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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Pedagogy, Culture and Society, Published online: 19 Jul 2016. DOI:
10.1080/14681366.2016.1210202

The final definitive version is available online:

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2016.1210202>

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**Towards a Critique of Educative Violence: Walter Benjamin and
'Second Education'**

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Towards a Critique of Educative Violence: Walter Benjamin and ‘Second Education’

Although modern systems of mass education are typically defined in their opposition to violence, it has been argued that it is only through an insistent and critical focus upon violence that radical thought can be sustained. This article seeks to take up this challenge in relation to Walter Benjamin’s lesser-known writings on education. Benjamin retained throughout his life a deep suspicion about academic institutions and about the pedagogic, social and economic violence implicated in the idea of cultural transmission. He nonetheless remained committed to the possibility of another kind of revolutionary potential inherent to true education and, when he comes to speak of this in his *Critique of Violence*, it is remarkable that he describes it as manifesting an *educative violence*. This article argues that Benjamin’s philosophy works toward a critique of educative violence that results in a distinction between a ‘first’ and ‘second’ kind of education and asks whether destruction might have a positive role to play within pedagogical theories in contrast to current valorisations of creativity and productivity.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin, education, violence, instruction, destruction, teaching-led research

Introduction

You should know, then, that there are two ways of contending: one by using laws, the other, force [*forza*]
...This policy was taught to rulers allegorically by ancient writers: they tell how Achilles and many other ancient rulers were entrusted to Chiron the centaur, to be raised carefully by him. Having a mentor who was half-beast and half-man signifies that a ruler needs to use both natures, and that one without the other is not effective.

Machiavelli, *The Prince*

For Machiavelli (1988, 61), the education of princes must teach future political rulers how human law is ineffective without brute force; the necessary intermingling of the two in the education of the ruling class was embodied by the monstrous figure of the centaur Chiron. Modern systems of mass education, in contrast, are typically defined in their opposition to violence. A UNESCO report on *Non-Violence in Education* by Jean-Marie Muller (2002, 11 & 7), for example, argues that '[e]ducating a young child may be said to mean teaching it to speak, not so much in its mother tongue as with others,' that '[s]peaking is the foundation and structure of socialization, and happens to be characterized by the renunciation of violence,' and so that '*non-violence in teaching is the first step to teaching non-violence.*' This is, Muller writes, specifically opposed to the 'confused thinking' that asserts that 'violence is "ambivalent"' and that there is "good violence" and "bad violence"' (10).

Benign Violence, Ansgar Allan's provocative study of modern schooling, is the latest work to challenge the optimism of such beliefs about educational socialization and the capacity for progressive pedagogies to not only escape from but overcome the violent inequalities of societies. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, Allan (2014, 64) points out the problems of first identifying violence with physical power and then distinguishing this from a "good" power (often identified with speech, reason and education) that is that not permeated by physical power or violence: 'Foucault was at pains to demonstrate that the violence of power could at the same time be rational, calculated and controlled. And yet, following Nietzsche, we should also emphasise the reverse and companion view, that "reasonable" power is also underwritten by violence.' Offering a 'history of benign violence' that locates 'devious forces in kindly reforms' (167), Allan unpicks the power inherent within modern education, not only in its overt or malign form whose model is the early-nineteenth century monitorial school, but also

a benign one that originates in the moral training schools of the mid-nineteenth century and extends into the current techniques of formative assessment and education for resilience and optimism.

Benign Violence unsettles Muller's claims to be able to clearly separate education from violence. Modern educators are, Allan argues, particularly vulnerable to a '*malevolent simplicity*' that ignores the complex violence of their institutions (246). Yet it is only through an insistent and critical focus on such violence that radicalism is sustained within the thought not only of Foucault and Nietzsche but also, Allan points out, that of the philosopher and cultural theorist Walter Benjamin (64-5). This article aims to take up this challenge in the context of Benjamin's lesser-known thoughts about pedagogy.

Although rooted in concrete historical circumstances, Benjamin's claims are highly speculative, at times verging on esoteric. For pedagogic reasons that will hopefully become clearer, this article does not attempt to submit a programme of practical recommendations but merely seeks to justify the claim that Benjamin's political philosophy works towards a critique of educative violence that implies a distinction between a 'first' and 'second' kind of education. While acknowledging the provocative nature of Benjamin's term *violence*, it seeks to clarify the meaning of this term in its educational context and, by way of conclusion, ask whether a critical conception of *destruction* might nonetheless have a positive role to play within the philosophy of education, in contrast to the current pedagogical valorisations of creativity and productivity.

Educative Violence?

