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Benjamin and Spinoza: Divine Violence and *Potentia*¹

Abstract:

In this paper, I seek to clarify, criticize, and expand upon the ambiguous-yet-influential concept of divine violence introduced by Walter Benjamin's "*Zur Kritik der Gewalt*". I proceed in three parts: in the first, I outline Benjamin's argument about the cycle of mythical violence and divine violence's special role as an interruption of that cycle. Next, I explicate Spinoza's key concepts of *potentia* and *potestas*, which can be used to more clearly define what ought to instead be translated as "divine force". In the third part, through Benjamin's brief discussion of Sorel's theory of the anarchist general strike, I equate *potentia* as a determinate power of aggregative individuals to divine force, both as a collective action and as an idea itself. I use this renewed and more sophisticated concept of divine force to oppose several interpretations of Benjamin's concept, including Benjamin's own quietist stance toward divine force.

Keywords:

Walter Benjamin, Baruch Spinoza, Georges Sorel, divine violence, power, *potentia*, *potestas*

One of Walter Benjamin's most commented upon writings, "Toward the Critique of Violence," serves as one of several canonical texts in continental philosophy for thinking through the phenomenon of violence, implicitly or explicitly serving as either a grounding or a foil for works by Arendt, Marcuse, Habermas, Derrida, Butler,

1) I would like to thank Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, Holly Longair, Robert Engelman, and the anonymous reviewers for *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* for their helpful and challenging comments on earlier versions of this paper.

Žižek and others. Despite the text's clarity of purpose and language, each of these authors produces a new Benjamin, with a different emphasis that transforms the identity of the piece beyond recognition; Procyshyn rightly laments the "sad fact," that the essay "has been treated as an occasion to exercise our own intellectual powers," and, "after reading enough secondary literature, one may be left to wonder whether Benjamin's essay is anything more than an *exercice de style*."² Any intervention into this specific literature is fraught both by the prestige of the commentators and an array of questionable, irreconcilable exegesis.

That said, if the exegetical conceit is expressly abandoned, then Benjamin's concepts remain compelling in their own right. Most compelling of all is his enigmatic notion of divine violence (*göttliche Gewalt*), which is opposed to that of mythical violence (*mythische Gewalt*). Divine violence, despite its currency in the secondary literature, is only scarcely defined throughout the text, mostly restricted to the final paragraph. Benjamin's text is primarily an exploration of mythical violence, while divine violence remains unelaborated, allotted an indeterminacy that turns out to define the concept itself. The following paper is a constructive criticism of Benjamin's concept of divine violence, proposing to read his concept in conjunction with the notions of power and multitude in the work of Spinoza and his radical twentieth century commentators, most importantly Balibar and Negri.³ I do not propose to find the *true* meaning of the concept, but to develop an analytically-fecund account through comparison to a structurally-similar idea in Spinoza, while noting some indeterminacies in Benjamin's original text. The productive outcome of this amalgamation of concepts is, hopefully, a more robust understanding of divine violence, which opposes the mystical or irrational interpretations of divine violence that easily slide into quietism.

This paper will proceed in three parts. First, I will outline Benjamin's conceptions of mythic violence, the cycle of mythic violence, the role of means-ends rationalization, and divine violence. Next, I will outline Spinoza's structurally similar distinction between *potestas* and *potentia*, which elucidates the relationship between the sovereign state and the multitude in Spinoza's metaphysics and political theory. Once *Gewalt* (force/violence) is understood as force or power and *göttliche* (divine/godly) is equated to a Spinozist metaphysics of "God-or-Nature", a fruitful compatibility of Benjamin's and Spinoza's conceptions becomes apparent to us. Lastly, I will elaborate the transformed understanding of "divine force" that is produced within the Spinozist frame, filling in the emptiness of the original concept, setting it into a material relationship to mythic violence, and demonstrating how one could produce the conditions for it, rather than merely awaiting or recognizing its occurrence.

1. Mythic and Divine *Gewalt*

"Toward the Critique of Violence" is chiefly preoccupied with the justificatory relationship between law and violence. Natural and positive law share a means-ends schema for their evaluation of violence, but both end up doing so through a presumption that evacuates a critical understanding of the phenomenon of violence. Natural law criticizes means as unjust only by reference to the moral status of the ends pursued and positive law evaluates the justness of ends by reference to a procedural means. Both are insufficient because they leave unexamined their criterion: "For if positive law is blind to the absoluteness of ends, natural law is equally so to

2) Alexei Procyshyn, "Manifest Reason: Walter Benjamin on Violence and Collective Agency," *Constellations* 21, no. 3 (2014): 390–400.

3) Between the brief mention of Spinoza in "Toward the Critique of Violence" and the possible dating of Benjamin's "Theologico-Political Fragment" to the same period, there is exegetical potential in my proposal which I leave unexplored here.

the contingency of means.⁴ In Benjamin's estimation, violence as a phenomenon is either lawmaking, in that it constitutes the means by which a legal foundation is established that could criticize it (the institution of a legal code by a conquering warlord), or it is law-preserving, in that it is a means that is justified by the transcendental requirement of the law's continued efficacy (police action). Violence is only justifiable, for both positive and natural legal traditions, in regards to the law that it preserves or founds; it is only ever a means, but this role as means begs the question of the justness of its procedure or end.⁵ Benjamin also sees here a reciprocity between law-preserving and law-making violence that preserves the unjust legal form despite revolutions in the political order:

The law governing their oscillation rests on the circumstance that all law-preserving violence [*Gewalt*], in its duration, indirectly weakens the lawmaking violence represented by it, through the suppression of hostile counterviolence [*Gegengewalten*]... This lasts until either new forces [*Gewalten*] or those earlier suppressed triumph over the hitherto lawmaking violence and thus found a new law, destined in its turn to decay.⁶

Benjamin terms this phenomenon mythic violence, encompassing both law-making and law-preserving violence, because both ultimately serve to preserve and confirm the same paradoxical form of unjustified violence at the origins of law.

