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In the Blink of and Eye: The Augenblick of Sudden Change and Transformative Learning in Lukacs and Benjamin

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Abstract *Although much work dedicated to clarifying the link between learning and change has made a sincere effort to show how change can be a part of the learning process of every individual's life, the progressive functionalist approach to understanding this link in developmental psychology has created a blind spot when it comes to a consideration of the possibilities of sudden change. Developmental approaches to understanding change are also evident in macro-level politics, and they have increasingly become part of other spheres of social life such as education where the individualized inculcation of skills has come to define the progressive mantra of learning and telos of schooling (Frymer, Carlin & Broughton, 2009).*

Instead of remaining within the confines of liberal progressivism or functionalism that advance a notion of transformation in gradual, piecemeal, and developmental terms, change needs to be re-conceptualized to account for the ways that learning can be a momentous, sudden, and sometimes violent event. To this end I discuss temporal, sensory, and perceptual change through use of the concept of 'Augenblick'—a German term connoting a fleeting moment of time normally associated with a form of sight. Focusing on the theories of education inherent in the work of Georg Lukacs and Walter Benjamin I demonstrate how micro- and macro- forms of expressions of the Augenblick occurring at not only the individual, but also the social level in the context of revolutionary politics forces us to rethink the ways that the dominance of liberal conceptions of learning prefigure the horizon of the possibility of change.

Introduction

When the word Augenblick is broken down into its etymological components we find that 'augen' refers to something ocular or ophthalmic and 'blick' refers to look, glance, glimpse, gaze, sight, blink, view, or squint. Consequently, the word 'Augenblick' denotes a fleeting moment of time typically associated with a form of sight. The word's connection to change is less literal. As a word that denotes a fleeting visual moment, 'Augenblick' inherently posits transformation in dramatic terms as a flash of perceptual and/or sensory reorientation.

There are numerous ways of working with a broad conception of Augenblick that refer to those moments that bind together time and sight to mark a dynamic change or transition. These include anything from the moment of border and boundary crossing, to the notion of discontinuity that entails a break from normal functioning. Specific examples include everything from the leverage points of systems theory, Kuhn's paradigm shift, Foucault's rupture that ushers in a new episteme, Heidegger's being-toward-death that connects freedom with the realization of our own finitude, Nietzsche's epiphanic moment of the abyss of vision, to Kierkegaard's qualitative leap of faith, and even Walter Benjamin's divine violence that marks a sudden transition into a something that stands outside the cycle of the foundation and decay of law. In all of these cases, the Augenblick is a moment measured as the shortest possible temporal duration marking the transition into something radically new in which preconceived notions of self and the world are permanently altered.

I begin with some of the progressive trends, possibilities, and pitfalls in our current conceptualization of what is referred to as transformative learning, and move toward the concept of Augenblick as both a radical perceptual reorientation indicative of a decisionist model of change, as well as exemplary of the ‘divine’ form of violence that escapes the sanctioning of the law thereby ushering in the appearance of new sensory possibilities reflective of a politics of becoming. Through utilizing these two examples of Augenblick that point to how perceptual and sensory reorientation can happen in dramatically sudden and shocking ways, our attention on learning shifts to subject areas that are not commonly considered within traditional educational studies while also challenging our fundamental understanding of how transformative learning takes place. I argue that learning cannot be properly accounted for through developmental, functionalist frameworks that posit transformation in a way that always anticipates what is to come—thereby relegating learning to an instrumental transfusion of skills and knowledge. Instead, transformative learning needs to be reconceptualized in anti-progressivist and anti-developmental terms that fully consider the power of sudden, violent perceptual and sensory shifts in order to open up our understanding of change in socio-cultural life to unforeseen possibilities.

Liberalism and Transformative Learning

The name Jack Mezirow is virtually synonymous with transformative learning. As an adult educator and learning specialist Mezirow has had an enormous impact on how we understand generic processes of cognitive and perceptual transformation, as well as the implications that these processes have for educators. Moreover, Mezirow’s founding

work in the field has given rise to a movement of sorts that has not only led to an increasing number of studies on educational processes in adults, but has had a profound effect on opening up the possibility for individual transformation during a time of life when one's education is generally considered to be over. Because of the extent of Mezirow's influence on theories of transformative learning it is easy to identify some of the common threads that typify the work in this field. For example, the field of transformative learning has generally advocated a notion of change that is conceived of as a) a gradual, piecemeal process, b) structural in that transformation is understood as progressing developmentally through stages, and c) functional in that predetermined goals of development take place via the implementation of planned forms of action. For Mezirow (1990, 1991, 2000) transformative learning takes place through destabilizing the meaning one has derived through the course of his/her life, and then reformulating it in a way that helps the individual to reflect more critically and openly upon their own thoughts and actions as well as those of others. He argues that there are four ways that learning can occur: 'by elaborating existing frames of reference, by learning new frames of reference, by transforming points of view, or by transforming habits of the mind' (Mezirow 2000: 19). Learning is thus posited as the reorganization of habit and the emergence of the new—as in new perception and new cognition—that arise only by being unbound from the sociological, cultural, and economic constraints that have served as a framework by which commonly accepted assumptions about oneself and others were established. For Mezirow, these constraints not only work toward the reification of thought, but also the distortion of perceptual-cognitive meaning. In order to fight this distortion and the encroachment of reification, one's previous perceptual and cognitive

habits must be put into question. For him, the reifying structures of the mind and its associated distortions are only overcome through the creation of a rational ground from which to begin to reassess our understanding of the world and critically reflect upon our assumptions.

