

Toward a Critique of the Political Economy of Violence

Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott

Capitalism is entirely without precedent, in that it is a religion which offers not the reform of existence but its complete destruction.

Walter Benjamin. *Capitalism as Religion* (289)

I

On February 27, 2010, at 3:38 AM, and with a magnitude of 8.8, one of the strongest earthquakes ever registered in human history struck Chile, followed by many equally dramatic aftershocks and a devastating tsunami, marking what would be an exceptional year for this country. Almost two months before, the afternoon of January 12, 2010, a similar situation took place in Haiti, with even worse consequences. The Chilean earthquake, however, was also the inauguration of a series of dreadful events affecting that country in the year of its bicentenary. Soon after, while people were still fighting to recover from that terrible situation, on August 05, a copper-gold mine near the northern city of Copiapo caved in, trapping 33 miners for more than two months. This new accident attracted the world's attention until October 13, when in a sort of universal cathartic ceremony, one after the other, all 33 miners were rescued from their involuntary confinement at 2,300 feet underground. The spectacular rescue and the permanent mediatic show that continues till today were both a melodramatic testimony of humankind's redemptive potential when working together to overcome "natural disasters", and a perfect whitewashing mechanism used by the government to hide the hunger strike of 34 Mapuche *comuneros* in the south; a strike protesting the *comuneros'* unfair imprisonment under the State Security Policy on Terrorism (which, in a paradoxical way accuses them of violating private property,

forgetting that Mapuche is *the* very name of a population historically abused and expropriated). These *comuneros* were fasting from July 12 until the first week of October when, in a surprising strategy, the government decided to withdraw the charges of terrorism with which they were arbitrarily imprisoned; and to review the general Anti-Terrorist Law that was by itself a curious and horrendous archaism, given the return of democratic governments following Pinochet's dictatorship¹.

Unfortunately, all the efforts oriented to alleviate the catastrophic consequences of these "incidents" proved sterile a month later, on November 23, when a traffic accident in a leased highway took the life of 19 people in Talagante, about 40 miles southwest of Santiago. The millions spent in the spectacular rescue of the Copiapo miners were clearly not enough to hide the feeble legislation related to social security and welfare in Chile. After the general process of privatization of the former public companies, a process essential to neoliberalism, the population of our societies appears defenseless not only regarding the "natural" economic cycles of prosperity and crisis, but also regarding the "incalculable will of nature". This new accident brought to the fore the real thing: the precarious condition of the population in neoliberal times; in a country proud of its democratic tradition and exemplary republican history, precariousness was the very condition that better describes its current situation. In this sense, if the paraphernalia surrounding the epic return of the miners from the underground was efficient in silencing the still waiting victims of the earthquake and the problematic associated with the

¹ However, besides the government initiative to review specific aspects of this Anti-Terrorist Law, and the withdrawing of the charges, the main problem remains unaddressed: the concentration of land and the privilege of transnational companies and private owners over its ancestral possession by the indigenous communities. The naturalization of violence works like this: a symbolic recognition of Mapuches as an indigenous community that belongs by right to the Chilean society, and, at the same time, their actual exclusion from the basic means of production and reproduction of existence.

protests and strikes of the Mapuche *comuneros*, it was not efficient at all when we consider all these accidents as belonging to the same level. To attain this level, where natural and man-made catastrophes overlap in their effects upon the precarious condition of life, is the main task of a critique of violence unwilling to repeat the limitations of traditional criticism; a critique that is able to confront contemporary capitalism and the specific forms of life proper to it.

Sadly, the year was not over. On the morning of December 8, just a few days later, a fire in the San Miguel prison in the southeast side of Santiago took the lives of 81 prisoners who were confined there - as in any other prison in Chile and Latin America - in inhuman conditions. Of course, this last "accident" did not attract the world's attention as the miners' redemptive experience, but it nevertheless marked the bicentennial celebration of the country's Independence in a dramatic way. Regardless of the insistences in the exceptional character of the Chilean democracy (and its economic success), this collection of "natural accidents" have one thing in common - they disclosed, once again, the abysmal class difference between those few who possess all, and the rest, those who are subjected to natural laws. In fact, in her last book *Crítica de la memoria* (Cuarto Propio: 2010) Nelly Richard, an important critical intellectual of the Southern Cone addresses this overlap between the natural and the historical meaning of the catastrophe not as a pitiful irony of 'unpredictable nature' but instead as a strategy of the new right-wing government that took over the country in March of 2010, after 20 years of "transition" to democracy from the abovementioned dictatorship:

The displacement of the tectonic plates fractured the ground of what we knew, terrifying us with its uncontrollable aftershocks, which produced a sense of abandon and insecurity, while the change of the presidential scenario of March 2010 removed dramatically

the signs of memory in fearful directions, due to its unsuspected ability to empty the historico-political meaning of what we called catastrophe and tragedy (the *coup d'état* of September 1973) just before the last cataclysm of nature shattered the semantic borders of the word "misfortune" and detached it naturally from the traumatic memory of the military dictatorship (27).

Thanks to this semantic re-elaboration, the new right-wing government was able to interpellate the population as one community in order to confront external adversities in a spectacular strategy that confirmed, after so many years of frustration and impunity, the so-called national reconciliation. Nonetheless, with this *naturalization of the catastrophe* "the figure of the disappeared abandoned the field of human rights traditionally animated by a leftist sensibility (who knew about the bodies that were thrown to the sea by the army during the dictatorship) and came surreptitiously in to the world of the natural catastrophes, instrumentalized by the right-wing with the purpose of legitimizing its government of 'national reconciliation'" (10). Reconciliation in the name of the country's survival confronted now with the hazardousness of nature and its devastating consequences. Indeed, naturalization is a *political* strategy of de-politization.

