

critique of violence walter benjamin

Introduction: Unpacking Walter Benjamin's Critique of Violence

Walter Benjamin, a towering figure of 20th-century critical theory and Jewish mysticism, offered a profound and often unsettling critique of violence that continues to resonate deeply in contemporary discourse. His seminal essay, "Critique of Violence," published posthumously, dissects the multifaceted nature of violence, distinguishing between its instrumental and its inherently destructive forms. Benjamin grapples with the complex relationship between law, justice, and violence, suggesting that violence is not merely a tool but a foundational element within legal systems themselves. This article will delve into the core tenets of Benjamin's thought on violence, exploring his nuanced distinctions, his analysis of mythic and divine violence, and the implications of his ideas for understanding political and social conflict. We will examine how Benjamin's critique challenges conventional notions of coercion and power, offering a framework for reimagining agency and liberation in a world saturated with violent forces.

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Walter Benjamin's Core Argument on Violence

Walter Benjamin's central thesis regarding violence is that it is not an external force merely imposed upon society, but rather an intrinsic and often foundational element of the very

systems that claim to regulate and control it. His "Critique of Violence" argues against a simplistic understanding of violence as solely an act of aggression or transgression. Instead, Benjamin posits that violence is deeply interwoven with the fabric of law and the state, serving both to establish and to maintain existing power structures. This intricate relationship is at the heart of his critique, suggesting that a genuine liberation from violence requires a radical re-evaluation of the legal and political apparatuses that seemingly aim to abolish it.

Benjamin challenges the common perception that law is primarily an instrument of justice, arguing that it is equally, if not more, a product of violence. The creation and enforcement of laws, from the initial establishment of a state to its ongoing administration, are fundamentally acts of violence. This foundational violence, often masked or legitimized by the concept of law, is what Benjamin seeks to expose. By revealing this inherent connection, he opens up a space for considering forms of action and liberation that operate outside the purview of established legal frameworks, hinting at a possibility of justice beyond the violence of the law.

Distinguishing Types of Violence in Benjamin's Framework

A crucial aspect of Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" lies in his meticulous differentiation between various forms of violent action. This categorization is not merely academic but serves to illuminate the complex ways in which violence operates within human society and its relationship to power and legality. Benjamin's distinctions provide a critical lens through which to analyze and deconstruct prevailing understandings of force, coercion, and authority.

Law-Making Violence vs. Law-Preserving Violence

Benjamin's most prominent distinction is between "law-making violence" and "law-preserving violence." Law-making violence is the foundational force that establishes legal systems and political orders. It is the original act of power that imposes a new legal structure, often through conquest or revolution. This form of violence is inherently constitutive, creating the very framework within which subsequent actions are judged. Benjamin argues that this initial act of violence, while often brutal, is rarely subjected to the same moral scrutiny as other forms of violence, as it is legitimized by its role in establishing order.

Conversely, law-preserving violence is the force employed by the state or legal system to maintain existing laws and social order. This includes policing, punishment, and the enforcement of legal statutes. Benjamin suggests that law-preserving violence is ultimately dependent on law-making violence; it is the continuation and maintenance of the initial violent act of imposition. While appearing as a more legitimate and controlled form of violence, it still operates within the shadow of the foundational violence that created the legal system. The critique here is that law-preserving violence, by its very nature,

perpetuates the initial injustice inherent in the establishment of law.

Mythic Violence and the Perpetuation of Law

Benjamin links mythic violence intrinsically to the concept of law. He argues that mythic violence is the kind of violence that is deeply embedded in the cyclical nature of history and the repetition of social structures. This violence is often perceived as natural or inevitable, thereby serving to legitimize and perpetuate existing laws and power dynamics. It is the violence that repeats itself, ensuring the continuity of institutions and traditions, regardless of their inherent justice or injustice.

According to Benjamin, mythic violence operates through a form of "blood vengeance" or reciprocal retribution, creating an endless cycle of cause and effect that reinforces the established order. This cycle, while appearing to uphold justice, actually serves to preserve the existing legal framework by presenting it as a natural and unavoidable consequence of human action. The critique is directed at how this cyclical, mythic understanding of violence becomes the basis for legal systems, trapping societies in a perpetual repetition of its own origins.

Divine Violence: A Paradoxical Force for Liberation

In contrast to mythic violence, Benjamin introduces the concept of "divine violence." This is a more radical and transformative force, characterized by its immediacy and its potential to shatter the cyclical nature of mythic violence and the legal order. Divine violence, for Benjamin, is not necessarily tied to religious dogma but rather represents a pure, unmediated manifestation of force that can break the chain of law and retribution.

