Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Interdisciplinary Humanities and Communication Studies
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38156

Halting the Progression of Catastrophe: On the Temporal Deconstruction and Transcendence of Schmitt's Political Theology in Benjamin

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Abstract. Walter Benjamins critical interaction with and eventual separation from Carl Schmitts legal theory calls for an interpretive method that goes beyond the paradigm Giorgio Agamben has established as prevalent.In State of Exception, Agamben well-knownly framed the Benjamin–Schmitt exchange as a structural clash within a topology of law, a situation where law maintains itself via its own suspension.However, this way of presenting things conceals Benjamins real philosophical stances in at least two respects.On one hand, Agamben transfers the exception to an abstract legal boundary, a formalized spatial model that replaces the materially-based historical experience which is crucial to Benjamins thinking.On the contrary, he turns the exception into a general logic of sovereignty, replacing the radical power of Benjamins historical-materialist critique with a form of messianic nihilism. The contention put forward here is that Benjamin truly surmounted Schmitt by reinterpreting the state of exception from a legal-philosophical concept to a structure of just interruption placed in historical time, which can be called a Historical-Materialist Theory of Temporal Justice.At the heart of this theory lies the resistance to consolidating the productive conflict between materialist and messianic-ethical aspects into a flawless synthesis. Instead, their reciprocal tension forms the dynamic core of Benjamins political philosophy.

Keywords: Benjamin, Schmitt, Political Theology, State of Exception, Historical Time

1. Introduction

At the disputed point where modern political philosophy, critical legal theory, and historical materialism meet, the discussion about the state of exception spreads across three essentially different theoretical domains.Schmitt puts forward the query: How does sovereignty make a decision on the exception?Agamben re-formulates it as: How does the exception turn into the actual structure of law?The current investigation poses a distinct question: In what way is historical time disrupted as a disastrous continuum?

What the initial two inquiries have in common is an unquestioned supposition, that is, the homogeneous continuity of historical time. And it is precisely the breaking down of this supposition that signifies the true locus of Benjamins political philosophy.Schmitt handles the exception in order

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DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38156

to reinstate the temporal sequence; Agamben fixes the exception as an internal structural element within the law; Benjamin, on the other hand, disrupts the sequence itself.

This difference requires passing through Agamben's influential but misleading synthesis, restoring the materialist and messianic dimensions of Benjamin's thought, and showing how they cohere as a theory of temporal justice [1].

2. Schmitt's decisionism — guardian of the homogeneous historical process

2.1. The framework of decisionism: restorative punctuation, not redemptive break-up

Schmitts fundamental claim in Political Theology: Sovereign is he who decides on the exception is commonly interpreted as a theory of extreme break, where sovereignty exposes the chasm beneath the polished surface of legal normativity. This kind of interpretation, though not entirely baseless, fails to grasp the key aspect that Benjamin regarded as crucial. The rulers choice is a disruption enlisted in the cause of continuity: law is put on hold so that the actual order of state-being, within which law can later function, may be re-established. The exception is stated so that the stability of sovereign power can be re-ensured [2].

Consequently, the temporality of the Schmitt-related decision is basically restorative. It interrupts the normal course of legal time to correct it. It serves as a punctuation in an ongoing account instead of bringing that account to an end. What Benjamin refers to as the storm of progress keeps on blowing after the sovereigns action.The anomaly is managed, normality is re-established, and the fateful buildup of history continues. Owing to this very reason, Schmitt, despite his highly dramatic rhetoric regarding the exception, serves as a protector of the unified historical progression.

Schmitt personally critiques liberal normativism, yet he does this within the scope of state-order Schmitt criticizes liberalism only within the horizon of state order [3]. Benjamins assessment functions on a completely distinct level. Its aim is not the self-misapprehension of liberal normativism, but instead the temporal framework of historical continuity per se-the continuous disaster that both liberal legalism and Schmittian decisionism take as the undisputed background of politics.Schmitt endeavors to handle the exception to safeguard the continuum; Benjamin aims to disrupt the continuum as it is the exception, the perpetual emergency that the oppressed have constantly endured.

