Kantian problem of "radical evil" in which the transcendental principle for rule gracefully intervenes with its own enduring presence. And like all transcendental principles, its inaccessibility ensures that it retains something of the mystery of a divine supplement since we have to admit a work of grace as something incomprehensible. As Allen Wood noted, while Kant's notion of evil invariably links human action to the transcendental level, it also functions 'systematically by means of an examination of the sources, extent, and limits of human capacity'[38].

Gordon Michalson Jnr. captured the implications of this tremendous moral burden majestically with the title *Fallen Freedom*[39]. As Michalson explains, 'Kant's disturbing account of the way the free will turns against it own best interests suggests that each of us carries a malevolent stowaway that could come to life at any moment'[40]. This evidences 'the terrible paradox that our fallenness is our own doing –

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[37] Sharon Anderson-Gold, *Unnecessary Evil: history and moral progress in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant* (New York, State University Press: 2001) pp. xi, 3,
p. xi, 3,
[39] Gordon Michalson Jnr., *Fallen Freedom: Kant on Radical Evil & Moral Regeneration* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press:1990)
[40] Michalson, *Fallen Freedom* p.x

terrible, because within the Kantian framework this amounts to reason virtually turning against its own best interests, and freedom freely producing its own most severe debility'[41]. With this in mind, we might argue that Kant's timely political revival in the latter part of the 20th Century was not in any way incidental. He was a philosopher whose time had come as far as liberal power was concerned. Not only would his thought give moral armoury to the violence of the liberal interventionism. He provided moral justification for war, which more than for the mere defence of peoples, would be explicitly fought in the name of humanity complete. It is Kant who thus philosophically binds the lethality of freedom without Sovereign warrant with the bio-political imperative to make life live in a way that summons forth a distinct theological claim; thereby displacing the language of foundationalism with a more promissory note. Our task is to relate this to the question of violence in more contemporary times.

**Liberal War as Divine Violence**

Despite universal claims to peaceful co-habitation, liberal regimes have been compelled to make war on whatever threatens it[42]. This is why the liberal account of freedom has depended upon a lethal principle, which discursively wrapped in the language of rights, security and justice, inaugurated planetary state of warfare and siege. It has promoted an account of freedom that, in the process of taking hold of the problem of the planetary life of political subjects, linked human potentiality to the possibility of its ruination. If liberal violence has then produced a necessary lethal corollary in its mission to foster the peace and prosperity of the species in order to alleviate unnecessary suffering; so it has also needed to foster a belief in the necessity of violence in the name of that suffering and vulnerability to which it continually stakes a claim.

The Liberal wars of the past two decades in particular have revealed a number of defining principles[43]. Aside from relying upon technological supremacy and universal claims to truth, they have been overwhelmingly driven by a bio-political imperative, which has displaced concerns with Sovereign integrities with forms of violence

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[41] Michalson, *Fallen Freedom* p.7

[42] See Dillon & Reid, *The Liberal Way of War*; & Julian Reid, *The Biopolitics of the War on Terror: Life Struggles, Liberal Modernity and the Defence of Logistical Societies* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2006).

[43] I have explored these in more detail elsewhere. See Brad Evans (2011) "Liberal War: Introducing the Ten Key Principles of 21st Century Bio-Political Warfare" (*The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 110 (3) ISSN 0038-2876) 747-756

carried out in the name of an endangered humanity. In this regard, they have destroyed the Westphalia pretence, seeing the catastrophes of our global age in fact as a condition of possibility to further the liberal will to rule. Since incorporation in this setting has proceed on the basis that all life should necessarily be included within its strategic orbit, the veritable evisceration of any sense of "the outside" (as conceived in terms of its political imaginary) has led to the blurring of all conventional demarcations between friends/enemies, citizens/soldiers, times of war/times of peace. What is more, as life itself became increasingly central to questions of security, issues of development as broadly conceived would no longer be regarded as peripheral to the war effort. It would in fact become a central motif as most notably articulated in the strategic mantras "War by Other means" and "War for Hearts and Minds". Not only would this point to new forms of de-politicisation which, less about Schmittean exceptionalism, were more explicable in terms of the fundamental political and social transformation of societies. It would also lead to the production of violent subjects, as the recourse to violence became sure testament to a conception of humanity realised through the wars fought in its name. Liberal violence, in other words, proved to be unbounded, unlimited and without conventional Sovereign warrant – namely revealing of the fundamental principles of what Benjamin once elected to term "the divine".

