TO ACHIEVE IN HISTORY

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Abstract

Many studies have described how our notions of violence and war have been modified and transformed under influence of new technology, war industries, etc. But they do not explain what in violence can be mechanical as such. This is precisely what I want to explore in this article. I do not want to explain or describe a form of violence as generated by machines, but I first and foremost want to show how there can be a mechanical aspect in a form and in the expression of violence as such. In order to achieve this, I make use of some insights expressed by Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin. The model of violence used is that of a "force" that paralyses any form of adequate reaction and hence introduces a fissure between our experiences and our capacities to act and react. A perfect model of this are the descriptions that German writer W.G. Sebald gave of the population in the bombed cities during the second World War. They exhibit a form of survival that seems to be immune for the unbearable aspects of the reality in which they have fallen. Their actions and forms of behavior start to reveal and to become something purely mechanical.

Introduction

To *achieve* means two things: to accomplish and to finish, which in turn can mean to kill or exterminate. In the 20th century, the meaning of both terms became very closely correlated. Human beings came to conceive of the accomplishment of a project with historical amplitude based basically on the idea of killing: "Yar – Vur – Oldur", i.e., "Burn - Kill - Demolish". As you might all know, these were the scant three terms used by Talat Bey in the telegram ordering the extermination of Armenians in the vilayets of the region of Diyarbakir (Suni, 2015, p. 293).

Often, but not exclusively, the historical account seeks to celebrate and honor human beings for the things they have *accomplished*. And so, for a long time, human beings were deemed to be worthy of the creations of which they considered themselves to be the author. Expressed in the terms of traditional metaphysics, as a cause the human being eminently contained the realization of his or her effects. None of these effects would release itself from the power it exercised as a cause. And this idea has strongly determined the stakes of history and the work of historians: they are driven by the necessity and challenge of understanding, thinking and expressing the things we human beings are capable of doing. The historian's challenge is to bring the understanding of events into proportion with human creativity.

1) This challenge had already been put into question by some philosophers at the very start of what we historically conceived as being the origin of Modernity, 17th century rationalism. A beautiful example of this is what the French thinker Blaise Pascal writes in one of his "pensées", the one dedicated to what he calls "disproportion of man". In this thought, he critics Descartes' claims according to whom nature can be cognitively appropriated and submitted to the proportion of our own ideas and scientific methods. But, says Pascal, all are ideas and representations of nature lack the right proportion: in relation to what is microscopically and infinitely small, our concepts are too broad, we miss the point and feel ourselves giants in relation to that infinite. But in the other direction, once we start to look at, and to try to grasp what seems to us as infinitely giant and huge, we feel how disproportionately small and insignificant our thoughts and beings are. Hence, we are always oscillating between these two extremes, small in relation to what is infinitely big, and big in relation to what is infinitely small. We are vacillating in between these two infinites: our knowledge can only hope to find some momentary equilibrium. That equilibrium definitively crashed with the development of science in the 20th century, among them nuclear physics and quantum mechanics. They pit into question our "proportionate" views one matter and the nature of the universe. But not only that. As a consequence of the discoveries concerning the atomic structure of matter, and the use of the energy delivered by the fission of the nuclei, another disproportion raised. A disproportion that not only affects our cognitive relation in regard to universe and matter.

In the 20th century, the new disproportion affects human creativity as such. This disproportion is related to what the German philosopher Gunther Anders called the *Promethean discrepancy*. Discrepancy: not in the classic sense of the sorcerer's apprentice losing control over self-generated dynamisms, i.e. engineers and industrialists overwhelmed and carried away by the unforeseen consequences of their technological progress. In the 20th century the relation between cause and effects refers to a new kind of disproportion: instead of

being contained eminently in the power of the cause, the effects surpass the cause in power. But this power is of a strict specific kind: the power to destroy.

The 20th century has been fertile in this sense: human beings have excelled in their power to accomplish and do what they were probably incapable of imagining. They dropped the plutonium bomb on Nagasaki and perpetrated and continue to perpetrate a series of genocides or mass murders. As if the first were merely a repetition for the others, and as if the Hiroshima atomic bomb were merely an exercise, a test, a prelude to the one dropped on Nagasaki. How does this *repetition* fit into history? That's what is at stake in this article.

2) When thinking about history, we usually start from a strict difference between inheritance and heredity: the former is accomplished within the framework of human action and freedom (culture) - the latter is purely physiological and deterministic (nature). We may inherit and be determined by character traits, such as irascibility and aggressiveness, but it is as free subjects that we determine whether or not we act according to these traits. But there is also something as pure destructiveness. Walter Benjamin, in this context, wrote a short essay about what he called "Der destruktive Charakter" (Benjamin 1977, pp. 289-290). How is this "destructiveness" transmitted? We could situate Benjamin's short essay within the Nietzschean framework of history, even if he himself does not explicitly refer to it.