Before even commenting on this "political de-politization" and on the real status of the notion of accident, let us just remark on how Richard opposes the strategy of the government, that of forgetting and impunity, whitewashing and brutal impoverishment of its population thanks to its decided neoliberal orientation, with what she calls a *critique of memory* that, on one hand, challenges these punctual mechanisms and, on the other hand, tries to disclose the complementary commodification of memory (its *museumfication*), which is symptomatic of the cultural and media institutions particular to neoliberalism, and their spectacular rhetoric. In a materialist way, memory appears

neither as the traumatic narrative of the accident nor as the official version of what would have happened in the past; instead, memory appears as a politicization of the becoming-natural of everything, as if everything were governed by natural (and naturalistic) laws. Thus, again, what would be the relationship between a critique of memory as a political strategy of de-naturalization of the catastrophe and, say, the inclement weather conditions (hurricanes, heavy storms, rivers overflow, etc.) that take the lives of thousands every year in the world? What would be *that* relationship regarding also the so-called inexorable accidents of the global system, its cyclical crisis, food shortages, pandemic diseases, etc.? Somehow these questions evoke what Paul Virilio had in mind when proposed the idea of a museum of the accident (*The Original Accident* 2007), not much as a collection of natural events, but as a place designed to interrogate their so-called natural condition in order to make them historically visible, that is to say, as historical products and effects that belong to the very logic of capitalism's expansion and development:

In order to avoid shortly inhabiting the planetary dimension of an integral accident, one capable of integrating a whole heap of incidents and disasters through a chain reaction, we must start right now building, inhabiting and thinking through the laboratory of cataclysm, the museum of the accident of technical progress (24).

Virilio's understanding of the major accidents of the 20th century establishes a connection between every new technological invention and what would appear as its tragic reverse. These reverses indicate that man-made accidents are becoming more important in contemporary history: from the sinking of the Titanic in 1912 to Chernobyl in 1986; from the Hindenburg aerial explosion in 1937 to the disintegration of the space shuttle

Columbia in 2003. Every new invention brings with it its own virtual calamity. Nonetheless, even if he is right asserting the historical conditions of these events, his distinction between natural and man-made accidents seems at least problematic today, not only due to the so-called integration of systems (nature, society), but also because the horizon in which accidents are linguistically processed concerns humankind in all dimensions. I am not presenting a disguised version of the Hegelian thesis according to which everything that happens will happen for human history, but yet, what I am proposing is a radical problematization of notions such as disaster, catastrophe and accident conceived as natural phenomena, and am claiming their reincorporation into the human dimension of existence, since in that human dimension (which we already called precarious), accidents show themselves as a particular kind of political violence that is inherent to contemporary capitalism. From hurricane Katrina to the Haitian structural crisis, from the Chilean earthquake to the global food shortage, AIDS and the like, from nuclear accidents to the proliferation of nuclear weapons, from traditional communitarian violence (the sociological caricature of subaltern negativity), to athmo-terrorism, narco-terrorism and State-terrorism, there is a whole political economy of violence that needs to be criticized². But, this critique is delayed because different mechanisms of

2 The endless discussion on terrorism that has taken place in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, indicates, *grosso modo*, these important aspects: 1) Terrorism is not accidental but inherent to the States' strategies of control and disciplining of their populations. 2) Traditional political violence related to national liberation processes, conceived as terrorism by central powers, has lost its telluric (territorial) condition with the very process of globalization, and what prevails today is a process of privatization and corporatization of violence (a sort of post-ideological de-regulation that could be related to post-fordism); and 3) the exhaustion of the telluric condition of political violence that characterized partisanship through 20th century, makes visible forms of terror that are essentially aerial, that is to say, that are oriented to the total control of life, and not just to the extension of traditional sovereignty. See, Peter Sloterdijk, *Terror From Air* (2009); and, Carlo Galli, *Political Spaces and Global War* (2010).

invisibilization, homogenization, and naturalization prevent us from grasping an integral understanding of the dynamics of contemporary violence and its consubstantial co-belonging with the very logic of intensive capitalism³.

If that is so, then what really matters is the very contradiction between progress and democracy, and not the dialectic between nature and history as the defenders of the naturalization would want it. The critique of violence should be considered, therefore, as a critique of historicism and its pervasive narratives of progress and modernization, with their correlative utopian images of humankind and social order; only disclosing the secret link between the theory of modernization and the violent condition of capitalist accumulation will allow us to grasp the global dimensions of precarious life (*blosses Leben*) beyond the mythical appealing to nature. To have disclosed this link is one of the most important contributions of Walter Benjamin; thanks to his problematization of the *catastrophe*, his critique of historicism, violence and his conception of capitalism as religion, today we can confront the task of elaborating a critique of the political economy of violence that is inherent to our global society⁴.

3 Again, the increasing discussion on contemporary capitalism and the transformation of labor seems crucial; however, let me just refer to Bernard Stiegler, *For a New Critique of Political Economy* (2010), since his analysis points to the extinction of productive labor, the transformation of the working class, the expansion of proletarianization to service and consumption related activities, and the general *stupidization* of human beings within contemporary post-labor capitalism.

