

Violence and Politeness

From Walter Benjamin's Critique to the Streets of Chicago¹

[Version edited for publication with *Constellations* available here:
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1467-8675.12465>]

"...war, with infinite patience, watches every act." - Wilson Carey McWilliams

"Patience is in any case at the heart of politeness and, of all the virtues, is perhaps the only one that politeness adopts without modification." – Walter Benjamin

Introduction:

In his 'Critique of Violence' (*Zur Kritik der Gewalt*), written in Germany between two World Wars, Walter Benjamin (1996a) strikes at the state violence, and threats of violence, that make and keep law and order. He does not reject violence *per se*, which he argues might sometimes be just, but rather the right of the state and the ability of the law to determine when that is the case, that is, the essence of sovereignty as defined by Max Weber. (1946, p.78) At the outset of his essay, in a few short pages, Benjamin dismantles the complementary justifications of violent means by lawful ends, and violent ends by lawful means, thus undoing the formal legitimacy of positive law and the substantive legitimacy of natural law, respectively. (p. 237) Regarding the former, he argues that the very idea of instrumental violence is inextricable from that of law. He declares, "all violence as a means is either lawmaking or law-preserving." (p. 243) By implication, "a totally nonviolent resolution of conflicts can never lead to a legal contract." (Ibid.) As he explains, a contract authorizes force in the case of its violation, that is, the law-preserving violence of "enforcement." The normal, "peaceful" order in which contracts are made

and kept, he reminds us, is secured by the threat, and frequently the extra-legal practice of violence on the part of the police, who thus perform the function Hegel assigned them, sweeping up the disorder and failures endemic to market economies. (See Benjamin, *Ibid.*; Hegel 1991, pars. 231-239) In short, Benjamin argues that the legal state underpinning market society reflects not reason but power. In turn, rather than seek a rational basis for law, he introduces the enigmatic notion of just, or “divine” violence (*göttliche Gewalt*), which does not establish, but instead destroys legal boundaries. (See Benjamin 1996a, p. 249, 1974a, p.199)

Benjamin’s essay is commonly read as a philosophical support for revolutionary politics. On one hand, it de-legitimizes the state monopoly of violence; on the other, it theologizes its destruction. For many, it therefore serves a more general antinomianism. Expanding on the premise that violence is not the exception, but rather the basis for the normal order, and not infrequently invoking Benjamin’s example, political theorists have posited violence at the heart of social hierarchies, group identities, the coherence of a self, even of concepts, that of violence included.² In this respect, the English translation that substitutes violence for the German term *Gewalt* – a term that can also signify power or force more generally - is apt. A capacious understanding of violence deliberately leaves little room for the pretense of a nonviolent political order. Indeed, to imagine a politics without violence is to invite mystification.

What, though, of those already demystified? Benjamin’s critique may ring true to those who live on the South and West sides of Chicago, for instance, but few there need reminding that state and police violence, and threats thereof, are not necessarily just. Nor, however, do all see the state as the only problem, or look to its revolutionary overthrow

for relief. How is Benjamin's critique relevant for those beset by violence, legal and otherwise, in this city? One could very well align Benjamin's account of divine violence with proposals for police "abolition".³ However, as proponents of the latter know, any proposal to destroy the prevailing order will raise questions regarding resolutions of conflict without recourse to the police and criminal justice system (a recourse often seen as lacking for most vulnerable today). In this essay, I make the case that Benjamin's essay does not only dispel legitimacy - and foretell or even exhort revolution - but also offers theoretical resources for those seeking nonviolent alternatives to law-enforcement. In particular, I focus on an intriguing suggestion he makes in the first part of his essay, namely, that although we cannot put an end to violence by means of an ostensibly legitimate state authority, a nonviolent politics is possible whenever we adopt nonviolent or "pure means" (*reine Mittel*) to mediate conflicts. (Benjamin 1974a, p. 94)

In what follows, I first elaborate on Benjamin's conception of nonviolent means, focusing especially what he describes as their subjective preconditions and objective manifestations, namely "politeness" (*Höflichkeit*) and "technique", respectively. To do so, I move from Benjamin's 'Critique' to several minor texts that address these and related concepts. I then reflect on and critically revise Benjamin's concepts in light of extra-legal strategies employed by the anti-violence organization 'Cure Violence Chicago' as depicted in the film 'The Interrupters'. Finally, I situate strategies of this kind in relation to large-scale racialized geographies of violence in the city, considering the limits and possibilities of nonviolent means as Benjamin described them.

I. Walter Benjamin on Nonviolent Means

Benjamin's primary example of nonviolent means is the General Strike. Following Georges Sorel (1941), Benjamin distinguishes the general strike – also described as revolutionary, or Proletarian - from “political” strikes. Whereas a political strike is a violent means to a legal end, the general strike posits no particular goal. It neither aims to replace one set of rulers with another nor to improve contractual terms for better pay or improved labor conditions. (1996a, p. 246) Indeed, its general character precludes concrete demands, since it mobilizes workers across firms and sectors who have diverse, even conflicting interests and grievances. Rather than serving the designs of a given group, the general strike is a “pure means” that sets the stage for “a wholly transformed work, no longer enforced by the state.” (p. 246) For this very reason, Benjamin points out, the same state that authorizes the strike as a means of improving terms of employment will take emergency measures against a general strike, which it (rightly) sees as an attack on the legal order as such. By provoking this response, the general strike reveals the contradictions of a constitutional order that grants a legal right that can threaten its own conditions of existence. For Sorel (1941, 90), this was precisely the point of the strike, namely, to disrupt all negotiation between classes and force the violence of the bourgeois order out into the open.

