1. Traces of Benjamin’s Esteem for Schmitt

Walter Benjamin’s esteem for Carl Schmitt is one of the most irritating incidents in the intellectual history of the Weimar Republic. It arouses astonishment to this day, connecting as it does Benjamin, a victim of Nazism, to Schmitt, who, with his distinction between friend and enemy, developed a Manichean definition of the political and took a public stance in support of National Socialism in the years after the Macht greifung.1

Yet this bizarre relationship, which for decades was repressed as inconceivable or dismissed as a mere chance episode, was no isolated incident. Although he was forbidden to teach after 1945 and his reputation remained tainted, Schmitt served as a kind of oracle for countless intellectuals and politicians in Germany and elsewhere before his death in 1985.2 It was even suggested that he “has more ‘pupils’ at universities in Ger-

For Stephan Holmes’s fiftieth birthday.

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many and abroad than any other professor of his generation.” Finally, he continues to be the subject of increasing interest, even and especially in the United States.

What is particularly remarkable is the frequency with which we learn of the high regard for Schmitt held by persons who at first seem foreign to him in their origin and thought. Perhaps the most spectacular instance of this kind of interest was the sudden departure of Alexandre Kojève, the celebrated philosopher of “the end of history,” after a lecture at the Freie Universität in the seething Berlin of 1967. Kojève announced that he was going to see Schmitt, the only one “worth talking to” in Germany. Jacob Taubes, who had invited Kojève, was, in his own words, dismayed.

But it was that same Taubes who, almost twenty years later, revealed the heretofore little-noticed connection between Benjamin and Schmitt. In 1986, one year after Schmitt’s death, Taubes was called to account as before a “tribunal” at a panel discussion in the Maison Heinrich Heine in Berlin. Taubes, the son of a rabbi and himself a well-known Judaist, was taken to task for having visited Schmitt himself and even, despite the gulf that separated them, having respected his work. It seemed inconceivable that a scholar who characterized himself as an “arch-Jew” could have had anything to do with Schmitt. Taubes countered with Schmitt’s own dictum, which the latter had borrowed from his poet friend Theodor Däubler—“The enemy is the embodiment of your own question”—and then played his trump card: Benjamin’s admiration for Schmitt.


5. See Jacob Taubes, Ad Carl Schmitt: Gegenstrebige Fügung (Berlin, 1987), p. 24; hereafter abbreviated CS.


Evidence of Benjamin’s attraction to Schmitt can be found as early as 1923. In a letter to Gottfried Salomon from December of that year, Benjamin wrote that he had been reading texts on the doctrine of sovereignty in the baroque era during work on his Habilitation. Without doubt he is referring to Schmitt’s Politzsche Theologie, which Benjamin cites as his political-theoretical basis in a central chapter of his Habilitation on The Origin of German Tragic Drama (Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels), published two years later. In his short curriculum vitae of 1928, Benjamin confirms that his work on the Trauerspiel book was methodologically influenced by both the art historian Alois Riegl and the political thinker Schmitt:

This effort, undertaken on a larger scale in the above-mentioned Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels, embraces on the one hand the methodological ideas of Alois Riegl with his idea of the Kunstwollen, and on the other the contemporary essays of Carl Schmitt, who in his analysis of political structure makes an analogous attempt to integrate phenomena that can only seemingly be isolated in different areas. Above all, however, it seems to me that such observation is the prerequisite for any penetrating physiognomic interpretation of works of art, to the extent that they are unique and inimitable.