According to Mezirow, the creation of the rational ground is facilitated via cooperation between the learner and teacher in developing the foundations of what Habermas (1984) calls 'ideal speech situations'. In these social constellations previous problems are posed anew, previous frames of reference and expectation are questioned, and both long-standing and recently encountered dilemmas can begin to be clarified. Following Habermas, Mezirow sets out a fairly straightforward list of preconditions that must be met in order for rational dialogue and the possibility of transformational learning to take place. According to him, a framework for rational dialogue must have the following: 1) access to more thorough information, 2) an environment that is free of coercion, 3) openness and empathy toward others, 4) the ability to assess evidence impartially, 5) equal opportunity to present one's point of view and fully participate in the discourse, and 6) the capacity to come to an agreement and verify the results until new information comes to light about the issue and can be reassessed accordingly (Mezirow 2000: 13). Consequently, transformative learning centers on changing one's perspective and gaining the ability to process and transmit meaning clearly. By approximating ideal speech acts and developing a more transparent form of communication, Mezirow argues that the learner becomes more open to possibility and otherness, while acquiring the capability not only to reframe his/her subjective and objective assumptions but also to act on them (Mezirow 2000: 23).

As the groundwork for the establishment of a critical and open approach to reassess and clarify meaning, the ideal speech situation posits that change is incremental and one's ability to participate in dialogue is understood in functional and developmental terms. Mezirow's functionalism becomes even more explicit when, in adopting the work of Deweyan learning theorist Karen Kitchener, he summarizes her seven stages in the development of reflective judgment (Mezirow 1991: 124). Similarly, he also lays out seven parallel stages of problem solving that range from interpretation to action and serve as the central component of his four forms of learning that are understood as the amplification of current frames of reference, the creation of new frames of reference, and the transformation of our points of view or habits of the mind (Mezirow 1991: 94). The fundamental idea of transformative learning is to develop these problem solving and reflective skills in order to overcome and/or more effectively assess and act upon some of the societal and environmental limitations that one faces on a day to day basis such as family and relationship problems, economic hardship, problems on the job, and deterioration of health.

In spite of his adherence to developmental forms of learning, Mezirow does seem to consider the potential impact of dramatic events or crises as moments that destabilize our sense of being and ways of knowing. He argues that,

Perspective transformation can occur either through an accretion of transformed meaning schemes resulting from a series of dilemmas or in response to an *externally imposed epochal dilemma* such as death, illness, separation or divorce, children leaving home,

being passed over for promotion or gaining a promotion, failing an important examination, retirement. ... Any major challenge to an established perspective can result in a transformation. These challenges are painful; they often call into question deeply held personal values and threaten our very sense of self. (Mezirow 1991: 167; italicization is my own emphasis)

For Mezirow, these moments are sudden, traumatic, and/or violent intrusions into one's life that, while unpredictable in their outcomes, do provide opportunities to perceive and understand things anew. The realization of one's impending death, a death of a loved one, a debilitating illness, a break up of a family, or being a victim of injustice, among other examples, can all be forms of crisis that create an instability in the way one makes sense of the world. However, while entertaining the possibility of momentous events as incitements to changing one's perceptual and cognitive habits, Mezirow remains cautious in his understanding of transformation, never straying too far from the model of rational communication as the foundation for his theory of transformative learning. Instead of understanding moments of crisis, disaster, and/or violence as transformative in and of themselves, he posits that they merely serve as platforms from which the pedagogue can insert him/herself into the situation in order to begin the facilitation of the learner's progression through the various developmental stages of problem solving and reflection.

Even in the case when transformative learning theorists are distanced from ideal speech and rational communication as the central mode of learning, there continues to be an under-appreciation of how sudden and dramatic destabilizing moments serve as a

primary source of learning. Instead of assessing the potential for learning that occurs in temporally dramatic terms, much of our understanding of transformative learning regularly reverts to either the slow, developmental progression for the capacity of rational speech and thought or the gradual embodiment of a new-age holistic morality.¹

The most problematic aspect of how transformative learning has generally been conceived of is not related to the central place that the creation of meaning and/or habitual patterns occupy in terms of their understanding of learning processes. Rather the primary problem is that there is an under-evaluation of, and lack of attention to the question of how meaning and habits are changed, transformed, destabilized, and/or reconfigured, and the role that the suddenness of epiphany, surprise, violence, and/or shock have on the reorientation of our sensibility, perception and cognition. Similar to how transformative learning theorists have always concerned themselves with ways to destabilize the taken-for-granted assumptions in learners in the process of clarifying meaning, the following puts forth some ways that we may begin to destabilize the commonly accepted notions of transformative learning as gradual, processual, developmental, and non-violent.