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche published around 1870 a famous text on the use of History (Nietzsche 1997): it was integrated in a book containing also an essay on David Strauss, Schopenhauer and Wagner. The polemical book was called *Untimely Meditations, Unzeitgemässen Betrachtungen.* Untimely since he considered his own remarks to be far beyond the temporal climate he criticized in his book, i.e. cultural decadence or philistinism. This critique is also the motive of his second essay, the one on History. History has been reduced to a one-dimensional academic enterprise devoted to scientific knowledge and explanation of the past. But, he says, History has three dimensions and forms; there are three forms of *historicization* – i.e., the monumental, the antiquarian and the critical. And these three forms must come together in order to generate and inspire not our knowledge, but our actions: history belongs to those who want to act, he claims, and not just to those who wish to accumulate information about the past generations. History as (academic) discipline always overemphasized the cognitive aspect of our relation to the past at the expense of the vital dimension. As a consequence, life and intellect got disconnected: what we know about the past remains of purely intellectual value and lacks any force or impact on our actions – and in the way we act, nothing from what we know from the past inspires us: we act in stereotypes. At the level of the mind, we are full of sophisticated opinions

and cultural insights – but in our relations with the external world and other persons, we behave as uneducated brutal idiots or ignorant people. Hence the importance, according to Nietzsche to reconnect knowledge of the past and our behavior, to reconnect the mind with life and its vital forces. Our actions have to be inspired by what we know about the past. This is the task of what he will describe as *History* in his text.

In his vision, action has to be driven by the desire to accomplish in the future, what the past has bequeathed to us in terms of greatness, which, by way of example, encourages us to change the present in the hope of a more fulfilled existence. Fulfilling this ideal also means sacrificing and excluding anything that doesn't fit in with the project, or anything that slows down achievement. The very basis of our action corresponds to a dynamism that Sartre in his theory on imagination would have called a double *neantization* (Sartre, 1940): we act when we refuse to conform to the demands and constraints of the present situation, with the aim of modifying them in line with a project that does not yet exist. Acting in this case means doing what we are capable of imagining. In this kind of action, the three dimensions of History, i.e. the monumental, the antiquarian and the critical one, have to form a unity or fit into a temporal synthesis.

The *monumental* aspect presents the past as something huge and inspiring (and it represents the future), the antiquarian defends and protects all the small details belonging to our tradition and that we easily tend to forget in our monumental plans (it represents the past as such), and the critical aspect represents the juvenile and impatient live of the present, that has no time to lose. The dynamical unification of these three temporal dimensions or forms of "History" ensures and should structurally organize what we call human and historical action.

Hence, let us try to imagine what would happen if the "neantizing" power (*denying* the present in favor of a future that itself still *is not*) *frees itself* from this pure dynamism of action? For example, what would happen if the "Kritische Historie" (i.e. the critical, juvenile and vital part of history) emancipates itself from the temporal synthesis and exhausts itself in demolishing the past, without any goal nor project? This is, I think, the situation Walter Benjamin describes.

3) A "destructive character", Benjamin says in the short essay we referred to, generates no action in the strict sense of the term: it cares nothing for what it destroys and what comes in its place. In this sense, what he does is no longer driven by the imagination. All it retains is the power to *refuse* and as a consequence it limits itself to create emptiness.

Action belongs to those people who strife for the transmission of meaning, and hence for the preservation of all the things they care for, they search to protect and to put out of reach - yet destructiveness transmits no meaning but, says Benjamin, only *situations*: i.e. opportunities or occasions to appropriate one's things or objects of care, in order to liquidate or demolish them. The spirit sensitive to history and its legacy is, says Benjamin, nourished by distrust and insecurity about the course that the things they seek to transmit can take: anything can go astray. They're also afraid of being misunderstood and thus endangering their heritage. Hence also, says Benjamin, their incessant chatter (Klatch) to make sure their (good) intentions are well conveyed. The destructive character, on the other hand, is always clear and reliable about its intentions and the nature of what it is doing. No misunderstanding is conceivable here: *demolish*. If, moreover, the destructive character seeks to stay alive, it's not because it thinks life is worth living, but because suicide isn't worth committing. Its only affirmation is a negative one: that of freeing itself from everything that ties it to a history and its dynamics of *historicization*. This destructiveness is not inherited, nor is it the result of genetic transmission. It destroys *without hatred nor passion.*