The emphasis of this appraisal is remarkable. But an even more unequivocal sign of Benjamin’s admiration for Schmitt is found in a letter

12, 35, 79, 91, 96; see also Meier, Die Lehre Carl Schmitts: Vier Kapitel zur Unterscheidung politischer Theologie und politischer Philosophie (Stuttgart, 1994), p. 76. On Taubes’s use of the verse, see CS, p. 51; on Benjamin and Schmitt, see ibid., p. 26.
written to him in December 1930, announcing the shipment of his 1925 book on German tragic drama:

Esteemed Professor Schmitt,

You will receive any day now from the publisher my book, *The Origin of the German Mourning Play*. With these lines I would like not merely to announce its arrival, but also to express my joy at being able to send it to you, at the suggestion of Mr. Albert Salomon. You will very quickly recognize how much my book is indebted to you for its presentation of the doctrine of sovereignty in the seventeenth century. Perhaps I may also say, in addition, that I have also derived from your later works, especially the “*Diktatur*,” a confirmation of my modes of research in the philosophy of art from yours in the philosophy of the state. If the reading of my book allows this feeling to emerge in an intelligible fashion, then the purpose of my sending it to you will be achieved.

With my expression of special admiration,
Your very humble
Walter Benjamin.12

Taubes called this letter “a mine” that “explodes our conception of the intellectual history of the Weimar period” (CS, p. 27), and since then it has given rise to a continuing discussion. The metaphor of explosion, however, presupposes fixed boundaries between Left and Right, the avant-garde and its reaction, that do not exist in monolithic form. Rather, the same opinions can often be formulated from different positions, a phenomenon that holds true for Benjamin and Schmitt as well. The two thinkers shared the critique of a liberalism lacking in seriousness, extremity, and depth, and when Schmitt emphasizes the modern character of


13. See Michael Rumpf, “Radikale Theologie.”
German romanticism in order to condemn the radical subjectivism he saw fully unfolded in it for the first time, he agrees with Benjamin, though the latter affirmed romanticism for the same reason that Schmitt repudiated it.  

Benjamin must have known that Schmitt had enjoyed considerable success as a literary critic and surrealist writer, as well as the high regard of poets such as Däubler and artists such as the Catholic-leaning dadaist Hugo Ball. The decisive factor in Benjamin’s use of Schmitt, however, was the way in which he saw his own concept of art clarified in the latter’s political theory. Benjamin saw the double strategy of placing the shock of the exception against the background of eventless continuity as a way to, on the one hand, oppose the integration of phenomena to the existence of isolated and autonomous areas within society, and, on the other, to search for that which made the work of art “unique and inimitable.” But this uniqueness consisted not only in the contrast to the close-knit web of phenomena but also in its opposition to the continuity of time. This is the point at which the ideas of Benjamin and Schmitt converge. Schmitt’s theoretical association of the political, art, and time appealed to Benjamin and finally ensnared him.

2. Conceptions of Time in the Work of Carl Schmitt

In a central passage of his Trauerspiel book, Benjamin addresses the significance of the “state of exception” (Ausnahmezustand) (UD, p. 246; OG, p. 65), a discussion that is based on Schmitt’s dictum “sovereign is he who decides upon the state of exception” (“Souverän ist, wer über den


15. His surrealist piece “Buribunken” appeared in the magazine Summa 4 (1918): 89–106, in which authors such as Ernst Bloch, Hermann Broch, Max Scheler, and Robert Musil were also published.


Ausnahmezustand entscheidet") (PT, p. 13). In this idea, he saw the disparity between continuity and uniqueness expanded to include a concept of time that sought to distinguish between normality and exception. This idea is in fact the keystone of Schmitt's system of thought, at least during the years that were decisive for the relationship between Schmitt and Benjamin.18

The concept of the state of exception expresses Schmitt's conviction that democracy loses its foundation when different factions pursue their divergent interests to the point where a splintered political system is no longer able to guarantee the security of law. Under these circumstances, an extrasocietal force, the sovereign, must suspend the laws in order to save them.