Diagnosing the liberal wars of the past two decades as a form of divine violence offers a more disturbing reading of the violence of the liberal encounter. If the violence of political realism, at least in theory, appreciated the value of limits and boundaries, what seems to define the lethality of liberal freedom has been a commitment to war *without boundaries,* hence *limitless*. As Dillon and Julian Reid acutely observed:

> [L]iberal peacemaking is lethal. Its violence a necessary corollary of the aporetic character of its mission to foster the peace and prosperity of the species... There is, then, a martial face to liberal peace. The liberal way of rule is contoured by the liberal way of war... Liberalism is therefore obliged to exercise a strategic calculus of necessary killing, in the course of which calculus ought to be able to say how much killing is

enough...[However] it has no better way of saying how much killing is enough, once it starts killing to make life live, than does the geopolitical strategic calculus of necessary killing'[44].

This brings us to Steven Pinker's *Better Angels of Our Nature*[45]. Reworking the well-rehearsed liberal peace thesis, for Pinker, the reason we have become less warlike today can be account for in terms of our liberal maturity. Leaving aside the evident theological undertones to Pinker's work, along with the numerous empirical flaws in his thesis, his not so original thesis at least accredits its all too Euro-centric sources of inspiration on matters of civility: 'The reason so many violent institutions succumbed within so short a span of time was that the arguments that slew them belong to a coherent philosophy that emerged during the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment. The ideas of thinkers like Hobbes, Spinoza, Descartes, Locke, David Hume, Mary Astell, Kant, Beccaria, Smith, Mary Wollstonecraft, Madison, Jefferson, Hamilton and John Stuart Mill coalesced into a worldview that we can call *Enlightenment humanism'*. John Gray has been rightly suspicious of the entire project and claims being made here:

> The idea that a new world can be constructed through the rational application of force is peculiarly modern, animating ideas of revolutionary war and pedagogic terror that feature in an influential tradition of radical Enlightenment thinking. Downplaying this tradition is extremely important for Pinker. Along with liberal humanists everywhere, he regards the core of the Enlightenment as a commitment to rationality. The fact that prominent Enlightenment figures have favoured violence as an instrument of social transformation is—to put it mildly—inconvenient... No doubt we have become less violent in some ways. But it is easy for liberal humanists to pass over the respects in which civilisation has retreated. Pinker is no exception. Just as he writes off mass killing in developing countries as evidence of backwardness without enquiring whether it might be linked in some way to peace in

[44] Dillon & Reid "Liberal Way of War" 42, 81, 88
[45] Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (London: Viking, 2011)

the developed world, he celebrates "re-civilisation"... without much concern for those who pay the price of the re-civilising process[46].

Gray showed his evident concerns here with the promissory nature of liberal violence. Indeed, what he elsewhere terms the violence of the liberal missionary, reposes Nietzsche's further instance that 'god is dead and man has killed him' with a devastating humanistic critique[47]. Such violence, in the end, however has proved to be politically, ethically and economically narcissistic. Just as liberal advocates in the zones of crises now increasingly find themselves operating within fortified protectorates as part of a great separation *from* the world[48], this has been matched, albeit it ways that initially appear disconnected, by new forms of violence which also takes place almost exclusively *at a distance*. Indeed, as liberal actors increasingly give up on the idea that the world may be transformed for the better, new modalities of violence are emerging which seem to be more logically in fitting with the new politics of catastrophe that increasingly defines our terrifyingly normal times. As the promise of violence and catastrophe now appears inescapable, insecurity is becoming normalised, dystopian realism becoming the prevailing imaginaries for political rule, and once cited claims to emancipation, unending progress and lasting security for peoples all but abandoned[49].