As Benjamin and Sorel both acknowledged, such disruptions can be highly destructive, even “catastrophic,” not least in their effects on the economy. (Benjamin 1996a, p. 246) Related problems preoccupied Benjamin's contemporary, Carl Schmitt (1988 (1923)), who also credited Sorel for his acute diagnosis of the extra-legal basis of a constitutional order. However, whereas Schmitt (2005 (1922)) promoted a leader empowered to suspend ordinary legal procedures in case of emergency and to produce

the “normal” preconditions for their operation, Benjamin criticized the circular legitimation of a nonviolent order secured by the threat – and the ongoing practice - of state violence. Again following Sorel, Benjamin (1996a) commended the General Strike as “the highest manifestation of unalloyed violence by man,” contrasting it with the “pernicious” executive and administrative forms of violence that establish and maintain law. (p. 252) Beatrice Hanssen (1997) takes this to mean that “even if it were to produce bloody or catastrophic effects, the proletarian strike remained fundamentally pure... as it gestured towards the coming of a new historic era, on the other side of all mythic violence.” (p. 243-4) She thus implies that means are purified by their ends, and that revolutionaries are absolved of responsibility for the “bloody” actions leading to “the other side”.⁴ For Benjamin, nothing could be further from the case. The destruction of the legal order does not absolve actors of responsibility, but instead leaves them to struggle with their own decisions concerning actions whose just or unjust character are no longer determined by the law. If anything, Benjamin (1996a) raises the stakes of such decisions when he asserts that divine violence can never be identified with certainty, even in particular cases. (p. 252) The alternative to mythical authority, he insists, is not a “naïve” permissiveness but instead a solitary struggle with “commandments” to which we remain responsible.⁵ (p. 250; Cf. p. 252) Specifically, Benjamin cites the commandment ‘Thou Shalt not Kill,’ which serves as a “guideline” with which people must “wrestle... in solitude” rather than a rule with specified applications or penalties. One can never be sure that killing is right, even if it may not always be wrong (as indicated by the fact that Judaism “expressly rejected the condemnation of killing in self-defense”). (Ibid., 250)

Like Sorel, Benjamin refrained from programmatic designs for a “wholly transformed work.” However, he did not without reservation embrace revolutionary violence, nor heroize sacrifice in the service of uncertain and potentially tragic ends, as did Georg Lukács (2014). Risk and sacrifice have their place in political struggles, to be sure, and Benjamin was hospitable to revolutionary politics.⁶ However, he also conceptualized less dramatic, quotidian forms of nonviolence that do not destroy legal orders by preventing compromises but instead produce “agreements” in the absence of legal sanctions. He writes,

Nonviolent agreement (*Einigung*) is possible wherever a civilized outlook (*Kultur des Herzens*) allows the use of unalloyed means of agreement (*reine Mittel der Übereinkunft*). [...] Heartfelt politeness (*Herzenshöflichkeit*), sympathy, peaceableness, trust, and whatever else might here be mentioned, are their subjective preconditions. Their objective manifestation, however, is determined by the law [...] that unalloyed means are never those of direct, but always those of indirect solutions. They therefore never apply directly to the resolution of conflict between man and man, but only to matters concerning objects. [...] For this reason technique in the broadest sense of the word is their most particular area. Its profoundest example is perhaps the conference, as a technique of civil disagreement. For in it not only is nonviolent agreement possible, but also the exclusion of violence in principle is quite explicitly demonstrable by one significant factor: there is no sanction for lying [...] This makes clear that there is a sphere of human agreement that is nonviolent to the extent that it is wholly

inaccessible to violence: the proper sphere of “understanding,” language.

(Benjamin 1996a, p. 244. Translation modified; Cf. 1974a, p. 191)

In this passage, Benjamin parts ways with Sorel, giving a very different theoretical and political inflection to the language of pure means.⁷ However, in his ‘Critique’, he says little more about a civilized outlook (*Kultur des Herzens*, literally “culture of heart”), a phrase few will associate with the General Strike. No doubt, this is one reason readers have generally focused instead on the grander themes of class struggle and revolutionary violence. However, those who aspire to abolish state violence, and those already well acquainted with its absence, have all the more reason to be interested in nonviolent means of agreement. For further insight, I turn now to several minor texts in which Benjamin discusses “politeness” and related concepts.

In a short passage from his “Ibizan Sequence” (written in 1932), Benjamin (1999a) declares “The true mediator, the product of the conflict between custom (*Sittlichkeit*) and the struggle for existence (*Kampfes ums Dasein*), is politeness.” (p. 587. Cf. Benjamin 1974b, p. 402) Politeness, he explains, “... is nothing and everything, depending on the way it is regarded.” (Ibid.) It is nothing when it is merely for “appearances,” [*Schein*] superficially masking the absence of moral agreement and the unresolved character of struggle. The latter is often counseled for holiday dinner parties, at which one is advised to avoid topics of conversation that might reveal pointed political or religious differences of opinion and so upset a (superficially?) cheerful gathering. However,

The very same politeness is everything – namely, when it frees itself, and thus the proceedings (*Vorgang*), from convention... then true politeness comes into its own, since it tears down these barriers... it widens the conflict past all bounds, while at

the same time granting entry – as helpers, mediators, and conciliators – to all those forces and authorities it had excluded. Anyone who allows himself to be dominated by the abstract picture of the relationship in which he finds himself with his opponent will never be able to make anything but violent attempts to gain the upper hand... Whereas an alert openness to the extreme, the comic, the private, and the surprising aspects in a situation is the advanced school of politeness... Of all the virtues, [patience] is perhaps the only one that politeness adopts without modification. As to the others, which a godforsaken conventionality imagines could receive their due only in a “conflict of duties,” politeness as a muse of the middle way has long since given them this due – that is to say, a real chance for the underdog.” (Benjamin 1999a, pp. 587-8; 1974b, p. 402)