Lukacs's Challenge and the Shadow of Instrumentalism

One of the more identifiable and traditionally leftist uses of the notion of Augenblick is found in the work of Marxist philosopher, Georg Lukacs who struggled for much of his later years to clarify how the dialectical relationship between subject and object in the

¹ For an example of how transformative learning is posited as a form of new-age holistic morality see Sullivan, Morell, and O'Connor (2002).

context of a Marxist revolution necessitates a theory of radical and creative intervention. Although not normally construed as a theory of education, Lukacs' use of the concept of *Augenblick* in his theory of revolution necessitates a consideration of how learning is primarily a creative social phenomenon that combines a perceptual and cognitive transformation, the possibility of which occurs in a fleeting moment that presents itself in the blink of an eye. Through his use of the concept of *Augenblick* Lukacs is able to avoid some of the didactic and patronizing pitfalls that plague many Marxist theories of education that typically call upon the all-knowing vanguard to instill in the poor worker the 'correct' knowledge of his/her situation.

As a young revolutionary in the 1920s, Lukacs was confronted with the dominant leftist European view that chose to understand the slow disintegration of the Russian revolutionary moment of 1917 as an indication that the objective conditions for the revolutionary moment had not yet ripened. In contrast to this over-emphasis on the objective economic conditions of the time, Lukacs foregrounded the subjective role of the people in the revolutionary process. His fundamental argument was that the role of the revolutionary subject (i.e., the working class) in its dialectical relationship with the objective conditions of revolution (i.e., capitalist crisis) had been vastly underemphasized. Against the proto-positivist Marxists of his era who viewed the revolutionary process through the lens of natural law, Lukacs held that even when the conditions exist for a revolution to take place, there is never any guarantee that one will actually occur. Instead, transformation becomes dependent on the art of intervention, or as Lenin put it 'the art of insurrection', when there is a momentary opening (i.e. the *Augenblick*) and opportunity to intervene actively in a situation in order to remake

permanently the political and socio-cultural order. For Lukacs, the critical opening in the dialectical relationship between the subject and object is:

A situation whose duration may be longer or shorter, but which is distinguished from the process that leads up to it in that it forces together the essential tendencies of that process, and demands that a decision be taken over the future direction of the process. That is to say the tendencies reach a sort of zenith, and depending on how the situation concerned is handled, the process takes on a different direction after the “moment”.

(Lukacs 2002: 55).

This understanding of ‘Augenblick’ marks not only the point at which the subjective moment assumes the central place in the process of radical socio-cultural transformation but also a complete change in our collective perceptual orientation that ushers in the opportunity for a moment of social learning. For Lukacs, there is no way that the objective conditions could alone give rise to revolution because one’s relationship with nature is always mediated socially. In other words, the objective conditions are not directly reflected back to the observer/participant in an unadulterated manner. Instead, the relationship between the conscious understanding of the revolution and the objective economic conditions must be understood dialectically so that the provisional space their interaction provides can be seized by the revolutionaries themselves. Once this space is created the subjective element of the revolutionary process assumes central importance. The zenith of this process which creates the space for

intervention demands that ‘a decision be taken over the future direction of the process ... and the day after tomorrow might be too late to make that decision’ (Lukacs 2002: 55). This moment of the dialectical relationship between subject and object provides the impetus for the perceptual reorientation, as in ‘I can see clearly now’, of the Augenblick.

The transformation is both perceptual and cognitive. The moment instigates a perceptual reorientation through opening the present situation to possibilities previously unnoticed and consequently unattainable. This new perception, best understood as an intuitive or epiphanic moment, is followed by a cognitive ‘coping’ of the situation that determines the formation of a plan of action to take advantage of the newly apparent possibility. For Lukacs, it’s that moment that must be seized before the intuition fades as a result of the reconfiguration of the situation - thereby extinguishing the possibility for intervention and diminishing the demand for revolutionary change to a mere request for reform.

There are parallels with Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning in that ‘disorienting dilemmas’, like the zenith of a revolutionary moment, create opportunities to alter ones perceptual and cognitive orientations radically and permanently. In Mezirow’s case, the possibility to learn is brought about by a crisis that is seized upon by teacher and student in much the same way that Lukacs imagines the revolutionary opening being seized by the communist party and the working class. However, there are two distinct differences: 1) while the opening for an active pedagogical intervention is premised on disorientation in Mezirow, the Augenblick in Lukacs is a product of a moment of clarity, and 2) While the augenblick in Lukacs’ theory of the revolutionary act is the social product (learning moment) of a collective will, Mezirow identifies

transformative learning as primarily taking place at the individual level. The danger of the prioritization of the individual is that the act of seizing the moment on the part of teacher and learner can easily become instrumentalized (a danger for any functionalist account of learning), while for Lukacs the moment of clarity and intervention into the moment is based on a transcendental perceptual reorientation that is bound to a collective conception of history.