Up to this point, Schmitt's argument corresponds to the standard justification for dictatorial authority. What lends it an art-theoretical twist, however, is his relentless politicization of the concept of time. According to Schmitt, it is logically impossible for the representatives of law and politics to create a limited sphere of time outside the framework of normality. Like the miracle for the theologian, the state of exception must come from the outside. Schmitt thus defines sovereignty as a "borderline concept" (Grenzbegriff), localized in the "outermost sphere." Because its place lies beyond the space of normality, sovereignty corresponds to an abnormal time. And, since the framework of normality cannot be broken open from within, the state of exception must be declared by a person coming from the outside who interrupts the line of continuity. Political theory thus begins to approach political theology.19 It demands a court of appeal—the state of exception—located outside all frameworks, one that defines the character of time and even produces it. The state of exception in temporal terms may be described as the cessation of ordinary time.

The concept of a limited time beyond the continuity of the normal, in itself already an unusual idea, has the even stranger consequence of establishing itself as a "delay" (Frist). The interpretation of the state of exception as a Frist is a function of Schmitt's arch-Catholic conception of the katechon or the "Restrainer,"20 a scheme in which history takes place


in the space of time between the present and the coming of the Antichrist. It is the span of time in which the works of the Lawless One have not yet gained the upper hand and the Antichrist has not yet appeared. The *katechon*, whatever form he may assume, produces history; without him, time itself would long ago have ended. He halts the flow of time leading toward the counter-era of the Antichrist, whether Communism or the mechanization of the world: “in the time of exception, the power of true life breaks through the crust of a mechanics caught in continuous repetition” (*PT*, p. 21).21 The reciprocal play of both together—the continuous time of normality as well as the shock of the state of exception—produces the history that is given to humanity as the *Frist*.

This political concept of time might at first seem too cryptic to be worthy of further consideration. But here, too, other thinkers have adopted the same ideas as Schmitt, making them appear less strange. The construction of the *katechon*, for example, was used as an alternative to nihilism not only by the Catholic Schmitt but also by the Protestant Dietrich Bonhoeffer.22 Schmitt’s ideas, moreover, have a diabolical logic that has ensnared others besides Benjamin. Their marginal movement is exactly what it pretends to be; Schmitt’s theory of time is a philosophical “borderline case” (*Grenzfall*), which posits a zone far beyond the known world. Accordingly, this theory seeks to nullify the rules of normal time and produce a moment of standstill and shocklike clarity.

This motif of the abrupt departure from the time of normality corresponds to the concepts of shock, the now, and suddenness from the canon of the avant-garde propagated by Ernst Jünger and Martin Heidegger as well as by André Breton and Louis Aragon.23 In his curriculum vitae Benjamin emphasizes the proximity of his theory of art to Schmitt’s dichotomy between continuity and uniqueness; in actuality, this dichotomy corresponds to the span between normality and the state of exception used by Schmitt in his concept of the *katechon*. And even the cinematic “shock effect” praised by Benjamin in “The Work of Art in the Age of

*Schmitts fundamentalistischer Kritik der Zeit* (Berlin, 1994), and Meier, *Die Lehre Carl Schmitts*, pp. 46, 234–53, as well as Meier, *Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss, und "Der Begriff des Politischen,*** pp. 56, 90.


Mechanical Reproduction”—an effect that, “like every shock, should be cushioned by intensified spiritual presence”—refers to the tension between normal time and uniqueness that Benjamin in his curriculum vitae had also found and praised in Schmitt’s method.24

But the connection between Benjamin and Schmitt is more complex and contradictory than the mere adoption of Schmitt’s concept of uniqueness would suggest. The link between the two thinkers can be established much more firmly via a relatively lengthy detour, one that leads to Thomas Hobbes’s concept of political time and offers a key to both Benjamin and Schmitt.