Benjamin’s use of the term *Höflichkeit* is characteristically idiosyncratic. The German word can also be translated as courtesy, or more literally as ‘courtliness,’ from ‘*Hof*’ (court). However, the politeness Benjamin describes is not reducible to courtly manners and dispositions - ritualized practices of consumption, lower thresholds of shame, etc. – whose popular dissemination Norbert Elias (1978) associated with the “civilizing process.” As Benjamin conceives it, politeness is not a conventional virtue but rather a virtuosic disposition that transforms forces and authorities - including interests and norms – into mediators between parties who are not bound by enforceable rules and conventions.⁸

So conceived, politeness defies formalization. Conventional manners can limit physical violence and minimize offense, but they can also mask rather than placate hostilities, and superficial politeness can even provoke hostility (consider the phrase,

“with all due respect”). For those thinking of those dinner parties, remember, politeness of the sort Benjamin describes is for those of the advanced school. (1999a, *op cit*) What, though, would one learn in this school? In a passage that follows his discussion of politeness in the ‘Ibizan sequence’, ‘Do Not Seek to Dissuade,’ (*Nicht abraten*), Benjamin provides a brief, introductory lesson. When someone seeks advice, he explains, you should presume they have “already made up their minds” and only seek confirmation “from the outside.” Hence, when counseling someone “*halfway* to a decision [that one presumably considers a mistake] ...it is better to lend it skeptical support than to contradict it with conviction.” (1999a, p. 588; Cf. Benjamin 1999b, pp. 642-3)

Benjamin’s point is not immediately clear. What good is skeptical support, and in what sense is someone who has already made up her mind only “halfway” to a decision? We find some guidance in a literal translation of the German text, which describes the person seeking advice as “already half helped” (*schon halb geholfen*), rather than halfway to a decision. (1974b, p. 403) Recalling Benjamin’s longer description of politeness, we can infer that in this halfway, before a confirmation from the outside was sought, a variety of forces and authorities were already guiding the agent toward a decision. Benjamin’s examples of politeness therefore illustrate its limitations as well as its potentials. The advisor he describes cannot simply contradict a judgment already supported at so many levels, but she can take advantage of the already mediated character of decisions, intervening in the process whereby a decision is assembled with the help of contending forces and authorities. Rather than dissuade through confrontation, politeness unsettles oppositions that have not yet hardened. To borrow a phrase from Bergson (1991), one might say the advisor intervenes in a ‘zone of indetermination’ wherein a plurality of

incipient responses are still being edited. (p. 32) In the case at hand, skeptical concurrence leverages an incipient hesitation indicated by the solicitation of advice, giving a boost to the underdog.

An appreciation for the uncertain possibilities of the ‘halfway’ also clarifies the special place patience takes among the virtues adopted by politeness. By deferring what Benjamin (1996a) calls “nonmediate” flashes of anger, patience opens an interval in which conflicting impulses and aims can contend. (p.248) Of course, this is not the only way to understand patience, or the most conventional. After all, patience can also serve instrumental reasoning, giving an agent time to weigh the most efficient means to achieve desired outcomes. It would seem, then, that patience too also be modified. In brief remarks on Herbert Vorwerk’s ‘The Right to Use Force’, Benjamin (1996b) distinguishes impatience not from rational calculations that serve predictable ends, but rather from a kind of open-ended “anticipation” that allows for transformative events. When the legal system turns to coercion in cases of perceived threats, this reflects not merely “the internal tendency to establish its authority... [but rather] the violent rhythm of impatience in which the law exists and has its temporal order, as opposed to the good (?) rhythm of anticipation (*Erwartung*) in which messianic events unfold.”⁹ (Benjamin 1996b, p. 231; 1974c, p. 104)

Benjamin is well known for having infused Marxist expectations concerning the collapse of Capital and the arrival of communism with messianic Jewish themes of redemption. However, to heighten anticipation is not simply to excite hope for salvation, but also to increase an alertness to opportunities for underdogs to reconfigure hierarchies and alter the course of history.¹⁰ In ‘On the Concept of History’, Benjamin (2003a)

suggested that human beings can exert a messianic power, however “weak.” (p. 390) Politeness, as he characterizes it, is a weak power of this kind, one that can “wrest tradition away from... conformism” not only through radical upheavals but also in the everyday course of events. (Ibid., 391)

The weak messianic power of politeness is illustrated in Benjamin’s (2003b) commentary on Brecht’s poem, ‘Legend of the origin of the Book Tao-te-Ching on Lao-tzu’s Road into Exile.’ According to legend, the Tao-te-Ching originated from a chance encounter between Lao-tzu and a customs officer guarding a mountain passage. After interrupting Lao-tzu’s journey, the officer asks him to transcribe his wisdom in return for a meal. The officer is interested in who defeats whom, his curiosity sparked by Lao-tzu’s dictum concerning the soft water that wears away hard stone, summarized by the child leading Lao-tzu’s Ox as “what is hard must yield.” (Benjamin 2003b, p. 246) Lao-tzu also yields to the customs officer, having noted from the latter’s worn clothes, bare feet, and ugliness that “this was not a victor.” Brecht thus makes clear that Lao-tzu is defeated, if you will, not by official authority, but instead by the solicitation of one with little power. Of course, to be so moved he must also be predisposed, as indicated by Brecht’s explanation that the old man was too old to turn down a “polite [*höfliche*] request.” (p. 247; 1974d, p. 569-570) Lao-tzu responds by transcribing the lessons comprising the Tao-te-Ching, a laborious process that delays his travel for a full week. Brecht asks, “Now tell me, can anyone be more polite (*höflicher*) than that? (Ibid.) He then admonishes us to thank not only Lao-tzu, but also the customs man who made the request, “for wisdom must first be wrung from the wise.”¹¹ (Ibid.) A polite reader will give helpers their due.