The debatably-speculative moment in Benjamin's text,⁷ in so far as he seems to move beyond just describing the functioning of law, is the proposal of divine violence (*göttliche Gewalt*), which he takes to be the antithesis of mythic violence: it destroys laws, wrecks boundaries, expiates where the mythic engenders guilt, strikes where the mythic only threatens, and is bloodless while the mythic is bloody in its executions.⁸ The curious place of divine violence in Benjamin's theorizing on violence and law is that of an action that is law-destroying without also being law-founding. In other words, divine violence names that ideal of a justified law that is inherent to law-opposition (viz. the appeal to a moral standard higher than existing law, such as in civil disobedience or revolutionary movements) but before its incorporation into a plan of instrumental, practical reason.⁹ The negative character of divine violence is as a law-destroying violence that threatens the mythic cycle, a contentless presentiment or enactment of uncoercive human society. The only further elaboration offered is that it is possible, that it is impossible to recognize, that there is no urgency in recognizing it, and that its expiatory power is invisible.¹⁰ In other words, divine violence for Benjamin is: (1) more than a posit

4) Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writing* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 279.

5) *Ibid.*, 287.

6) *Ibid.*, 300; Walter Benjamin, "Zur Kritik Der Gewalt," in *Walter Benjamin Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II.1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1999), 202.

7) Whether the characterization of divine violence Benjamin gives follows from his account of mythic violence, I am not prepared to say either way; I merely wish to note the possibility of this being an open question.

8) Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 297.

9) Though not confronted in this paper, Procyshyn makes the important contribution of showing how Benjamin's text, in context, at least partially serves as a critique of Weberian theories of practical political reason. Ultimately, Procyshyn and I arrive at similar conclusions about the constitutive role of divine violence, but via much different concepts. His focus on political resistance keeps divine violence internal and parasitic on mythic violence, whereas I release it as an independent concept, or at least equal concept, via Spinoza. For more see Procyshyn, "Manifest Reason."

10) Luis Guzmán, "Benjamin's Divine Violence: Unjustifiable Justice," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 14, no. 2 (2014): 51, <https://doi.org/10.14321/crnewcentrevi.14.2.0049>.

or speculation, (2) it is epistemically indeterminate in particular cases, (3) recognition-as-divine is not needed for its effects, and (4) those effects are themselves invisible until the mythic cycle is totally annulled.

By the end of the text, Benjamin remains of two minds: divine violence is called epistemically indeterminate and unrecognizable, yet he references the concrete example of Sorel's proletarian general strike, distinct from the political general strike, in the course of his argument; while the latter strike is mythic lawmaking violence that conforms to the state-form, the former is "anarchistic," rejecting utopian end-positing.¹¹ If it is appropriate to call the anarchist general strike divine violence, then there might be some criterion for positively identifying divine violence. This split in the text reflects itself in the contrary positions of interpreters, proposing either that indeterminacy holds or that there are graspable instances.¹² Divine violence is thus a sort of ambivalent concept by design: it is external to the success criterion of instrumental thinking, it is opposed to the mythic cycle encompassing both natural and positive law, and epistemic apprehension of it in the world is unnecessary. Even further, the secondary literature on the concept is conflicted about this apprehensibility. It is in this contested conceptual field that I propose a rearticulated understanding of the concept of divine and mythic violence on the model of Spinoza's concepts of *potentia* and *potestas*.

2. *Potentia*, *Potestas*; Multitude, State

The full meaning of Benjamin's concept of divine violence is truncated if we restrict our imagination to the notion of "violence" — *Gewalt* can also be translated as "force". While mythic *Gewalt* is perhaps still best translated as violence, for it points to the ironic contradiction of *unjustified* law, the a-legal orientation of divine *force* is a power that breaks that cycle, as well as only arising from a point outside the legal discourses of positive and natural law.¹³ On the plane of legal discourse, the phenomenon under discussion is indeed violence, but divine violence is precisely the intrusion from beyond this plane — specifically that of more fundamental, less mediated *forces*. "Violence" is the law's name for this intrusion, but on the plane of bodies in contact, conjunction, and conflict, that intrusion is subsumed under the more general heading of "force".

In Spinoza's view of reality, every "thing" is an individual, where an individual is understood as an aggregate of aggregates, without any true, essential level of beings or fundamental atoms.¹⁴ There are no essential, really-real *things* at the base of reality (other than the singular substance of God-or-Nature which constitutes all things), upon which all of the epiphenomena of everyday reality supervene, but instead varying levels of complexity at which something like an individual thing (*res singulares*) is identified as a determinate thing and understood; to understand things as "substances", and not as aggregates of force and interaction, would

11) Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 292.

12) For examples of the former, see Judith Butler, "Critique, Coercion, and Sacred Life in Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence,'" in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed. Hent de Vries and Lawrence Eugene Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 201–219, <https://doi.org/10.5422/fso/9780823226443.003.0009>; Guzmán, "Benjamin's Divine Violence: Unjustifiable Justice." For the latter, see in particular Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008).

13) Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 279.