4 Of course, I am referring to Benjamin's canonical texts: "Critique of Violence" (1996 [1921]); "Capitalism as Religion" (1996 [1921]); "On the Concept of History" (2001 [1940]); and, "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History'" (2003 [1940]). And apart from the innumerable references to Benjamin's works in contemporary debates, I would like to refer to Hermann Herlinghaus, *Violence without Guilt* (2009) as one of the most systematic and thoughtful readings of the German Jewish author for Latin America. What makes Herlinghaus' a rare contribution is his resistance to extrapolate speculatively Benjamin's ideas into the current situation; his strategy consists, on the contrary, in a less conventional approach that pays special attention to the cultural dynamics of global capitalism, through the questioning of the dialectical image produced by cinema and literature, as key

II

Before dealing with Benjamin's contributions, however, we need to dwell on Marx's critique of political economy in order to determine some basic orientations for our work. It is important to emphasize that Marx's critique differs from the tradition of modern criticism insofar as his understanding of capitalist economy cannot be reduced to an academic dispute, neither to a process of reformulation of that discipline. On the contrary, his readings were oriented to show the complicity between the idealistic principles of this political economy and the capitalist system as a naturalized state of things. His particular approach worked, somehow, as a process of de-naturalization oriented to find the historical agents related to every single event, therefore, instead of assuming the division of labor as a natural fact, he problematized the historical constitution of this division as the key to understand modern society; instead of assuming the category of labor as a natural principle, he proposed the notion of labor-power which serves better to understand the logic of capitalization and the extraction of surplus value; instead of contenting himself with the notion of population as the basic unity where traditional analyses started, he proposed "commodity" as a historical-concrete category useful to criticize the limitation of those analyses; instead of accepting the division between the private human being and the public citizen, he criticized the formalities of modern juridical reformism and its inherently limited

presentations of *blosses Leben* or precarious life (hence his interest in contemporary Latin American cinema and the *international narconarrative*, including the melodramatic aspects of narco-corridos). Herlinghaus goes even beyond the implicit "forgetting" of contemporary critical theory too focused on the biopolitical dimensions of the concentration camps and totalitarianism, and problematizes the increasing relevance of narcotraffic and drug-addiction, not in merely denunciative moral terms, but as a defining phenomenon of introjection of guilt and mythical authority in the fulfillment of capitalism as a destructive religion.

republicanism, and so forth⁵. In all these strategies we have a process of materialization that differs from vulgar materialism as much as it differs from any disciplinary order. This materialization is, indeed, a de-naturalization of the forces actually working in history, as history.

If these basic observations are correct, then the Marxian critique is not to be complemented by a philosophy of history, with its predetermined periods and necessary stages, since the de-naturalization implies also a relative indetermination of every social process. As a non-conventional critique, it does not allow the restitution of a new political economy or a new philosophy of history, it is rather an alternative to the objectuality and protocols defining those disciplines and an alternative to the modern tradition of criticism and restitution that defines historical thinking through a historicist and rigid narrative (from the critique of metaphysics to dialectic, genealogy, psychoanalysis, critical theory, archeology, etc.). One might say Marx's reading of capitalism goes through a process of materialization, de-naturalization, and de-mythification of the classical order of things, allowing reconsidering not only the violence of economy, but what's most important, the economy of violence⁶.

5 There is a complementary relationship between all these aspects, a complementariness that we want to invoke with the name Marx. The role of the social division of labor is presented in *The German Ideology* (1998 [1845]). His understanding of labor-power and surplus value are in *Wage-Labour and Capital* (2008 [1847]), as well as in the first volume of *Capital* (1992 [1867]). His problematization of the notion of Population is in *Grundrisse* (1993 [1857]), particularly in the introduction. And his early comments on Hegel and the limits of the bourgeois understanding of law are in: "On the Jewish Question" and "Toward a Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*" (1994 [1843]). Of course, besides the whole analysis of capitalist accumulation in *Capital*, it is in the *Communist Manifesto* (2007 [1848]) where this accumulation is shown as an essentially destructive undertaking.

6 Even though Foucault put him in the classic epistemic order where there is not much distance between his critique of political economy and that of the tradition, from the physiocrats, to Petty, Smith and David Ricardo. See, *The Order of Things* (1994). I would just argue that Foucault's reading could be, at least, relativized.

In a recent article focused on Hegel's philosophy, its impact on Marx and its subsequent critique, Vittorio Morfino elaborates a distinction between what would be a "dialectical conception of violence", and what he calls, after Louis Althusser's aleatory materialism, an archaeological approach⁷. For this archeological perspective, violence is not regarded as a predetermined function already inscribed within a historico-philosophical horizon, but rather as a material process that is at work everywhere within capitalism. Morfino then, pays special attention to the way in which Hegel's philosophy of history assigns to violence a particular role in bringing to the fore the new society that is *in nuce* within the ruins of the old regime and, therefore, he emphasizes how this childbirth figure, for which violence works as the midwife of history, is complemented by the sublation of negativity that allowed Hegel finding a final positive function for it. In other words, if violence first appears as a negative force working through history, at the end, it shows itself as a negativity determined by the total unfolding of his omniscient philosophy. Morfino, nonetheless, does not refer explicitly to the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, instead he comments particular passages of the *Science of the Logic* and *Outlines of Philosophy of Right*, works regarded as products of Hegel's mature philosophy and where violence as such (*Gewalt*) shows itself already de-materialized, as an automatic dialectical mechanism oriented teleologically to the realization of the Idea. One might add, in these works violence is de-materialized as much as it is conceived as a natural mean to a rational end. Of course, it would not be very difficult to prolong this consideration to the Marxist tradition, starting by Engels himself and by some particular and infamously mechanical sentences of Marx, and Morfino does so, but he is more interested in opposing to this dialectical understanding (that conceives violence as a necessary price in the becoming subject of the

⁷ Vittorio Morfino, "The Syntax of Violence" (2009), and Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter* (2006).

substance) its archeology, which allows a different conception focused on the material, pervasive and plural dimensions of the practice of violence upon the social body:

If we read [in this perspective], violence loses its traits of unidirectionality, of punctuality and immateriality, which are all conferred upon it by the Hegelian philosophical syntax, where violence is the necessary holy Friday on the road to Spirit (or to communism). Instead, we find violence in the plurality of its forms, in the pervasiveness and materiality of a historicity that is not dominated by the rhythm of an essence, but by a fundamental polychronism (97).