Whereas Brecht emphasizes the contributions of various parties, Benjamin highlights mediations between them. In the poem, politeness modifies perceptions and dispositions as it circulates between different speakers, drawing out generous responses from each. A similar operation is accomplished by “friendliness”, a disposition one could plausibly include among “whatever else might be mentioned” in Benjamin’s remarks on politeness, sympathy, etc. “This poem”, Benjamin (2003b) comments, “gives us an opportunity to note the special role played by courtesy and friendliness in the world of the poet’s imagination. [...] Though it would be going too far to say that friendliness is the very subject of the *Tao-te-Ching*, one would nevertheless be right in saying that, according to the legend, the *Tao-te-Ching* was passed down through the ages by virtue of the spirit of friendliness.” (p. 247) Benjamin identifies three aspects of friendliness. First, it is not dispensed rashly, or without due consideration (here, Lao-tzu considers the customs official’s worn clothing and bare feet). Second, “friendliness consists not in performing an incidental and trivial service, but in rendering a great service as if it were trivial.” Third, “friendliness... *does not abolish the distance between people but brings it to life.*” (p. 248) Rather than identify common interests or values, friendliness involves a responsiveness to others not determined by conventional hierarchies or preconceived interests. Like politeness, it breaks down barriers of hostility by making use of the comic and the surprising. To wit, “The boy, who cannot resist explaining Lao-tzu's poverty with the dry remark, ‘He taught,’ is light-hearted. This puts the customs man at the checkpoint in a cheerful mood, and... inspires him to make the auspicious inquiry about the results of Lao-tzu's researches. So why shouldn't the sage himself be cheerful?” (Ibid.) Like the politeness that passes from the customs official to Lao-tzu, and if Brecht has his way, to

us, a friendly spirit of communication circulates. Lao-tzu, Benjamin tells us, “seems to spread cheerfulness” wherever he goes. (Ibid.)

Dispositions of this sort are anything but trivial. Indeed, Benjamin (2003b) suggests cheerfulness and friendliness are most important in times of crisis. “The classical writers... lived in the bloodiest, darkest times, but they were the most courteous and cheerful people imaginable.” (p. 248) Moreover, he argues, these attitudes did not merely make oppression easier to bear. Regarding Lao-tzu’s dictum, ‘what is hard must yield,’ he writes,

The poem was written at a time when this statement rang in the ears like a promise nothing short of messianic. And for the present-day reader it contains not only a promise but a lesson: "That the soft water, as it moves / Vanquishes in time the mighty stone." *This teaches us that we should not lose sight of the inconstant, mutable aspect of things, and that we should make common cause with whatever is unobtrusive and plain but relentless, like water.* Here the materialist dialectician will think of the cause of the oppressed... Third and last, in addition to the promise and the theory, there is the moral to be drawn from the poem. Anyone who wishes to see hardness yield should not let slip any opportunity for displaying friendliness. (2003b, p. 248-9. Italics mine.)

As Benjamin emphasizes, the legend operates at various registers. As a promise, it inspires messianic hope for the cause of the oppressed, the underdog. As a lesson, it keeps us alert to the inconstant and mutable, and aligns us with the “unobtrusive and plain,” including especially the cause of the oppressed, giving hope an ethical and political purchase. As a moral, the legend teaches us how we might work for

transformation and on behalf of the weak. It tells us that we should not always try to dissuade, and that conflicts can be undone by nonviolent redirection.

One may still ask whether all this talk of politeness and friendliness supplants revolutionary politics with a “civilized” ethics, putting attitude before praxis. Some critics suspect the so-called ethical turn in political theory of such a diversion, taking up the objection to which Brecht (2003) gave voice in a “counter song” to “Of The Friendliness of the World,” a poem that insists on rising up to fix the world (not just love it).¹² To such objections, a few rejoinders are in order. First of all, Benjamin argued that violence is *sometimes* a just response to oppression (divine violence can never be identified with certainty). Likewise, he does not counsel friendliness in all cases, but instead exhorts us not to “let slip any opportunity.” (2003b, *op cit*) For the same reason, politeness and friendliness require more than a good heart. They also require an “alert openness” to different possibilities that contend in an unfolding encounter, a perceptive consideration of others’ material situation, and a sense for the “inconstant, mutable aspect of things.” Finally, politeness is only the *subjective precondition* for nonviolent means, the objective manifestations of which Benjamin places under the sign of “technique.”

What, then, are nonviolent techniques, and what is their relationship to polite dispositions? What Benjamin calls nonviolent techniques can be distinguished first of all from instruments. As he suggests, techniques are “indirect” solutions that do not address a conflict between “man and man” but instead act on the objects that comprise a field of struggle. Hanssen (1997) attributes to Benjamin’s ‘Critique’ a “politics of noninstrumental means”. (p. 243) However, Werner Hamacher’s (1994) description of the means in question as “pre-instrumental” strikes me as more apt, inasmuch as

techniques are not divorced from, but instead act on the impulses and aims of those who adopt them.¹³ (p.117) Techniques are constitutive means, that is, means that transform ends. Rather than merely express the identity or serve the interests of “abstract” subjects, techniques modify subjective orientations in the course of struggle.

Politeness and technique, in short, are dialectically entangled. Indeed, when objectively “manifest”, friendliness, politeness, etc. shift from being subjective preconditions to techniques that communicate or “spread” non-instrumental orientations. By the same token, non-instrumental dispositions could be called “pre-subjective”, following Benjamin’s (1996b) remark in that “a truly subjective decision is probably conceivable only in light of specific goals and wishes”. (234) In practice, furthermore, analytic distinctions between techniques that modify dispositions and instruments that serve intended aims readily break down. To use a tool is always also to be transformed by it, to one degree or another. A hammer, a doll and an icepick can all serve as instruments, but they can also inspire fears or quicken desires and suggest possible actions. In current parlance, one might say such objects are “affordances”, that is, not merely instrumental but also agentic.¹⁴ To take an example relevant to the problems at hand, handguns shape the inclinations as well as the capabilities of those who handle them, or know that others do, raising the stakes of hostility to existential levels. By implication, nonviolent techniques work in the opposite direction, defusing antagonisms before they cross the threshold of what Carl Schmitt (1976) called the “political” and give rise to (abstract) existential oppositions of friend and enemy.