This form of violence is paradoxical. It is often destructive, but its destructiveness lies in its ability to abolish the conditions that perpetuate mythic violence and legal oppression. Divine violence is not bound by the law; it is a force that can interrupt the continuum of history and the perpetuation of injustice. Benjamin associates it with moments of intense political upheaval or revolutionary action, where existing legal structures are overthrown, and new possibilities are created. It is a force that aims not to preserve but to fundamentally remake, offering a path towards a justice that transcends the limitations of existing legal frameworks.

The Role of Justice in Benjamin's Critique

Walter Benjamin's critique of violence is inextricably linked to his contemplation of justice. He posits that justice cannot be fully realized within the confines of existing legal systems, as these systems are themselves products of violence. His analysis of law-making and law-preserving violence leads him to question whether true justice can ever be achieved through these means, suggesting that a radical break from the cycle of violence is

necessary.

Benjamin implicitly argues that while law aims to establish justice, it often does so through violent means that perpetuate injustice. The law-making violence that establishes a legal order is frequently an act of subjugation, and the subsequent law-preserving violence serves to maintain this subjugation. Therefore, any understanding of justice that remains solely within the framework of positive law is, for Benjamin, inherently flawed. He points towards a notion of justice that is perhaps external to, or even in opposition to, the established legal order, a justice that might be enacted through forms of violence that are not merely continuations of the existing power structures.

Implications of Benjamin's Critique of Violence for Modern Society

Walter Benjamin's critique of violence holds profound implications for understanding and addressing contemporary social and political issues. In a world still grappling with state-sanctioned violence, systemic oppression, and the complexities of revolution, his insights offer a critical framework for analysis.

Firstly, Benjamin's distinction between different forms of violence encourages a more nuanced examination of state power. The everyday operations of policing and judicial systems, often justified as necessary for maintaining order, can be re-evaluated through the lens of law-preserving violence. This prompts questions about the legitimacy and inherent violence embedded in these institutions, pushing for deeper scrutiny of their origins and their impact on marginalized communities.

Secondly, his critique of mythic violence speaks to the ways in which historical narratives and cultural traditions can legitimize ongoing injustices. The cyclical understanding of conflict and retribution, often perpetuated through media and political rhetoric, can create a sense of inevitability around violence and oppression. Benjamin's work challenges us to break free from these cycles and to question the narratives that normalize violence.

Finally, the concept of divine violence, while challenging and often misunderstood, offers a theoretical space for imagining transformative change. It suggests that true liberation might require acts that fundamentally disrupt existing power structures, actions that are not merely reactions within the established system but rather attempts to forge entirely new possibilities. This resonates with movements seeking radical social and political transformation, highlighting the potential for disruptive action to break cycles of oppression and pave the way for a more just future.

Critique of Violence Walter Benjamin: Key Takeaways

Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" provides a radical and enduring re-evaluation of the relationship between violence, law, and justice. His core argument exposes the inherent violence within legal systems, distinguishing between the foundational acts of law-making violence and the ongoing maintenance through law-preserving violence. Benjamin argues that mythic violence, characterized by its cyclical nature and perpetuation of legal order, stands in contrast to the potential for transformative change offered by divine violence. This latter form of violence, though paradoxical and often destructive, holds the possibility of shattering oppressive structures and ushering in a new era of justice that transcends the limitations of existing legal frameworks. Benjamin's enduring legacy lies in his challenge to conventional understandings of power and authority, urging us to critically examine the very foundations of the societies we inhabit and to seek liberation from the pervasive cycles of violence.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the core argument of Walter Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' regarding the relationship between violence and law?

Benjamin argues that there's a fundamental, often unacknowledged, relationship between law and violence. He distinguishes between 'law-making violence' (Gewaltgesetzgebung), which establishes and maintains legal systems, and 'law-preserving violence' (Gewaltbewahrung), which upholds existing laws. Both are forms of instrumental violence, but he also identifies a third, more revolutionary form: 'violence pure' or 'divine violence,' which is not bound by law and aims to break its chains.

How does Benjamin differentiate 'law-making violence' from 'law-preserving violence' in his essay?

Law-making violence is the initial, foundational act that creates the legal order itself, often through conquest or revolution. Law-preserving violence, on the other hand, is the ongoing use of force by the state (police, military) to maintain that existing legal order, punishing those who transgress it. Both are expressions of the state's monopoly on legitimate force, serving to perpetuate the existing legal framework.

What is Benjamin's concept of 'divine violence' and why is it significant in his critique?