3. Hobbes’s Image of the Leviathan as the Creator of Time

While Benjamin himself does not quote Hobbes, there can be no doubt that his fundamental theses are based on the latter’s definition of the political. Thus it has been surmised that the image of the Leviathan should be viewed as a secret antithesis to the emptiness of the allegory. At the beginning of Benjamin’s “Kritik der Gewalt,” where he deals with Spinoza, Hobbes is likewise present between the lines.25

Schmitt, on the other hand, who sought to reactivate the Hobbesian view of the state as rooted in elemental human fear, lays explicit claim to Hobbes as his intellectual “brother.”26 Of particular interest is the importance he attributes to the Leviathan metaphor: “In the long history of


political theories, richly laden with colorful images and symbols, icons and idols, paradigms and phantasms, emblems and allegories, this Leviathan is the most striking and powerful image. It transcends the framework of all intellectual theories or constructions.” 27 Despite his criticism of the Leviathan as an image inappropriate for the mechanistic Hobbesian state—a position he later repudiated28—Schmitt attributes to this image the power to rupture the time of normality. The Old Testament metaphor of the Leviathan is equivalent to the sovereign, and thus possesses that time-producing quality that justifies sovereignty.

The same holds true for the anthropomorphic visualization of the Leviathan. The frontispiece is the most authoritative answer imaginable to the experience of inescapable political chaos and years of civil war (fig. 1). Equipped with the bishop’s crosier of spiritual power and the sword of secular authority, the giant bends men to his will. In the tradition of Arcimboldesque composite images,29 his body is comprised of over three hundred people who, like a coat of mail, replace the skin and obviously extend into the body itself (fig. 2). This double effect, where hundreds of people look toward a single head that itself returns our gaze, doubtless illustrates the decisive passage in chapter 17 of the Leviathan in which the birth of the state occurs through the transfer of the individual will to the sovereign: “This is more than Consent, or Concord; it is a real Unite of them all, in one and the same Person, made by Covenant of every man with every man. . . . This is the Generation of that great LEVIATHAN, or rather (to speak more reverently) of that Mortall God, to which we owe under the Immortall God, our peace and defence.” 30

“Generation” here means the creation not only of a body but also of time. The concept is related to the tradition of state effigies fashioned at the death of a king in order to fill the period of the interregnum with a quasi-living representation of the state. Such effigies prepared the way for the process of visualization without which the Leviathan would


FIG. 2.—Detail of the Leviathan.
scarcely have been conceivable. The collection of royal effigies, dating back to the fourteenth century, demonstrated what was otherwise only visible to a supernatural eye, elevated above the flow of time: the chain of office-holders, fragmented over time, but extending from the past into the future as a coherent composite figure. In Leviathan, Hobbes explores the question of the “Right of Succession” as if he were envisioning the royal effigies of Westminster Abbey:

Of all these Formes of Government, the matter being mortall, so that not onely Monarchs, but also whole Assemblies dy, it is necessary for the conservation of the peace of men, that as there was order taken for an Artificiall Man, so there be order also taken, for an Artificiall Eternity of life; without which, men that are governed by an Assembly, should return into the condition of Warre in every age; and they that are governed by One man, assoon as their Governour dyeth. This Artificiall Eternity, is that which men call the Right of Succession. [L, p. 135]

In Leviathan, the artificial figure that represents the state claims this artificial eternity. The Leviathan is built to last.

4. The State of Exception: Hobbes, Schmitt, and Benjamin

Common to both Hobbes and Schmitt is the preoccupation with a form of time posited beyond the continuum of normality. Like Hobbes’s interregnum, Schmitt’s state of exception constitutes the center around which all political considerations revolve. But while Hobbes theoretically

31. The words representation and image were used synonymously for the first time on the occasion of the burial of Henry VII in 1509: “Over the Corps was an Image or Representation of ye late king layd on quissions of gold appareld in his Riche robes of astate wat crowne on his hed ball & scepter in his hande.” Later, arms and legs were added, allowing the figure to assume various positions, so that “sundrie accions first for the Carriage in the Chariot and then for the standinge and for settinge uppe the same in the Abbey” intensified the illusion of life through the appearance of motion (quoted in W. H. St. John Hope, “On the Funeral Effigies of the Kings and Queens of England, with Special Reference to Those in the Abbey of Westminster,” Archologia: or Miscellaneous Tracts Relating to Antiquity 60 (1907): 539, 555). Against this background, Hobbes’s description of the Leviathan as a living machine is understandable. His introductory statement, “by Art is created that great LEVIATHAN called a COMMON-WEALTH, or STATE, (in latine CIVITAS) which is but an Artificiall Man,” is clearly inspired by kings’ effigies (L, p. 9). Compare Bredekamp, “Zur Vorgeschichte von Thomas Hobbes’s Bild des Staates.”