This fundamental polychronism implies also that the very notion of violence is too general and unspecific to grasp the multiple dynamics of contemporary society. It has become already an ideological category proper to the general analysis of political economy, with its naturalizing effects and whitewashing mechanisms. A critique of the political economy of violence, therefore, requires, as a complementary condition, a materialist revision of the very notion of violence to determine in which sense it is being used and to what purposes. Notwithstanding, there is a second element pointed out by Morfino that is crucial for us; in its reading of violence as a necessary yet punctual activity, the dialectical perspective inscribes it within a philosophical understanding of capitalism which is both teleological and unidirectional. This understanding comes from a representation of history proper to the XIX century and shared by the so-called philosophy of progress as well as by more sophisticated forms of evolutionism. Even if Hegel was one of the most significant detractors of that philosophy, what seems important here is not only to read the dialectical conception of history as an overcoming of the vulgar philosophy of progress, but also to discern whether dialectic itself was a more refined

elaboration of that philosophy or something else. In other words, it is important to discern up to what point the immanentization of the teleologico-transcendental horizon of the infinite progress of humanity shares with the vulgar philosophy of progress a similar representation of the relationship between history and nature, a representation that the Hegelian logic conceives as the dialectic between exteriorization and interiorization, between loss and restitution (reconciliation). Morfino is not making this observation, but his critique of the "Hegelian syntax of violence" entails a reconsideration of this very issue as one of the capital problems a critique of the political economy of violence should address. In other words, it is the critique of historicism as the self-representation of progress and modernization within capitalism.

However, even before mentioning Benjamin's *Theses on the Concept of History*, which still prevails as one of the most significant criticisms of the subterranean philosophy of history of our time (and to the progressivism of the traditional working class⁸), we should emphasize how the dialectical sublation (*Aufhebung*) conceived as a movement of interiorization and restitution implies a historization of nature (for the philosophical perspective, the Sage) as much as it implies a naturalization of history (for the natural consciousness). In that case, the archeology of violence shows the historical condition of what appears as merely "accidental" for that natural consciousness. To put it differently, when Morfino refers to Althusser's aleatory materialism he makes it possible to understand violence beyond the transitional moments of primitive accumulation (understood chronologically, *in illo tempore*); violence, on the contrary, appears now as a practice

8 Just to mention how Benjamin was already aware of the co-belonging of classic liberalism and the official communism (of the left and the right), as they shared, unknowingly, a similar conception of historical temporality. In the thesis XI ("On the Concept of History"), we read: "Nothing has so corrupted the German working class as the notion that it was moving with the current" (393).

consubstantial to capitalism itself, proliferating in diverse historical levels and not just as an "accident" related to the order of natural laws and dialectical sublations; it is the real work of capitalist's process of accumulation that cannot be referred either to an originary fictional time since it works, as Althusser would have put it, randomly, or, as Deleuze and Guattari would have said, axiomatically, beyond and despite any philosophy of history⁹. In this sense, violence as a heterogeneous, material and pervasive social practice condenses the basic capitalist operation, that is to say, in spite of the punctual (temporal and geographically limited) peace and well being that capitalism might offer, war and devastation define its historical course¹⁰. Indeed, the counter-narrative to progress and perpetual peace with which 19th century philosophy understood capitalism is colonialism, exploitation, impoverishment of world's population, and naturalization of precarious life. The random articulation of capitalist's accumulation implies, therefore, the pervasiveness of violence through space and time.

This last argument takes us to the central relationship between capitalism as a mode of production and violence as an inherent aspect of that mode. Early enough Marx realized of the flagrant contradiction between the logic of accumulation proper to capitalist society and the logic of conservation proper to its juridical discourse, whereas the first presents itself as a

9 Althusser's later writings have brought him wide attention, particularly in relationship to his readings of Machiavelli and Hegel and his elaboration of "*du matérialisme de la rencontre*" (2006 [1982]). In a similar fashion, it would be important to re-read Deleuze & Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (1982 [1972]), beyond the *succès de scandale* that this work produced in France and America. I am contending that their analyses on deterritorialization and axiomatic capitalism are pertinent alternatives and complement the Schmittian version of the nomic crisis of current international order.

10 As shown in the *Manifesto* (2007); however, a more detailed interrogation needs to be developed in relation to the inherently destructive process of capitalist production, particularly in contemporary global economy with its processes of de-proletarianization (regarding the classic working class) and re-proletarianization (regarding the informatization of economy), as Stiegler has argued (*For a New Critique*).

permanent destructive production and productive expenditure without limits, the second constitutes an attempt to conserve the variable capital within the limits of natural law, that is to say, an attempt to preserve the human existence in spite of the destructive potential of capitalist's accumulation as such. This is the contradictory kernel of capitalism, the fact that it works as a violent inscription of life within the horizon of natural law, while its logic of accumulation expresses itself as the production of *blosses Leben*, the precarious life of the anonymous workers. Having disclosed this constitutes, one might argue, Marx's radical displacement of the modern problematic of law and justice, of violence and right that characterized the bourgeois political invention of the modern judicial and political order. It is so precisely because the destructive potential of modern production requires the reinstallation of the mythical fundament of the law (altered by capitalism's secularizing dynamics) as reflected in the contractualist theories of social order, which proliferate from the XVII century on, thanks to the exhaustion of the idyllic -ideological- pre-capitalist community. Marx's communism, to put it in other words, presupposes the disclosing of the *effective operation of law* as a permanent territorialization of human existence within its own conservative horizon, while the very condition for this existence is the logic of accumulation that produces, in the first place, the working class as a historical entity. There is not life that is not, at the same time, a form of life, and law does not oppose violence as an external entity, they rather complement each other in the production and territorialization of precarious forms of existence.