In summary, Lukacs's theory of Augenblick allows us to newly consider transformative learning processes that work temporally through a strictly non-progressive, and non-developmental logic. While learning is here posed as an opportunity that presents itself in dramatically sudden terms that disturbs the teleology engrained in liberal ideology, it also works to fundamentally shift our focus on learning away from the individual realm and into the social.

Walter Benjamin and Adult Learning

Who will educate the educators?

- Question posed by Karl Marx in his 'Theses on Feuerbach' (1998 [1924]: 569-74)²

Connected to the rejection of the possibility of sudden change found in liberal, developmental theories of change, is the absolute aversion to violence. While this aversion might initially appear as the result of a well reasoned commitment to, or moral

² This question is reframed by Adorno (1998 [1959]: 100) in the context of wondering how education would be able to contribute towards ensuring that the past horrors of the holocaust remain present in a way that diminishes the possibility of a return to fascism.

plea for non-violence, upon further scrutiny we find a fundamental and contradictory flaw to this position: liberalism's prioritization of the individual inherently elevates the clearly identifiable, sensational form of violence to the highest level of horror. In other words, by prioritizing the most sensational form of violence - that which is committed by clearly identifiable individual actors - the insidiousness of systemic/social forms of violence are smoothed over and obscured, while potentially emancipatory forms are completely discounted a priori (Zizek, 2008, Balibar 2002).

A similar situation exists within contemporary liberal theories of transformative learning where change is completely dissociated from any form of violent disruption and is consequently relegated to a simple leveling out of habitual patterns of cognition. One of the major influences that Mezirow acknowledges in his own work is psychiatrist and learning theorist Roger Gould whose position is exemplary of the liberal approach to learning. According to Gould,

while children mark the passing years by their changing bodies,
adults change their minds. Passing years and passing events slowly
accumulate, like a viscous wave, eventually releasing their energy
and assuming new forms in altered relationships with both time and
people. By recognizing the patterns, we may gain some control over
the forces by smoothing the transition and muting the peaks and
valleys of adult life phases. (Gould 1975: 218)

For Gould, as well as for Mezirow, learning in the individual becomes dependent on the ways that the teacher is able to facilitate a series of seamless transitions through a set of developmental stages in people's lives. Minimally, and perhaps most optimistically, what learning theorists such as Gould and Mezirow attempt to do is illustrate how small, life-sustaining change is possible for everyone. While that is certainly a legitimate concern, it is important to avoid allowing this developmental approach to homogenize our understanding of violence, and discount from the outset the ways that it is tied to transformation. As a result, this section focuses on some of Walter Benjamin's work in order to link transformative learning to sudden, socially oriented forms of violence.

The work of Walter Benjamin is a good place to start for three reasons: First, his work helps us to consider how sudden transformative moments of learning do not dissipate with the onset of adulthood; secondly, he incites us to rethink the political dimensions of temporality as they relate to notions of learning; and thirdly, he replaces the understanding of education as a leveling out of individual life transitions and the gradual acquisition of critically reflective skills with a conception of education tied to the *Augenblick* of both the moment of danger, and what he calls 'divine violence'.

For Benjamin, like his fellow Marxist philosopher Lukacs, the process of learning was essentially a social phenomenon that happened in sudden and momentous ways as a flash of transformational illumination. To summarize what I have tried to argue elsewhere in much more detail (Carlin 2010), Benjamin understood the difference between the learning of children and adults in capitalist society as being primarily due to the increasing degree with which contemplation came to dominate the ways that we make

sense of the world.³ His argument went something like this: with increasing exposure to the commodity form in capitalist society the world around us would become increasingly detached, distant, and foreign, resulting in the gradual replacement of a somatically oriented form of knowing with an ever-greater degree of contemplation that is representative of capitalist epistemology. The end result would be the emergence of a comparatively static vision of the world where transformative possibility could only be conceived of in distant and abstract terms instead of as a concrete product of our own making.

While there is no specific mention of adult forms of learning in Benjamin's writing, there is a theory of transformative learning connected to adult life that is identifiable in at least two parts of his work. One example appears in his famous essay 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1968 [1939]: 253-64) where he refers to the illumination that can occur in those instances of socially oriented forms of danger that challenge the homogeneity of developmental and progressivist forms of time. Another example is found in his essay 'Critique of Violence' (1986b [1921]: 277-300) where he discusses education in terms of the radically shocking and destabilizing power of 'divine violence' to disrupt our normal sensory orientation. In both accounts, the transformative aspect of learning is conceived of not as a gradual development toward a predetermined telos but as a dramatic change that happens in the lightening quick moment of an *Augenblick*.

³ For an account of how Benjamin conceived of how learning takes place in childhood see his essay 'On the Mimetic Faculty' (1986a [1933]: 333-36). In this account his conception of childhood learning is similar to the position argued by Gould above where attention to the body in childhood/adolescents gives way to the dominance of the mind in adulthood.

