

Reflections on Divine Violence: Forum on the Actuality of Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' at Its Centenary, Part III

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Abstract: Walter Benjamin published his influential essay 'Critique of Violence'/'Zur Kritik der Gewalt' in 1921, and the work has troubled and provoked thinkers across disciplines for over a century now. This Forum gathers a group of scholars in philosophy, political science, international relations and legal studies to reflect on the *actuality* of Benjamin's essay for contemporary critical theory. Melany Cruz, Kaveh Ghoreishi and Sara Minelli engage Benjamin on 'divine violence.' As Cruz notes, lynching in contemporary Mexico has become a recurrent phenomenon in *nota roja* outlets. Due to its brutality, perceptions of lynching have been reduced to a form of uncivilised and irrational crime. In opposition to this perspective, Cruz theorises the political dimension of the violence of lynching by drawing from Benjamin and argues that such violence symbolically and *affectively* dramatises the suspension of 'mere life' in which the communities enacting the lynchings are immersed in the current conditions of neoliberal Mexico. In this way, it is possible to claim that lynching, in Benjamin's terms, constitutes a form of divine violence that has the capacity to reveal and communicate the need to end the fear- and anger-provoking condition of 'mere life.' In the second section, Ghoreishi and Minelli propose a reading of 'divine' as opposed to 'mythical violence' that brings out the radical elements of some contemporary struggles by interpreting some examples of strike which took place in Iranian Kurdistan (Rojhilat) in the last forty years. They understand the revolutionary 'general strike' considered by Benjamin as what Jesi has called a 'suspension of time,' bringing 'normal' economic and social relations to a halt. In this sense, the general strikes in Kurdistan can be said to bring the mythological temporality of oppression to an end. These struggles, in which new forms

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of collectivity have emerged and been experimented, should, therefore, be seen as anticipations of the 'divine violence' that puts an end to 'mythical violence.'

Keywords: Walter Benjamin; political violence; lynching; divine violence; Mexico; political emotions; Kurdistan; strike; Georges Sorel.

The Divine Form of the Violence of Lynching in Mexico

Melany Cruz

Introduction

In 2004 in the *pueblo* of San Juan Ixtayopan in Mexico, a vast crowd of people witnessed the fierce torture of three police officers. According to the newspapers and radio reports, the crowd numbered in the thousands, with all of them observing how the three men were brutalised. Only one of them remained alive by the time police entered the town to break up the crowd; the other two officers were killed. The reason for these killings was described as an *irrational* fury which erupted when the police officers in question were mistaken for child kidnappers by members of the community. The collective violence remained anonymous, no individual perpetrators were identified and, as with many other lynchings, it remained a spectacle of violence printed in the Mexican *nota roja*.¹ However, this lynching is not simply an isolated anecdote of violence within Mexican media outlets. On the contrary, such expressions of violence have been reported from the immediate post-revolutionary period (Kloppe-Santamaría 2020) to today (Gamallo 2015). Incidences of lynching have been on the increase over the last few decades, a period which coincides with the expansion of neoliberalism in Mexico (Rodríguez Guillén and Veloz Ávila 2014; Gamallo 2015).

The discussion of lynching in Mexico, as well as the rest of Latin America, is varied. Scholars have tended to classify it as a form of criminality due to its lawless composition. Others have described it as a moment of agency, an act of resistance, and even an expression of empowerment (Goldstein 2004; Snodgrass Godoy 2004, 2006; Fuentes Díaz 2006a). It is clear that lynching possesses several complexities which frustrate a universal definition. Nevertheless, this paper seeks to address the political dimension of the violence of lynching, drawing from Walter Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence.' I argue that lynching is generally overlooked as a form of political violence because there are clear limitations of what violence and politics mean and represent in the action of lynching.

Benjamin's subversive account of the relationship between non-instrumental violence and the state is critical for a deeper understanding of lynching. As Agamben suggests, Benjamin 'recognized the necessity of breaking the vicious circle of means and ends in order to discover a form of violence that would, by its nature, be irreducible to any other'

(Agamben et al. 2009: 107). Lynching presents us with the possibility of observing this 'vicious circle,' as well as challenge the notion that violence could ever end it. For this, my Forum contribution will firstly introduce a discussion of the concept of lynching and a description of the case study, followed by an interpretation of Benjamin's notion of mythical and divine violence. Later, an analysis of lynching as a violence against 'mere life' is presented along with the argument that lynching constitutes a form of divine violence. Finally, this paper concludes that lynching represents a form of political violence because it dramatises the often silent social conditions out of which this violent action emerges.

Through the lens of a lynching

From its etymological origins in the public execution of mainly African Americans in the Southern states of the USA (Waldrep 2002; Dray 2003; Thurston 2011), lynching in Latin America evocates a different connotation. Since the early 1990s, scholars from the region have made efforts to define this spontaneous and brutal form of violence (Huggins 1991; Goldstein 2004; Snodgrass Godoy 2006; Mendoza Alvarado 2008; Rodríguez Guillén and Veloz Ávila 2014). Through the recollection of this work, my contribution characterises lynching in Latin America, and particularly in Mexico, as a form of collective action that directs physical violence towards an individual(s), sometimes resulting in the death of the victim. The act of lynching can be anonymous, where participants do not know each other, or communitarian (Benavides 1991: 34), where participants belong to the same community. Lynching commonly appears as a response or reaction to a situation of robbery, rape, police corruption, abuse of power or negligence on the part of authorities which results in common people 'taking justice in their own hands' (see Monsivais 2002; Rodríguez Guillén 2005, 2010; Vilas 2001). In the case of communitarian lynchings, these are highly ritualistic and spectacular, suggesting some elements of organisation. For example, as in the case study of this paper, the ringing of church bells to alert (and invite) the community is a common sign of the ritual (Castillo Claudett 2002: 222; Rodríguez Guillén 2010: 81). Particularly in Mexico, expressions of lynching have been registered for over fifty years. Regardless of the numbers, lynching, as a concept and action, remains complex.² Thus, I focus on the lynching in San Juan Ixtayopan, or simply known as Tláhuac, to illustrate the common elements seen of lynching in Mexico.³