Of course, politeness and friendliness can also be superficial conventions, or even calculated simulations. Moreover, insights into reciprocal entanglements among means

and ends can be placed in the service of violence. In contemporary counter-terrorism, Brian Massumi (2015) notes, strategies to “pre-empt” emergent hostilities serve U.S. national interests. In the war on terror, he writes, “the intervals will not be pauses.” (p. 86) An appreciation for agentic function of means, and the emergent character of preferences and identification has also been coupled with domestic forms of political authority. For behavioral economists such as Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein (2003, 2012), for instance, the susceptibility of reasoning and judgment to contextual priming justifies the paternalistic role of a bureaucratic elite charged with constructing a “choice architecture” that maximizes the social utility of individual decision-making.¹⁵ Rather than coerce citizens, the thinking goes, the state can simply ‘nudge’ them in the right direction. Such thinking is increasingly incorporated in public policy, as exemplified in the British government-funded “Behavioral Insights Team” (BIT), whose website explains, “While the onus is on the resident to follow the rules, cities also have surprising amounts of power in structuring the environment in ways that either support or hinder residents in meeting the rule of law.”¹⁶

Benjamin envisioned more radical restructurings of social environments, to put it mildly. It is worth remembering in this context that Marx described modes of production as pre-instrumental techniques from which relations of production, and ultimately class conflicts emerge, regardless of the intentions of human innovators. Through material practice, Marx (1976) argued, human beings can actively transform the conditions that define their positions, or as he put it, “the educator himself must be educated”. (61) The general strike can be seen in this light as a radical de-structuring of social positions.¹⁷ However, as I have argued, Benjamin also recognized that people modify the structures

within which they act in the course of everyday practice, especially when they resolve their conflicts without recourse to violent (legal, instrumental) means. In particular, this is the case with what Benjamin (1996a) calls nonviolent means *par excellence*, namely language.¹⁸ (See pp.244-5) While language can serve as an instrument of power, as in the case of propaganda, an exchange of words can also alter the dispositions of parties in the course of a dialogue. For example, Benjamin (1996a) highlights the function of the “conference... as a technique of civil agreement,” whose nonviolent character is demonstrated by the absence of any sanction for lying. (p.244) Like the General Strike, but in routinized miniature, the conference creates a space from which legal sanctions are excluded, at least where its purity is not “degraded” by formal preconditions.¹⁹ Having forsaken violent means, the parties of the conference resort to talking things out.²⁰

II. Politeness in Chicago: The Interrupters

[The philosopher’s] mission is to show that a subject can be an interrupter, not merely a channel that allows thematic epidemics and waves of excitation to flow through it. – Peter Sloterdijk (qtd. in Roy Scranton, ‘The Interrupter.’)

What good is politeness in the midst of Chicago’s violence? As Benjamin put it, politeness can be nothing or everything, depending on how it is regarded. For a glimpse of what politeness can do, watch the 2011 documentary, *The Interrupters*, which follows members of operation ‘Cure Violence Chicago’ (formerly CeaseFire), an anti-violence organization that uses mediators to discourage individuals caught up in interpersonal conflicts from turning to violence. The program works directly with victims of gun violence, along with their families and peers, seeking to discourage retaliation, to mediate disputes and to “cool” on-going conflicts through regular interventions. As indicated by the title of their umbrella organization, the authors of the program conceive violence in

epidemiological terms. Their website (Cure Violence 2014) explains, “Cure Violence stops the spread of violence in communities by using the methods and strategies associated with disease control – detecting and interrupting conflicts, identifying and treating the highest risk individuals, and changing social norms.”

As indicated by the film’s title, mediators “do this initial interruption of transmission.” Without weapons or legal sanction, so-called interrupters intervene in a sort of halfway, where violent retaliation is taking shape, but not yet decided. As Benjamin said of politeness, interrupting requires insight and skill. As one mediator puts it, you have to know the language of the street, and appreciate its significance, to “immerse yourself in the bullshit.” (*The Interrupters*) To be effective, some rely on personal authority or reputation. Your words gain weight if you’ve “been there” as a member of a gang, a prisoner, a victim, or perpetrator. Rather than simply issue instructions or make threats, they seek to build trust on the part of those they work with. Other techniques are more formalized. As one mediator explains, once you win someone’s confidence, you tell them that if you know they plan to retaliate then so do the police. You introduce the “science” behind the program, give them a “history lesson” about the generational transmission of violence, and then make a personal appeal: “It’s time to save yourself.” However, while interrupters follow certain guidelines, they proceed without strict rules and boundaries, appealing variously to self-interest, ethical obligations to friends and family, fears and aspirations, and their tactics vary.