The politics of catastrophe and its relationship to "end of times" narratives adds another layer to our theological enquiry. As Jacob Taubes once noted[50], there is perhaps something theologically different at work here between the pre-modern apocalyptic movements and the catastrophic reasoning now defining the contemporary moment. For all their nihilism and monotheistic servitude, at least the apocalyptic movements of yesteryear could imagine a better world than already existed. There is therefore a vast difference between the subjects which names its disaster 'apocalypse' to that which reads disaster in terms of 'catastrophe.'[51] Unlike apocalypse, there is no beyond the catastrophic. Its mediation on the "end of times" is

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[46] John Gray, *Delusions of Peace*. Online at: http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/john-gray-steven-pinker-violence-review/

[47] Gray, *Black Mass*

[48] Mark Duffield, "Risk-Management and the Fortified Aid Compound: Everyday Life in Post-Interventionary Society" (*Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* Vol. 4 No. 4: 2010) 453 — 474

[49] See Brad Evans & Julian Reid, *Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously* (Cambridge, Polity Press: 2014)

[50] Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology* (Stanford, Stanford University Press: 2009)

[51] Evan Calder Williams, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse* (Winchester and Washington, Zero Books: 2011) pp.1-13.

already fated. Catastrophe denies political transformation. It demands instead a forced partaking in a world that is deemed to be insecure unto the end. The upshot being, as all things become the source of endangerment, the human becomes the source of our veritable undoing.

**Angels of History**

Every war produces its casualties. Some of these stand out in terms of the sheer body count. The horror of mass warfare reduced to the most banal forms of inhuman quantification. Others, no less important, are its political and philosophical losses. What is increasingly clear is that the past two decades of liberal warfare, punctured but not initially determined by the tragedy of the events of September 11$^{th}$ 2001, ultimately put the very concept of war into question. The reluctance to officially declare war, even when our involvement in the politically motivated violence appears to be all too evident, now demands a move beyond the dominant frames which have shaped discussions for the past two decades. There is an important caveat to address here. What happened during last decade of the Global Wars on Terror cannot simply be inserted into a post 9/11 frames for analysis. Much of what passed for post 9/11 justice or military excessiveness was slowly maturing in the global borderlands for some considerable time. If there is a departure it needs to be accounted for against this broader post-Cold War humanitarian sensibility through which liberalism absorbed local crises into its political fabric to further condition its violent interventions.

It has been all too easy for political and social theorists to put the blame for the violence and atrocities of the Global Wars on Terror onto the shoulders of George Bush and Dick Cheney. This has allowed liberals to appropriate Schmitt as one of their own, hence reducing the entire war effort to the reductionist measures of "US hegemony/exceptionalism". Such retreats back into state centric models have not only proved unhelpful in terms of questioning the normalization of violence, they have failed to grasp the complexity of war – especially how questions of universality, economy, power and the formation of political subjectivities can be rethought through violent encounters. What is more, the limits of these analyses have been further evidenced by the complete lack of engagement with political theology, failing to recognize the violence of universal ambitions, along with the need to put the

contemporary legacy of Kant on trial. Lets not forget Tony Blair and Barack Obama have embodied the liberal Kantian idea of political leadership better than any others throughout the history of liberalism. Any change in liberal fortunes must be understood in this context.

We have witnessed in recent times profound changes in the violent cartography of what is a post-Iraq liberal influence. Instead of actively and one-sidedly engaging the world, humanely, violently or otherwise, what we are now encountering are new political arrangements shaped by forms of *distancing* and *technological realignment*. Just as liberal agents in the dangerous borderland areas increasingly find themselves operating within fortified protectorates as part of a great separation *from* the world, this is matched, albeit it ways that initially appear disconnected, by new forms of violence that also take place *at a distance*. The political and philosophical significance of this should not be underestimated. The technological and strategic confluence between the remote management of populations (notably surveillance) and new forms of violence are indicative of the narcissism of a liberal project that reeks of the worst excesses of technological determinism. Instead of looking with confidence towards a post-liberal commitment to transforming the living conditions of the world of peoples, what has taken its place is an intellectually barren landscape offering no alternative other than to live out our catastrophically fated existence. This is instructive regarding how we might envisage "the end of liberal times" as marked out and defined by this incommensurable sense of planetary siege. It also demands new thinking about the relationship between violence, technology and theology in these uncertain times.