In Benjamin this destructiveness is still conceived as a form of the vital or as the emancipation of what Nietzsche in his essay called the *critical history*: unburdened by any legacy, without any project, destructiveness rejuvenates. "Zerstörung verjungt" (Benjamin, 1977, p. 289). It is driven by a need for fresh air ("Frische Luft") and free space ("Freie Raum"). It is highly likely that Benjamin was also critically targeting the controversial remarks of German writer and essayist Ernst Jünger, for whom the Great War of 1914 was experienced as the source of an immense vital amplification. A combatant himself, he never tires of glorifying his experiences at the front, aestheticizing them or seeking in them the source of a revitalization that compensates for the "poverty" of the experience of people in large modern cities. Against this modern world governed by Progress, Reason, or the democratic principles born after the French Revolution and the Enlightenment, he championed the virtues of warlike violence and the general mobilization of emotions and "life." His claims are permeated by what has been called Faustian delirium (Brosteaux, 2025, pp. 143-196).

4) However, I would like to put this version of the destructive character or power into question: Benjamin, in line with Nietzsche and Jünger, describes (and criticizes) it as the affirmation of something vital. The destructive character I'm trying to describe is not vital anymore: it's *mechanical*. Not in the sense that the mechanization of war delivers a power on its own, but in the sense that de violence as such is mechanical. Many studies have described how our notions of violence and war have been modified and transformed under influence of new technology, war industries, etc. (De Landa, 1991;

Mhalla, 2025). But they do not explain what in violence can be mechanical as such. This is precisely what I want to explore. Not the violence generated by machines, but the mechanical aspect of a form of violence as such.

Let me explain.

We may not limit ourselves to thinking of the power of destruction in terms of a single, isolated event: its monstrosity is manifested *in its repetition* and in the accumulation of catastrophes. Horror and terror are not Hiroshima, but the unmotivated and gratuitous *repetition* of the destruction of Nagasaki[1]. In the same way, the horror of the crime of 1915 is not condensed in the atrocious genocide perpetrated against the Armenians, but in the repetition and mechanization of death carried out ever since. They say that history repeats itself: no, what repeats itself is what each time destroys and annihilates it.

These forms of violence and massive, systematic destruction of part of the population have often been linked to technical and industrial progress. It's as if the mechanization of life and culture as such, as I said, gave rise to a new form of violence and destruction. This model would also have influenced military management: for example, the army being described as an immense war machine, a machine that mobilizes the totality of a society and submits it to the demands of that big mechanical enterprise.

But I think we need to reverse the relationship: mechanization is not the cause of a new form of destruction: this last one cannot be reduced to a mechanical repetition effect, like the devastating effect of a machine gun. Mechanization has to be understood as the product and materialization of destructive power as such. What is repeated is not an identical effect caused in series by one machine or another. In this model, the effect is determined and programmed by the cause and reinscribes itself into the chain of determinations that control the order of the material world.

But devastating power repeats *itself as such:* because it is neither caused nor limited by anything. It stems from a form of thinking that has freed itself from the dynamic of action. Action, we said, presupposed a form of thinking that neutralizes a part of reality in order to modify its structure. But what happens when consciousness limits itself to neutralizing the impact of reality, without reinvesting itself into action? Then it no longer lets itself be dictated by the apprehension of *something possible* (imagination) to be realized, an ideal or a project. It frees itself as *pure possibility.* As a thought entirely displaced or out of joint with the demands of reality and limited by nothing.

It is this thought which, without limits, repeats itself as destruction. I think Cioran captured this intuition very well, when he wrote: "Thought, in its essence, is destruction. More exactly: in its principle. One thinks, one begins

to think in order to break ties, to dissolve affinities, to undermine the joinery of the 'real'" (Cioran, 1997, p. 387).

During the first atomic bomb test at Alamogordo, Oppenheimer, in a fit of literary and prophetic megalomania, supposedly proclaimed: "Now I have become death, the destroyer of worlds" (Bird & Sherwin, 2006).

It's true that the very *paradigm* of the devastating power unleashed by human thought is the atomic bomb. Resulting from a thought that splits the internal structure of the very core of matter, it unleashes an energy whose force of effect far exceeds that of the cause. And the effect doesn't merely multiply the original power tenfold (like an engine): it's a power that does nothing but destroy, and whose radioactive fallout itself spreads death. And it's in this devastating power that mankind has invested itself in the overproduction of nuclear weapons (and I'm not yet talking about the threat posed by civilian use), capable of destroying the entire planet in a kind of global human suicide, a total extermination, a *globocide*.