Ameena Matthews gets center stage in the documentary, for good reason. She is strikingly charismatic and a virtuoso of politeness, highly alert to the circumstantial expression of different motivations and adept at defusing volatile encounters. In one

scene, she explains the backsliding of a difficult charge: “She wanted to get back in touch with her mom, and that caused her to feel... and she acted out on some old behavior.” She is giving this explanation at a birthday party for her daughter, where her next spoken words are, “I need you guys to say please and thank you... right?...” When dealing with emotionally charged confrontations between teenagers, however, she adjusts her approach on the fly, entreating, menacing, reasoning, and admonishing by turns. Mediating a conflict among teens at a residential facility, she confronts a young man who explains he gets “fed up.” She interrupts, “No, no, no, no, you got to play it like a big boy,” then empathizes, saying that when she gets angry she too can “bring some noise,” but she also has to play it like a big girl and “fight my own ego.” When a young woman involved in the dispute interjects, seeking to align herself, Matthews reasserts her role as an independent broker by referring to her would-be ally in the third person, remarking, “they feed off her energy too.” In these moments, we see Matthews’ alertness to various forces and authorities shaping the situation, and her ability to modify them on the fly. Walter Lippmann (1997) might have said she is a skilled diplomatist, who, “compelled to talk out loud to... warring peoples, [has] learned how to use a large reparatory of stereotypes.” (p. 85)

Another interrupter, Ricardo “Cobe” Williams takes what initially seems a hopelessly tentative approach. It turns out, however, that his hesitations are contagious. One could say he listens skeptically while spreading friendliness. Consider his conversation with Toya and her two sons, Kenneth and Bud. Toya, we learn, has changed the locks on the apartment they live in, after seeing a friend of one of the sons bagging drugs there:

Kobe: “time’s hard, you got to have a job out here, man.”

Kenneth: “yeah, man, or a hustle, one or the other.”

Toya interjects: “that’s gonna end you up one of two places.”

Bud speaks up: “you just gotta hump for yourself. You thinkin’ like you want a handout. Nobody’s gonna give you anything.”

Kenneth: who are you talking to?...

Bud: I’m talking in general now, and if you’re listening I’m talking to you too.”

Kenneth: “I’m really not listening to the shit you’re saying.”

Bud: “that’s why you in the predicament you is in now.”

They argue, and Kobe interrupts: “One thing you all is forgetting, you all is blood brothers, man, you all ain’t no bad kids, both you all finish school, both you all ain’t bitch in no motherfucking penitentiary. That’s good, man.” They arrive at their destination, joining Tio Hardimon around a conference table, and talk further. At the conclusion of their conversation, Kobe says he’d love to see the brothers embrace each other. “And [hug] your mama,” Hardimon adds. Kenneth declines. You can’t win them all. But in the next scene, Kobe goes into a bar and hugs his own mother, who is sitting at a table. It’s his grandmother’s birthday. She comes in and they embrace. Both explain they were close as he was growing up. “She always remind me of the good in me.” They dance together.

In several respects, the interrupters can be said to adopt nonviolent means as Benjamin understands them. They do not have the power to impose a set of norms by force, or recourse to legal sanction against those who violate them.²¹ Instead, they use nonviolent means, principally language, to turn forces and authorities into helpers,

settling conflicts without enforceable contracts. As Benjamin (1996a) said of diplomats, theirs is “a delicate task that is more robustly performed by referees, but a method of solution that in principle is above that of the referee because it is beyond all legal systems and therefore beyond violence.” (p. 247) ‘Cure Violence’ mediators do not simply teach moral lessons. They also communicate a theory, and hope. Rather than simply command young people to “cease fire,” they provided them with insights into forces and authorities inspiring violence in themselves and those with whom they have conflicts.

As others have pointed out (to me) it could be argued that Cure Violence treats nonviolence not only as a means but also as an end inasmuch as their techniques are instruments of peace. By that simplifying logic, one could respond (having paused to think), the General Strike is also a means to an end, namely the overthrowing of state power. In both cases, the ‘end’ is not a legal contract backed by state violence. One can nonetheless acknowledge that the interrupters’ mediations could serve a variety of ends (as could a General Strike, for that matter). Regardless of their intentions, their program could be subject to cost-benefit analysis and be marketed as a means to reduce the costs of police and health services for taxpayers. BIT might even approve of their methods. As I noted earlier, the line between instruments and techniques is often blurred. Nonviolent techniques can become instruments of unjust ends, just as violence can serve just ends. However, the interrupters are not working simply to pacify the underprivileged, or to protect wealthier populations downtown and on the North side. Furthermore, the homicides Cure Violence combats among black youth in Chicago are less plausibly interpreted as revolutionary activity directed at neoliberal municipal policies than as fratricidal war amongst the most disadvantaged. By demonstrating techniques to mediate

disputes by other means, Cure Violence facilitate agreements that may find other purposes.²²

Viewers of the documentary, in turn, are affected as well as enlightened, their half-formed judgments modified at several levels. One could say they are given a theory, hope, and a lesson. First, they are presented with an epidemiological theory of interpersonal violence that serves as a useful corrective to voluntarist and racist ideologies. More importantly, I think, the film reveals young men and women on the west and south sides of the city making sense of and struggling with the architectures that position them as perpetrators or victims. Most of all, it shows them “fighting their own ego”, as Matthews puts it, in volatile situations. These youth often appear frightened or angry, and some may be armed, yet they are still willing to extend an open hand at great personal risk. To be sure, their efforts are limited by psychic as well as material resources. In the fight with their egos and circumstances, they are often weak, and rarely victors. But while we are shown an epidemic, we are also shown hard-won insight, vitality and resilience. Finally, we witness the insights and struggles of the interrupters themselves, people of color from the same embattled neighborhoods they work in, some of them former inmates. We watch these mediators bring epidemiological theories of violence to bear in practical mediations with some of the most vulnerable populations in Chicago, frequently in highly tense situations. We watch them face terrible odds without badge or gun, bringing only their reputations, their alert insights and their fluent bullshit, and taking serious personal risks of their own – vividly illustrated when a member of Cure Violence is shot and badly injured - with minimal financial compensation. By introducing these individuals to viewers unlikely to encounter them in everyday life, the

film challenges stereotypes at the level of perception as well as theory. At the same time, it communicates hope, and a lesson. As the documentary indicates, the subjects of conflict are never entirely “abstract”, and even in these fraught circumstances, events are not yet decided. It shows that redemptions - some small and some not so small - are possible, and it encourages viewers to side with the relentless but often unobtrusive struggles of the oppressed.