In November of 2004, three men sitting in a car outside the local school attracted the attention of the community. These men were police agents doing undercover work in the area, allegedly investigating drug dealing (*narcomundeo*). Early reports indicate that the agents were found 'taking pictures and videos,'⁴ which alerted local mothers who were collecting their children from school. Rumours of child kidnappers visiting the area had been circulating weeks before the events⁵ which led to the police agents being seen as potential threats. As the rumours and panic spread, the crowds grew in size. In a short period of time, the three men were surrounded by a large crowd, who refused to believe that they were police officers and were instead convinced that their intentions were malicious.⁶ The lynching followed quickly. The three police officers were tied to lampposts, tortured and

two of them were burned alive.⁷ Evidence of failed negotiations between the community and the authorities existed in both the media and the official police report. However, the lynching only ended hours later, when police special forces entered the crowd to rescue the remaining survivor. The lynching in Tláhuac was televised and widely covered by the media, but its development and characteristics are not particularly divergent from hundreds of other lynchings that were less widely televised. Thus, I use this lynching as a lens through which to discuss the theoretical implications of understanding this phenomenon as a form of non-instrumental violence that dramatises the struggle embodied in living life as the dispossessed at the margins of the political sphere.

Walter Benjamin and divine violence

Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' has been widely discussed within the field of political theory. Some accounts of this famous essay link his analysis of *Gewalt* to the necessity of revolutionary violence due to the tensions between the normativity of law and violent actions (Frazer and Hutchings 2011). This tension, without doubt, exists beyond revolutionary interpretations of violence and extends to the question of how the law, in its different kinds, exercises and contributes to violence. Towards this, Benjamin makes an important distinction between 'natural' and 'positive' law:

[T]heory of natural law, according to which violence is a natural given, is diametrically opposed to the positive-law theory of violence as a product of history. If the natural law can assess all existing law only on the basis of a critique of its ends, its positive counterpart can assess all emergent law only on the basis of a critique of its means. (Benjamin 2009: 2)

In both cases, violence is bound to the rule of law, meaning that it fulfils the role of 'law making' and 'law preserving.' These forms of law are dialectically dependent on each other (Frazer and Hutchings 2011: 128) working in a cyclical dynamic (Khatib 2016). Therefore, the violence that produces and reproduces capitalism is enacted, justified, and modified for the state to proceed and make new laws that restart the cycle of violence. This has been called by scholars the fateful cycle of conserving the violence of law making and law preserving (Müller 2003: 469). Benjamin called this mythical violence (Benjamin 2009).

I agree with Khatib (2016: n.p.) that 'whereas the position of natural law is often an issue when armed anti-hegemonic, anti-state, or anti-colonial struggles are to be legitimized, the opposite standpoint of positive law is normally put forward by the state in order to justify state repression and institutionalized coercion.' In this sense, the law is a parasitic form of violence wherein the myth of the state has appropriated the idea of a legitimate and eternal return to the performance of violence (Müller 2003: 469). Preserving a system of law is only possible through a constant reaffirming of the acts and representations of violence, which are monopolised, especially in western and westernised societies,

in the institutions of the state. Thus, mythical violence ‘pertains as much to the violence of the representation – its ability to strike or shock us – as it does to the representation of violence’ (McCall 1996: 187), as it reproduces through its cyclical motion.

The problem of mythical violence is its restriction to means and ends, that is, to the law which prescribes particular means and ends given in particular contexts and systems. The state and all its institutions, including the police (Benjamin 2009: 12), guarantee the maintenance of social domination and the strength of the state (Arteaga e Arzuaga 2017: 30). Its function, then, is ‘to extend momentary violence over a temporal span, thus giving it an aura of duration in [the] creation of an authorial, authorised power’ (McCall 1996: 191). This is particularly relevant because violence – in its performance and narrative configuration – always suggests a permanent action, which remains the same over different contexts, as a continuum that is ‘all-encompassing and remarkable as myth and law’ (McCall 1996: 192-93).

Benjamin argues that all non-state uses of violence are threats to existing law, a form of ‘provoking-law-preserving violence’ (Frazer and Hutchings 2011: 128). In opposition to mythical violence, Benjamin argues for an expression of violence as a *pure* manifestation that is not congealed in the cyclical rationality of law making. Addressing the issues of instrumentality and immediacy (Müller 2003: 468), Benjamin contraposes mythical violence to what he called ‘divine violence.’ Divine violence has been interpreted as ‘law-destroying, boundary-destroying, breaking the cycle of law-making and law preservation’ (Frazer and Hutchings 2011: 129). In other words, Benjamin proposed an idea of violence that would oppose the state’s monopoly of force by destroying (both materially and symbolically) the reproduction of mythical violence.

Divine violence ‘is manifested and sanctioned in everyday life’ (Frazer and Hutchings 2011: 129), positioning it entirely outside of state power. In this sense, it does not attempt to install ‘law or justice in the form of rights but transform the organisation of society as a whole’ (Frazer & Hutchings 2011: 129). It looks for a form of justice that is not a matter of mediation, but which is an ‘absolutely decisive, striking and terminating intervention’ (Müller 2003: 470) against the state’s system of rule. In particular, divine violence would end the cycle of capitalist violence, which has been historically reproduced through mythical violence. Benjamin characterises and relates this to a conception of human life as ‘the prison of a life reduced to natural life, that is, mere life, guilt and misfortune, which drag the human down and bring disaster upon them: the eternal recurrence of violence’ (Salzani 2008: 27).

A useful concept for understanding ‘divine violence’ comes from Benjamin’s notion of the general strike. ‘So far as class struggles are concerned, in them (...) strike must count as a pure means,’ Benjamin (2009: 17) says. He uses Sorel’s distinction of the political general strike and the general strike to materialise the idea of ‘divine violence.’ The general strike, the one conducted by the proletariats, ‘set itself the sole task of destroying the violence of the state’ and its indifference ‘to the material gains’ (2009: 17, 18) as it purely aims to end the domination of the state. Although I do not attempt to compare the general strike with lynching, since both are distinctive in composition and practice, I take

Benjamin's conceptions of the divine violence to argue that lynching represents a moment of rupture of mythical violence, a striking, decisive and brutal contestation of 'mere life.' To understand this, I incorporate emotions or emotional life as part of the process of breaking the cycle and establishing a 'good life.'