The liberal wars of the past decade have been premised on two notable claims to superiority. The first was premised on the logic of technology where it was assumed that high-tech sophistry could replace the need to suffer casualties. The second was premised upon a more humanitarian ethos, which demanded local knowledge and engagement with dangerous populations. The narcissistic violence of the Global War on Terror has put this secondary vision into lasting crises as the violence of liberal encounter has fatefully exposed any universal commitment to rights and justice. Not only did we appear to be the principle authors of violence, thereby challenging the notion that underdevelopment was the true cause of planetary endangerment,

populations within liberal societies have lost faith in worldly responsibilities. Metaphysical hubris displaced by a catastrophic reasoning that quite literally places us at the point of extinction. Violence as such has assumed non-locatable forms as liberalism is coming to terms with the limits to its territorial will to rule. Physically separated from a world it no longer understands, it is now left to the digital and technological recoupment of distance to shape worldly relations with little concern for human relations.

Drone violence is particularly revealing of this shift in the liberal worldview. While the first recorded drone strike was authorised by President George Bush in Pakistan on 18th June 2004, it has been during the Presidency of Obama that the use of the technology has become the more favoured method for dealing with recalcitrant elements in the global borderlands. Indeed, it seems, whilst the Bush administration favoured extraordinary rendition, detention and torture, the Obama policy for preventing the growth of inmates in camps such as Guantanamo has been their execution. Hence inhumane torture and barbarity replaced by the more dignified and considerate method of targeted assassination! While debates on drone violence tend to centre on questions its legality, especially whether it fits within established rules of war, little attention is given to the wider political moment and how the violence points to the changing nature of liberal power and its veritable retreat from the world of people.

Whereas Bush and Blair launched a one-sided territorial assault on Iraq and Afghanistan in order to promote 'civilisation', Obama has waged his war in the deregulated atmospheric shadows where technological supremacy allows for the continuation of uninhibited forms of violence, while addressing the fact that the previous interventions failed by any given measure. Hence, this time, out of respect for public sensibilities a 'precise' or 'surgical' form of violence is delivered remotely to its distant adversaries. We should not forget however that the technologies, infrastructures and aesthetics essential for remote warfare are essentially the same as those that support the economy and consumer society. Targeted drone-strikes and the advertising that maintains the consumer hothouse essentially rely on the same computer-based technologies and algorithmic sense-making tools. Put another way, how Amazon mechanically predicts your next book purchase is not fundamentally

different from how adversarial behavioural patterns are isolated in authoring a signature-kill.

Drone technologies are not simply a new tool of warfare that allow for legal or strategic reassessment. They are paradigmatic to the contemporary stages of liberal rule. As technological advance compensates for the "soldiers on the ground" militaristic retreat, they further radicalise the very idea of the territorial front line such that any Schmittean notion of inside/outside appears like some arcane remnant of an out-dated past. What takes its place is an atmospheric gaze that further eviscerates the human. From the perspective of violence, displacing the primacy of human agency from the act of killing represents more than the realisation of the military's dream of zero casualties. It reveals more fully the dominance of dystopian realism as the defining rationality shaping the political landscape in the here and now, and beyond[52]. Demanding then of a new conceptual vocabulary that allows us to critique what happens when violence is neither orderly nor progressive, but is simply tasked to mitigate the demise liberal power and ambition in an uncertain world seems more pressing than ever.

Benjamin once wrote about Paul Klee's *Angel of History* (Angelus Novus) whose 'face is turned toward the past'. Linking his interpretation of this masterpiece to questions of violence with technology, Benjamin further observed, 'Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward'[53]. How might Benjamin have interpreted Klee today? Would he be compelled to reinterpret the work as the past now holds no epistemic comfort and the future prophesised to be littered with corpses of catastrophes to come? This is taken up by Henry Giroux who argues that Benjamin's Angel of History can be seen as a metaphor for our contemporary condition which 'has been blinded and can no longer see the destruction beneath its

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[52] For further discussions on this see, Brad Evans & Henry A. Giroux, *Disposable Futures: The Seduction of Violence in the Age of Spectacle* (San Francisco, CityLights: 2015)

[53] Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" In *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4; Volumes 1938-1940* (Boston, Harvard University Press: 1996) p. 392

feet or the clouds paralyzing its wings. It is now stuck in a storm without a past and lacking any consideration of the future'[54]. Thinking along these lines, what does this mean for developing a critique of violence adequate to our times? Indeed, on matters of political theology, can we perhaps understand drones to be the new angels of history, whose violence is most revealing of the political storm created by the narcissistic ambitions of liberal powers, which are now facing the prospect of terminal decline?

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[54] Henry A. Giroux, *Twilight of the Social: Resurgent Politics in an Age of Disposability* (Paradigm Publishers: 2012) p.46