What Allen (2014, 64) cites as Benjamin's (2003, 391-2) 'notorious remark' – that there 'is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism'

– is based on a view that recognizes with horror not only the violence that underpins the social division of labour inherent to the production of cultural works but also to the manner in which such documents are handed down to the present-day. But while Benjamin's writings on art and literature have proved enormously influential in cultural and critical theory, in the Anglophone reception of his work less attention has been devoted to his thoughts on educational transmission (for some exceptions in English, see Lehmann, 1996; Salzani, 2009; Neary and Winn 2009; Gess 2010).

Benjamin retained throughout his life a deep suspicion about academic institutions and about the pedagogic, social and economic violence implicated in the idea of cultural transmission. Having attended the Kaiser Friedrich secondary school in Berlin in two spells between 1902 and 1912, he later wrote that its corridors and classrooms were 'among the horrors that have embedded themselves most ineradicably in me – that is to say, in my dreams' (Benjamin 1999b, 601). Benjamin remembers with revulsion climbing the stairs 'with nothing before me but boots and calves, the scraping of hundreds of feet in my ears' and 'the damp odour of sweat emitted by the stone steps that I had to hasten up five times or more each day' (624); he recalls the 'perfect emblems of imprisonment: the frosted windows... the infamous carved wooden battlements over the doors' and the 'school clock that held sway above our heads' metrically beating out the 'invisible bars of our timetable cage'; and he recounts with horror the classes of Herr Knoche, a 'zealous exponent of the cane' whose lessons were 'enlivened by frequent intermezzi for thrashing.' A forty-year old Benjamin is still moved by terror before the 'antiquated forms of school discipline': the techniques of punishment ('caning, change of seats, or detention'), deference ('Only today ... am I able to appreciate how much hatefulness and humiliation lay in the obligation to raise my cap to teachers'), assessment ('the importance attached to promotion to the next

grade and to the four report cards brought home each year'), and competition ('the unfathomable shock or, rather, bewilderment' of sporting events in which he felt, if he relaxed his vigilance for only a moment, he would 'fall in ten years' time irredeemably into the power of this place: I would have to become a soldier') left an indelible print on the mature cultural critic (627).

Benjamin nonetheless remained committed to the possibility of another kind of messianic or revolutionary potential inherent in true education, one that was deeply informed by the two years he spent recuperating at Haubinda, a country boarding school in Thüringen, from 1905 to 1907. Haubinda was founded in 1901 by the progressive educationalist Hermann Lietz and modelled on Cecil Reddie's Abbotsholme School. Reddie had in turn been influenced during his studies in Germany by the progressive educational philosophies of Johann Friedrich Herbart and Friedrich Froebel. During Benjamin's stay, the school operated according to the pedagogic ideals of the educational reformer Gustav Wyneken. Benjamin's time at Haubinda must have seemed to him a utopian interruption of the discipline meted out in Berlin. Yet when Benjamin (1999a, 250) comes to speak of a perfected form of education, in his 1921 essay *Critique of Violence*, it is remarkable that he describes it as a sanctioned manifestation of a *divine* violence and therefore speaks in positive terms of the possibility of an *educative violence* [*erzieherische Gewalt*].

To hear violence spoken of in a positive as well as negative sense is, perhaps, unsettling for modern sensibilities and it is perhaps unsurprising that Benjamin's notion emerges in the context of the turbulent crises of interbellum Europe. Although the phrase *educative violence* might be taken to indicate any experience of violence that educates, there are grounds within the rest of Benjamin's writings to suggest such a violence is specifically located within the formal process of education itself. To read of

such a violence not only endorsed but located within the process of education – the sphere most often idealized as opposed to violence in all forms – is, therefore, particularly shocking. Benjamin (1999a, 250) himself admits that the ‘premise of such an extension of pure or divine power is sure to provoke, particularly today, the most violent reactions, and to be countered by the argument that, if taken to its logical conclusion, it confers on men even lethal power against one another.’

Indeed, the philosopher Axel Honneth (2009, 123-4) has recently argued that Benjamin’s ‘initially surprising proposal’ implies a moral endorsement of corporal punishment:

No different from the will of God, Benjamin seems to want to say, the will of the parents or guardians is exclusively directed toward the well-being, the salvation of those entrusted to them, their own children or pupils. Thus, the violent expressions with which they react to possible misconduct are a pure demonstration of benevolent justice ...it could be feared that here his talk of “strik[ing]” ...is meant entirely literally. The blows with which the father punishes the child's malefactions are manifestations of a just wrath and, to that extent, as such justified testimony of pure, indeed “sacred” ..., violence.

Benjamin (1999a, 250) insists, however, that such counter-arguments ‘cannot be conceded’.