2.2. The temporal presupposition of political theology

Schmitts argument posits that all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts Contains an uninvestigated temporal aspect. The Deity in political theology is not simply all-powerful; it forms the basis of temporal order. Political theology presupposes a continuous divine time; miracles confirm rather than cancel that continuity.

Schmitts sovereign determination precisely inherits such a structure. Similar to the theological wonder, the state of anomaly doesnt do away with the temporal arrangement it disturbs; it reaffirms the authority of the individual who rules over that arrangement. Schmitt mentions, The state remains, and whereas law recedes. Once the decision is made, the flow of historical time recommences under the re-established sovereign authority. Benjamins attack on homogeneous, empty time thus aims at the common temporal assumption of both liberal progressivism and Schmitts political theology, a breakdown of the very basis on which all theories of sovereignty rely [4].

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3. The two limitations of Agamben's interpretive path

3.1. The formalist reduction of Schmitt

In State of Exception, Agamben suggests interpreting the Benjamin–Schmitt connection as a fictional controversy, an underlying polemic where each thinker reacts to the other indirectly [5]. This proposed hypothesis leads to a remarkable distortion.To make the controversy understandable, Agamben removes the specific political-theological essence from Schmitts decisionism and simplifies it into a formal topological framework, the framework of inclusion via exclusion, of the boundary between norm and exception.

3.2. The Schmittian reduction of Benjamin

More significantly yet, Agamben proceeds to interpret Benjamins crucial concepts from this identical topological perspective. Divine violence is reimagined as a formal agent that makes law inoperative at the level of its own structural framework; pure means serves as a label for the area of non-differentiation between law and non-law; the actual state of exception is restricted to a boundary within the juridical topological setup itself.

The outcome is a Schmittian reduction of Benjamin.The fundamental essence of Benjamins historical-materialist criticism lies in his assertion that the actual state of exception is a historical occurrence grounded in the material experiences of the oppressed, within the realm of class conflict, and in the tangible build-up of disasters. This leads to a messianic nihilistic state. The Benjamin presented in Agambens interpretation lacks the ability to act. Instead, he can merely reveal the structural emptiness at the core of the law and bide his time. Ultimately, both Schmitt and Agamben stay within the scope of the exception regarded as a legal-structural idea. Both fail to understand Benjamins move from the legal-structural level to the realm of historical time.gamben rightly identifies law's inoperativity, but detaches it from the class-specific, material history Benjamin requires

4. Benjamins temporal politics — from legal exemption to historical break

4.1. The temporal revolution of the theses on history

Benjamins work On the Concept of History launches a continuous attack on the idea of homogeneous and empty time, which is the view of historical time as a neutral backdrop where progress takes place.In its stead, Benjamin presents the Angelus Novus. The angel doesnt perceive a series of events but one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage. What seems like advancement when viewed from within homogeneous time seems, from the angels perspective, to be an unbroken disaster. The Ninth Thesis makes the temporal implications unavoidable: the storm gusting from Paradise propels the angel inexorably into the future, and the heap of ruins in front of him rises towards the sky. Advancement is disaster [6].

Agamben formalizes Jetztzeit as Paul's remaining time; Benjamin instead insists on the concrete historical claims of the oppressed [7].

4.2. The redefinition of the "real state of exception"

Benjamin's real state of exception has three dimensions. First, it is experienced by the oppressed, not proclaimed by the sovereign. Second, it interrupts the catastrophic continuum and opens a present-

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time in which past oppression becomes legible. Third, it is oriented not toward restoring order but toward rescue: retrieving defeated possibilities and silenced voices.

5. Critique of violence — deconstruction at the level of legal philosophy

5.1. Mythic violence, divine violence, and temporality

Understanding how the temporal shift described in Part Three functions in the realm of legal philosophy demands a revisit to Benjamins 1921 essay Critique of Violence.In that place, Benjamin differentiates between law-establishing violence, law-maintaining violence , and divine violence. The initial two uphold what can be termed the law-violence cycle: a self-replicating closed system where each act of founding necessitates safeguarding violence, and every act of safeguarding validates the founding. This process forms the legal-philosophical manifestation of uniform, void time, an unceasing continuum of control that allows no true escape.

