

## The (In-)Justifiability of Violence

### Reapproaching Benjamin's "Toward a Critique of Violence"

Walter Benjamin's "Toward a Critique of Violence" has been understood as a justification for revolutionary violence and as a demand for radical nonviolence. But what if both miss the actual point of his critique? I argue that through the lens of his later reflections on history and progress, we can reconstruct his early critique as an immanent disruptive critique of myth that is relevant for contemporary questions on progress and violence. As a disruptive critique, it primarily breaks with the dominant framework, by showing its inherent contradictions. Thereby, Benjamin moves beyond the level of appearance. What appears violent, from the dominant perspective, as a threat to the order, is not necessarily violent. What is actually violent in the precise sense is the betrayal and defeat of the possible that appears necessary, from the dominant perspective. This becomes clear when reading Benjamin's early article, together with his later reflections on history. I claim that what Benjamin later conceptualizes as the "continuous catastrophe" is precisely this underlying *actual* violence that reproduces itself as if it were our mythical fate. Thus, Benjamin's critique opens up a philosophical space of understanding the historical-political problem not as an interruptive crisis, but a continuously given blockade. In this space, that is, through his disruptive critique, it subsequently becomes possible to understand that an interruption of this continuous unfolding of the catastrophe is politically possible and necessary, even if it will appear and be rejected as "violent" from the dominant perspective. Two things follow from this, which extend beyond the dominant interpretations. Firstly, to the extent that political violence remains in the image of the great "revolution", it reproduces the dominant mythical framework of violence and victory. Although Benjamin views revolutionary violence as a historical counterpart to his idea of "divine violence", he can only mean a kind of revolution that inherently liberates itself from the idea of victory and fate. Secondly, to the extent that opening up the space not only theoretically (through critique), but also historically (through political action) depends on breaking the self-reproducing machine, change cannot be achieved through disengagement from politics that will be decried as "violent". Therefore, violence is unjustifiable for political action, but since violence already justifies itself, progressive politics has to break with this mythical cycle. If the question is how, the only true Benjaminian answer is: through a radical hope that *together* we can escape from this catastrophe. If mythic violence is already the foundation of this world, then the only hope is that in our (non-)violent political action and construction of counter communities, we can realize another world. This is rather a social transformation of geographies than a political revolution, and it is rather the problematisation of progressive change than an ethics of nonviolence.

*Critical Theory, Walter Benjamin, myth, catastrophe, politics*