14) "By individual things [*res singulares*] I mean things that are finite and have a determinate existence. If several individual things concur in one act in such a way as to be all together the simultaneous cause of one effect, I consider them all, in that respect, as one individual." Benedictus de Spinoza, *Ethics*, in *Spinoza: Complete Works*, ed. Michael L. Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), IID7. References to the *Ethics* will follow standard abbreviations: part number in roman numerals, followed by axiom (A), proposition (P), corollary (C), scholium (S), postulate (Pos.), definition (D), lemma (L) number, preface (Pre.) or appendix (App.) section.

be a mistake.¹⁵ For example, the human body is a concatenation of bodies that realize a power for cohering and maintain themselves in their organization, and thus can be identified together as an individual, but there is no transcendental or essential body-ness, only a way of speaking about a coherence of forces.¹⁶ At another level, the state is also an individual, which can be analyzed and appraised in the same way: “Now in a civil order the citizens as a body are to be considered as a man in a state of Nature.”¹⁷ The continued maintenance of an individual aggregative body, that is the existence of a thing, is the effect of a continued power of creation. Said power is of God-or-Nature, the power of natural forces and bodily interaction, a totality that exceeds human comprehension and is grasped inadequately through ideas of a personal creator god.¹⁸ The human body is maintained by externals like food and the state is maintained by the reproduction of its associated populace (and possibly another, conquered population as well). So, while we can speak of an individual in the case of the human body or state, the necessity of the “eternal power of god” to continually reproduce these concatenations as an external force disabuses any notion of individuality as separation: there is no essential inherence to an individual, nor autonomy, except in an attenuated sense.¹⁹ God-or-Nature pervades all supposed boundaries or self-sufficiencies that might be implied by a notion of an atom or real essence — without god, that is, the totality of reality with which you interact, you *are not*, and thus a fully-adequate definition of your being (in so far as it would have to include how you come to be and are sustained) would have to include the rest of reality (hence Spinoza’s argument for the unity of all reality as a single substance). One of the central thrusts of Spinoza’s entire philosophy is combatting the presumption of human separateness from the ordinary run of reality/nature/god, ridiculing the idea that humanity (as well as any individual human) constitutes an “*imperium in imperio*” or “kingdom within a kingdom” that acts solely on its own operations.²⁰

With this view of individuality in mind, for Spinoza, there is nothing other than “natural right”, where that natural right is understood as the inalienable capability of an individual to persevere in its being, and where civil right is nothing other than this same right engaged in a strategic coordination with and against other individuals doing the same under the auspices of a shared community: “the right of the individual is coextensive

15) Other than the single substance of God-or-Nature which constitutes reality in a general sense for Spinoza, the “things” about which we talk in everyday language, Spinoza argues, should not be mistaken for constituting essential types, Platonic forms, or universals. “Entity”, “thing”, and “something” [*ens, res, and aliquid*], termed by Spinoza as “universal terms”, come under fire as part of his critique of universals, which are the product of the human mind’s limited, particular engagement with entities and collection of their images together under confused, general notions. What gets dubbed the “essential aspects” of a universal like “man” or “horse” will vary “according to the conditioning [of the] body” of different respondents. Singular things, like universals, are a matter of language and particular experience. This is a key example of Spinoza’s more general nominalism, most noticeable in his method of presenting the definitions at the beginning of the parts of *Ethics* with a version of the phrase “By *X I understand/I mean...*” such as in the citation above. Ibid., IIP40S1.

16) Ibid., IIPos. 1–6.

17) Benedictus de Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, in *Spinoza: Complete Works*, ed. Michael L. Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), VII, 22. References to the *Political Treatise* will follow standard citation, followed by the chapter in roman numerals and the numbered paragraph. For more on the relationship of the state as individual-of-individuals and the human individual, see Etienne Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, trans. Peter Snowden (London: Verso, 1998), 64–71.

18) Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, II, 2.

19) To put this another way, Spinoza absolutely rejects giving any metaphysical credence to there being “models” of natural things, by which we judge natural things being more or less perfect. Natural things, humans included, lack any ends to be judged by, except the end-in-itself to persist in its being (the famous *conatus*). In this section, my interpretation of Spinoza denying “essences” intends to reject such a Platonic or Aristotelian notion of essence. When Spinoza later speaks of the essence of things, like humans, he intends the latter sense of the *conatus*, which all things share, but some things have complementing constitutions (like rational humans), whereas other may not (like a human and a rat or the flu virus). Spinoza, *Ethics*, IVPre.

20) Ibid., IIIPre.

with its determinate power. . . . Whatever an individual thing does by the laws of its own nature, it does with sovereign right, inasmuch as it acts as determined by Nature.”²¹ The distinction that separates Spinoza’s view from the liberal rights discourses of his contemporaries is that this natural-right-as-power is not the foundation for a polity or alienated to the sovereign to achieve peace and security, but ever-present throughout civil society. For Spinoza, community, or rather the state, is a “natural determination, a second nature, constituted by the concurrent dynamics of individual passions and guided toward this end by the action of that other fundamental natural power: reason. It is a dislocation of power.”²² Individuals are motivated to conjoin for the increase in determinate power,²³ and so we can think of the state as an individual of individuals, a being that by nature attempts to persist in its determinate being, to realize its power. There is no levels distinction here: the state-individual is something with or against which the human individual can and does coordinate in order to realize its own natural right.²⁴ For Spinoza, the best state is the one in which conditions and institutions are such that there exists a harmony of interests between state and individual, where civil peace reigns uncoerced.²⁵ Spinoza’s political analysis is thus centered on the latent civil war between factions of the political body, for the greatest threat to a political body is not the external enemy, but its own citizens – specifically the “multitude”, that mass conjoined by shared passions, interests, imaginations, and state.²⁶ As Balibar puts it, the notions of individual and state only serve to “express one modality through which the *power of the multitude* can be realized as such.”²⁷

Parallel to this notion of the multitude in Spinoza is the distinction between two different valences of “power” not present in English. *Potentia* names that power that was discussed above: the constitutive power of an individual to persist in its being and realize the extent of its manipulation of its surroundings. The etymological basis of “potential”, *potentia* can also be broadly understood as the essential, or rather *internal*, ability to be affected in some way, the potential to realize a capability upon an encounter with another.²⁸ With Spinoza’s anti-atomism in mind, something like a determinant power is equivalent to an affective power, or rather power as “sensitivity.”²⁹ One’s essence, one’s persistence in being, is dependent upon God-or-Nature

21) Benedictus de Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, in *Spinoza: Complete Works*, ed. Michael L. Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), XVI, 527. References to the *Theologico-Political Treatise* will note the chapter in roman numerals, followed by the page number in the cited edition.

22) Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza’s Metaphysics and Politics*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 110.

23) “If two individuals of completely the same nature are combined, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one singly.” Spinoza, *Ethics*, IV18S.

24) The state is also not seen as transcendent: the sovereign is a mere man, not external to the concatenations (as Hobbes holds, with the sovereign external to the social contract), whose “sovereign right” only extends as far as his powers allow. Benedictus de Spinoza, “The Letters,” in *Spinoza: Complete Works*, ed. Michael L. Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), letter 50.

25) Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, V, 2.

26) *Ibid.*, VI, 6.

27) Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, 69.

28) As Barbone makes clear in his article on the concepts of power in Spinoza’s writings, *potentia*, “can serve as the definite description of an individual as a particular individual; power is linked to its right and its essence; power is its being and its activities. In short, an individual is its power.” Steven Barbone, “Power in the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus,” in *Piety, Peace, and the Freedom to Philosophize*, ed. Paul J. Bagley, 91–109, vol. 47, The New Synthesis Historical Library: Texts and Studies in the History of Philosophy (Baltimore: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), 97, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-2672-6_5. And with a thing’s *potentia* dependent upon the rest of reality, of the divine “power of creation”, the self-sufficiency of a thing’s identity is diffused with the rest of God-or-Nature.

29) Dorothy H.B. Kwek, “Power and the Multitude: A Spinozist View,” *Political Theory* 43, no. 2 (2015): 161, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591714537080>.

after all. *Potestas*, on the other hand, is accidental rather than essential: it is the rule of command or authority, viz. sovereignty, derived from inadequate, superstitious ideas. For Spinoza, an idea is “inadequate” when it leads one to a false estimation of their potential powers or capabilities. Hierarchies which are structured and justified on the basis of transcendental or metaphysical differences (i.e. divine appointment, racial and gender prejudices, or mere convention) necessarily are in the wrong about the nature of individuals and the world (on the basis of Spinoza’s metaphysics), so there is some *potentia* going unrealized and ideal organization is lacking.³⁰ By “ideal organization”, I mean Spinoza’s deduction that the “highest happiness or blessedness for mankind consists in [the perfection of the intellect] alone.”³¹ The perfection of this intellect consists in the accurate self-conception of one’s capacities (i.e. *potentia*), and because individuals in such harmony with themselves are the most amenable and useful in cooperation (entailing an unshakeable stability amongst the rational), the obfuscation of human capabilities and powers is productive of human strife, not peace. While in a mediated sense, a Platonic noble lie may be more productive of security and happiness in a situation of some rational thinkers within a superstitious mob,³² Spinoza’s critiques of the role of superstition in politics is made in the light of the idea of this enlightenment encompassing the multitude, wherein noble lies vitiate against the full acquisition of harmony, justice, honor, and human happiness.³³ Any hierarchy that is not the result of reason (like the hierarchy of a student and teacher in terms of a craft), but instead by “divine appointment” or a similar convention, is an indicator of some unrealized human potential and the possibility for present and future strife.

Rather than being an expression of *potentia*, the power of command or authority (that power ascribed to the sovereign) is a power derived *externally*, not immanently, because it derives from one’s position in some kind of organization or hierarchy; it is a power realized *only* on account of position, a fact realized in so many kingdoms and companies where the heir takes charge despite their clear unfitnes for the requirements of the role. In the case of the heir, the role of inadequate ideas and the frustration of *potentia* is obvious: the kingdom would realize greater potential powers under a competent ruler, the heir is inculcated with a confused, inaccurate estimation of their capabilities (“I am appointed by God for this role!”). The only reason everyone else is compelled to maintain this monarchical rule is because customary expectations have reduced them to needing such a central figurehead derived from primogeniture or the like.³⁴ *Potestas* is an accidental power, at the cost of a frustrated, unrealized essential power. Put another way, *potentia* is what one is able to do (under certain affections) and *potestas* is what one is allowed to do by dint of another’s leave. Learning when exposed to a good teacher is a *potentia*; the legal right to dispose of a piece of property is a *potestas*. In Spinoza’s equation of power and right, *potestas* is the kind of right alienable in something like a social contract (because it was already

30) Reminder: because potential is indexed to the particular things (i.e. people) involved, this is not “ideal” in some grand, universal sense, but as particular to some set of what is under consideration.

31) Spinoza, *Ethics*, EIVApp.

32) *Ibid.*, IVApp. “But if [a man following the universal order] be among individuals who are by no means in harmony with his nature, he will scarcely be able to conform to them without a great change in himself.”

33) *Ibid.* The critics of human frailty and vice are a special target for Spinoza in parts 3 and 4 of the *Ethics*, dubbed a, “stumbling block to themselves and others”, for they essentially propagandize against the real basis of human power, the community built on friendship and love, which is worth suffering envy and the rest of the disadvantages of society.