To deal with this problematic, however, we will come back to the logic of sublation as it is re-approached by Georges Bataille in his so-called "Hegelianism without reserve". The importance of this author lies in his elaboration of the relationship between sacrifice, expenditure and communism, that is to say, in his particular understanding of sacrificial

violence and his criticism of Hegel's negativity as a *spectacular representation* of death. Once there, our argument will turn to Benjamin's early text "Critique of Violence", as the first problematization of the consequences of mythical violence upon bare life.

III

Of course, we are just pointing to the problematic horizon that a critique of the political economy of violence opens for thinking, but this critique is not a theoretical issue or a packed device ready to be implemented; as such, it requires from us a radical problematization of the basic notions that configure our understanding of human life, notions such as politics and the political, violence, economy, destruction, community, sacrifice and negativity, among many others, which today seem useless when confronted with the deterritorializing dynamics of global capitalism. Accordingly, we have suggested that Marx's description of the logic of accumulation is an important antecedent to read Benjamin's critique of violence, particularly when we take Marx's arguments beyond the "Hegelian syntax of violence", disclosing the contradiction between destructive production and the *effective operation of law*, to say, the inscription of life within the juridical understanding of social order. That syntax, according to Morfino, is the result of a dialectical mechanism of automatization and positivization of negativity that produces an utilitarian, punctual, and finally positive image of violence. And this is, again, the whole problem, the relationship between negativity and representation, or better, the possibility of conceiving negativity as representation. No wonder then that the so-called "Hegelianism without reserve" with which Jacques Derrida characterized Bataille's reception of Hegel (via Kojève), be an important contribution for our particular critique, insofar as his readings

of the problem of negativity and sovereignty point to the same subject¹¹.

Sacrificial violence and its relationship to politics, whether as a foundation or as a destruction of a particular order, is what first comes to mind when thinking on the French tradition inaugurated by the Great Revolution. Bataille undoubtedly belongs to this tradition (from Joseph de Maistre and Marquis the Sade to Georges Sorel, for example), but his understanding of sacrificial experience would place him even beyond that tradition, producing a sort of depoliticization that is particularly present in his writings before the Second World War¹². Indeed, Bataille's understanding of sacrifice works in two different levels; first, as an ontological exploration of experience as such that takes him to question the self-limitations of Hegel's philosophy; and then, as he deepens his notion of inner experience, sacrifice is conceived as a limitless

11 Bataille's reception of Hegel's and Kojève's philosophies permeates the totality of his writings, but the main works to keep in mind when addressing this issue are: "The Notion of Expenditure" (1985 [1933]); *The Inner Experience* (1988 [1943]); "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice" (1990 [1955]); and, *Erotism* (1986 [1957]). The objections to the Hegelian understanding of negativity as a restricted experience, along with his elaborations on expenditure and general economy, sacrifice and spectacular representation of death will be symptomatic not just of his but of the whole French intellectual reaction to the early version of the "end of history" as sustained by Kojève. In a more specific sense, what matters the most in his works is precisely the relationship between the inner experience as dissolution of the ego and the radical negativity as the realization-exhaustion of sovereignty. Even though Derrida relates all these topics to the problem of writing in a complex way that is beyond our current concern, his reading remains a fundamental contribution: "From Restricted to General Economy. A Hegelianism without Reserve" (1992 [1967]).

12 It is, indeed, the project of "The Notion of Expenditure" and *Summa Atheologica* (which first part is *The Inner Experience*), a project concerned with the critique of restricted economy, limited non-sovereign experience, and negativity. For Bataille, sacrifice does not have a foundational character as in the French tradition of sacrificial violence; it is rather a de-activation of politics inasmuch as politics should not be the result of an instrumental use of sacrifice or martyrdom. Here lies the main difference with Sorel and his foundationist understanding of the general strike (*Reflections on Violence*, 1999). But besides this, here also lies the a-moral principle of his criticism that distinguishes him from the utilitarian and normativist traditions. See Jesse Goldhammer, *The Headless Republic. Sacrificial Violence in Modern French Thought* (2005).

negativity that unworks any political employ the French tradition might have granted to it, whether as revolutionary martyrdom or as transgressive crime.

His critique of Hegel and the concept of negativity is, therefore, not a naïve refutation or a surreptitious sublation; it is rather an interrogation of the dialectical *Aufhebung* that assigns to negativity a finally positive function within the system, as it is view from the Sage's perspective (Hegel's). Derrida comments:

The Hegelian *Aufhebung* is produced entirely from within the discourse, from within the system or the work of signification [...] The *Aufhebung* is included *within* the circle of absolute knowledge, never exceeds its closure, never suspends the totality of discourse, meaning, law, etc. [...] The Hegelian *Aufhebung* thus belong to restricted economy, and is the form of passage from one prohibition to another, the *circulation* of prohibitions, history as the truth of the prohibition ("From Restricted to General Economy" 275).

In this sense, he is not just criticizing some particular aspects of Hegel's philosophy (let's say his presentation of the clash between the lord and the slave), he is, on the contrary, deactivating the dialectic's general operation, placing it in a sort of suspension, in order to reach the radical consequences of negativity and sacrifice, beyond any systematic retrieval¹³. Hence, this radical negativity is inassimilable to the philosophical system as much as it is incommunicable; it implies the futility of philosophical discourses and the dissolution of

13 Derrida states: "The blind spot of Hegelianism, around which can be organized the representation of meaning, is the *point* at which destruction, suppression, death and sacrifice constitute so irreversible an expenditure, so radical a negativity -here we would have to say an expenditure and a negativity *without reserve*-that they can no longer be determined as negativity in a process or a system" ("From Restricted to General Economy" 259).

the ego, which is also the exhaustion of the so-called subject of philosophy and its endorsed sovereignty¹⁴.