The next two sections of this article therefore seek to justify Benjamin’s collapsing of the distinction between law and violence in his deployment of the ambiguous term *Gewalt* (meaning violence, force or coercion) and from this ground to distinguish an opposition not between law and violence per se but between a negative and a positive conception of *Gewalt*. The final three sections then attempt to develop the

consequences of Benjamin's remark that a positive or divine *Gewalt* finds its highest manifestation in education by introducing a conceptual distinction between a problematic 'first' and liberatory 'second' concept of education and explaining some of the destructive characteristics of the latter through a rethinking of the agency of teachers and of learners.

The Right to Violence

The term *Gewalt* in Benjamin's essay indicates power, force or authority itself and the physical violence that is employed – legally or illegally – to preserve it or to challenge it. It is therefore broader than the narrow restriction to merely physical violence that Allan criticizes in *Benign Violence*. The ambiguity of the term *Gewalt* exists because for Benjamin violence cannot be easily separated from, but is rather intimately related to, the spheres of law and justice, and consequently to the question of the coercive relationship between *means* and *ends*. The diverse and complex range of examples he gives illustrate the various ways in which violence and law come together: strike action, martial law, conscription, capital punishment, legal contracts, legal rights, police violence, revolutionary violence and, in the closing sections of the essay concerned with the deeper question of justice, the violence inflicted by the gods in the classical myth of Niobe and God's divine judgement on the company of Korah in the Book of Genesis.

As notes associated with the writing of the essay make clear, these diverse examples can nonetheless be contextualized in specific relation to historical events in Germany surrounding the general strike of March 1920. This general strike had, with the support of over 12 million workers, defeated an attempted military coup against the social democratic coalition that had itself come to government in the wake of the 1918-9 revolution (Hamacher 1991, 1137; Sprinker 1999, 132; Eiland & Jennings 2014, 130-1). Attempts to prolong the general strike by socialist and communist organizations in

western Germany were met in turn by brutal suppression from the newly restored government. In September that year, in the context of a discussion of the coup, the journal *Blätter für Reliösen Sozialismus* published a juridical analysis of the legal right to the use of *Gewalt*, prepared by Herbart Vorwerk (Jacobsen 2003, 306, n.56; Fenves 2011, 215-6).

In a series of unpublished notes associated with the writing of the *Critique of Violence*, Benjamin responds to Vorwerk's starting hypothesis that only the state has the right to use force by defending the antithesis, that only the individual has such a right. He does so from the standpoint of what, with critical reservations, he terms an *ethical anarchism*. This position does not deny a moral right to use violence *as such* but does deny it 'to every human institution, community, or individuality that either claims a monopoly over it or in any way claims that right for itself' (Benjamin 1999a, 232).

That the law seeks to assume a monopoly over force is evident, Benjamin (1999a, 280) argues in the *Critique*, from the way the 'legal system tries to erect, in all areas where individual ends could be usefully pursued by violence, legal ends that can only be realized by legal power.' Even where the use of force is permissible under certain circumstances considered as justified ends, the law always intervenes to prescribe legal regulations for its use. Benjamin gives as an example the (then) permitted use of force on children by parents and teachers in education, which extends from the compulsion to attend to corporal punishment. Benjamin's interest in this example concerns how the state, having decided force or coercion is permissible by individuals for the justified ends of education, nonetheless feels compelled to regulate such force beyond the existing laws that already legislate for imprisonment, assault and murder.

Having considered a parallel example – the state endorsing the legal right of organized labour to exert coercive force over pay and conditions through strikes (but then seeking to regulate such actions) – Benjamin concludes it cannot be a question of the *ends* pursued that invalidates violence in such instances but rather that the use of force by individuals is in itself an existential threat to the functioning of the law and its institutions. The law coercively intervenes to regulate such coercion because it fears not the ends pursued but the existence of such power in the hands of others. In this way, it is the state that insists on the separation and distinction between law and violence, as a way of concealing its own violent history of the monopolization of force as a means and, through this, the power to determine which ends are legally sanctioned. To avoid the circularity that follows when the legitimacy of using force is analysed only in relation to the *ends* pursued (since these ends have been determined by the state that has, historically, had to utilize violence as a means to its accession to power), Benjamin seeks to develop a critical analysis of violence (in its broadest sense) that considers its ethical legitimacy as a *means*, independent of any ends pursued.

Law-Making and Law-Destroying Violence

At this point, Benjamin leaves the brief allusion to violence within education behind and only returns to this theme in the conclusion of the essay, where – as noted – education is unexpectedly cited as an example of the contemporary manifestation of a positive divine violence. The essay leaves only a few hints about the kind of positive force manifested in education, clues which nonetheless point back to a continuity with his earlier writings on educational reform.