Divine force breaks this cycle.The core claim of the paper is that what divine violence disrupts is not the effectiveness of any specific legal rule but the temporal framework that allows the law-violence cycle to endure as a historical continuity.The structural violence of law, which is the act of imposing a normative order on a situation that constantly surpasses it, is exactly what Benjamin's divine violence targets divine violence aims at. The alternative that Menke points out in Benjamin is relief of law: not merely destruction but setting life free from the violent hold of law. This idea is directly linked to the time-related dimension. Relief implies pausing the time-based mechanism of the laws self-replication and interrupting the cycle at its origin.

5.2. "means without end" as the philosophical foundation of temporal interruption

Using Hamacher's notion of the afformative, the proletarian general strike does not found a new legal order but suspends the law's capacity to reproduce itself. It is not a rejection of all order, but an interruption of the temporal logic by which law repeats its violence. This distinguishes Benjamin from anarchism: the aim is not to replace one mechanism with another, but to render the operative system inoperative. The strike's legitimacy is achieved before and independently of its empirical outcome. Even when the sovereign suppresses it, the repression exposes sovereign violence as dependent on coercion and exploitation; the state can no longer present its violence as law-preserving. What legal form conceals—the mythical violence that founds and maintains law—becomes visible. This demystification is the strike's unalterable accomplishment, whether or not the strikers are defeated. Its legitimacy does not depend on victory [8].

6. Justice as an ethical-temporal category

6.1. Derrida: "justice is undeconstructible" and the closed logic of Schmitt

Derrida put forward the idea that justice cannot be deconstructed, whereas law can still be deconstructed. This offers a vital ethical addition to Benjamins critique of the law. In Derridas view, justice represents an endless obligation towards the unique individual. It is a requirement that perpetually surpasses the defining ability of any existing legal system. Law can be deconstructed as it is always constructed within historical contexts, rooted in founding acts of violence, and reliant on calculable, general regulations; justice serves as the very impetus that propels deconstruction, an incalculable requirement that no law can completely fulfill [9]. This clearly opposes Schmitts decision-making logic. Instead of dealing with the conflict between law and exception via sovereign

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decision as Schmitt does, the openness to the other that Derrida pinpoints as the core of justice is precisely precluded.

The confluence of Benjamin and Derrida, though, has to be tempered by a significant tension that Derrida himself admits. In the final part of Force of Law, Derrida expresses deep discomfort regarding the latter half of Benjamins Critique of Violence, especially the notion of divine violence. He perceives in Benjamins description of a violence that expiates and strikes without bloodshed a perilous nearness to the principle of annihilation, warning that the framework of divine violence—unanswerable, non-legal, absolute—has the risk of offering concealment for precisely the disasters Benjamin aimed to denounceDerrida worries that divine violence may be indistinguishable from annihilation. The materialist foundation answers this by defining divine violence negatively: it does not found or preserve law. The Historical-Materialist Theory of Temporal Justice expounded here addresses Derridas concern exactly by adhering to the materialist foundation. In this interpretation, divine violence isnt a theological carte-blanche for any destructive act claiming to be expiatory. Its defined structurally by its relation to the law-violence cycle it halts. Its standard is negative and formal: it refers to violence that does not establish a new law, does not create a new sovereign arrangement, and does not build up into a new cycle of mythical violence. The relief of law represents a liberating act, rather than a dissolving one.It is an insight from Derrida himself. Justice is the boundless, non-deconstructible responsibility directed at the individual other. This provides the positive ethical substance that Benjamins divine violence needs but fails to produce on its own. The two philosophers are thus less in agreement and more mutually rectifying than a partial reading could imply: Derridas ethical requirement for accountability to the other curbs Benjamins divine violence from descending into the annihilative logic Derrida is worried about, while Benjamins materialist disruption emphasizes that any real answer to the call of justice has to be carried out in historical time, by actual historical entities. How that enactment becomes a perceptible event of justice is addressed in Part Seven.