III. Dispositions and Institutions: Widening the Conflict

I would be a little leery to say yet that this is a turning point. The turning point will be when we decide as a city that there won't be two Chicagos. –Rev. Michael Pflager.

While *The Interrupters* illustrates Walter Benjamin's concepts of nonviolent means in several respects it also poignantly highlights the *weakness* of even the most virtuosic politeness and technique when confronted with large-scale, entrenched ecologies of violence that set the stage for the interpersonal conflicts to which violence interrupters respond. Along these lines, one could elaborate on the epidemiological metaphors 'Cure Violence' employs. Replacing the language of punishment with that of treatment has the salutary effect of challenging widely held ideas of personal responsibility and racist essentialism. However, the language of treatment can also de-politicize the problem of violence, isolating it from larger political contexts.²³ Pathogens do not circulate or cause disease by themselves, but instead gain purchase in opportune conditions and among vulnerable populations where the odds of infection and transmission increase. Subjective preconditions cannot be isolated from their objective environs, and daily statistics attest to the long odds faced by those attempting to “cure” violence conditioned by “choice architectures” that include, among other things,

concentrated poverty, unemployment, mass incarceration, residential segregation, police brutality, lead poisoning and handguns. Moreover, so-called structural sources of uneven racial distributions of violence in Chicago are reproduced through a racialized aesthetics of violence that drives white flight, fear and hostility, forming a feedback loop between racist perceptions and racialized inequalities.²⁴ One could say the interrupters work not in a “halfway” but rather in the final moments of decades- if not centuries-long, overdetermined processes. As one mediator puts it, “we up against history.”

How can we break down or “interrupt” the overlapping socio-economic inequities and racialized geographies conditioning interpersonal violence and the racialized policing with which it is entangled in the city? While Benjamin’s critical writings hardly provide a set of instructions, they remind us of the inconstant, mutable aspect of things, and encourage us to be alert for opportunities. As I noted earlier, Benjamin’s description of the micropolitical “middle way” has its macro-political counterpart in his assertion that revolutionary movements can “blast open” or “explode” the continuum of history, proving the past is not a structure that determines the present but instead a reservoir of memory that can be “appropriated... in a moment of danger.” (2003a, p. 391) To describe this as a “hope” may be a stretch. As we have seen, Benjamin recognized that however violent the normal order, the outcomes of revolutionary explosions can be catastrophic. In his ‘Critique of Violence’, furthermore, Benjamin largely discounts the possibility that nonviolent means for mediating private disagreements can address large-scale political conflicts. Whereas a fear of mutual disadvantage arising from uncertainty about outcomes can drive individuals to avoid direct confrontation and seek nonviolent means to resolve private dispute, he suggests, the mutual disadvantages of conflicts between classes or

nations are too distant and indirect to be appreciated by most people. (See 1996a, p. 245) In Chicago, likewise, the mutual disadvantages arising from violent means – including the enormous financial and human costs of policing and mass incarceration as well as the psychic and moral costs of severe inequality and segregation – are nearly as remote as those of the international conflicts Benjamin describes.

Nonetheless, as I have argued, the successes of Cure Violence indicate that subjects of conflict are never entirely “abstract”. And while Benjamin was hardly optimistic about the revolutionary power of politeness, he (1996a) also suggested that nonviolent means of agreement between private parties have a political analogue in international diplomacy, where representatives “must, entirely on the analogy of agreement between private persons, resolve conflicts case by case, in the name of their states, peacefully and without contracts.” (p. 247) By way of intermediaries, one could say, the two Chicagos meet in the state legislature in Springfield. There too, certainly, opportunities for politeness are rare, and language is degraded by parliamentary rules, powerful partisan alignments, corporate funding, and “special interest” lobbies. However, this does not mean there are no chances for underdogs. Because official deliberations are often superficial facades for the exercise of power, Iris Marion Young (2002) proposed that we dismantle procedural boundaries to make room for other communicative means, including narrative, rhetoric and intimate gestures such as winks and hugs.²⁵ Ameena Matthews could add substantially to this repertoire.²⁶

It would be optimistic, to say the least, to describe legislators as diplomatic delegates for antagonized social groups. However, if it would be naïve to count on the power of nonviolent means in electoral politics, it would be cynical to discount it

altogether. Mercifully, cynicism and naïveté are not our only choices. Nor is electoral politics the only place we may look for redemption. A wide range of community groups and non-governmental organizations are working diligently to replace legal violence with alternative means of conflict-resolution, and to communicate a spirit of responsive consideration for those who are not victors. One can take heart, too, from the recent payment of reparations by the city of Chicago to victims of police torture. Moreover, what Benjamin calls the true mediator makes appearances in community meetings, neighborhood gatherings, and street demonstrations that transform public spaces into sites of democratic protest, disrupting conventional routines. Finally, we need not discount the possibility of a General Strike, however unlikely it may appear today. Rather than overthrow state institutions altogether, a large strike across different financial sectors and areas of the city could serve as a technique by which to generate critical attention to architectures of injustices in Chicago. Can collective action, too, be undertaken in a polite fashion, and so increase the likelihood of a polite response? No doubt it can, as attested by the nonviolent comportment of many radical protests. Whether it can dismantle infrastructures of violence in places like Chicago, and whether it can do so without catastrophe, remains to be seen.

¹ Acknowledgments: I gratefully acknowledge the friends and colleagues – too many to mention – who commented on earlier versions of this essay presented at various conferences. This essay also benefitted from the informed, attentive and detailed criticism of three anonymous reviewers for *Constellations*, though I cannot claim to have done justice to all of their recommendations. Finally, I acknowledge those who created and appeared in the film ‘The Interrupters’ for the insights and the inspiration they have contributed to this essay, and for their much larger contributions to the struggle against gun violence in Chicago.