First, Benjamin delineates language as a policy of pure means operating within a sphere wholly inaccessible to the instrumentality of violence (Benjamin 1999a, 244-5). This suggestion is exemplified through the conference or parley [*Unterredung*], which

induces individuals to reconcile their interests peacefully without involving the legal system, and international diplomacy, in which conflicts are resolved case by case without the establishment of contracts (247). These claims led Jürgen Habermas (1979, 59) to insist that the contemporary relevance of Benjamin's thought lay not in its appeal to another kind of force but in guiding 'a theory of linguistic communication' for 'a materialist theory of social evolution'. It is, however, this liberal promise of social democratic consensus (and the violence this conceals) that is the precise target of Benjamin's essay. As Brendan Moran and Carlo Salzani (2015, 3-4) have pointed out, the influence of Habermas's article 'may have contributed to a kind of non-reading of Benjamin's essay' by later generations of critical theorists. This culminates in Honneth's horrified claim – when the essay was re-read – that it involves an advocacy of corporal punishment.

Second, Benjamin draws a distinction between two kinds of temporalities, one negatively associated with the secular order of law (the 'violent rhythm of impatience') and the other with the time in which messianic events unfold (the 'good rhythm of expectation') (231). Benjamin's claim about messianic temporality points to a philosophy of history that is explicitly opposed to progressive promises of social democratic evolution. Such a view point is already present in an early essay on 'The Life of Students,' associated with his presidency of (and subsequent break from) the Wyneken-inspired Berlin Free Students Association around 1914-5. In the conclusion of the essay, Benjamin (1999a, 46) speaks of the need for every student to 'discover his own imperatives, the supreme demands on his life' through which each 'will succeed in liberating the future from its deformed existence in the present.' His introductory remarks identify the view of history associated with this demand as that 'in which history appears to be concentrated in a single focal point, like those that have

traditionally been found in the utopian images of the philosophers,’ and the historical task to ‘grasp its metaphysical structure, as with the messianic domain or the idea of the French Revolution’ (37). Contrary to popular conceptions of the utopian, however, this concentrated focus of historical forces upon the deformations of the present recasts the utopian as a destructively or catastrophically redemptive and punctual overcoming of existing violence (see Charles 2010).

A fuller critique of educative violence might be derived, nonetheless, from a consideration of a distinction Benjamin draws in the *Critique of Violence* between law-making and law-destroying instantiations of violence related to the general strike. Because of the structural parallel drawn between law-making coercion in education and the workers’ strike, a brief consideration of the potential for law-destroying violence in the latter may help illuminate its presence in the former, with which we are interested.

In the strike, the ‘moment of violence... is necessarily introduced, in the form of extortion ...if it takes place in the context of a conscious readiness to resume the suspended action under certain circumstances that either have nothing whatever to do with this action or only superficially modify it’ (Benjamin 1999a, 239). The state concedes the right to strike – and thus interposes *legal* means and ends for such coercion – under such circumstances because ‘it forestalls violent actions the state is afraid to oppose. Did not workers previously resort at once to sabotage and set fire to factories?’ (245). In this way, even a general strike (in which the question of law and violence becomes acutely problematic) can function to establish and to preserve the law of the state (as with the general strike of March 1920).

This touches on the historically pernicious nature of law-making violence: to establish through violence a “peace” which guarantees its own power by monopolizing violence for the state and, for all others, substituting violence with legal rights: at ‘the

moment of instatement [it] does not dismiss violence; rather, at this very moment of law-making, it specifically establishes as law not an end unalloyed by violence but one necessarily and intimately bound to it, under the title of power' (248). This power does not annihilate the defeated but, in the place of force, accords them (ambiguously, since the situation is not one of equal power) equal rights: 'for both parties to the treaty, it is the same line that may not be crossed ...the same ambiguity to which Anatole France refers satirically when he says, "Poor and rich alike are equally forbidden to spend the night under the bridges."' (249). Inversely, both poor and rich alike have equal right to strike or the right to protest under conditions determined by the state, although only one group finds it necessary to resort to such a right. This is the kind of peace that *Benign Violence* regards with suspicion as 'just a cover "for blood that has dried on the codes": for 'when peace arrives, so does domination' (Allan 2014, 84).

This analysis of law-making violence helps us to expand upon the instrumental coerciveness of existing education institutions. This can be related to Benjamin's attack on the abstract equality of rights and the law itself. The abstract ambiguity which treats all as *equal* before the law, even as their concrete inequality is profoundly significant, exemplifies what the young Marx describes as the 'perfection of religion' in secular democracy, where the promise of heaven is brought down to earth in the secular distinction between abstract public equality before the State and concrete private inequality in civil society (Marx 1992, 222-3). In its modern incarnation, education plays a central function in liberal democratic capitalism as the principle bearer of such abstract equality: equality of opportunity rather than the more profound dictum, to each according to their need (see Allan 2014, 249).