Learning in the Moment of Danger

The theory of learning present in Benjamin's essay 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1968 [1939]: 253-64) pivots on the destabilizing effect that characterizes a moment of danger. For Benjamin, it is this moment that creates a brief possibility for the radical transformation of our normal perceptual orientation. The possibility that arises in a moment of danger, he argues, takes the form of a mental image that weakens the dominant view of history as a smooth functioning developmental continuum - one written by the victors, largely devoid of conflicting perceptions, and thus limited in its depiction of the possible (i.e., blind to anything other than the status quo).

This moment of discontinuity fosters the emergence of a fleeting opportunity to connect the present with the past; raising the victims of modernity's seemingly endless array of catastrophes out of the depths of obscurity and into the truth of the now. In other words, it is the moment of danger that brings the past - governed by the interests of the ruling class and strewn with the bodies of the oppressed - into the present as an inspirational force to alter the course of time. Forming a memory of the oppressed provides a motivational force to change the trajectory of history. This momentary mnemonic flash must be grasped in the blink of an eye before our perspective on the present is neatly fitted back into the traditional arrangement that preceded the danger; returning us to 'homogeneous' time that eliminates the oppressed and the possibility of radical transformation.

For Benjamin, the transformative possibility of the present is obscured behind the monotonous drone of the teleology of history dominated by the perspective of the victors.

Under these circumstances thinking can only be understood as an unthreatening and progressive cognitive activity that gradually builds upon the achievements of the past, confining us to a conception of time that precludes transformative possibility. For Benjamin, however, genuine thinking is not about reconciliation with the present course of things, but is about working to radically disrupt our established perceptual coordinates as they relate to time and the possible.

(T)hinking involves not only the flow of thoughts but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. (Benjamin, 1968 [1939]: 262)

Benjamin's conception of the transformational moment of learning is thus bound to a radically different conception of time where impending catastrophe provides the dialectical image that brings the past into contact with the present in a way that radically shocks the developmental flow of thought and opens up the possibility for a revolutionary form of intervention. The stability of empty homogeneous time is 'burst' open by 'Jetztzeit' - a moment of history that protrudes from the continuum and stops the established flow of thought to provide an opportunity for a radical change in perspective

that now operates on the side of the oppressed (1968 [1939]: 260).⁴ For Benjamin, in order to grasp the transformative possibility in the moment of danger one must possess a presence of mind (*Geistesgegenwart*)⁵ that instead of dissipating in the midst of crisis seizes the chance that the interruption of time has generated to create a more just form of life. For the revolutionary Benjamin, transformative learning is not posited as a seamless transition from X1 into X2, where small scale progressive forms of perceptual change can gradually lead us to a better life. Rather, learning is conceived as a radically momentous and lightning quick transformation from X1 into Y1 that ushers in a drastically different perception of the world.

The Zapatistas and the Educative Power of Divine Violence

Although only briefly examined, the topic of education is talked about in more explicit terms in Benjamin's (1986b [1921]: 277-300) essay 'The Critique of Violence'. In this instance, instead of highlighting the learning potential that exists in a moment of danger, he ties learning to a very specific conception of violence; discussing what he calls the 'educative power of divine violence.' In order to clarify the link that Benjamin identified between these two seemingly disparate subjects, we have to first outline how Benjamin conceived of violence.

For Benjamin, the ultimate goal of this essay was to outline a kind of violence that wouldn't serve in either a law founding capacity or in the defense of already established

⁴ This is similar to what Jacques Ranciere (1994) and Panagia (2000) call the 'untimely'. Ranciere is referring both to an illegitimate and unaccepted form of time that is unbound from the dictates of a conception of history that only acknowledges and is able to identify that which it can causally predict.

⁵ I owe the use of this term to Michael Lowy (2002:44).

law. To this end, Benjamin explains that essential to both the founding and sustenance of law are the state institutions of the military and the police. In both cases, these institutions serve to clear the terrain for the establishment of law and also subordinate the populace to the dictates of already established law.

The function of violence in lawmaking is twofold, in the sense that lawmaking pursues as its end, with violence as the means, what is to be established as law, but at the moment of instatement does not dismiss violence; rather, at this very moment of lawmaking, it specifically establishes as law not an end unalloyed by violence, but one necessarily and intimately bound to it, under the title of power. Lawmaking is power making, and, to that extent, an immediate manifestation of violence. (Benjamin, 1986b [1921]: 295)

The problem for Benjamin was how to conceive of a form of violence that did not operate in the service of the law at any point. Thus he was confronted with the task of developing a theory of transformation that was seemingly in debt as much to anarchism as it was to Marx. This implied accounting for the emergence of a violence that escaped both the state's monopoly of its use (e.g. by the police and military), and the endless cycle of its own decay and re-foundation that would inevitably lead to the emergence of a new state in need of the establishment of its own legal framework after the previous one's dissolution. For Benjamin, this type of violence, connected to the endless dialectic of foundation and decay, was what he referred to as 'mythical violence' - a judicial form of

violence, enacted in order to establish and defend state power. In contrast, he proposed what he calls “divine violence” as a boundless, law destroying form of violence wielding a revolutionary force that was capable of permanently undermining the reestablishment of the state, its law, and the tautology endemic to its explanation of means and ends. Divine violence does not operate in the service of the formation of a new order, but rather in the service of a transformational creativity not subsumed by the dictates of a new law or telos.