34) This last point highlights how apologists for traditional hierarchies like monarchy, citing its rational usefulness in regard to the ignorance of the masses (who love a celebrity or dignified royal heir more than a president), in fact help sustain the fundamental problem of human ignorance, acting as yet more “stumbling blocks”.

a social product),³⁵ whereas *potentia* is inalienable, essential, and thus a thing to be continually accounted for in political analysis.³⁶

The theoretical richness of these twin concepts can be mobilized in surprising ways. Consider Negri's delineation of the productive forces and the relations of production using Spinoza's framework: the former are the inherent capabilities of the material world, of what can be done with the given materials and coordination of bodies, and the latter is the mode of command and subordination-domination that prevails in an imperfect arrangement of relations (viz. the inefficiencies of capitalist market competition).³⁷ Thus for Negri, Spinoza provides an ontology for historical materialism, albeit with almost teleological overtones. But one should be careful of reifying these two concepts as polar opposites or as equal terms. Spinoza's crucial lesson is that *potestas*, understood adequately, flattens into an understanding of *potentia*. The relationship between ruled and ruler has nothing sacred about it (a realization that frees one from the dependency on primogeniture succession for social cohesion, for example) and the relationship is only the expression of a certain balance and realization of material and ideal forces. The existence of an aristocracy that preserves itself is a realization of a degree of *potentia*, to the extent that they wield real power (hired swords, stockpiled resources, class solidarity) as well as ideal power (natural superiority, divine appointment) that keeps the rest in fear and awe of them. The former aristocratic powers are the origins of the superstitions which maintain the latter, and thus a nuanced understanding of *potentia* shows *potestas* to be a facet of it, a variable in real, rather than abstract, situations, like friction in simple mechanical physics problems. The rulers too are part of the multitude divided against itself, with that unnecessary ideological division between the parts causing a frustration of *potentia*. *Potestas*, then, is a power one individual wields against another by dint of an inadequate idea held by one or both of them; it is a negative power, borne of inadequate notions like teleology or transhistorical essences, whereas *potentia* is a positive power, the realization of capabilities. *Potestas* is a power only ever held by the state in relation to

35) This interpretation of the distinction of *potentia* and *potestas* is relatively consistent with that of Barbone in: Barbone, "Power in the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus." Barbone agrees that Spinoza is clear that *potentia* is not alienable, whereas the *potestas* of self-defense is, but in the sense that the creation of a state alters the calculus such that it is always in the interest of the rational agent to obey, from a utilitarian standpoint. So, it is never that a "natural right" is moved from an individual into the state apparatus or sovereign, but that the activity of state-making is consistent with the most rational act of self-defense. The potential to rob, steal, and kill one's compatriots remains unalienated and an ever-present possibility (and the most effective state administration would never forget this), but the post-contractual normative (read: legal) right to do so is conceded (which is not a concession, because you do not possess such a thing prior to the contract). Spinoza's overall project of critiquing superstition, in this case, is aimed at preventing us from ever falling into the fallacy of exclaiming at an infraction, "he can't do that, it's illegal!" Spinoza's materialism implores us to never forget that we deal with humans of a certain capacity to act, and in the absence of collective enlightenment, cannot be counted on to always adhere to the strictures of law; *potentia* is always retained, and must not be mistaken for the unstable *potestas* of authority being obeyed. Outside of the Spinozian republic of rational humanity, human law should not be reified into having a consistency akin to gravity.

36) This is perhaps the key political distinction between Hobbes and Spinoza, despite many similarities: Hobbes's political program is to achieve peace via as much power-alienation as possible, but Spinoza's recognition of the *potentia* category demonstrates a fruitlessness in an endeavor solely focused upon *potestas*. Hobbes's occlusion of the category is perhaps most visible in his attempt to legitimate the activity of the death-row inmate seeking escape: the determinate power of the individual is what explains the chaos of the state of nature, but in the prisoner-sovereign relationship, Hobbes attempts to make the prisoner's action a "moral right", and thus somehow still internal to the logic of the social contract, to political society as the source of moral norms. For more on the contrary relationship of Spinoza to early modern political philosophy's normative theorizing, see Den Uyl's introductory remarks in: Den Uyl, "Introduction," in *Political Treatise*, by Benedictus de Spinoza, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000), ix–xv. For more on Spinoza's idea of the coextension of right and power and this idea's relation to Hobbes and Machiavelli, see the following essays: Edwin Curley, "The State of Nature and Its Law in Hobbes and Spinoza," *Philosophical Topics* 19, no. 1 (1991): 97–117, <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics199119114>; Edwin Curley, "Kissinger, Spinoza, and Genghis Khan," in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Don Garrett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 315–342.

37) Negri, *The Savage Anomaly*, 140.

the multitude, the power of a part in regard to a whole which takes the part to be transcendent. *Potentia* is the power of the multitude, *potestas* is the power of the sovereign.³⁸ Even without Negri's Marxist reading, there remains a revolutionary kernel to Spinoza's distinction here.

Potentia and *potestas* are wrapped up in a dialectical relationship: because *potestas* is nothing but the expression of a limited command over the *potentia* of a multitude, it is a self-destructive phenomenon. The power of the state is dependent on the cultivation of ever-greater coordination of the multitude (i.e. the mobilization of a population for total war), but a necessary condition for a greater *potentia* is a greater self-awareness of the real state of things. Two or more individuals are better able to conjoin in shared efforts if they abandon superstitions,³⁹ take up adequate ideas about their surroundings, and more effectively realize their determinate power. Chief among these debilitating superstitions is that propounding of human finitude in understanding the divine plan; Spinoza sees the maintenance of human ignorance along such lines as the "one and only support" safeguarding the authority of the obfuscating clergy, mystics, idealists and so forth.. Shorn of burdensome clerical authority shrouding everything in fog, potentials are realized and worked towards. The more self-aware and the quantitatively more individuals that are engaged in this effort, the more powerful of a collective individual they become that the sovereign can direct towards particular tasks, like war-making. However, the greater the *potentia*, the more fraught the grounds for *potestas*, that power of the non-democratic state, and hence concessions are made and the ambit of *potestas* shrinks (i.e. the feminist and social-democratic developments in the aftermath of total war mobilization). This is why the trajectory of the *Tractatus Politicus*, as Balibar notes, is of ever greater democratization: the more absolute, stable, and powerful state is the one that increases the bounds of sovereign decision-making, incorporating potential centers of counter-powers into itself, where the sovereign is increasingly limited and moderate.⁴⁰ Of course, this is a dialectical tendency, not a teleology; rather, democracy is the "immanent demand" that is implicit in the concept of the state, a democratizing potential inherent to the nature of power *tout court*.⁴¹

3. The *Potentia* of the Idea of Divine Force

To return to Benjamin, divine *force* is easily equated to *potentia* — not just because both are incorporated into a sort of anti-state political dynamic (divine force against mythic violence; *potentia* against sovereign *potestas*), but because they are tied to a *positive* conception of power by virtue of that oppositional tendency. Just as *potentia* is constitutive of a political body, democratizing the state in its realization, so divine force is only ever contemplated as an organization of the masses in some act contrary to the mythic cycle, as a collective subjectivity, as indicated in the reference to Sorel's notion of the proletarian general strike.⁴² In fact, an elaboration of Sorel's theory can help show the relationship between *potentia* and divine force.