To extract the more general discussion of law-making violence in the essay and apply it to the context of education, we could speak not merely of physical violence

against the young (and although many countries no longer permit the corporeal punishment of Benjamin's epoch, we should pause to acknowledge the violence inflicted on young students in protests around education within educational spaces and beyond) but more generally of the coercive threat of punishment or lack of reward for failure attached to assessment, attendance and participation, and of an educational instrumentalism that threatens the autonomy of the student.

As David Blacker points out, the right to education is one of the few rights that is often enshrined in law as a right that it is simultaneously compulsory to exercise (Blacker 2013, 196-7). In England, for example, the extension of this compulsion has risen from up to the age of 10 in 1870 to the current requirement to be in some form of education or training until the age of 18. We might pause to consider here if it is even possible to consider a right *not* to be educated – or more precisely, the capacity to alienate that right – and what kind of politics might be encapsulated in such a demand.

What Benjamin declares as the obligatory destruction of such legal violence is therefore predicated on the existence of violence that breaks this cycle by abolishing law without inaugurating power in its place. The *Critique of Violence* deduces such a possibility through the postulation of divine violence which, as a law-destroying force intimately connected to the notion of justice, constitutes the antithesis of law-making violence: not a 'bloody power over mere life for its own sake; divine violence is pure power over all life for the sake of the living' (250). Such violence manifests itself 'not by miracles directly performed by God but by the expiating moment in them that strikes without bloodshed, and, finally, by the absence of all law-making' (250). Because it is connected to a higher sphere of justice, beyond the law, the expiatory power of such violence remains invisible to humans. In Kantian terms, Benjamin believes that it is a necessary condition for thinking about the possibility of justice, even if empirically

unverifiable. Only the assurance of such divine violence, ‘furnishes proof that revolutionary violence, the highest manifestation of unalloyed violence by humans, is possible, and shows by what means.’ (252).

This postulate of divine violence justifies the distinction between law-making and law-destroying violence in the sphere of human activity. Drawing on the French political theorist Georges Sorel’s 1908 *Reflections on Violence*, Benjamin delineates the *proletarian* or *revolutionary* general strike from the *political* strike in the following terms:

While the first form of interruption of work is violent since it causes only an external modification of labour conditions, the second, as a pure means, is nonviolent. For it takes place not in readiness to resume work following external concessions and this or that modification to working conditions, but in the determination to resume only a wholly transformed work, no longer enforced by the state, an upheaval that this kind of strike not so much causes as consummates. For this reason, the first of these undertakings is law-making but the second anarchistic. (246)

The revolutionary general strike – exemplified, potentially, in the Paris Commune of 1871 or the revolutionary uprisings of April 1920 – escapes the instrumentalism of coercion, according to Benjamin, precisely because it does not make demands on those who have monopolized institutional power but rather embodies the very ends it pursues *as means*. It is, therefore, the ethical manifestation of pure means without instrumentalized political ends.

Benjamin claims the revolutionary general strike is the highest manifestation of law-destroying violence possible by humans (252). The distinction drawn in the conclusion of *Critique of Violence* between the violence inherent to acts of mythical

law-making and the violence associated with divine acts of law-destroying therefore supports a differentiation between “bad” and “good” violence of the kind that Muller’s report on *Non-Violence in Education* conceptually rejects. Furthermore, the existence of divine violence is attested to not only by the religious tradition for Benjamin but also by the example of educative violence, ‘which in its perfected form stands outside the law’ (250).

First and Second Education

Drawing on the structural similarity posited between the law-making power of the state over violence in education and the right to strike, it is now possible to consider whether a comparable analogy with the law-destroying violence of the revolutionary general strike might illuminate Benjamin’s provocative claim about educative violence. This structural analogy between revolutionary and educative violence – both examples of law-destroying force which are in the *Critique of Violence* delineated in opposition to their normally political or law-making forms – is repeated elsewhere in Benjamin’s writing. In the apocalyptic conclusion to *One-Way Street*, written a few years after the *Critique of Violence* in the mid-1920s, Benjamin (1999a, 487) describes the wave of post-war revolts in Europe as the first attempts by humanity to assert some kind of *Gewalt* over its new, technologically-mediated body. Under these circumstances, he writes, only proletarian revolution (and not pacifist polemics) could save humanity from the annihilation threatened when technology is concentrated in the hands of the ruling class.