If mythical violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody the latter is lethal without spilling blood (Benjamin, 1986b [1921]: 297).

For Benjamin, while justice is the principle of all divine or pure violence, the acquisition and maintenance of power is the priority of all mythical lawmaking (1986b [1921]: 294).

Although notoriously difficult to clarify, the one specific example of divine violence that Benjamin provides is that of the syndicalist general strike - a work stoppage aimed at destroying the power of the state to institutionalize, appropriate, and undermine socialist ideals and refusing to utilize its various apparatuses at any time to carry out their goals. The example of the general strike is significant for three reasons: First, it elucidates the influence that Georges Sorel had on Benjamin’s own thoughts regarding

politics and violence⁶; secondly, it provides us with an outline of a form of radical, anti-state politics that is less intended as a form of blood spilling than it is a form of socially oriented action designed to inhibit the state's ability to appropriate its political intentions; and thirdly, it helps to clarify the connection in Benjamin's work between contemporary, socially oriented forms of violence and his specific theory of learning.

In spite of the difficulty in identifying contemporary forms of divine violence, we are able to point to some recent examples. One of the clearest contemporary examples of a social movement that fits the above mentioned criteria outlined in the example of the general strike that combines a resolute distrust of the state and a commitment to the eradication of class divisions is the indigenous (led) Zapatista movement that emerged in Chiapas, Mexico in the 1990's.⁷ On January 1st, 1994, thousands of armed indigenous farmers that served as the foundation of the movement took over the 7 main cities and towns in Chiapas in an attempt to reclaim stolen land and put an end to hundreds of years of destructive state and federal government policy that had pushed the survival of their communities to the brink. The armed wing of the Zapatistas (EZLN—The Zapatista Army of National Liberation) that overtook army barracks as well as state and local police headquarters was not aimed at claiming state power or institutionalizing their

⁶ There is a much larger discussion here regarding the similarities and differences between Sorel and Benjamin in terms of their respective understandings of myth, violence, and politics. However, for the sake of this essay, I only wish to refer to a few of the more important similarities that contribute toward clarifying the ways that a theory of transformative learning exists within Benjamin's conception of divine violence.

⁷ Another example is arguably the Brazilian *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (Landless Workers Movement).

revolutionary ideals after the attack. Instead, the Zapatistas attempted to clear the political terrain for the possibility of a new form of life that would elude the cycle of mythical violence and thus establish itself as a politics of becoming.⁸ In other words, Zapatista violence and the associated reclamation of land from large scale landowners resulted in the creation of new geo-political territories known as ‘autonomous rebel municipalities’ that have served as the platform from which to redefine what there is to see, say, and hear in these places in a way that was previously unavailable to them.⁹

In order to deny the restitution of the mythical violent aspects of the state and its ‘mal gobierno’ the task for the Zapatistas was threefold: 1) to create a new political formation and space that would not succumb to the professionalization of politics and the corresponding institutionalization of an official Zapatista political party; 2) to avoid the development of a hierarchical local political structure that would oversee the construction and maintenance of the autonomous municipalities; and 3) to decrease the likelihood that future generations of the movement would become intoxicated by its armed and violent component.

⁸ I would add that this aspect of the movement clearly differentiates it from the vast history of state focused revolutionary struggle in Latin America over the last century. By ‘becoming’ I do not mean to imply that the Zapatistas struggle is based on an avoidance of accomplishment, but rather that their idea of accomplishment intentionally lacks any sense of finality; remaining at all times vigilant against the potential institutionalization of its political aims.

⁹ An example of what Jaques Ranciere would call a ‘redistribution of the sensible’ where politics is identified as the disturbance in the previous aesthetic division of the sensory realm (i.e. ‘the police’) by those (the indigenous of Chiapas) whom had no part in the ‘perceptual coordinates of possibility’ within the context of Mexico (2005: 3).

Zapatista autonomy has become the possibility to create something at a strict distance from the state, on their own, and without the intervention of the Mexican government that is ultimately subject to the control of national and international economic interests. As a president of the rebel municipality of Ernesto Che Guevara told me during a conversation:

We are asking to be autonomous in that those who are governed are also the people who are governing. ... The people of this municipality have the right to elect their own authorities, and not be named, governed, or ordered to do anything by any political party. ... Our autonomy is actually the contrary to how the federal and state governments are run; by ordering the people to follow their orders. We will not carry out what the government tells us to do. In order to be autonomous, the community has to decide and create their own system of authority within the municipality. This is where they have their own commissions governing education, health, justice, etc., and it is from these roots that we want to be autonomous.

(Carlin 1999)

The new Zapatista municipalities created amidst the sudden and violent emergence of the Zapatistas in 1994 changed the sensory parameters of possibility, ushering in new ways to see and speak about such issues as governance, health, education, gender, and land.