² See Martel, James (2014) *The One and Only Law*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

³ On movements for police “abolition” in Chicago, see <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/police-abolitionist-movement-alternatives-cops-chicago/Content?oid=23289710> (Accessed 6.15.19)

⁴ Jacques Derrida highlights the dangers involved in the idea of a pure or “bloodless” violence. Derrida, Jacques (1978) ‘Violence and Metaphysics.’ *Writing and Difference*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press.

⁵ See also Tracy McNulty, 'The Commandment Against the Law'. *Diacritics* Vol.37, No. 2-3 (Summer-Fall 2007), pp. 34-60

⁶ In 'On the Concept of History', for instance, he suggests that the mission of redeeming a long history of oppression better instills the "hatred and spirit of sacrifice" necessary for revolutionary action than utopian vision of happy future generations. Benjamin 2003a, 394.

⁷ One could say the same, certainly, of Benjamin's invocation of theological terms in connection with nonviolent ends, but this is not my focus here.

⁸ I discuss these themes in a previous essay. See Kam Shapiro, 'Politics is a Mushroom: Immanent Sources of Norm and Exception'. *Diacritics* 37 Numbers 2-3 (Summer-Fall 2007), pp. 121-134.

⁹ Translation modified.

¹⁰ On the slight alterations of the world prophesized in Jewish thought, see Benjamin (1999d), 'In the Sun', Jennings, ed. Vol 2., p.664

¹¹ Brecht's retelling of the origins of the Tao Te Ching thus exemplified the quality Arendt attributed to his poetry, "...which does not make some into participants and others into the instrument of events". Hannah Arendt. "The Poet Bertolt Brecht," in Peter Demetz, ed., *Brecht: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1962), 43-50 Qtd in Patchen Markell, 'Politics and the Case of Poetry: Arendt on Brecht', *Modern Intellectual History* (Aug. 2018) Vol.1, Issue 2: 503-533, pp. 13-14.

¹² Cf. Bertold Brecht, *Poems 1913-1956*. Ed. John Willett, et. al. New York. Routledge, 1987. P. 450. Benjamin (2003b: 248) references 'The Friendliness of the World' but not Brecht's "counter song."

¹³ Hamacher does not describe politeness as an instance of "affirmative" or pure violence, which, on his terms, "deposes", "abolishes" or "breaks the cycle" of positing violence (i.e. the operations attributed the general strike). However, he aligns "sympathy, peaceableness, trust" with pre-instrumental "mediacy," and so "the field of affirmation" more broadly. (Ibid. 115, 117-118)

¹⁴ On affordances, see James Gibson, (1979). *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Boston. Houghton-Mifflin.

¹⁵ Along these lines, the authors of the University of Chicago Urban Lab's 'Gun Violence in Chicago' report draw the analogy with traffic fatalities that involve driver error, but which can nonetheless be reduced by changes to the infrastructure in which drivers act, including "the safety of cars and roadways." See the University of Chicago Urban Labs report, 'Gun Violence in Chicago, 2016' (hereafter GVIC). <http://urbanlabs.uchicago.edu/projects/gun-violence-in-chicago-2016> (Accessed 10/16/17)

¹⁶ See <http://www.behaviouralinsights.co.uk/> (Accessed 3.28.17)

¹⁷ Benjamin describes "the educative power, which in its perfected form stands outside the law" as a manifestation of divine violence. (1996a, 250)

¹⁸ See also 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', where Benjamin described language as a medium "in the purest sense". (1996c, 64). I do not have space here for an exposition of Benjamin's extensive, complex discussions of language. As Samuel Weber has argued, Benjamin understood language neither as a means of expression, nor a repository of given ends but rather as a medium that variously enables and constrains human agency. See Samuel Weber (2008) *Benjamin's -abilities*. Cambridge. Harvard University Press, pp. 38-9.

¹⁹ Benjamin's conference rules out procedural norms of the kind imagine by Habermas, which determine a nonviolent speech situation, namely truth, sincerity and rightfulness. See Jürgen Habermas, *A Theory of Communicative Action*. Boston. Beacon Press, 1984.

²⁰ Language, Derrida (1992) reminds us, is hardly "pure." Moreover, the idea that language is "wholly inaccessible to violence", as Benjamin puts it, would come across as naïve to critics who emphasize the unequal distribution of language competence and social recognition that shape the outcomes of deliberation. See Derrida, 'Force of Law.' *Op cit*. I therefore take issue with Agamben's description of Benjamin's appeal to nonviolent language as "a pure and anomic violence... removed from the dialectic between constituent power and constituted power." Agamben Giorgio. *State of Exception*. Trans. Kevin Attell. Chicago. University of Chicago Press, 2005, 54. Edmund Jephcott's translation of "*reine Mittel*" as "unalloyed means" is salutary in this respect. Rather than ensure purity, nonviolent means prevent hardening.

²¹ The group cites studies showing a reduction in shooting in those Chicago neighborhoods where they operate by 41-73%, and a consistent rise in shootings following cuts in their funding. For their own graph correlating funding with shooting rates, see 'Cure Violence Chicago' <http://cureviolence.org/results/scientific-evaluations/doj-evaluation/> (Accessed 7.5.19)

²² I am thinking, here, of Fred Hampton's brokering of peace among Chicago's fragmented ethnic factions, prior to his assassination by the Chicago police in 1969.

²³ On the de-politicizing effect of therapeutic discourses on violence, and the extension of study to the broader ecologies from which personal violence emerges see Robert J (2012) *Great American City*. Chicago. University of Chicago press, pp. 41, 99.

²⁴ See *Ibid.*, 177.

²⁵ See Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*. Cambridge. Oxford University Press, 2002. Cf. 'Activist Challenges to Deliberative Democracy.' *Political Theory* Vol. 29, No. 5 (Oct., 2001): 670-690

²⁶ In fact, she is currently running for Congress.

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