Sorel's proposal was not simply that "the syndicalist unions should expand and go on strike," but the more nuanced claim that the virtues and powers of the proletariat as a class would be augmented by the development

38) Ibid., 191–202.

39) "I.e. the misconception that the final causes of external things are always to the advantage of oneself, the reluctance to believe in feared misfortunes, and the readiness to believe in what we hope for." Spinoza, *Ethics*, IApp., IIP50S.

40) Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, 74. One is also reminded of the rubber-stamp monarch of some parliamentary regimes today, which is one possible route in which *potentia*-development reconciles with the problem of incompetent heirs by progressively reducing the practical scope of their actual power, but preserving only the bare semblance necessary to avoid running afoul of the monarchist sympathies preserving the superstition of divine appointment.

41) Ibid., 33.

42) Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 292.

and proliferation of “the apocalyptic general strike” as an idea, or in his terms, *as a myth*.⁴³ Sorel understood myth as a collective social narrative held as thought-images rather than reason, and such imagined narratives, if well-suited to the situation and lives of those concerned, serve as powerful stimulants to epic, heroic collective activity, shorn of the prejudices and statist conceits of the liberal-socialists.⁴⁴ To employ Spinoza’s terminology, Sorel’s proposal is the proliferation of a sort of counter-superstition which is designed to have the effect of bringing out the *potentia* of the working class, to affect through ideals a concatenation of bodies that bring out the latent essential abilities of the masses, with those essential abilities being what is described by Marx’s theories. Sorel’s argument was that the *idea* of divine force had salubrious effects, and it only secondarily referred to a science of Marxism that contingently foretold of the revolution. Marx’s theories, however, were the science which systematically indicated the potential of the masses, and thus the viability of the Sorelian project.

Now to return to Benjamin’s vocabulary, Sorel’s end was the means of force itself: he was concerned with the essential, immanent ends of the divine force of the general strike, not the external ends of a transformed political order. This is why Sorel’s general strike is the closest that Benjamin gets to picking out an example of divine force – it successfully found an articulation of a pure revolt, not a revolution that upends mythic violence to only re-establish it. Differentiating revolt and revolution by their effects, Sorel’s general strike is a revolt because it has no predetermined outcome, no *telos* outside itself taken to be the reason for the act, and thus does not perpetuate the mythic cycle, but escapes the threat of anarchistic irrationalism by finding its nonetheless rational end in the means itself, in the myth-idea.⁴⁵ Sorel’s rational myth, through a modesty about the power of human intellect determined, first of all, by the faculty of imagination (shared with Spinoza), fulfills an increase in *potentia*, a greater coordination of bodies for greater determinate power.⁴⁶ Sorelian myth, therefore, appears to be a means of bringing about divine force.

Once Sorel’s myth of the general strike is understood in the Spinozian lens, we can now affect a disaggregation of the concept of divine force into two senses. On the one hand, divine force is *potentia*, a collective action that breaks up a cycle of domination which is dependent on ignorance and superstition – the mythic cycle is reliant on the supposition of the foundational law, mistaken as being justified by means other than violence. It is the multitude that overthrows a legal order, but it is certainly not the multitude that founds another one – that is the product of a faction, on the basis of a superstition. This mythic cycle is the exact same as the cycle

43) This should not be confused with the Benjaminian sense of mythic violence. Sorel proposes the proletarian myth in order to organize the workers to perform a “proletarian general strike”, which is equated with divine violence in Benjamin’s discussion of Sorel, whereas the “political general strike” makes no true break with the system of capitalism for Sorel, and is precisely absent a Sorelian myth. Despite the common vocabulary, these two usages are quite distinct, and in fact opposed.

44) Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, ed. and trans. Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 20, 118, 240–241.

45) For example, Sorel sees as inherent to the combative quality of the myth a necessary salubrious effect on the morality of the workers, bequeathing a Nietzschean, rather than Christian, ethic. Benjamin focuses upon the bloodlessness of the Sorelian general strike, but this only served a secondary foundation for Sorel’s valorizing of the idea as an idea. *Ibid.*, 215–252.

46) For more on the relationship between Sorel’s idea of myth and Spinoza’s theory of the imagination, which plays into his epistemology and political theory, see Chiara Bottici, “Philosophies of Political Myth, a Comparative Look Backwards: Cassirer, Sorel and Spinoza,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 8, no. 3 (2009): 365–382, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885109103840>. Albeit critical of Sorel’s treatment of myth as anarchistic, in a manner similar to Benjamin, Gramsci develops a similar understanding of power/*potentia* as Spinoza and the necessity of an “individual” locus in the “modern Prince” of the revolutionary political party: “The modern prince, the myth-prince, cannot be a real person, a concrete individual. It can only be an organism, a complex element of society in which a collective will, which has already been recognized and has to some extent asserted itself in action, begins to take concrete form. History has already provided this organism, and it is the political party — the first cell in which there come together germs of a collective will tending to become universal and total.” Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 129.