7. Synthesis — a historical-materialist theory of temporal justice

7.1. The fruitful tension: why combining would be an error

This tension must not be resolved into a seamless synthesis. Historical materialism provides the historical conditions of interruption—class relations, modes of production, and material structures of oppression—while the messianic-ethical provides its redemptive orientation, directing struggle toward rescue rather than the imposition of a new order. The two cannot be merged; they can only be held in tension. This tension is not a defect but the creative core of Benjamin's political thought.

7.2. The dialectical interplay: how the two trajectories convert into one another

The interplay between these two lines isnt merely additive; its dialectical. Each modifies the inner logic of the other. Historical materialism offers the particular chance for messianic interruption. Without the material circumstances of class conflict, the messianic would stay an abstract theological pledge, unable to connect with the specific, named hardships endured by historical individuals.

Conversely, the messianic aspect provides the temporal rationale of the interruption. Without redemptive direction, class conflict runs the risk of turning into another type of the very instrumental violence it resists, a fresh founding deed of mythic violence that restarts the law-violence cycle at a greater intensity.

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7.3. The structure of justice events: how justice manifests in temporal break

This part addresses the central question that remains unresolved by the assertion that justice equals the interruption of the catastrophic continuum: specifically, how is justice generated or made apparent during the instance of interruption? Two separate instances should be differentiated.

The action of interruption.When the disastrous succession is halted, whether via the general strike or via revolutionary immediate-time, what takes place is not the setting up of a new just system but the formation of a void in which what was repressed becomes discernible. The remnants, the lost causes, the unheralded deceased: these come into view precisely as the tempest of advancement has briefly halted. Amid the quiet that ensues after the historical machine halts, the voices that were muffled by progress can be heard for the very first time.

The deed of constellation. Benjamins idea of the constellation depicts how the past and the present are put into a non-linear connection in the instant of now-time [10].

In the dialectical picture, a particular instant of past hardship and a particular instant of present predicament lock into a tense, enlightening arrangement. Justice is not a characteristic of the interruption per se but of the particular way in which the interruption enables the past to engage with the present, the means by which the oppressed deceased assert a claim on the living.

In this context, justice is the occurrence where a constellation becomes understandable: it is not a standard to be put into practice, but a demand to be addressed.This indicates why justice cannot be deconstructed, cannot be simplified to any legal framework, and why it demands the tangible disruption of history to be observable at all. The three aspects of the argument, material-based, messianic-oriented, and deconstructive in nature, come together at this juncture.

8. Double reconstruction

8.1. the reconstruction of Schmitt: two types of temporal disruption

Schmitts determination demands homogeneous time as its operative presupposition: only within atemporal structure focused on order-restoration does managing the exception hold meaning.The rulercan make a decision only when there is a normal state to reinstate; the extraordinary case isunderstandable only in the context of an uninterrupted legal-temporal sequence which theextraordinary case briefly halts and then mends. Benjamins reaction is not to put forward a differentdecision but to break down the temporal assumption that enables decision-making.

A clear difference can be delineated between the two types of breaks.Schmitts determination is arestorative break: it intervenes in regular legal operations within the scope of re-establishing uniformorder. Its temporal flow shows discontinuous punctuations amidst a continuous narrative. It intervenesso as to carry out repairs. Benjamins interruption serves as a redemptive break: it shatters the uniformcontinuum, not to reinstate it, but to bring about the diverse present-moment where the past cancommunicate. Its era is the constellation, non-sequential, retrieving, directed towards what wasexcluded. It intervenes to carry out a rescue.

In Benjamins view, once the disastrous sequence of historical time is disrupted, and even if only fora short while the tempest of progress comes to a halt, Schmitts sovereign determination not only loses its target (the exception that needs handling) but also its whole temporal scope (the order that has tobe reinstated). The monarch is faced with a choice that has no place to settle. According to thisperspective, sovereign power is not an unchanging framework of political ontology. Instead, it is atechnology specific to a historical period for handling a particular form of temporalconsistency. Disrupt the continuity and the technology ceases to function properly.