There is a similarity here between the way that the Zapatista violence during the first days of 1994 worked on the sensory parameters of possibility and the way that

Georges Sorel (2004 [1908]) describes the role of the general strike in the context of syndicalism. For Sorel, the general strike is the primary ‘method of expression’ of the syndicalists because it is able to ‘throw a full light on things’ in a way that fully illuminates the opposition between workers and capitalists. The act of the general strike provides an ‘image’ of what is at stake that is grasped ‘intuitively’ and ‘instantaneously’ in a way that ‘language cannot give us in perfect clarity’ (2004 [1908]: 128). Although not focused on creating an image of worker initiated socialism, the ‘divine violence’ of the Zapatistas created an ‘image’ of the plight of indigenous peoples in Chiapas that was ‘instantaneously’ brought into sharp relief against the policies of neo-liberal capitalism. The success in immediately creating such an ‘image’ that intuitively resonated with millions of people around the world is precisely the reason that the Zapatistas were able to garner such widespread international support in the hours, days, and weeks that followed, in effect inhibiting the Mexican government from violently annihilating the Zapatista bases of support at the outset.

The avoidance of the foundation of a new law and telos and the coinciding reemergence of mythical violence has been a tricky task, the difficulty of which has not gone unnoticed by the Zapatistas themselves. In a recent interview, subcomandante Marcos of the EZLN speaks about the fears that many members of the Zapatista resistance had during the 90’s about the next generation of the movement:

Our worst nightmare was that the armed guerillas (the EZLN) would begin to produce followers. Usually, political military groups produce little guerrillas, who along with other people come to find that the only

way to advance (the movement) would be through the military, even though that military might be the EZLN. Fortunately, that didn't happen with the EZLN - the movement had given birth to other types of people: young people that grew up as part of the resistance. These were kids that grew up in the era of the uprising, and thanks to the strength of Zapatista supporters are now autonomous authorities—promoters of education, or of health *not merely followers of an armed struggle* (Castellanos 2008: 34-35; this is my translation of this passage and the italicization is my own clarification).

For Marcos and the Zapatistas, there was a (very) real possibility that the temptation to engage with the state in a cycle of perpetual violence would eventually be acted upon and come to define the political trajectory of the movement.¹⁰ The concern for Marcos as it relates to the violence inherent in the Zapatista movement was not an ideological one but rather a phenomenological one. The question became whether or not the first generation of Zapatistas were going to create enough force and energy in the Zapatistas as a social movement in order to lessen the exhilarating and romantically intoxicating experiential effects of the original violence of the EZLN. For the Zapatistas, the possibility of creating a form of socio-cultural life existing at a distance from the reach of the 'mal gobierno' (bad government) has been bound up with the very problem and use of violence from its very inception.

¹⁰ This situation is perhaps most identifiable in the development of the F.A.R.C. – the Spanish acronym for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

What has occurred in the second generation of Zapatistas has been nothing less than remarkable. Instead of increasingly identifying the movement with the army (i.e. the EZLN), the most recent generation of Zapatistas has been able to sublimate this excess of euphoria into a steadfast commitment to the further development of their liberated territories over and above a violent confrontation with the state. Consequently, they maintain the possibility for future violence only in a position of subservience to the movement, instead of the other way around. In other words, the Zapatistas remain armed, but since their initial violent uprising they've chosen to consider violence only in the cases where they are attacked by the Mexican army or local paramilitary groups.¹¹

¹¹ What is striking about the accounts of Zapatista violence from the early days of the movement is their pronounced lack of cruelty. The initial confrontation between the EZLN and the Mexican army in 1993 took place at a federal army barracks in the Lacandon Jungle 6 months before the official appearance of the Zapatistas. As the EZLN made its way toward the barracks they announced to the soldiers there that they had a decision to make: they could either immediately desert the barracks and flee unharmed, or they would be killed (Castellanos 2008). The exact same choice was provided to all of the targets of the EZLN, including land owners and city police, throughout the 12 days of war between the EZLN and the Mexican army beginning on January 1st, 1994. By all accounts, even in the case of the EZLN's 1994 kidnapping of the violently racist, former governor of Chiapas, General Absalon Castellano Dominguez, there was a clear lack of cruelty involved. Castellano Dominguez and generations of his family were renowned for innumerable acts of the torture, kidnapping, and murder of indigenous peasants across Chiapas in the protection of the more than 7 million hectares of the state's richest farmland that belonged to the 19 'families of Chiapas' (Ross 1995). Instead of torturing him or possibly even executing him, the Zapatistas symbolically sentenced him to spend his life carrying out hard labor in indigenous villages, eventually leaving him to live the rest of his days with the 'shame' at having been pardoned and let go by the same people who he and his family had ruthlessly killed and plundered for more than a century (Ross 1995).