extends the brief interregnum in order to transform the potentially endless time of anarchy into a period of authority and order through the permanence of the social contract and a living effigy—that is, the state—Schmitt is concerned with the duration of an unstable order, to which he opposes the moment of the “state of exception.” Hobbes’s objective is the permanence of the Leviathan, whereas Schmitt emphasizes the exaltedness of the moment. Schmitt, who attacked occasionalism as a delusion specific to German romanticism, is, in fact, its involuntary heir. Hobbes is political, Schmitt romantic.

Benjamin occupies a middle ground between Hobbes and Schmitt. At first, his Trauerspiel book follows Schmitt’s approach. Adopting the contrast between the serious case (Ernstfall), borderline concept (Grenzbegriff), and exception (Ausnahme), on the one hand, and the phenomenon of continuous normality, on the other, he emphasizes the significance of the “unique-extreme.” Moreover, the criteria by which Benjamin evaluates German tragic drama are taken from Schmitt: the sovereign, his relation to the state of exception, and his ability to make extreme decisions.

In his chapter on the theory of sovereignty, Benjamin makes reference to Schmitt’s concept of sovereignty, which “emerges from a discussion of the state of exception” (UD, p. 245; OG, p. 65; trans. mod.). Accordingly, one would expect Benjamin to follow Schmitt at this point, too; but such is not the case. Sovereignty, according to Benjamin, “makes

34. See Schmitt, Politische Romantik.
36. “The normal proves nothing, the exception proves everything” (“Das Normale beweist nichts, die Ausnahme beweist alles”) (PT, p. 21).
it the most important function of the prince to avert this,” that is, the state of exception. The shift of nuance is of utmost significance. For while Schmitt views the state of exception as the conditio sine qua non for the establishment of sovereignty, Benjamin sees sovereignty as existing in order to avoid the state of exception in the first place.

The passage that follows likewise reveals fundamental differences, despite the Schmittian influence: “The ruler is designated from the outset as the holder of dictatorial power if war, revolt, or other catastrophes should lead to a state of exception.” At first glance, the sentence reads like a summary of Schmitt’s work on Diktatur, which Benjamin had praised in the letter of December 1930. But while Schmitt views the sovereign, who establishes himself in the reciprocity of normal continuity and the state of exception, as both necessary and possible, Benjamin speaks of his absence.39 His Trauerspiel shows rulers who are only seemingly able to govern the state of exception and, ideally, to exclude it. The symbol of the epoch is neither the clarity and permanence of the laws nor the moment of the sovereign’s decision, but rather the “inability to decide” (Entschluß-unfähigkeit)40 and the torsion of hesitation: “The prince, who is responsible for making the decision to proclaim the state of exception, reveals, at the first opportunity, that he is almost incapable of making a decision. Just as compositions with restful lighting are virtually unknown in mannerist painting, so it is that the theatrical figures of this epoch always appear in the harsh light of their changing resolve” (UD, p. 250; OG, p. 71; trans. mod.). Benjamin searches for traces of the true sovereign, but the rulers appear to him unable to find a way to the transcendence that would make possible an outer Archimedean point.41 The potentate is symbolized by the cold, unrestrained plotter, whose actions fill up the permanent state of exception stochastically, without meaning or morality. His counterpart is the masquerade of the allegory, which transforms reality into changing masks of continual metamorphosis.42

Benjamin criticizes authority as a masquerade of the chaotic state of nature, the endless repetition of change without substance, and the

39. The German drama of the Counter-Reformation was formed “in an extremely violent effort, and this alone would mean that no sovereign genius gave the form its peculiar character” (“in einer höchst gewalttätigen Anstrengung und dies allein würde besagen, daß kein souveränischer Genius dieser Form das Gepräge gegeben hat”) (UD, p. 229; OG, p. 49; trans. mod.).