Death and erotism (*la petite mort*) are the exemplary cases of this radical negativity, as much as they appear as inescapable experiences through human history, but the problem for Bataille is how to elaborate these experiences when they imply the suspension of the subject and the principle of reason that might justify them? How to speak of them when they suspend the very chance of a discursive (theoretical) communication? How to think them when they cannot be determined any longer within the system? This would be the challenge that Bataille presents for a critique of the political economy of violence, not only how to imagine the community beyond discursive, sacrificial and moral foundations? But also, how to deal with negativity, to say, with the experience of sacrifice and expenditure as inescapable human dimensions, without *falling back* into the system and its rational and normative interdicts? Foucault thought this precisely as *transgression*, not the *petite* crime and sin of everyday life, but the modern experience of the outside as a constitutive immanence without a subject ("Preface à la transgression" 2001 [1963]).

This transgressive experience does not have anything to do with the vulgar representation of Bataille as a champion of desire and erotic literature, in fact his attention to sexual transgressions was over-determined by his research on death as

14 The relationship between this suspension of discursive communication and the community based upon radical sacrifice is what marks Bataille's communism, and his particular understanding of inner experience as the realization-exhaustion of sovereignty (see, *The Accursed Share, Volume III: "Sovereignty"*, 2007). Of course, his understanding of sovereign experience is far away from the conventional notion of sovereignty, something pointed out by Maurice Blanchot and Jean-Luc Nancy, among others. Roberto Esposito (*Communitas* 2003) has extended this analysis to the possible link between Bataille's *unpolitical* conception of community and Heidegger's destruction of metaphysics, paying critical attention to Jean Paul Sartre and his symptomatic reduction of the former to the condition of a "new mystic". See also Alphonso Lingis ("Contact and Communication" 2009), as a contribution oriented to the possibility of a non-discursive communication founding the community. This would be also the right place to interrogate Bataille's and Benjamin's "theories" of language, something we can just mention now.

the most defining experience of negativity. But then, how to relate to this experience in a non-theoretical, systematic, or even philosophical way? Bataille's works after the Second World War have been considered to be the elaboration of an anthropological economy of the gift (potlatch), very much in the tradition of Marcel Mauss, and the three volumes of *The Accursed Share* (2007) as the consolidation of his thought. However, in his reflections regarding the inner experience as the realization-dissolution of sovereignty and in his text dedicated to Kojève's reading of Hegel ("Hegel, Death and Sacrifice" 1990 [1955]), this problem was already articulated: if sacrifice is an inescapable human practice¹⁵, and if Bataille's goal is to think this practice beyond the Hegelian *Aufhebung*, then Hegel's presentation of negativity in general (and sacrifice in particular) seems to him limited and theoretically constructed, closer to a comic or spectacular representation than to the real experience as seen from the natural consciousness¹⁶. To put it in other words, while Hegel realized of the importance of sacrifice (beyond religious rituals), his presentation of it is merely symbolic or spiritual, forgetting that sacrifice as such has a corporeal dimension that cannot be overcome by the discourse of the Sage:

15 "[A]t all costs, man must live at the moment that he really dies, or he must live with the impression of really dying ("Hegel, Death and sacrifice" 20).

16 Bataille's, of course, understands this comic or spectacular representation as uncompleted but necessary, even though in Hegel it is the dramatic representation that has a privilege: "Man does not live by bread alone, but also by the comedies with which he willingly deceives himself. In Man it is the animal, it is the natural being, which eats. But Man takes part in rites and performances. Or else he can read: to the extent that it is sovereign -authentic-, literature prolongs in him the haunting magic of performances, tragic or comic (20). To address this so-called sovereign literature, as the one comporting a presentation of the sacrificial experience would open a whole new dimension in Bataille and in his relationship to Benjamin's *Trauerspiels*. Let me just refer to Jorge Luis Borges as a contemporary example of this "sovereign literature", among his many short narratives, "The South" (1998) presents the case of an inescapable sacrifice in a duel without other resolution than death, without sublation.

Between Hegel and the man of sacrifice there nevertheless remains a profound difference. Hegel was *conscious* of his representation of the Negative: he situated it, lucidly, in a definite point of the "coherent discourse" which revealed him to himself. That Totality included the discourse which reveals it. The man of sacrifice, who lacked a discursive consciousness of what he did, had only a "sensual" awareness, i.e., an obscure one, reduced to an unintelligible emotion ("Hegel, Death and Sacrifice" 21).

This negative experience without reserve is not just the act of dying; it requires understanding negativity in an immanent way, without redemption. What is at stake here, of course, is a conception of history unredeemed; already divorced from any philosophy of history that might appeal to an utopian future of reconciliation. Bataille's communism is indeed an effervescent landscape full of desire and conflicts that is not subsumed into the theological image of a peaceful community. Sacrifice, loss, and expenditure, therefore, are not aspects of the human experience to be discarded once the kingdom of reason prevails on earth; on the contrary, the current spectacularization of violence as a "secular" ritual in the capitalist society is due to both, the capitalization of expenditure and the normative justification of sacrifice. Capitalism as religion means the reduction of the inner experience to an individual relationship with the gods of productive consumption, without gift, without loss. This is so because Bataille is criticizing restricted economy not from a moral viewpoint, rather from that Marxian understanding of destructive production and accumulation. A critique of the political economy of violence should, therefore, orient itself to this contribution as one that enables the indetermination of experience and opposes its capitalization. Here lies again an important coincidence between Bataille's critique of restricted economy and Benjamin's critique of law-

positing and law-preserving violence since both work as an over-determination of experience from the means-ends rationality.