Divine violence, or pure violence, is a type of violence that operates outside the instrumental logic of law and its coercive mechanisms. It's not about achieving a specific goal or maintaining a system, but rather a pure, instantaneous disruption of the existing order. Benjamin sees it as a potential force for liberation, capable of breaking the cycle of violence perpetuated by law and its guardians, though its nature and manifestation remain somewhat enigmatic and open to interpretation.

What does Benjamin mean by the 'instrumental' nature of state violence, and what are its implications?

Benjamin views state violence, whether law-making or law-preserving, as 'instrumental' because it is employed as a means to an end, primarily the maintenance and perpetuation of the legal system and the social order it upholds. This instrumentalization means that violence is treated as a tool, devoid of inherent ethical value and often legitimized through its supposed service to justice or order, thereby masking its potentially oppressive nature.

How has Walter Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' influenced contemporary discussions on political action and revolution?

Benjamin's essay has been profoundly influential in post-structuralist and critical theory. It challenges simplistic notions of 'good' versus 'bad' violence, forcing a deeper examination of the inherent violence within legal systems and the state. His ideas have informed debates on revolutionary tactics, the nature of justice, the role of myth, and the ethical considerations of political resistance, particularly in challenging the legitimacy of established power structures.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to Walter Benjamin's critique of violence, with short descriptions:

- 1. The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction by Walter Benjamin**
This seminal essay, often published as a book, explores how the reproducibility of art changes its aura and its potential for political engagement. Benjamin argues that mechanical reproduction detaches art from its traditional context, making it more accessible but also altering its relationship with power and ideology. He examines how this shift can be harnessed for revolutionary purposes, challenging the existing aesthetic and political order.
- 2. The Arcades Project by Walter Benjamin**
This unfinished magnum opus is a vast collection of thoughts, observations, and citations that Benjamin compiled over years, focusing on the Parisian arcades. While not solely about violence, it offers a rich tapestry of material for understanding Benjamin's approach to history, memory, and the material conditions of modernity, which underpin his critique of violence. The project's fragmented nature mirrors Benjamin's own historical materialism, highlighting the decay and potential for redemption within capitalist society.
- 3. Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings**
This comprehensive biography provides essential context for understanding Benjamin's multifaceted thought, including his engagement with violence. It traces the development of his ideas within their historical and intellectual milieu, revealing the influences that shaped his radical critique of state-sanctioned violence and his search for revolutionary means. The book offers insights into Benjamin's personal struggles and how they informed his philosophical positions.

4. **The Violence of the Text: Walter Benjamin and the Ethics of Critique** by Peter Arnds
This scholarly work delves into Benjamin's ethical considerations regarding violence, particularly in relation to literary and artistic critique. Arnds examines how Benjamin's concept of critique itself can be seen as a form of violence against established norms and traditions. The book explores the moral implications of Benjamin's radical critique and its potential consequences.

5. **Benjamin's Ghosts: Revolution in the Age of the Information Society** by Nicholas Gane
Gane analyzes Benjamin's enduring relevance in the contemporary world, particularly in light of new forms of technology and media. He connects Benjamin's insights on mechanical reproduction and the changing nature of experience to the digital age, exploring how these shifts impact violence and resistance. The book posits Benjamin as a vital guide for understanding power and dissent in the 21st century.

6. **Walter Benjamin: Philosophy, History, Aesthetics** edited by Gary Banham
This collection of essays offers diverse perspectives on Benjamin's thought, with several contributions directly addressing his theories on violence. It situates Benjamin's critique of violence within broader discussions of history, aesthetics, and political theory. The varied analyses provide a nuanced understanding of the complexities of Benjamin's views on both destructive and redemptive violence.

7. **The Origin of German Tragic Drama** by Walter Benjamin
While focusing on Baroque drama, this book is crucial for understanding Benjamin's concept of history as a site of both suffering and potential redemption. His analysis of allegorical decay in Baroque art offers a framework for understanding how violence is embedded in historical formations and can be subverted. The book's concept of "melancholy" and its relationship to historical catastrophe informs his later work on violence.

8. **Critique of Violence** by Giorgio Agamben
Drawing heavily on Benjamin, Agamben's influential work explores the distinction between divine violence and human violence, particularly in the context of law and political sovereignty. He uses Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" as a foundational text to interrogate the relationship between violence, law, and the state. Agamben's analysis reveals how sovereign power often relies on a latent, unacknowledged violence.

9. **Violence and the Sacred** by René Girard
Although not directly about Benjamin, Girard's anthropological theory of the scapegoat mechanism offers a comparative lens through which to understand Benjamin's critique of societal violence. Girard argues that social order is maintained through ritualistic violence that expels a sacrificial victim, a concept that resonates with Benjamin's observations on the cyclical nature of violence in history. Their contrasting approaches highlight different facets of violence's role in human societies.

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