Lynching against 'mere life'

In the distinction between mythical and divine violence, Benjamin wishes to propose a radical break with the cyclical rule of law. Divine violence represents force which can destroy the system of law, its preservation and its irrevocable cycle of violent means and ends. The violence of 'pure means' aims to eliminate violence itself from the social relations established in capitalist societies, presenting itself instead as pure expression looking to destroy the conditions in which the capitalist order of the state is established. Benjamin argues for a rupture in the way the world exists as reification and fixedness, where the aims and means of violence form an instrumental logic (Benjamin 2009: 25). To strike out against such reification and fixedness is to challenge the very world itself, free from any rational or reasonable aim, which is not an aim in itself, but rather a violence which seeks to do away with the instrumental correlation of ends and means. The state is at the core of this cycle. However, beyond the abstract composition of this theory, the cycle of state violence through the rule of law does not operate universally.

As Mexican political scientist Rhina Roux (2009) argues, Mexico has *historically* been sustained as a 'fragmented state.' Against conceptions of 'failed state' (see Huggins, 1991; Nivette, 2016) that predominate in the explanations of lynching, Roux's reading of the Mexican state gives a better explanation of not just the context, but the cyclical dimension of violence. She argues that the Mexican state is disjointed at its core, where the functioning parts are systematically beneficial for those in power (the bourgeoisie), whilst the malfunctioning aspects of the state are regularly suffered by the subalterns (Roux 2009: 265). Roux uses a Gramscian reading of the subaltern that is not immediately germane to this paper. However, the notion of 'fragmented state' is useful to explain the cyclical violence and how the oppressed, in a Benjaminian sense, takes part in and opposes it.

This disjuncture in the Mexican state has become more visible, Roux indicates, with the introduction of neoliberal measures that have dismantled the legal framework that protected subaltern classes, such as the disappearance of networks and commitments (legal and informal) that were once tied to the welfare state; the transfer of public goods to private interests and the disappearance of constitutional powers which granted the nation original right over the land, natural goods, and subsoil (Roux 2009: 261). Instead, the neoliberal state imposes the rationality of private exchange through the market, with a corresponding form of legitimacy and political command.⁸

Throughout this rationality, *cracks* are manifested economically and symbolically through the disfranchisement from politics, the fragmentation of communal organisation and the overall atomisation of societal relationships (Fuentes Díaz 2006b). For the Mexican sociologist Fuentes Díaz, lynching occurs in this neoliberal context – although

not exclusively (see Kloppe-Santamaría 2020) – because disembodiment of the internalisation of the system of law (Fuentes Díaz 2006a: 112). These moments characterise the lack of distinction between the law and the exception in which the law loses its meaning for some communities, creating spaces for violent self-defence or popular justice (Fuentes Díaz 2018: 136). The disembodiment of the system of law is not simply a structural issue. Scholars researching lynching in Mexico and Latin America have seen these processes also as moments of empowerment and agency.

Snodgrass Godoy (2004: 623), for example, argues that cases of lynching in Guatemala can be seen as ‘agentive moment[s]’ because they give a glimpse of empowerment to communities that are otherwise dispossessed from material and political capital. It is argued that, although morally incorrect, this momentary monopoly of violence permits those dispossessed, or subaltern – in Roux’s (2009) words – to control a perceived justice in a context where social, political, and economic justice never arrives. Looking at lynching through this lens permits us to understand how the cyclical formation of violence fixed in the state is challenged by the (brutal) force of lynching. In concordance, I argue that the violence of lynching can be interpreted as momentum shifting towards the ending of ‘mere life’ that is reproduced by mythical violence, and as an *expression* that offers a brief suspension of a life lived as disposable.

Benjamin addressed the idea of ‘mere life’ as the life that is only considered in its natural or biological terms, not in the way that it is lived and experienced. In Benjamin’s (2009: 24) words, ‘mythical violence is blood over mere life for its own sake, its divine counterpart is pure violence over all life for the sake of the living person.’ ‘Bare life,’ as Agamben (1995) would interpret, represents in contemporary terms a life that is quantified but not lived, a life that is merely subsistence and which excludes the experiences and *feelings* of those who are excluded from politics and the state. In other words, the state’s system of rule is a ‘manifestation of the mythic [and] thus condemns the human to remain imprisoned within natural life; it condemns them to the guilt of mere life, whose symbol is blood. Mythic violence is ‘bloody power over mere life for its own sake and demands sacrifice’ (Salzini 2008: 28). Therefore, the bare life is a product of modern states in which this life is lived through *guilt*, a life of perpetual culpability. It is the life of those marginalised from society, those affected by power over life, those who have been deprived of a ‘good life.’ Although Agamben’s idea of ‘bare life’ is described as a non-political status of life or life that is outside the political realm, I expand from this conception indicating that ‘mere life’ can be contested when acknowledging the *emotional life* that constitutes part of divine violence.

Even though Benjamin does not reflect specifically upon *emotions*, I sustain that the tension between ‘bare life’ and ‘good life’ is similar to the conceptual tension between reason and emotion. Philosophers and feminist scholars have extensively discussed this separation (see Ahmed 2015; Clough and Halley 2007; Freedman 2013; Nussbaum 2016; Prokhorovnik 2002). Prokhorovnik (2002: 51) argues that ‘historically the dominant strand of at least western philosophy has considered that reason and emotion are mutually exclusive.’ By this, she does not imply emotions hijack processes of judgment and decision-making

that occur in the mind (reason), but that emotions are part of cognitive processes that take part in the ways we engage in the world. I argue that the production of 'bare life' belongs to the tradition of instrumental rationality determined by the cyclical reproduction of violence, whilst the possibility of 'good life' illustrates the incorporation of emotions as a constitutional part of how we engage with the political sphere. In Benjamin's terms, mythical violence – the law that is instrumental rationality – has control over 'bare life,' a biological self that is treated without experiences. This control is not just over bodies (who can and who cannot use violence) but is rationalised in the mere actions of bodies (who breaks or who does not break the law), without considering how bodies experience determined social and political conditions. Therefore, emotions that are an inherent part of the human experience are left outside of 'mere life.'

To revoke the cycle of mythical violence, and to reconsider those dispossessed by this cycle, we can look at emotions⁹ as a political component of the expressions of divine violence. Benjamin indicates that divine violence stands against a principle of guilt and retribution, which is the foundation of the modern system of law and its morality, a nexus that is embedded within the mythical beliefs surrounding the modern state (Khatib 2016). I agree with Artega and Azuaga (2017: 33) who interpret divine violence as a way of expanding frontiers of justice not through the establishment of laws but through 'dramatization' of the class struggle. It is a moment of *rupture* which challenges the very understanding of what it means to live beyond reification. It is the reconsideration of life beyond pure rationality through the uses of violence. Thus, emotions, as political expressions of the divine violence, dramatically communicate how 'bare life' *affects* the lives of the dispossessed.