IV

Of course, we have just suggested this rich zone of contact between Bataille and Benjamin, beyond the coincidence of it having been the first who kept the *Arcades'* manuscripts when the second decided to leave Paris in 1940. Their relationship to Surrealism and Marxism, their accounts of historicism and its idealistic determination of experience, their versions of accumulation and of capitalism in general, as well as their confluent understanding of non-discursive communication, sacrifice and violence, would be a solid ground to develop further reflections. However, let us just come back to the horizon opened by a critique of the political economy of violence, since here Benjamin's early texts are indisputable contributions.

In "Critique of Violence", a 1921 text that has become a referential point in many contemporary debates, Benjamin elaborated a distinction between mythic and divine violence, while the first is expressed by law-positing and law-preserving mechanism (institutionalization, constitutions, decrees, the State, the army and the police), the second has no justification and manifests itself as a radical indetermination of the social order, which is the result of the foundational violence of law:

If mythic violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythic violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the later strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood [...] Mythic violence is bloody power over mere life [*blösset Leben*] for its own sake; divine violence is pure power over all life for the sake of the living. The first demands

sacrifice, the second accepts it ("Critique of violence" 249-250).

It would be naïve, however, to present this text without even mentioning the context in which it has become an already-read contribution. One of the first of these readings was Jacques Derrida "Force of Law" (2002 [1990]), where Benjamin appeared as a member of the Jewish-German intelligentsia advocating for an anti-parliamentarian revolutionary action, close to Carl Schmitt's latter "Nazism". This brought a wide reaction with many excellent contestations, being one of them the already mentioned book by Hermann Herlinghaus, *Violence without Guilt* (2009), which is a problematization of *bare life* in contemporary Latin America¹⁷. Indeed, while most of the contributions to this debate remain within the textual implications of Derrida's and Benjamin's works, Herlinghaus interrogates the state of affairs in Latin America and the global world (narcotraffic as a pervading practice) through an actualization of Benjamin's critique of violence and religiosity, and particularly, through an interrogation of the current condition of bare life:

To reapproach Benjamin's term *blosses Leben* requires that we develop interpretative strategies from an end other than that of abstract ontological speculations, or of inertias that tend to take the normative constructedness of modern society as the self-fulfilling impulse of transcendental will. Endangered human existence has begun to acquire unprecedented shapes of global immanence, and its

17 Other contributions of a similar outstanding quality are: Agamben (*State of Exception*, 2005 [2003]); Forster (*Walter Benjamin y el problema del mal* 2003); Idelver Avelar ("Specter of Walter Benjamin. Morning, Labor, and Violence in Jacques Derrida" 2004), which is one of the most elegant challenges to Derrida's reading from a Derridian perspective; and the recent book of Federico Galende (*Walter Benjamin y la destrucción* 2009), probably the most rigorous reading of Benjamin's early texts in relationship to violence, destruction and the *effective operation of law*.

distribution follows avenues that are as arbitrary as they are paved with cynical common sense, trying to reason away the heightened vulnerability of the world or to close up permeable borders by escalating sovereign rule (*Violence without Guilt* 6).

The problem remains, therefore, as what kind of violence characterizes the current global articulation of capitalism? Narco-terrorism, atomic or highly technological terrorism, neo-corporative violence (post-fordist), post-liberationist political partisanship (with the dramatic exception of the Palestine situation), and quotidian exclusions, discriminations and so on. The global articulation of different processes of accumulation, read beyond the "syntax of violence", means that the complexity of today's world lies in the combination of innumerable kind of violence that belong to what Benjamin called mythic, that is to say, bloody violence exerted upon bare life. Here, the divine or revolutionary violence that destroys any mythical authority is what Benjamin presented as an alternative to the mythic foundation and preservation of order. Accordingly, mythical violence operates through natural or rational theories of right, and through the law-enforcing and law-positing activity of the police¹⁸, while revolutionary violence does not have anything to do with the partisan or mythical representation of actual revolutionary processes, insofar as those processes show themselves captured by the dialectical rhythm of lawmaking and foundationalism. Here again the critique to sacrificial violence

18 "Police violence is [...] lawmaking, because its characteristic function is not the promulgation of laws but the assertion of legal claims for any decree, and law-preserving, because it is at the disposal of these ends" ("Critique of Violence" 243). As in the old Zizekian joke, when a police shoots a pedestrian who is going to his house five minutes before the curfew, claiming that he knows where that pedestrian lives and therefore he wouldn't be able to get to his house on time, police for Benjamin embodies the automatic mechanism of mythic violence, positing and preserving law at the very same time. Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* and Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* are good examples of this automatic mechanism as well.

as the fundament for any political order puts together Bataille and Benjamin.

Divine violence, which in the human sphere is revolutionary, is not sacrificial or partisan; it is just the proliferation of mere life in spite of the permanent territorialization that law exerts upon it. This is what law cannot tolerate, the possibility of a life that proliferates even beyond its sanctioned order, not because life pre-exists this order, but because as such life cannot be permanently reduced to law. The mere chance of this proliferation is what law calls violence, since: "that violence, when not in the hands of the law, threatens it not by the ends that it may pursue but by its mere existence outside the law" ("Critique" 239).