Expanding on the nature of this revolutionary force, Benjamin distinguishes it from the power held by the ruling class through an analogy with teaching:

The mastery [*Beherrschung*] of nature (so the imperialists teach [*Lehren*]) is the purpose of all technology. But who would trust a flogging-master [*Prügelmeister*] who proclaimed the mastery of children by adults to be the purpose of education [*Erziehung*]? Is not education, above all, the indispensable ordering of the relationship between generations and therefore mastery (if we are to use this term) of that relationship and not of children? And likewise technology is the mastery of not nature but of the relation between nature and human. (487, translation amended)

Similarly, in his essay ‘The Work of Art of the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,’ written in the mid-1930s, Benjamin (2002a, 107) draws a distinction between two kinds of technological control, separating these as what he calls a ‘first technology’ and a ‘second technology’ on the basis of an identical definition of technological ‘mastery over nature’. ‘The first technology really sought to master nature,’ he writes, ‘whereas the second aims rather at an interplay between nature and humanity’ (107). This is again illustrated by an analogy with the learning process in children:

Revolutions are ...efforts at innervation on the part of the new, historically unique collective which has its organs in the new technology [i.e. the proletariat] ...Just as a child who has learned to grasp stretches out its hand for the moon as it would for a ball, so humanity, in its efforts at innervation, sets its sights as much on currently utopian goals as on goals within reach. (n10, 124)

Benjamin’s distinction between a first technology, which is utilized for an instrumental mastery of its object, and second technology, which aims at control of the relationship in a way that liberates an interplay between subject and object, plays upon and extends the conceptual distinction between a ‘first nature’ connected with organic

nature and the inorganic, artificial and cultural realm that has become a 'second nature' for us. What is important for this discussion is that this distinction, read back into the parallels between revolutionary and educative violence drawn in *One-Way Street* and the *Critique of Violence*, permits us to speak of two concepts of education in Benjamin's work: a 'first education' and 'second education'.

'First education' aimed at the mastery of children by adults. This is exemplified by the discipline of Knoche, who wields violence as a means to establish new ends or goals for the child, but also in the patronising coerciveness of pedagogues such as Alois Jalkotzy, which Benjamin characterizes as 'colonial pedagogy' (Benjamin 1991, 272-4)). 'Second education' aims not at the direct mastery of children but merely a control over the educational relationship. By controlling this relationship, it permits an *interplay* to arise between adult teacher and child learner, as demonstrated in the pedagogy of Wyneken at Haubinda.

Benjamin allows that a certain kind of mastery, force or violence is still involved in 'second education' but regards it as exerted over the medium of education itself – the educational apparatus – and not its apparent object, the child. This opens up a space and time of communicative interplay that complicates both the means-ends instrumentalism of first education (that the purpose of education is always something extraneous to itself) and the subject-object hierarchy inherent to such instrumentalism (that the teacher, who knows these ends, is the one who educates or emancipates the child and not vice versa).

Instruction

In order to draw some conclusions from these claims about second education, this last section will turn to a remarkable letter, written by Benjamin in 1917 to his friend Gerhard (later Gershom) Scholem, which contains *in nuce*, I believe, Benjamin's

philosophy of education. In an article criticizing the politics of the Zionest youth group *Blau-Weiss*, Scholem (1917, 26-30) had argued that the only way to influence the souls of future generations is by setting an example through work. In his response, Benjamin (1994, 93-94) insists on a crucial point: that this notion of “setting an example” be totally excluded from educational theory on three grounds. It should be excluded first, because the educator’s teaching activities do not provide any *examples* of how students should learn; second, because “showing by doing” is always limited to empirical possibility, to what the educator can currently do and not anything more, and so it inspires imitation rather than transcendence; third, because this encouragement to imitate the teacher’s example is characteristic of a belief in pure power [*Macht*], the same power negatively identified with the principle of all mythical law-making in the *Critique of Violence*, where it is distinguished from justice.

To speak of the educator setting an example conceals, Benjamin argues, that aspect which is characteristic and autonomous: that is to say, teaching [*Lehren*]. In the place of example and influence, Benjamin therefore insists on the centrality of instruction [*Unterricht*] to all ideas about education (in this, Benjamin’s ideas would seem to resonate with Gert Biesta’s (2012, 2014, 2015) recent demands to give teaching back to education). Before turning to Benjamin’s definition of instruction, it should be noted that he insists it is ‘difficult to talk about education because its order so completely coincides with the religious order of tradition’ (Benjamin 1994, 94). This not only explains the esoteric theological language utilised in his discussion but also provides the justification for the association drawn between the orders of religious tradition and education as manifestation of divine violence in the *Critique of Violence* a few years later.

Benjamin defines 'instruction' as 'education by means of the teachings [*durch die Lehre*] in its actual sense' (Benjamin 1994, 94, translation amended). This complex concept of teachings or *Lehre* plays an important role in Benjamin's early philosophy and emerges, in collaboration with Scholem, at the intersection of Benjamin's work on philosophy, language and education. For the sake of simplicity it might be glossed here as philosophically-informed knowledge that encompasses not only the spatio-temporal experience of the world given by nineteenth century natural science but also the multiplicity of others kinds of profound metaphysical experience denied by such science (see Benjamin 1999a, 93-96 & 108).