Within the context of Mexico's fragmented state, it is possible to see some of these elements. Through the forceful expression of fear and anger, lynching symbolically and *affectively* dramatises the suspension of 'bare life' to which communities are condemned. These emotions provide momentaneous agency, in Snodgrass Godoy's (2004) sense, to communities that are otherwise subsumed in the cycle of mythical violence. In regard to the case of San Juan Ixtayopan, for example, the living conditions of the community were not only bare in the sense of economic marginalisation but in the gradual devaluing of the sense of community. This is revealed when the *fear* of kidnappers surrounding a neighbourhood turns into violence, which is manifested and perceived by others as 'uncivilised' *rage* and *anger*. As one witness stated, 'the crowd continued with the lynching to protect their children and *to make it known* that the community has *the guts*'¹⁰ [author's emphasis]. These collective emotions communicate via the lynching how bare life and the continuity of mythical violence are opposed and resisted, even when the violence of lynching is later criminalised, once again being subsumed by the cycle of mythic violence. In this sense, the divine form of the violence represented by lynching permits a momentaneous break in the cycle of mythical violence and allows those dispossessed to use their emotional life to enter the political realm, even when this is limited to the dramatisation of the struggle that characterises living 'mere life.'

The fight against mythical violence seems to be a *necessity* for communities whose lives have become dispensable. As I said before and in Fuentes Díaz's (2006a: 112) words,

lynching in Mexico occurs because of disembodiment and lack of internalisation of the system of law, which 'gave rise to forms of [violent] mediation parallel to the legal guidelines of the state.' Drawing from Benjamin, I claim the divine violence of lynching is the embodiment of *attempting for a good life*, in which the pure reason of law does not rule and rule out those marginalised from society. Therefore, it seems to the community that using violence is an expression of revoking or suspending bare life as it is determined and sustained historically by the system of law.

Benjamin's accounts of violence permit us to reflect on the complexities of what the political entails in the context of violent actions such as lynching. The question that arises in the context of lynching in Mexico is similar to what Martel (2001: 160) discusses in relation to Benjamin's notion of justice: 'What happens when the central organizing narrative of law and justice is disrupted or decentred? What kind of politics are we left with when such basic organizing principles are removed [however temporarily]?' Using the metaphor of Kafka's story 'Before the Law,' Martel (2011: 159) argues that 'justice is what is promised by the law; its possibility is what keeps us obedient, patient, and hopeful.' However, as in Kafka's story, the idea of justice never arrives, and the law seems to be natural, immovable. The tales do not reveal the 'truth' of these legal and political practices because – as we know – the main character never gets to see or know the law (Martel 2011: 159).

On the contrary, lynching seems to be something 'after/beyond the law,' a temporary suspension of the system of law and criteria of justice which opens the real significance of what these elements mean in modern capitalist Mexico, especially under the conditions of scarcity created by neoliberalism. The lynching allows us to reveal the 'truth' of those social and political elements that moved communities such as San Juan Ixtayopan to act violently. In this sense, lynching represents a political manifestation that vitalises or dramatises the anger and fear which is present in communities marginalised by the processes of accumulation by dispossession. Lynching appears in the cracks of the late capitalist state as a symptom that seeks to communicate with violence what is being silenced by the fragmentation of the Mexican welfare state, exposing the enduring myth of the state.

In agreement with Arteaga and Arzuaga (2017), I would say that the work of Benjamin provides us with the necessary elements to understand political violence as a dramatisation of social tensions and conflicts, such as fear and rage produced within marginalised communities. In this sense, lynching is an action which allows certain communities to confront the myth of the state's system of rule, as the protective, omnipresent, unique political system that monopolises violence through the legal order. Lynching, therefore, is *divine* and communicative, without wanting to be a rational instrument of force.

Conclusions

This Forum contribution theorised the political dimensions of the violence of lynching in Mexico. By drawing on Benjamin's ideas of mythical and divine violence and building the analysis on the illustrative case of Tláhuac, I argued that lynching can be interpreted as a form of divine violence when this is understood as a temporary *affective* rupture of 'mere life' that is perpetuated by conditions of dispossession in contemporary neoliberal Mexico.

Lynching, in its divine form, allows for a moment to end the cycle of ‘law making’ and ‘law preserving,’ communicating through *fear* and *anger* that this myth has – and continues – to marginalise communities.¹¹

Divine Violence: Kurdish Struggles and General Strike****

Kaveh Ghoreishi and Sara Minelli

Walter Benjamin’s essential work ‘Zur Kritik der Gewalt’ (‘Critique of Violence’) was published in 1921. In this crucial article of his young years, Benjamin draws on George Sorel’s *Reflections on Violence* in order to discuss the notion of ‘general strike.’ He then introduces the differentiation between mythical and divine violence, which is at the core of his argument. The discussion of political strategy is thus accompanied by metaphysical speculation on justice, violence and myth. Over the last century, the article has been interpreted in many different ways (cf. Moran and Salzani 2015: 2). Published in the most important sociological journal of the time, the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* founded by Max Weber, it could hardly be regarded as a sociological text (Kambas 1984:72). Its central concept is one of ‘divine violence,’ although the article certainly does not strive for some theocratic justification of politics. It is a philosophical approach to the problem of *Gewalt* (‘violence’ or ‘force’), though it also speaks to very concrete political events in Benjamin’s own lifetime.

In this paper we read Benjamin’s article in terms of its political content. We argue that, by reflecting on general strike as a form of political struggle, Benjamin not only shows the limits of never-ending debates on violence as a means for the struggle, but also indicates a way to overcome those limitations. Unlike Uwe Steiner (2000: 91), who claims that ‘Critique of Violence’ has turned ‘obsolete,’ not in the questions it raises but the answers it provides, we argue that Benjamin’s answers, if they can be called such, are still valid. Benjamin’s article helps us to recognise a new progressive political ‘possible’ in some actual struggles in the contemporary world. Despite the great abstraction of Benjamin’s text, and especially of his concept of divine violence, it is possible to interpret it as to make it operative in bringing out the radical elements of some contemporary struggles.