41. The more the world moves aimlessly toward its end, the more history becomes bound to the world: “The religious man of the baroque era clings so tightly to the world because of the feeling that he is being driven along to a cataract with it. The baroque knows no eschatology; and for that very reason it possesses no mechanism by which all earthly things are gathered in together and exalted before being consigned to their end” (UD, p. 246; OG, p. 66). See also Weber, “Taking Exception to Decision” (1993), p. 153.

meaningless use of pliable allegories. He views history not as the pendulum swing of disintegrating order and its reestablishment in the state of exception but as one-dimensional monotony—and thus to be lamented. Inasmuch as Benjamin views the absence of sovereignty as catastrophic, he remains, despite his “theological anarchism,” within the Schmittian framework. He differs from Schmitt in his interpretation of history, not, however, with respect to the criteria for its evaluation.

5. Schmitt’s Response to Benjamin

Schmitt reacted to Benjamin’s objections. In a series of letters from 1973, he mentions in passing that he had been occupied with Benjamin during the entire decade of the thirties. First, he underlines his relation to Benjamin by stating that he was “in daily contact” with shared acquaintances. Then he deals with Benjamin’s interpretation of the Leviathan. He suggests that his article of 1937 had implicitly criticized Benjamin’s failure to deal with the symbolism of the Leviathan: “The important thing is the symbolism of the Leviathan, of which, strangely, W. Benjamin says nothing (as far as I can tell).”

In the following remark—which may be described as nothing less than spectacular—Schmitt explains that his influential book on Hobbes of 1938, which he himself characterized as his most significant, was intended as an answer to Benjamin’s Trauerspiel: “Unfortunately, my attempt to respond to Benjamin by examining a great political symbol (the Leviathan in the political thought of Thomas Hobbes, 1938) went unnoticed.”

At first glance, it may seem questionable whether Schmitt really had Benjamin in mind when he wrote his critique of Hobbes. It is possible that he, looking back in 1973, was seeking some share in Benjamin’s fame. He may have viewed this as a welcome opportunity to disguise the book’s open anti-Semitism by describing it as a veiled answer to a Jewish emigrant, in this way appearing to take him seriously and even honor him.

On the other hand, the question of the extent to which Schmitt sought to style himself in retrospect is of secondary significance. For re-

44. Schmitt makes reference to a letter of 7 July 1932 written to him by Karl Korsch; “From the fall of 1932, I also have letters from Franz Neumann; most of them—above all Otto Kircheimer, who did his doctoral work with me in Bonn in 1928—and the acquaintances shared with W. Benjamin are not documented because we were in daily contact” (Schmitt, letter to Hansjörg Viesel, 11 May 1973, in Viesel, Jawohl, der Schmitt: Zehn Briefe aus Plettenberg [Berlin, 1988], pp. 60–61).
45. Ibid., p. 16. The article mentioned is Schmitt, “Der Staat als Mechanismus bei Hobbes und Descartes.”
gardless of whether it was consciously intended at the time or represented a later construction, Schmitt's preoccupation with the _Leviathan_ makes complete sense as a hidden dialogue with Benjamin. Benjamin had written that in the age of the baroque, a state of exception was impossible because there was no authority that could instate or end it. The abrogation of law had become the condition of normality, approaching the Hobbesian state of nature and dissolving the dialectic between the status quo and the _Grenzbegriff._