Capitalism as religion, therefore, describes the interpellation of mere life, that is to say, as a precarious form of existence it is inscribed within the horizon of law and subjected to it (it actually becomes "the subject of law") by the introjection of guilt that works, as Herlinghaus notes regarding the German word *Schuld*, in both senses, as infinite moral lack and as unpayable debt. This is again, a coincidence between Marx's critique of modern human rights and its adscription to the abstract notion of juridical recognition, and Benjamin's challenge to the law's monopoly of violence, due to the mythical investment in its authority. If Marx criticized capitalism as planetary circulation and destructive production, Benjamin enables a critique of this spatialization of time from the viewpoint of endangered existence. From that perspective, mere life proliferates beyond the exceptionalism that defines imperial powers¹⁹, and guilt works as a universal mechanism of control and subjectivization. The critique of the political economy of

19 To make this difference between proliferation of mere life and exceptionalism, finally between Benjamin and Schmitt, is the main goal of Agamben's *State of Exception* (2005).

violence will be concerned, therefore, with the awakening moments in which history unties itself from the *effective operations of law*, to say, with the moment in which planetary circulation is interrupted. These moments are fully described in Benjamin's works, moments of profane illuminations and interregnum that help to rethink violence beyond its mythical representation. Hence, the *interregnum* suspends the justification of violence according to its ends or means, presenting its proliferation as a de-naturalization of law.

Coming back to the Mapuche *comuneros*, it is not strange at all that this pagan population, which "resisted" Christianity and civilization, and which perseverates as a wild manifestation of bare life, appears now as the very embodiment of negativity, violence and terrorism (against private property). Precisely now, when the financial neoliberalization and the consequent globalization of Latin America have disarticulated the modern link between the Nation-State and the territorial sovereignty, putting an end to the modern political space of representation (domestication). Because the Mapuches are not an ancestral remainder of an untouched pre-modern community, a totemic fetish naturalized in the discursive orders of national history ("once upon a time"), anthropology, sociology, and the like; Mapuches is the name of a material process of production and proliferation of precarious life within the context of capitalist accumulation. They, as the immigrants crossing the desert of Mexico to sustain American economy, are unnatural condensations of the political economy of violence. To criticize this violence requires a thinking beyond identity, since identity is already an insemination of mythical violence; it requires a materialist understanding of history as a permanent process of destructive accumulation; indeed, a critique of the political economy of capital.

Fayetteville, January 2011.

References:

- Agamben, Giorgio. *State of Exception*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Althusser, Louis. *Philosophy of the Encounter. Later Writings, 1978-1987*. New York: Verso, 2006.
- Avelar, Idelber. "Specter of Walter Benjamin. Morning, Labor, and Violence in Jacques Derrida" *The Letter of Violence. Essays on Narrative, Ethics, and Politics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. 79-106.
- Bataille, Georges. "The Notion of Expenditure" *Visions of Excess. Selected Writings, 1927-1939*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985. 116-129.
- Erotism: Death and Sensuality*. California: City Lights, 1986.
- Inner Experience*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1988.
- "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice" *Yale French Studies*, No. 78 *On Bataille* (1990): 9-28.
- The Accursed Share*, 3 Volumes. New York: Zone Books, 2007.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Moscow Diary*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986.
- "Critique of Violence" *Selected Writings Vol. 1, 1913-1926*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997. 236-252.
- "Capitalism as Religion", *Selected Writings Vol. 1, 1913-1926*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997. 288-291.
- "On the Concept of History" *Selected Writings Vol. 4, 1938-1940*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003. 389-400.
- "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History'" *Selected Writings Vol. 4, 1938-1940*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003. 401-411.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. "The South" in: *Collected Fictions*. New York: Penguin Books, 1998. 174-179.
- Deleuze, Gilles & Felix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipous. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Viking, 1982.
- Derrida, Jacques. "From Restricted to General Economy. A Hegelianism without Reserve" *Writing and Difference*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. 251-277.
- "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'" *Acts of Religion*. New York: Routledge, 2002. 228-298.
- Eisenstein, Sergei. *Strike*. 1925.
- Esposito, Roberto. *Communitas. Origen y destino de la comunidad*. Buenos Aires: Amorrortu, 2003.
- Forster, Ricardo. *Walter Benjamin y el problema del mal*. Buenos Aires: Altamira, 2003.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things. An Archeology of Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage, 1994.

- “Prefáce à la transgression (en hommage à Georges Bataille)”
Dits et écrits I, 1954-1975. Paris: Gallimard, 2001. 261-278.
- Galende, Federico. *Walter Benjamin y la destrucción*. Santiago: Metales Pesados, 2009.
- Galli, Carlo. *Political Spaces and Global War*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
- Goldhammer, Jesse. *The Headless Republic. Sacrificial Violence in Modern French Thought*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2005.
- Herlinghaus, Hermann. *Violence without Guilt. Ethical Narratives from the Global South*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Kafka, Franz. “In the Penal Colony” *Essential Kafka*. Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2007. 79-112.
- Lingis, Alphonso. “Contact and Communication” Andrew J. Mitchell & Jackson Kemp Winfree Ed. *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille. Community and Communication*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2009. 119-132.
- Marx, Karl & Friedrich Engels. *The German Ideology*. New York: Prometheus Book, 1998.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital, Vol. 1. A Critique of Political Economy*. New York: Penguin Classics, 1992.
- Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. New York: Penguin Classics, 1993.
- “On the Jewish Question” *Selected Writings*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994. 1-26.
- “Toward a Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*. Introduction” *Selected Writings*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994. 27-39.
- The Communist Manifesto*. Minnesota: Filiquarian Publishing, 2007.
- Wage-Labour and Capital*. Maryland: Wildside Press, 2008.
- Morfino, Vittorio. “The Syntax of Violence. Between Hegel and Marx.” *Historical Materialism* 17 (2009): 81-100.
- Richard, Nelly. *Crítica de la memoria*. Santiago: Ediciones Universidad Diego Portales, 2010.
- Sloterdijk, Peter. *Terror From the Air*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009.
- Sorel, Georges. *Reflections on Violence*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Spielberg, Steven. *Minority Report*. 2002
- Stiegler, Bernard. *For a New Critique of Political Economy*. Cambridge, U.K.: Polity, 2010.
- Virilio, Paul. *The Original Accident*. Cambridge, U.K.: Polity, 2007.