To demonstrate this, we interpret some events which took place in Iranian Kurdistan (Rojhilat)¹² in the last forty years in terms of what Benjamin calls ‘divine violence.’ Following a suggestion of Massimiliano Tomba’s (2017) reading of ‘Critique of Violence,’ we draw on the conceptuality of the Italian philosopher Furio Jesi,¹³ who was an avid

**** This article was written in 2020. In the meantime, there have been many changes in our research area, including a wave of general strikes in Iranian Kurdistan in the wake of protests against the murder of Jina (Mahsa) Amini. Following the murder of Jina Amini by the morality police in Teheran on 16 September 2022, angry protest erupted across the country, with women burning their headscarves in protest against the Islamic Republic’s strict dress code and its enforcement. The protests began in Saqqez in Kurdistan (Jina Amini’s hometown) during her funeral and quickly spread throughout Iran. The next day all Rojhilat cities responded to the Kurdish parties’ call for a general strike. In some cases, the strikes lasted a week or longer. Although we could not discuss these events in the article, they clearly confirm our thesis on the general strike in Iranian Kurdistan.

reader of Benjamin. We argue that, like the ‘revolt’ Jesi describes in his book *Spartakus: The Symbology of Revolt*, the ‘proletarian general strike’ discussed by Benjamin does not plan the next actions of the struggle, but brings ‘normal’ economic and social relations to a halt (Jesi 2014: 15). In the moment of the revolutionary general strike, by stopping work without aiming at an immediate practical goal, people extract themselves from all the relations of oppression and exploitation that constitute the norm in capitalist society. The general strike, as thought by Georges Sorel and taken up by Benjamin, can thus be interpreted as the stopping of time (Tomba 2017: 579). The action of moving away, as in the exodus from Mariwan we discuss in the paper, destroys the boundaries that the law draws. The action of staying at home, as in the strike of 2018 in all Iranian Kurdistan (Rojhilat), suspends the temporality of exploitation, giving place to the possibility of experimentation, the anticipation of the ‘divine violence’ which has not yet actualised.

We proceed in three steps: we begin by introducing the differentiation between mythical and divine violence in the ‘Critique of Violence,’ then we discuss the notion of ‘general strike,’ for which definition Benjamin draws on Georges Sorel’s *Reflections on Violence*. In a final step, we show that the proletarian general strike could be considered as a form of divine violence, that is, of pure means, using the example of the general strikes in Kurdistan.

What is violence?

As has been noticed, the German word *Gewalt* is actually not the same as ‘violence’ (cf. Salzani 2008: 18). As Étienne Balibar (2001: 1271) writes, the German term reunites the meaning of the Latin ‘violentia’ (violence) and ‘potestas’ (power), which can equally translate *Macht* or even *Herrschaft* depending on the context. The ‘latent dialectic’ between ‘the negation of law or justice,’ the violence, ‘and their realisation (...) by an institution (generally the state),’ the power, that Balibar assumes as a constituent element of politics, is that very dialectic which Benjamin criticises in the article. As Tomba (2009: 127) points out, the ambiguity of the term *Gewalt* shows the unity between what is called ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’ *Gewalt*, or ‘power’ and ‘violence.’ The legal system is often presented as the only way to interrupt the circle of mythical or ‘natural’ violence, as in the Aeschylian *Oresteia*, when Athena prefers not to use her power as a goddess to destroy or forgive Orestes but instead to have a trial with him. Thus, Benjamin shows that the two types of violence do not differ in their essence. The law system has not broken the eternal circle of myth; rather, it is its continuation (Benjamin 2004: 249). Only an essentially different type of *Gewalt*, which Benjamin (2004: 250) at the end of the article calls ‘*göttliche Gewalt*,’ divine violence, could break the spell.

In the modern state theory, as in Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, people are meant to give up their violence-making right or ability to the state in order to put an end to the war of all against all. The role of the state is to guarantee safety to its subjects; in exchange, they owe it obedience. Through the legal system, the violence/power of the individuals is transformed into the violence/power of the state. Violence is not eliminated, it is legalised. Benjamin points out an aporia of the legal system in its connection with the moral question. If in German

law (*Recht*) and justice (*Gerechtigkeit*) share the same etymology, the law is in fact founded on a foreclosure (Tomba 2009: 129) of the question of justice. Indeed, it is based on the assumption that the justification, that is, legalisation of means can guarantee the justice of the ends. But the question of justice itself is not posed, let alone the question of justice in relation to violence. In this view, violence is justified when it is legalised as a means to protect and maintain the legal ends of law. The distinction is made between legal violence and illegal violence. But violence in this sense cannot be *just* (Benjamin 2004: 237).

At the time Benjamin was writing the 'Critique of Violence', the Weimar Republic became a theatre of many episodes of brutal repression of the worker movement by a social-democratic government. At the end of the First World War, the Spartacist uprising and the Räterepublik (democracy of councils) in 1918-1919 were repressed by the comrades of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), who founded the new parliamentary Republic. The Spartacist leaders Rosa Luxemburg and Carl Liebknecht were murdered and thousands of people were shot dead. Even closer to the time of the article being written, in March 1920 socialist parliamentarians sent troops to repress the uprising in the Ruhr region, where mineworkers had founded a 'red army' and begun to collectivise the mines. The workers' organization had been useful to the Social-Democratic Party in order to defeat the Kapp-coup d'état. Indeed, when the monarchist and nationalist Right tried to seize power, the workers stopped them with an unexpected general strike. But once the danger was out of sight, the socialists repressed the revolutionary labour by killing more than a thousand people (Sturm 2011).

There is an economic explanation to the brutal reaction of the state against class struggle. According to this view, the bourgeois state defends the interests of the capital and of the capitalists. The revolutionary project of destroying private property can only make the statists and capitalists shiver and respond with violence. Nevertheless, Benjamin suggests a more fundamental reason. What the state fears, he argues, is the *Gewalt* that it does not monopolise. As Benjamin (2004: 239) writes:

By what function violence can with reason seem so threatening to law, and be so feared by it must be especially evident where its application, even in the present legal system, is permitted. (...) This is above all the case in the class struggle, in the form of the workers' guaranteed right to strike.