Schmitt is concerned with the reconstruction of this reciprocal relationship. He attacks Benjamin's view of a persistent instability by critiquing its polar opposite, Hobbes's concept of the eternal, intact body politic. Hobbes's monster, according to Schmitt, cannot be as stable as it pretends to be. In the schemes of Jewish thinkers like Spinoza, "freedom of thought" works like a slow poison, undermining the foundations of the state, weakening its bones, and finally leading to its collapse. Schmitt sees this hollowing-out of the Leviathan as a process of decay, almost making us think he had abandoned "exception" in favor of order. But there can be no question that he did not abandon the former as the mere fact of his sympathy for pirates and interest in guerrillas proves. In his criticism of those who undermine the Leviathan, moreover, there are undertones of cryptic satisfaction, for it is these situations that make possible a higher authority than the Leviathan itself: the sovereignty of the state of exception, which provokes the shock of uniqueness. Without the underminers, the reciprocity on which sovereignty exclusively depends would be impossible. Since the state of exception remains the core of his political thought, Schmitt's _Leviathan_ book separates him from both Hobbes's concept of an earthly god of state and the perpetual absence of the Leviathan posited by Benjamin.

The possibility that Schmitt really was thinking of Benjamin when he formulated his critique of Hobbes is also confirmed by an explicit reference to him sixteen years later. In his book on Shakespeare, Schmitt confines his criticism to the two sentences in which Benjamin praises Shakespeare for having Christianized _Hamlet._ Schmitt maintained that since _Hamlet_ is in no way a Christian play, Benjamin had trivialized it. In Schmitt's view, Shakespeare's England was "more barbaric" than Benjamin was ready to admit—"barbaric" as an antipode to the Continental creation of the modern state with its omnipresence of the political.

Schmitt's use of the term _barbaric_ is similar to Benjamin's confron-

49. See Schmitt, _Hamlet oder Hekuba_, p. 63. See also _UD_, p. 335; _OG_, pp. 157–58.
tation of the “barbarians” Klee, Picasso, Brecht, Kraus, and others with the lifelessness of contemporary humanism.\textsuperscript{51} According to Schmitt, Shakespeare’s drama is interwoven with life beyond the stage and the elemental force of the exception. Schmitt defines Shakespeare’s Hamlet as “play” (Spiel), but a play that reveals its opposite, the “serious case” (Ernstfall). As play, the theater is the negation of the Ernstfall; yet without knowledge of the latter, it remains empty.\textsuperscript{52}

Schmitt’s interpretation of Hamlet negates the autonomy of the work of art\textsuperscript{53} in order to show it as the recipient of the “intrusion of time into the play”: as an extreme form of the elemental, nonmechanical, and anomalous that demands the highest order, clarified and given form in sovereignty. In contrast to Benjamin’s diagnosis that the state of exception is impossible because it already exists as a permanent state of lawlessness, here too Schmitt advocates the shock theory of the authoritarian avant-garde. Once again, political theory and the theory of art are intertwined.

6. Benjamin’s Response to Schmitt

As Schmitt noted with regret in 1973, the response to Benjamin implicit in his Leviathan book of 1938 went unnoticed. Nonetheless, shortly after the publication of his book he became the unstated target of Benjamin’s philosophy of history. Benjamin’s eighth thesis, followed by the famous picture of the Angelus Novus of destructive progress,\textsuperscript{54} was, to adopt Taubes’s theatrical description, “written eye to eye with the theses of Carl Schmitt” (CS, p. 28).\textsuperscript{55} Indeed, Benjamin calls attention to the allusion by placing the words state of exception in quotation marks:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “state of exception” in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real


\textsuperscript{52} See Schmitt, Hamlet oder Hekuba, pp. 42 and 71 n. 15.