of fear that Balibar identifies as the heart of Spinoza's passion-centric political analysis: "Once this fear has become reciprocal, and those who govern, terrorized by the latent power of the masses, seek to terrorise them in turn... a causal chain of violent passions (hatred between classes, parties and religions) is set in motion, which leads inevitably to civil war."⁴⁷ On the other hand, divine force is the idea of itself, the Sorelian myth about that collective action which makes it possible; only by propagating the possibility of it amongst the concerned group does it become possible. This aspect of divine force is especially seen in the interpreters who construe divine force as only that *ought* at the heart of law-destruction, a pure potentiality, the utopic moment that dreams of justice. As Sorel determined, the idea of a pure, unmediated forceful act, placed into a motivating narrative, is the necessary means by which a collectivity is formed and directed towards conscious action. *The idea of divine force is itself a force in the world.* The idea is held, and the effect is a divine force in the first sense, a break in the mythic cycle by a collective act.⁴⁸ The idea nullifies the ignorance that restricts determinative power, that ignorance being the condition for *potestas* and mythic violence – the idea vitiates against the threat of law-preserving violence, the empty threat borne of the law's own weakness as a *potestas* parasitic on *potentia*.⁴⁹

The dialectical relationship between *potentia* and *potestas* also helps to clarify the relationship between divine force and mythic violence that are too easily set up as dichotomous. Spinoza's conception of *potestas* as parasitic on the *potentia* of the multitude, in the first place, helps to make sense of Benjamin's final sentence describing divine force as "sovereign force [*waltende Gewalt*]."⁵⁰ Police and military (i.e. the mobilization of bodies in coordination), a kind of *potentia*, are the means by which *potestas* is preserved – a power-augmenting community is a necessary condition for dominative power. This is perhaps why Benjamin ultimately developed into a Marxist historical materialist: the increasing need for the organization of the multitude for ever greater coordination, either in external warfare or industrial production, is affected in the current regimes of power by the stretching of the limits of *potestas*, of mythic violence in the law. The historical tendencies at the time required the cultivation of the conditions of *potentia*, of divine force's possibility in the world and overcoming of the present bourgeois order that, more than prior regimes, articulated its rule in terms of positive and natural law. Hence, Benjamin did not think it urgent to identify instances of divine force, for the viciousness of mythic violence in conditions of modern capitalism were incongruous and self-destructive. Divine force operates at the scale of the multitude. Individual recognition is inconsequential – the question is at the level of the mass organization of bodies, which will realize divine force if they are able.⁵¹ The addendum that Sorel and Spinoza would write is that "the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things,"⁵² that *collective* recognition of divine violence is incumbent for the realization of liberation from the mythic cycle, ironically through the phenomenon of "myth", of the conscious attempt to organize (but not negate or restrict) the passions of the multitude into a rational plan of action. The enactment of divine

47) Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, 39.

48) In other words, the idea of divine violence, produced from Benjamin's "historico-philosophical view of law", is a concrete realization of Spinoza's third kind of knowledge, intuitive knowledge [*scientia intuitiva*], an adequate idea that in itself comprehends both the thing described and itself as a contingent, imaginative entity. Spinoza, *Ethics*, IIP40S2.

49) Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 285.

50) *Ibid.*, 300.

51) And this is where Gramsci's criticism of Sorel would redound to Benjamin as well: "Can a myth, however, be 'non-constructive'? How could an instrument conceivably be effective if, as in Sorel's vision of things, it leaves the collective will in the primitive and elementary phase of its mere formation, by differentiation ('cleavage') — even when this differentiation is violent, that is to say destroys existing moral and juridical relations?... In Sorel's case it is clear that behind the spontaneity there lies a purely mechanistic assumption, behind the liberty (will-life-force) a maximum of determinism, behind the idealism an absolute materialism." Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 128–129.

52) Spinoza, *Ethics*, IIP7.

force, *contra* Benjamin, is coextensive with the idea of divine force; the collective holding of the idea is what brings its truth into being.

The consequences of this filiation of the Benjaminian and Spinozian dyads, along with the Sorelian mediation, are multiple. Returning to Benjamin's original description of divine force, this conceptual fusion has rejected three of the four characteristics: (1) *potentia* is certainly more than a speculation, but (~2) recognition is integral to its production, (~3) there is no teleological necessity for its occurrence, and as a consequence, (~4) its effect in the world is not invisible, but fully visible if to be real at all. If the full consequences of a notion of force are reckoned with, especially in the political valence, then a practice of quietism is in contradiction with a valuation of divine force as progressive or productive of a new epoch.⁵³

Thus, in terms of the existing interpretations, my account rejects the mystical, irrationalist reading of Benjamin's divine force, such as the model of a "pure Event" that breaks through historical temporality from nowhere and rends asunder everything existing. It also opposes Derrida's diagnosis that some features of Benjamin's text constitute, "a grafting of neomessianical Jewish mysticism onto post-Sorelian neo-Marxism (or the reverse)."⁵⁴ Rather, divine force is materialized, grounded in the organization of the multitude and its essential relationship to mythic law as a consequence of inadequate ideas, superstitions, and ideology. It also corrects for what Guzmán laments as a descriptivism inherent to the account, on the model of Borges's famous country-sized map. Rather than a mere ideal or ought, divine violence is a self-conscious doing: Benjamin's qualified analysis does in fact give "guidelines for action", for the cultivation of *potentia*, of positive affective relationships with greater numbers of individuals constituting the preparation for divine force.⁵⁵ On the individual, subjective side, the Benjamin-Sorel-Spinoza account presented here partially accords with the reading of divine violence afforded by Slavoj Žižek. Following a Badiouan ontology, Žižek sees divine violence as an "Event", which is only instantiated by the unguaranteed recognition of the subject called into being by the "Event". In his brief account, he stresses the relationship between *potentia* and *potestas* ("[Jacobin] state terror was a kind of pre-emptive action whose true aim was... to prevent the direct 'divine' violence of the *sans-culottes*, of the people themselves"),⁵⁶ the non-superstitious character of this determinate power ("it is extra-moral", unencumbered by norms, legal or otherwise),⁵⁷ and the positive, affective basis of this violence ("*the domain of pure violence... is neither law-founding nor law-sustaining, is the domain of love*").⁵⁸ What my accounts adds to Žižek's reading is, most importantly, an explication of the framework surrounding the "Event-Subject" dynamic Žižek focuses upon; this framework includes the affective grounds for the potential of the divine force instantiation and the means by which a subjective recognition could take place, namely a self-conscious mythic narrative.