General strike

Strikes were one of the essential means of class struggle at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the years 1860-70 Germany experienced an unprecedented number of strikes. In 1871 the Kaiserreich recognised the right of association, including the right to strike, but only for the purpose of improving wages and working conditions (Döring 2009: 18). Yet, if strike is legal, why is it considered to be violent? Following Benjamin (2004: 239), strike can be defined as an 'omission of actions, nonaction' that is nevertheless a form

of 'extortion' (*Erpressung*). Thus, workers go back to work only when the improvement of wages and working conditions are achieved. From the point of view of labour, strike is then 'the right to use force in attaining certain ends,' a form of violence (Benjamin 2004: 239). Another form of strike has to be distinguished from the former in the analysis concerning violence, the 'revolutionary general strike.' Sometimes called 'political mass strike,' its goal is not only the improvement of working conditions, but furthermore to overthrow the legal system. In this case, workers appeal to their right to strike, but the state considers it as an abuse of this right, because the legally acknowledged reasons for strike cannot be met in all industries at the same time (Benjamin 2004: 240). As a consequence, the state reacts violently. In both cases, in the 'passive' form of extortion or the 'active' form of revolution, the state fears the particular function of violence as the ability to modify and found legal conditions (Benjamin 2004: 240). To defend the monopoly on the lawmaking (*rechtsetzend*) power, the state deploys its law-preserving (*rechtserhaltend*) violence (Benjamin 2004: 241).

Analysis of the concept of strike has shown that 'all violence as a means is either lawmaking or law-preserving' (Benjamin 2004: 243). The violence used to overthrow the regime turns itself to lawmaking violence when it comes to the foundation of a new order, which has to be defended by law-preserving violence. As Benjamin writes, 'lawmaking is powermaking, assumption of power, and to that extent an immediate manifestation of violence (...) power is the principle of all mythic lawmaking' (Benjamin 2004: 248).

Pure means and pure praxis

The question arises whether there are any ways to break the mythical cycle of 'lawmaking' and 'law-preserving' violence. In this case, violence could not be a means to an end, which was shown to be either 'lawmaking' or 'law-preserving.' But what could be violence as 'pure means' (*reines Mittel*), as Benjamin writes? Following Benjamin, under certain conditions strike itself can be seen as 'pure means,' that is, as means without ends. Drawing on Georges Sorel's *Reflections on violence*, Benjamin makes a further distinction between two types of strikes. The 'political general strike' is a means to seize power. Georges Sorel writes against the socialists of his time who either don't want any general strike because they believe in reforms, or they want a political general strike in order to impose a 'strong, centralized and disciplined authority, which will not be hampered by the criticism of an opposition, which will be able to enforce silence and which will give currency to its lies' (Sorel 2004: 162). This however would only be a transfer of 'power from one privileged class to another' (Sorel 2004: 171). Far from being liberated, the masses of producers will only 'change their masters' (*ibid.*). The revolutionary general strike is a means to reach an end, namely, the substitution of the 'class-state' with another form of state and a new law system. As an example of political general strike Benjamin mentions the 'abortive German revolution' (Benjamin 2004: 246), by which he critically refers to the November revolution of 1918, which finally led to the foundation of the Weimar Republic through the repression of all revolutionary ferments. The 'proletarian general strike' is a completely

different kind of strike. This second form of strike was advocated by the anarcho-syndicalist movements, whose political goal is the abolition of the state. While the first type of general strike is violent because it is lawmaking, the proletarian type – Benjamin writes – is ‘nonviolent’ because it takes place ‘in the determination to resume only a wholly transformed work, no longer enforced by the state, an upheaval that this kind of strike not so much causes (*veranlasst*) as consummates (*vollzieht*)’ (Benjamin 2004: 246). The choice of the verb ‘*vollziehen*,’ which entails the sense of ‘fulfilment,’ underlines that the proletarian general strike is not a means to an end but is the fulfilment of a process of liberation, which is its achievement. The nonviolence of the strike does not refer to the lack of any material violence, but the refusal to institute some legality which could justify it. In the strike itself, indeed, new forms of collectivity emerge and are experimented. Those are the very political contents of the strike. In this kind of strike emerges a new experience of time and collectivity, which can be seen as an anticipation of what Benjamin calls ‘divine violence’ (Tomba 2017: 583), that puts an end to ‘mythical violence.’

Strikes in Kurdistan

Benjamin wrote in 1920 that ‘if the rule of myth is broken occasionally in the present age, the coming age is not so unimaginably remote that an attack on law is altogether futile’ (Benjamin 2004: 252). Today, the strike ‘has become an organizing concept for a range of distinct political actions in a changed world.’¹⁴ However, as Benjamin insisted, not every strike is able to break the circle of myth. Which form does the ‘proletarian general strike’ take in our times? The case of Kurdistan is particularly interesting because of its tradition of struggle against the state. Through the identification of occasions in which ‘the rule of myth is broken’ in Iranian Kurdistan, we show that these occasions can be interpreted as a form of ‘divine violence’ in the sense that we have emphasized above. We focus on two events of modern Kurdish history: the first one took place in 1979, just after the Iranian revolution, the second in 2018.

After the 1979 revolution in Iran, the new constitution did not recognize some minorities at all and accepted others only on a symbolic and cultural level.¹⁵ The Kurds were a minority and were excluded from the new policies and laws. The government quickly launched a fierce war against Rojhilat, Iranian Kurdistan. In response to the new situation, the Kurds organised themselves. From the very beginning they tried to carry out various forms of civil struggle to defend themselves. Nevertheless, it has to be borne in mind that while political organisations in Rojhilat (Iranian Kurdistan) are influenced by general, nationwide developments, they are not reducible to them since they are also fundamentally shaped by Kurdistan’s socio-political and historical conditions. In particular, the geopolitical division of Kurdistan -- dominated by four different states since the end of the First World War¹⁶ -- has produced both constraints and opportunities for the Kurds, as they can rely on a rich history of resistance. The continuation of these traditions gives the oppressed hope that they are not alone in the struggle against judicial violence, which is now more than ever mixed with capitalist violence.