While the transformative aspect of divine violence is apparent, what constitutes its ‘educative power’ seems less clear. Benjamin formulates the educative power of divine violence in anarchistic terms as that which challenges the institutionalization of learning. For Benjamin, the link that divine violence has with education exists in the way that it works to disturb our relationship to ‘goods, right, life, and such like, never absolutely with regard to the soul of the living’ (1986b [1921]: 298). In other words, instead of being posited as a form of destruction aimed at physical annihilation, divine violence is that which works primarily to destroy and consequently rearrange the ways that we (among other things) relate to our material environment and conceive of our means of subsistence, formulate our forms of governance, and relate to each other on a day to day basis.

While both divine violence and mythical violence are “annihilating,” divine violence is neither compelled nor sustained by either the physical subjugation of human beings or the re-establishment of a new state. Consequently, what is educative about divine violence is the way that it operates at the sensible or sensory level - the way that it dramatically lays the foundation for the emergence of a new form of life that remains open to a future which is not preordained or inscribed in law. What is transformed is the scope of possibility - the way that divine violence changes what there is to see and do in a specific location. Education in the context of divine violence marks an interruption in the state’s institutionalization of learning, becoming a descriptor of a practice of general cultural life with new sensory possibilities.¹² The answer to Marx’s question above is

¹² Similarly, in a 1960 speech, Che Guevara states,

The first recipe for educating the people is to bring them into the revolution.

answered - with a new form of life that now stands outside of the law of the state, the official title of educator and the institutional and hierarchical framework that ensured its sustenance disappear.

There is another important aspect of Benjamin's theory of violence that ties education to the transformational aspects of religion. By granting *divine* violence an educative power, Benjamin (1986b [1921]: 277-300) is positing the transformational moment of any learning that results from the annihilating impact of a form of destruction as a type of permanent conversion. A similar argument is developed by Balibar (2002) when he makes the point that institutional education has always been connected to a 'soft' violence where the proposed acquisition of seemingly innocuous skills, capacities, ideas, and knowledge amount to:

a deconstruction of an already existing identity and a reconstruction of a new one. ...I would go so far as to say: it (education) has to be a *dis-membering* in order to become a *re-membering* or recasting of the mind - which inevitably confers on the mind a mode of existence which

Never assume that by educating the people that they will learn, by education alone, with a despotic government on their backs. The only emancipatory pedagogy is the self-education of the people through their own revolutionary practice.

(quoted in Lowy 2007: 125)

Because the liberated territories that make up Zapatista autonomous municipalities physically operate at a remove from the state, they are inherently anti-statist. Their Education is not the product of an institutionally oriented administration of knowledge, but rather the general cultural life that is their revolutionary practice of autonomy.

is akin to that of a body. One could put it in religious terms: all education is a conversion. (Balibar 2002: 140)¹³

This link between education and conversion is most obvious within the parameters of the law of the state, where the ‘soft’ violence of institutions remains a constant within the cycle of mythical violence. However, unlike religious conversion, where there is a founding moment of a new law to replace the previous one (e.g., the transformation that would create a born-again Christian out of a former drug addict) the transformational moment of divine violence that works at the level of the sensible posits learning as a becoming. While the transformational learning moment in divine violence is a product of a form of annihilation, the Augenblick of its enactment is less directed towards the spilling of blood than it is the creation of new sensible possibility and an associated ‘dis-membering’ and ‘re-casting’ of the mind that is unbound from the historical cycle of foundation and decay.

Conclusion: Another Transformative Learning

The dominant conception of education and learning in general is not that dissimilar from the dominant conception of transformative learning. What we find in education today is that learning is typically conceived of in terms of individual development and instrumental forms of skill acquisition. Transformative learning, while not being

¹³ As Balibar himself is quick to point out, this is not all that dissimilar from the famous arguments made by Althusser (1970) and Bourdieu (1977) on education that primarily critique how institutions operate in the ideological service of the capitalist state.

intentionally instrumental, does share with dominant conception of education a functionalist logic that posits learning in terms of the implementation of a set of predetermined goals that are reached with the help of the pedagogue. Although there are many ways in which we can critique the dominant forms of transformative learning theory, the most critical indictment we are able to level at these developmentally oriented models is the way that they limit the possibility of transformation to the dictates of a predetermined telos. In other words, within the context of developmental forms of transformation, the path of learning and the goal to be reached are already mapped out for us.

What the suddenness of Lukacs' 'Augenblick' and Benjamin's 'moment of danger' and 'divine violence' point to, is a form of transformative learning that emerges out of what is perceived to be an illegitimate temporality. From the perspective of the functionalist logic of developmentalism, sudden dramatic forms of transformative learning do not fit within the accepted temporal model of change (e.g., there is no sudden learning of skills). As a result, not only are sudden forms of transformation unidentifiable, they are also impossible.

The transformation depicted in the examples above is not a result of a gradual acquisition of a rational skill set for increasing one's capacity for self-reflection, but a form of learning based on dramatic changes in both our perceptual and sensory frameworks that happen in the shortest possible slice of time. In these examples, crisis and violence are neither posited as precursors for pedagogical interventions nor conceived of in terms that are antithetical to education and learning. Instead, these examples recast transformative learning as a dramatic reconstitution of the ways we see,

speak about, and do things that occur in the socially oriented epiphanic, and sometimes divinely violent flash of an Augenblick.

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