Where the present account significantly departs from Žižek's is in the classification of particular events as instances of divine force. Basically, my criterion for the classification of a thing as divine force is the cultivation of *potentia*, whereas his is the recognition of an "Event" as such by a subject. In the three examples he gives of divine violence (the Rio food riots, the Jacobin terror, and the Paris Commune), I am only prepared to identify the final instance as a case of divine force, by reason of the Parisians having effectively produced, for an instance, an instantiation of a new order, a break in the mythic cycle. The Commune was the generation of a *potentia*,

53) Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 300.

54) Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 263.

55) Guzmán, "Benjamin's Divine Violence," 61.

56) Žižek, *Violence*, 201–202.

57) *Ibid.*, 202.

58) *Ibid.*, 205.

of enthusiastic collective activity. In contrast, the food riots were more akin to a conjunction of affects without adequate ideas; one might say it was pure passion, albeit those passions being righteous indignation and/or envy. And in the case of the Jacobins, Žižek repeats so many other interpreters in valorizing the revolutionary moment (Robespierre before Dantonist reaction, i.e. Dantonist *potestas*), without recognizing that what of value he sees is only the utopic presentiment that exists in all law-destroying mythic violence (which even a common crime possesses). In short, the distinction between Žižek and myself here on the concrete determination of an instance of divine force is judging a thing by its effects. The food riots are at best a blip in historical memory, the Jacobin terror debatably laid the groundwork for the crushing of the *potentia* of the revolutionary Parisian masses,⁵⁹ but the Commune had to be militarily crushed, yet became a historical lodestar for revolutionaries and a terrible nightmare for rulers the world over.⁶⁰

In closing, the final point of congruence with Žižek, the affective basis of power, bears repeating, for it is crucial for any comprehension of a Spinozistic understanding of power, and thus of anything like a positive divine force. For Spinoza, literally everything having to do with the human comes down to love, for it is what attaches one to another person/body/idea/thing. Love simply is that feeling of pleasure enhanced by the affective engagement with another being, it is the link in the chain of affects that coordinates bodies in Spinoza's physics of the emotions, the basis for *potentia*.⁶¹ And so most importantly, in terms of these collective phenomena of the multitude, divine violence, the cycles of law-making violence through history, the basic affect of love is the only real point at which these topics touch upon personal experience – for the reader of this text, divorced from the standpoint of the easy position of a scholar writing in the retrospect, the actual experience of divine force will be in terms like “love”, rather than those used in the text above. It is out of the cultivation of love through things like the propagation of the ideal of solidarity or the preaching of a Sorelian myth that the conditions for divine force are forged. Love in this collective sense, most often just referred to as “solidarity”, as opposed to the sense of an exclusive one-to-one pairing, is the basis for the energy discharged in the here-and-now of the revolt-that-is-not-yet-a-revolution, untainted by a teleological or instrumental end.

Divine force, if thought through clearly, is just as foreign to the mystic as the economic-materialist. At the end of the day, a conceptual reevaluation of divine force through the lens of *potentia* culminates in a reaffirmation of the role of solidarity to political action, a role not fully captured by a model of practical reason shorn of the affective and imaginative basis of human understanding. Solidarity, achieved through shared images,

59) This should be noted to be in contrast to Robespierre's speeches themselves, which Žižek is correct for recognizing for their truly revolutionary, *potentia*-cultivating message and set of policies. For example, he opposed a “legalization” of the trial and execution of Louis XVI, on grounds that doing so would taint the mass action with legal moralism that undermines the revolution itself. He also proposed erecting a monument to the murder of the tyrant-king, so as to preserve the egalitarian passions of the masses and preserve the fear of the tyrants. Robespierre, despite the consequences of his policies, recognized the passion-ladenness of the *potentia* on which the French revolution depended. Maximilien Robespierre, “On the Action to Be Taken against Louis XVI,” in *Great Lives Observed: Robespierre*, ed. George Rudé (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 32.

60) The “un-Benjaminian” bent of this argument, given that he is the chief analyzer of minutiae and the vanquished, is acknowledged. However, I think this indicates two things. The first is the strangeness of the divine force concept in Benjamin's work; it makes sense that the optimism of 1921 would contrast with his other famous texts from the 1930's. The second is that the subjects of Benjamin's critique of the everyday are distinct from a critique oriented towards picking out and identifying the grounds for the cultivation of *potentia*. Criticism of the crudities of late-capitalist existence can go towards identifying unrealized potentials in human development, and hence divine force, but divine force retains an aspect of long-term cultivation of world-historical capabilities that would have a “persistence” that might arouse concern for a Benjaminian critique. Regardless, I admit that this paper's attempt to develop the fecundity of “divine violence” into a more coherent concept may have strayed from Benjamin's wider theoretical commitments. It did so in my efforts to develop the concept more precisely.

61) “I shall consider human actions and appetites just as if it were an investigation into lines, planes, or bodies.” Spinoza, *Ethics*, III, Preface.

only shareable because of common relations, is a conjunction, a power of bodies in unison which makes possibilities actual, breaking through the cycle of mythic violence, diminishing the margins of thought that permits *potestas*. Or, as the old American union song ran:

When the union's inspiration through the workers' blood shall run,
There can be no power greater anywhere beneath the sun;
Yet what force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one,
But the union makes us strong.

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