'Knowledge becomes transmittable,' Benjamin (1994, 94) insists, 'only for the person who has understood his knowledge as something that has been transmitted.' In other words, teaching is only possible for the one who grasps what she has learnt as something that was, in turn, taught or transmitted. This is quite a startling idea, perhaps, especially for many of us working in higher education. It requires us to remember how we learnt from others, to think about how our interests shaped and were shaped by that knowledge, and to foreground our own previous or ongoing conditions of ignorance or innocence within that educational process as we teach it to others, rather than forgetting or even concealing how our knowledge was acquired. As with Bertold Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* or distancing effect, it foregrounds the performativity of teaching as a way of defamiliarizing the apparent naturalness of learning. This backwards looking glance towards the origins rather than outcomes of teaching also recalibrates the focus of learning upon the ephemerality of the present, brushing the transmission of knowledge against the grain by allowing the means of education to intrude upon its expected ends.

As with the description of teaching in *One-Way Street*, Benjamin is tracing out a process of intergenerational communication or transmissibility as a space of interplay between generations. ‘Instruction,’ he writes, ‘is the only nexus [*Punkt*] of the free union of the old with the new generation. The generations are like waves that roll into each other and send their spray into the air’ (94). This is the violence enacted upon the educational scene itself in which a space is opened up through a suspension of the law to permit a communicative *interplay* between generations, one that is opposed to the mastery inherent to pedagogic violence against the student. There is much in these claims that anticipates Jacques Ranciere’s (1991) critique of ‘stultification’ as a form of pedagogic mastery in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* and, in particular, his description of the progressive pedagogization of society, although – in contrast to Ranciere – Benjamin’s teacher is not ignorant.

Importantly, and for reasons that are connected in a more complicated way to Benjamin’s theology of language, this transmission is not one of the identical replication of fixed content but always a form of translation: ‘Anyone who has not learned cannot educate, for he does not recognise the point in which he is alone and where he thus encompasses the tradition in in his own way and makes it communicable by teaching’ (Benjamin, 1994, 94). Such an idea anticipates Benjamin’s description of the oral tradition in his 1936 essay ‘The Storyteller’ and explains why he accords storytellers a place among ‘the ranks of the teachers and sages’: ‘The storyteller takes what he tells from experience... And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale ...the more completely the story is integrated into the latter’s own experience, the greater will be his inclination to repeat it to someone else someday, sooner or later’ (Benjamin, 2002a, 162 & 146). Conversely, we could begin to think of

teachers as storytellers and consider how the art of teaching might learn from such a tradition.

Nor, as we might assume, has the capacity for transmissibility been lost in the modern age of mass communication. In another exchange of correspondence with Scholem between 1934 and 1938, this time about Franz Kafka, Benjamin returns to the question of transmissibility and tradition in the context of the poverty of modern experience. Kafka's fiction details the cosmic rhythms of the prehistoric power of fathers over sons, Benjamin writes, of the older generation over the younger one (1999b, 796). Fathers, like bureaucrats, are the ones who punish, gnawing away at the younger generation's right to exist according to laws that exist but remain secret.

Significantly, Benjamin claims that Kafka's parables, instead of flattening out into meaning or information like the unfolding of a piece of paper, unfold poetically like a bud into a blossoming flower. To explain this, Benjamin argues that Kafka's 'experience was the tradition to which he wholeheartedly subscribed,' but this is a tradition which had no *Lehre* or teachings to learn, no consistent knowledge to conserve. In response to such a 'sickening of tradition,' Kafka's modernism did not, like many of the avant-garde, insist on the truth of incommunicability but rather 'gave up truth so that he could hold on to its transmissibility' (Benjamin, 2002a, 326).

Kafka's narratives seek to postpone the reproduction of the present in the future, by opening up a space in time that suspends this order. Philippe Simay characterizes this technique as 'the destructive device from which Kafka unveils the arbitrariness and violence of tradition' (Simay, 2005, 145); it corresponds with what, in the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin endorses as 'a kind of transmission that is a catastrophe' (Benjamin, 2002b, 473). This kind of unfolding – not a reproduction that flattens out into information but a fracturing of meaning that opens up a space of new possibilities –

corresponds to the ‘good rhythm of expectation’ that characterizes messianic temporality, rather than the ‘violent rhythm of impatience’ associated with the law.

In doing so, ‘Kafka’s gestures of horror are well served by the glorious field for play [*Spielraum*]’ opened up by his techniques, the same space for play that Benjamin valorizes in the generational interplay characteristic of second education. Within Kafka’s works it is those who have escaped from the family circle who are granted a glimmer of hope: the students, the fools and the messengers who Kafka inserted, like little childish tricks, into the oppressive violence of the prehistorical forces at work. As a pure means, rather than a means to an end, the practices of the students in Kafka’s novels provide a model of negative activity – a certain nihilism – that, given the nihilistic violence that surrounds them, becomes perversely useful.