In August 1979, at the time of the Iranian revolution, the fledgling theocratic government attacked the city of Mariwan in Iranian Kurdistan in order to 'cleanse' the region from the so called 'rebels' (Tayfuri 2019: 4). As a protest, the People's Council decided to leave the city and go to a camp 15 km from Mariwan. This resolution was quickly implemented. All inhabitants left their houses; the city was left empty. Through their decision to collectively move out of the city to the 'Kani Miran' camp, the people of Mariwan not only prevented the military attack, but also pioneered an unprecedented form of communal life, breaking away from all existing relations. The people of Mariwan started to manage themselves. Various committees were formed to respond to the necessities of that new form of life. People said that these two weeks of common life were like a 'feast.' This action also forced the government representatives to negotiate with the people's representatives on an equal footing. The people of Mariwan had achieved a new political possibility (see Tayfuri 2019: 5-7).

The people living in the Kani Miran camp for fifteen days set up quickly a peaceful self-organization. The camp consisted of various committees that allowed all its inhabitants to intervene directly. A report of the time describes the situation as follow:

In every corner of the camp, the spirit of solidarity and cooperation of the people of Mariwan is crystallized. (...) To regulate, tasks are divided between several committees, and everyone – men and women, young and old – acts within the functions of these committees. In addition to the armed men who control the city, armed men and women also provide security in the trenches. The work committee draws water from the spring by machine and distributes the commodity aid sent by the residents of the surrounding towns and villages to the campers. (Ayandegan 1979: n.p.)

On this occasion people decided to free themselves from the mythic rule of the state. Even if they did not call out for a strike, Mariwan inhabitants were realising that 'divine violence' which is 'law-destroying.' Moving away, they 'destroyed boundaries'; their violence was 'lethal without spilling blood' (Benjamin 2004: 250).

Kurdish people have a long tradition of strikes. While Iran's basic law or constitution (approved in 1946, 1958 and 1990) does not even recognize the fundamental right of workers to strike, let alone the right to a general political strike that is recognized in many European countries, in June 1982, both the Democratic Party of Kurdistan-Iran and Komala (a Marxist-leninist Party) called for a general strike in protest against military repression and the brutal execution of 59 people from the city of Mahabad (Aziz Mamlê, interview with Kaveh Ghoreishi, 2019). Although this protest did not cover all cities in Kurdistan and all industries, it was the beginning of a tradition of struggle through strikes. This is not only a Kurdish question: strikes have been employed in a fundamental way throughout Iran over the past 40 years in the face of nationwide struggle. One of the most recent and famous of these protests is the truckers' strike in December 2018. A group of truck drivers across Iran went on strike for several days to protest the high price of tires

(*Washington Post* 2018). The strike coincided with rising inflation, rising prices and widespread unemployment, which sparked weeks of protests in 100 Iranian cities, including in Kurdistan. The demands of the truckers were clear: They wanted to reduce the price of wheels. The demand, which was accepted by the government, immediately led to the end of the strike. The truckers' strike merely corrected or changed the appearance of their material condition; it did not lead to a fundamental transformation of the system that determines truck wheel rates.

It was an entirely different kind of strike, when some months later, in September 2018, following a wave of executions of Kurdish political prisoners and missile attacks on Kurdish opposition parties based deep inside Southern/Iraqi Kurdistan (Bashur), a politically and ideologically diverse group of Kurdish and leftist political forces called for a general strike on 12 September. Reports indicate that the majority of Kurds in Iran responded positively and the strike has been highly successful (Matin 2018). There are no exact statistics on the extent of the participation, but if we look at local news, evidence, images, and narratives, it can be estimated that the majority of people went on a general strike for at least one day, from all labour sectors. BBC Persian reported that most shops in the main markets of Kurdistan's cities were closed (BBC Persian 2018). This was the third major general strike since the Iranian revolution.

'We do not want this!'

Unlike other forms of union strike in Iran, this form of political strike in Kurdistan is general: all sectors of social and economic life participate. In the first case, the aim is to change the laws in order to meet the demands of the workers or the striking forces, while the second type has no specific demands and its aim is to overthrow and deny the integrity of the system.

In 2018, we randomly interviewed a number of strikers and asked why they stayed at home.¹⁷ Many of them did not have a clear answer, such as, making a clear demand, but more or less all of them were certain about why they were on strike: 'We do not want this!' They said that, while they were staying at home, the children asked 'Why don't we go to school?' It gave a possibility to talk about politics and to experience another temporality of being together. This one day of strike was for many people a way to express their refusal of the repressive system and to affirm their political *Gewalt*. Because the state took all the political power away from the people, what remains is violence as pure means, which is already a new form of living together.

These strikes are successive anticipations of a divine violence which could possibly render any attack on law 'futile.' The general strike is indeed a radical suspension of the political-economic relations. This revolutionary stop 'demands the halting of what is happening and what has happened. Before it can give itself some sort of positive goal, this negation is the first positive act' (Marcuse 1964: 25-26). Benjamin would have said, however, that the negation itself is the affirmation of the possibility of justice.