5) Human beings have acquired an immense power: that of neutralizing and ignoring the impact of reality. This is not a sign of a lack of consciousness: we are conscious of what happens in the world, but we put the impact of these events between brackets and continue to act in a manner that seems unaffected by them. What an immense force this power to neutralize the impact of reality releases or unbridles... that of *pure possibility!*

Sebald has written a disturbing essay about the horror of cities bombed and destroyed by phosphorus bombs during the Second World War (Sebald 2001). But what also preoccupies him is the power of repressing their impact. Of course, he has written about the relationship between this power of repression and the frenetic drive to rebuild destroyed cities. But what he also describes is, above all, this power of denial in the very present, leading nowhere, aiming for no future.

He gives the example of a couple in a suburb of Hamburg, which, with the exception of their house, has been completely destroyed: they are *bourgeoisely* having coffee on their terrace amidst the ruins. A disproportionately absurd activity compared to the catastrophe they are clearly able to ignore. From this denial, however temporal, nothing emerges except an instant distraction.

But this same power to deny reality and distract oneself in the face of the catastrophe or misery is the same power that causes catastrophes "by distraction". Nothing prevents it: because this power is itself born out of nothing.

The power to deny reality without passions, without prior motive, and without a goal to accomplish is an ever-renewed and repeated expression of pure possibility: without limit. How is this power transmitted? It is neither inherited

nor hereditary. Neither historical nor natural. It is mechanical by virtue of its *dynamic repetition.* Within history, within nature, within projects in progress or the genetic traits that determine us, this power surfaces without compromising, without adapting, without maturing or mutating, without learning anything. What it propagates is nothing: emptiness, "platz raümen". And nothing holds: it spreads again, always with the same youthful force. Many philosophers, sometimes inspired by Spinoza, emphasize the affective nature of our relationship with things: everything affects my power to act. But what interests me is to understand how a power to destroy arises in us, which is not the expression of an affect (*tristitia* or hatred), but of a power and pure possibility *to deny these things* as such. For Spinoza, this power makes no sense.

6)There is, however, a metaphysical tradition in which this power to deny reality, to turn our back on it, was attributed to sin and precipitated us into the abyss: Pascal describes it very well in his fragments on divertissement: "we run carelessly into the precipice, after we have put something in front of us to prevent us from seeing it" (Pascal, 2000, p. 600).

This denial gives rise to errors, lies and "non-being". But above all, it's interesting to see how certain metaphysicians have attempted to think about the transmission of this *neantizing* power. Malebranche, who combines Augustine with Descartes, links it to the idea of the original sin. Now, he says, this sin, which weighs down our relationship with the body and turns us away from truth or Being, is not transmitted through history, and there is nothing natural about it. To explain its transmission, the author of *The Search for Truth* refers to the purely mechanical laws of the body described by Descartes as a machine, the automaton. The sin is inscribed in the body as a material trace that activates the mechanical (neurological) movements of the animal spirits in our brain. Hence, that trace that does not impose hereditary behaviors. But something without history, without temporality: this is the idea of original "sin".

7) Let me come to a probably provisional conclusion. In this somewhat programmatic article I've tried to explain, or at least understand how, within history as an internal connection of motives and ideals, an action arises that responds to no project other than that of annihilating once and for all the very heritage that is called humanity or endangering the entire planet.

We can trace and compose a history leading up to genocides and the invention of the atomic bomb: but we can never again suppress or overcome their devastating power, or the *destructive character,* to use Benjamin's phrase, from which they stem. Any form of temporalization, any project opening onto the future, is definitively undermined from within, by mechanical repetition leading to an end that no longer opens onto a new world, a new life, a new history starting from scratch: an end that reveals nothing more than the fact that the human being has discovered, exploited and embodied pure and

simple destruction. A destructive power that has freed himself from history, life and passions: *"stärker als jenem hass"* said Benjamin. Faced with this power and its consequences, all morality, politics and juridical concerns remain, I'm afraid, without resources. This lack of resources is exactly what Anders described as the very stupidity of the human being.

"We are smaller than ourselves; we are absolutely no match for what we are capable of inventing and doing: our imagination is not proportionate to these products and certainly not to their consequences" (Anders, 2024, p. 322).

Some say that every époque has its own dominant affective atmosphere. The Greeks had admiration, the medieval philosophers: devotion, the rationalists: doubt or suspicion: the one that determines us today, at best, is shame. The shame of being human.

Notes

[1] This terror, according to the American perception of it, was supposed to secure the end of war: but according to the Japanese ethicist Yuki Miyamoto, it was itself purely genocidal (cf. for example Miyamoto, 2012).

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