On the one hand, this is to make the rather banal point that *communicability* or *transmissibility* lie at the heart of genuine education: the ability to continually transform the content in a way that makes it a form of living knowledge for each new generation of students and each individual student within a learning community. The task of instruction, therefore, is to make one’s learning *transmissible* or *communicable*. Since learning is always an encompassing of the tradition in an individual way, each for ourselves in isolation, the task of the teacher is always to give expression to the individuality of one’s own knowledge of the teachings and so to transmit them in such a way that each student can accommodate them in *their own way*.

As the comparison with Kafka’s literary techniques makes clear though, there is a moment of anarchistic violence, destruction or deformation that intrudes upon the scene of teaching in Benjamin’s (1994, 94) description of instruction. ‘*Lehre* is like a surging sea,’ he writes, ‘but the only thing that matters to the wave (understood as a metaphor for the person) is to surrender itself to its motion in such a way that it crests

and breaks. The enormous freedom of the breaking wave is education in its actual sense: instruction – tradition becoming visible and *free*.’ The language of surrendering, cresting, breaking, and clashing that runs through Benjamin’s metaphor pinpoints the violence of education in each moment of transmission, in which the learner must undergo a metamorphosis (or surrender) into the teacher and in which the content of teachings must undergo a deformation – a blasting open, hollowing or punching out of content – such that the learner can experience them as something transmitted and so as something in turn transmissible.

Destruction

Crucially, this involves a profound attentiveness to students: not just in relation to the content being taught but to the way in which their own interests, practices and anxieties make sense or even nonsense of the significance of that content, subjecting the theory or ideas being taught to the test of their experience (and not just using their experience to communicate the validity of the content). While I have emphasized the agency of the teacher – the one who seeks to master the educational environment – I would also like to conclude by suggestion that such deformation simultaneously responds or is provoked by the pedagogic demands of the student, the one whose agency is indirectly liberated by such violence.

Such a conception of instruction involves a subtle shifting of our understanding of the agency of the subject within the scene of education towards the learner’s epistemic and affective demands: not only to their interests and excitement (those dimensions we are trained to fixate upon) but also their frustration, boredom and distraction, which continually provoke the instructor to make the teachings transmissible once more. ‘I am convinced,’ Benjamin (1994, 94) writes, ‘that tradition is the medium in which the person who is learning continually transforms himself into

the person who is teaching... In the tradition, everyone is an educator and everyone needs to be educated and everything is education.' Here, it is the worldly interests of the student which act upon and teach the teacher and – because the teacher is not ignorant, but the embodiment of their scholarly expertise – upon the teachings themselves.

Benjamin's emphasis upon the central role of instruction within teaching and learning therefore suggest the need for a reconceptualization of the relationship between teaching and research within higher education. Traditional subjects need to be emancipated from the established forms of scholarly acquisition, he writes, insisting that 'it is precisely here that teaching and research should again part company' in order to establish for themselves 'rigorous new forms' (Benjamin, 1999b, 419). We should not look to research to lead to a revival in teaching, however, but instead strive for an improvement in research to emerge from the teaching: 'In principle, teaching is capable of adapting to the new strata of students in such a way that a rearrangement of the subject matter would give rises to entirely new forms of knowledge' (419).

Benjamin gives the outlines of a practice of teaching-led research here: it does not ground teaching on the expertise of established research, nor attempt to turn students into producers of research on an imitative model of the 'master' teacher (producing more 'masters' within a system of higher education that has no place for them), but rather opens up the expertise of the academic's own research to the lived experience and interests of the emerging generation. As Benjamin suggests, in the era of mass systems of higher education, there is the possibility that the new strata of students can function as agents in the educational process in a way that posits them not as 'creators' or 'reproducers' of scholarly knowledge but its deformers and destroyers. An education that is, to paraphrase Benjamin's 1931 essay on the satirist Karl Kraus, abrasive to what has been achieved and critical towards its conditions must, like the

justice he associates with the divine or messianic, itself be destructive in opposing the constructive ambiguities of law (Benjamin, 1999b, 456). 'For too long,' he adds, 'the accent was placed on creativity.'

In his most desperate and most determined responses to the violence of modernity that was to eventually destroy him, Benjamin plotted the course of those cultural figures who 'deserted to the camp of animal creation' (Benjamin 1999b, 438). Such monstrous deformations might enable us to see new pathways through the seemingly unchanging nature of human relations (Benjamin 1999b, 542). Clearing the debris from such pathways does not always require brute force, Benjamin adds, but sometimes the most refined – or, to circle back to our starting point, we might say most benign or Chironic – educative violence.

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