Notes

- 1 [Note by Cruz] *Nota roja* is a type of journalism in Mexico similar to sensationalist journalism, but with a focus on crime and physical violence.
- 2 [Note by Cruz] Researching lynching in Mexico is a difficult task. Since the action does not typify as a crime under Mexican law, lynching is not always registered by official institutions. It is only the media that take notes of these events and has been the main source for researchers doing both quantitative and qualitative research. This paper bases its empirical information from a broader project on lynching in Mexico in which the case of San Juan Ixtayopan was researched through media archives collected from the National Mexican Archives (Archivo General de la Nación) and the juridical and police report on the case.
- 3 [Note by Cruz] This paper makes a distinction between the concept of lynching and vigilantism. Although scholars tend to use both concepts interchangeably, vigilantism relates to an organised form of corporeal punishment committed by private persons or organisations (see Nivette 2016). Different from lynching, which does not have a specific objective, vigilantes mean to watch over, to guard and patrol something or someone with a specific purpose. Drug cartels enact more regularly forms of vigilantism than lynching, although, it is fair to suggest that lines are blurred both conceptually and practically when it comes to characterise the bigger picture of the violence in Mexico.
- 4 [Note by Cruz] Quotation collected from newspaper archives in *Diario Reforma*, 24 November 2004, 'Queman vivos a dos agentes de la PFP' by Fernández Leticia, Issue 12, Number 3996.
- 5 Information collected from newspapers archives in *Diario Reforma*, 25 November 2004, 'Todo inicio hace quince días con un carro,' Issue 12, Number 3997; *El Gráfico Universal*, 25 November 2004, 'Sabia la delegada de sospechosos en las escuelas,' Issue 82, Number 21606.
- 6 [Note by Cruz] Information collected from the Police Report (2009), page 119.
- 7 [Note by Cruz] Information collected from the Police Report (2009), page 237.
- 8 [Note by Cruz] The specific relationship between neoliberalism and the fragmentation of the welfare state in Mexico has been characterised by the increase of inequality in the distribution of social wealth, leading to greater impoverishment (Roux 2009: 269). Roux argues that throughout Mexican history there has been an 'ontological fracture' of the Mexican nation, which has been masked through the notion of legal equality of the liberal Republic and the ideological project of a culturally homogenous *mestizo* society. The legal structure ideology and culture of the liberal *mestizo* Republic was a form of unification which encompassed all citizens, regardless of their position in the community, which built the welfare state in the country. This form of narrative was useful for the post-revolutionary period in order to deliver a coherent political project. However, with the introduction of neoliberal policies, we see that the mask of the liberal project has failed to maintain the so-called social order and unification increasing those moments of rupture not only between the state and communities but also within marginalised communities themselves.
- 9 [Note by Cruz] Following Sara Ahmed's conceptualisation of emotions, I do not make a conceptual distinction between 'emotions' and 'affects.' She argues that this distinction presupposes 'affects' as pre-personal and non-intentional and 'emotions' as personal and intentional, which force a division of human experience. This separation makes the human experience as something that is 'experienced' in different realms, such as body sensations, emotions and thoughts (Ahmed 2004: 203), when actually all of these are lived as a whole.
- 10 [Note by Cruz] Quote collected from newspaper archives in *Diario El Grafico Universal*, 24 November 2004, 'Incineran vivos agentes de PFP, la policía no llego' by O. Herrera and R. Fernández, Issue 82, Number 21.605.
- 11 [Note by Cruz] I would like to thank Dr Laura Jenkins and Professor Christopher Finlay for their support and constructive feedback throughout the development of these ideas. I also thanks Dr Vittorio Bufacchi and Dr Mark Wenman for providing feedback and critical evaluation of my arguments on Benjamin during the examination of my PhD thesis, which proven to be insightful to write this piece. Finally, I thank Darcy Luke for reading and commenting early drafts of this paper.
- 12 [Note by Ghoreishi and Minelli] Iranian Kurdistan is called in Kurdish 'Rojhilatê Kurdistanê' or 'Rojhilat,' which means Eastern Kurdistan.

- 13 [Note by Ghoreishi and Minelli] Furio Jesi (1941-1980) is an Italian author. He has an important body of work on myth and mythology in the fields of literature and philology and of politics. In *Spartakus*, which was published after his death by Andrea Cavalletti (Bollati Boringhieri 2000), he draws on the events of the Spartacist uprising in 1919 in order to write a phenomenology of revolt as a 'suspension of time' and anticipation of the 'day after tomorrow.'
- 14 [Note by Ghoreishi and Minelli] As written in the call for paper 'On Strikes and Critical Theory' (2020) of the journal *Critical Times: Interventions in Global Critical Theory*, Duke University Press.
- 15 [Note by Ghoreishi and Minelli] Ali Younesi, former intelligence minister and now Hassan Rouhani's adviser on ethnic and religious minority affairs pointed out: 'according to the order of the Supreme Leader (Ali Khamenei), we recognize the Kurdish people as a cultural people.' (ISNA - Iranian Students News Agency 2019).
- 16 [Note by Ghoreishi and Minelli] Kurdistan is divided in Rojhilat (Iran), Rojava (Syria), Bakur (Turkey) and Bashur (Iraq).
- 17 [Note by Ghoreishi and Minelli] These interviews were recorded in 2018 by Kaveh Ghoreishi as part of a broader research about strikes in Iranian Kurdistan (Rojhilat) which has not yet been published.

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Reflexões sobre a Violência Divina: Fórum sobre a Atualidade da ‘Crítica da Violência’ de Benjamin em seu Centenário, Parte III

Resumo: Walter Benjamin publicou seu influente ensaio ‘Crítica da Violência’ / ‘Zur Kritik der Gewalt’ em 1921, e o trabalho tem incomodado e provocado pensadores de várias disciplinas por mais de um século. Este Fórum reúne um grupo de estudiosos em filosofia, ciência política, relações internacionais e estudos jurídicos para refletir sobre a atualidade do ensaio de Benjamin para a teoria crítica contemporânea. Melany Cruz, Kaveh Ghoreishi e Sara Minelli envolvem Benjamin na ‘violência divina’. Como observa Cruz, o linchamento no México contemporâneo tornou-se um fenômeno recorrente nas mídias *nota roja*. Devido à sua brutalidade, as percepções do linchamento foram reduzidas a uma forma de crime incivilizado e irracional. Em oposição a essa perspectiva, Cruz teoriza a dimensão política da violência do linchamento ao se basear em Benjamin e argumenta que tal violência simbolicamente e afetivamente dramatiza a suspensão da ‘mera vida’ na qual as comunidades que realizam os linchamentos estão imersas nas condições atuais do México neoliberal. Dessa forma, é possível afirmar que o linchamento, nos termos de Benjamin, constituiu uma forma de violência divina que tem a capacidade de revelar e comunicar a necessidade de acabar com a condição provocadora de medo e raiva da ‘mera vida’. Na segunda seção, Ghoreishi e Minelli propõem uma leitura do ‘divino’ em oposição à ‘violência mítica’ que destaca os elementos radicais de algumas lutas contemporâneas ao interpretar alguns exemplos de greve que ocorreram no Curdistão iraniano (Rojhilat) nos últimos quarenta anos. Eles entendem a ‘greve geral’ revolucionária considerada por Benjamin como o que Jesi chamou de ‘suspensão do tempo’, interrompendo as relações econômicas e sociais ‘normais’. Nesse sentido, as greves gerais no Curdistão podem ser ditas como encerrando a temporalidade mitológica da opressão. Essas lutas, nas quais novas formas de coletividade surgiram e foram experimentadas, devem, portanto, ser vistas como antecipações da ‘violência divina’ que põe fim à “violência mítica”.

Palavras-chave: Walter Benjamin; violência política; linchamento; violência divina; México; emoções políticas; Curdistão; greve; Georges Sorel.

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