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8.2. The remodeling of Agamben: from legal topology to historical-temporal break

Agamben situates the exception within the ontological framework of law. Law sustains itself viasuspension. The exception serves as the internal structural mechanism of sovereignty. The state ofexception turns into the enduring paradigm of governance. As this current argument has aimed toprove, Benjamins real stance is that the exception is not the legal structure but a break-up event inhistorical chronology, which pertains to the domain of history, not of legal ontology.

As List (2021) shows, Agambens Schmitt-like reduction of Benjamin leads to political defeatism. Ifthe exception is constantly the internal mechanism of sovereignty, there is no position beyond it fromwhich one can take action. The subjugated are already within the sovereign prohibition; opposition isalready ensnared by the logic it confronts. In contrast, Benjamin emphasizes the potential of genuinedisruption. Its not due to inexperience regarding the violence of the law. Instead, he finds the meansfor disruption in the material past of the oppressed instead of the logical framework ofsovereignty. The actual state of exception isnt an ontological state but a historical probability, attainable via the collective, materially carried-out halt of production.

Menke (2018) endorses this interpretation: Benjamins personal reaction to the law-violence dialecticis relief of law: a liberation, rather than an inversion or a retreat into a legal-structural emptiness.Toliberate life from the hold of law does not mean attaining a superior form of legality, nor does it implyexposing the perpetual invalidity of the legal form; it is about disrupting the temporal process bywhich law replicates its violence. This disruption is accessible to historical actors in historicalperiod. Agambens constant exception precludes it; Benjamins actual state of exception requires it.

9. Conclusions

This essay has contended that the essence of Walter Benjamins political ideology is not the criticismof law but the politicizing of historical time. In this understanding, the core of the political isnt thesovereigns crucial handling of the exception. The exception always functions inside and for thepurpose of the temporal sequence. Instead, its the ability to break the disastrous sequence of historicaltime. Its about creating the present-time where what was repressed can be understood, and wherejustice can put forward its claim.

Three theoretical implications result from this re-construction, corresponding to the three aspects ofthe synthesis elaborated in Part Six: the generative tension between materialism and the messianic, their dialectical interplay in the general strike, and the event-framework of justice as constellation. At the theoretical stage, this framework goes beyond the duality of juridical topology, re-situatingpolitical action from the domain of legal structure to the realm of historical time, where occurrencescan truly take place that are not pre-expected by the logic of sovereignty. Benjamins political ideologyis not a concept of what law effects on life, but rather a concept of what history impacts on time, andhow the oppressed can take action in return.

At the ethical aspect, justice is re-perceived not as a norm-based state to attain but as the assertionthat surfaces when the subjugated past becomes clear in the configuration of the present time, lookingbackward and forward concurrently, replying to the deceased while unlocking a distinct future. Thisunderstanding of justice cannot be simplified to rights-related discussions (Menke, 2020), toprocedural regulations, and to any structure that assumes the continuity of the legal system in whichjustice is to be allocated.

At the practical stage, a type of political agency is revealed which doesnt rely on sovereign reasoning:non-purposive, physically carried out, and temporally non-continuous. The large-scale

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38156

strike, ratherthan the sovereign proclamation, serves as the model.Political agency does not mean the exercise ofa right inside an established legal framework; it is the positive suspension of the time-related structurein which that framework replicates itself.

The creative tension that exists between historical materialism and messianic ethics, which ismaintained instead of being resolved throughout this discussion, is ultimately what stops Benjaminspolitical philosophy from falling into either a simplistic politics of complete break or a quietistmessianism of perpetual waiting. It sustains the interruption both materially based and ethicallydirected, that is to say, truly political. The theological midget and the historical-materialisticmarionette stay engaged in their odd, essential cooperation: the marionette cant succeed without themidgets direction; the midget cant take action without the marionettes form. Justice demands bothaspects.

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