\textsuperscript{53} “There is a powerful taboo of the autonomous work of art, isolated from its historical and sociological origin, a taboo of absolute form, the real taboo of an idealistic philosophy, a purity taboo, deeply rooted in the tradition of German learning. This taboo does not permit us to speak of the intrusion of time into the play” (Schmitt, “Was habe ich getan?” Dietsland-Europa 2 [Jan. 1957]: 7–9; rpt. and annotated by Piet Tommissen in Schmittiana 5 [1996]: 13–19).


state of exception, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism.56

Benjamin here expands the thesis developed in his Trauerspiel book, that in the baroque the state of exception is impossible not because it is superfluous but because it exists permanently as a perpetual state of lawlessness, continuing to the present. What Schmitt views as the event of historical rupture, as the state of exception and a cessation, Benjamin sees as trapped in the permanence of a power that now, in the worst possible sense, truly is “barbarian.” As in the Trauerspiel book, however, Benjamin once again concurs with Schmitt’s demand for a true state of exception57—in order, now, to turn it against Schmitt’s concept of history. Benjamin’s conception of the shocklike liberation acquires the character of a Last Judgment of Fascism.

As powerful as this image may seem, without knowledge of its real addressee it remains obscure.58 It adopts Schmitt’s state of exception in order to formulate a version of “political theology” that is immediately turned back against Schmitt. It is worth noting, moreover, that Benjamin, even while he seeks to attack Schmitt’s Politische Theologie, remains caught in the framework of its conception. Theses 14–17, in which Benjamin seeks to “destroy” the idea of linear progress, likewise contain an echo of Schmitt’s time-construct of the state of exception, inasmuch as they crystallize the idea of the “shock” in a “messianic cessation of activity.”59 Benjamin’s moving reflection on history uses the Schmittian pattern of politicized time, an idea that received its conceptual contours—as already with Hobbes60—in the realm of art theory.

Benjamin employed Schmittian metaphors or at least parallel con-

57. Michael Rumpf, Radikale Theologie,” p. 46, emphasizes this point but does not discuss Benjamin’s critical turn.
cept in his critiques, shifting at will between political theory and the theory of art. We see his borrowings in his critique of parliamentary liberalism, which, he says, leads to compromises reflecting nothing of the violence that gave birth to parliament, in his longing for decision, as formulated in his piece on Goethe’s Wahlverwandtschaften, written a year after he had read Schmitt’s Politische Theologie, and in his desire to argue from the Grenzlinie as developed in the Einbahnstraße.

“Affinities” between Benjamin and Schmitt have led Jacques Derrida to subject Benjamin’s “Kritik der Gewalt” to a similar analysis in the name of “deconstruction,” an investigation whose cryptic conclusions make the association appear downright harmless. Again and again, the comparison with texts by Schmitt is merely hinted at, causing the motive for the examination of Benjamin to remain vague. Only in one passage, where Derrida deals with the problem of time that arises in the moment of legislation, does he address the connection that was apparently constitutive of the “affinities” between Benjamin and Schmitt: “It is the moment when the justification of law hovers in the void or over the abyss, clinging to a purely performative act.” This moment may explain why Benjamin could orient himself so strongly to Schmitt. His esteem for Schmitt was based on art-theoretical considerations that, drawing from an iconology of time grounded in Hobbes, were able to sustain the longing for a time of exception.

Perhaps Benjamin saw Schmitt as the latter saw his enemy: “the embodiment of his own question.” This “embodiment,” however, was the aesthetically manifested state of exception, a trap from which Benjamin could not free himself even as he sought to turn it against itself. The aesthetic intersections were more powerful than the political fronts. To see this as a purely moral problem would be to ignore an elementary dilemma, one for which Schmitt and Benjamin each conceived his own solution: the filling of time with substance. One cannot confront it without first looking cold-bloodedly at the bottom of this Pandora’s box.

63. See Anglet, Messenität und Geschichte, p. 60.
Albert Salomon, Social Democrat and professor of political philosophy at the Deutsche Hochschule für Politik in Berlin—the one who had encouraged Benjamin to send his Trauerspiel book to Schmitt—organized a series of lectures called “Problems of Democracy” in the winter of 1929–30. Schmitt was one of the participants. Shortly thereafter, Benjamin had a long discussion with Bertolt Brecht, which he summarized in four words. In their highly emotional form, they embody Benjamin’s paradoxical proximity to Schmitt: “Schmitt / Agreement Hate Suspicion.”