

# **Technique as Politics**

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**Abstract:** This article attempts to answer the question “Is politics possible today?”, developing on some theses from my book *Class* (2019), particularly reflecting on the relationship between politics and technique. The aim is not to define this relationship (e.g. a technique as a means of good politics, or a politics that has a good technique as its goal) but to outline, at least in a preliminary and still imprecise way, the horizon of their non-destructive coincidence. Just like the book, this article also has its main reference in the work of Walter Benjamin and his original idea of solidarity.

**Keywords:** Technique, Class Struggle, Solidarity, Survival, Nonviolent Means, Walter Benjamin, Jean Fallot.

*The interventions, dangers and tempi of politicians are technical*  
W. Benjamin

1. The question “Is politics possible today?” is political in-itself because it concerns its own conditions of possibility; it concerns the simple survival of human beings, with “today” meaning *the time in which the ideal of a community which is originally and essentially “inoperative” (because Being itself is “being-with”)* must deal with the destruction of human life on earth as a specific effect of human social life. The end which is certain – for Heideggerians, at least – because it is indefinite, is “today” replaced by the end which is certain and definite because it has already begun. Consistently, “being-toward-death” is replaced by being-dead. The detestable face of Valdemar is the image of the current impossibility of politics; his hideous voice is nothing but the voice of the “self-determined” peoples: a threatening sound spread by the media which is nothing but our own voice, “intonated from a vast distance, or from some deep cavern within the earth”.

The question “Is politics possible today?” is not a rhetorical one (and the answer is not nonsense) because it can only be asked beyond the limit of this endless end. Indeed, if even today political life and life as such (being-with and pure being) cannot but coincide, it is because they share the one and only margin of possibility that remains to us.

2. In 1976, the Marxist philosopher Jean Fallot wrote: “Capitalist society is precisely the limit-class society, that is, if the words have a meaning, the limit of a classless society or the limit of a non-society altogether”.<sup>1</sup> This statement is an implicit quote and a particular radicalization of

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<sup>1</sup> Fallot, 1976, p. 287.

the famous quote in Marx's *Communist Manifesto*: "Modern bourgeois society, with its relations of production, of exchange and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells".

Fallot, however, was also a scholar of Epicurean materialism: he was thus able to combine the Marxist concept of class struggle with ancient hedonism. As is well know, Epicureanism was both a theory and a practice that aimed at pleasure as the reduction of desires, and achieved the extinction of fear through the separation of existence from death ("If I am, then death is not. If death is, then I am not").

This is the essential point for us too. It is also known, in fact, that the governmental dispositifs produce a balanced combination of fears and desires which is consistent with the logic and tactics of the government itself, that is, with preserving the capitalist system. Meanwhile, human beings – the active and passive subjects of this apparatus – reproduce and consume their commodities and their own life in the threatening but habitual scene of their disappearance from the face of the earth. This has been happening "today" and for too long, just like in 1976. And that is why Fallot's warning sounds more urgent than ever. This admonition is to be understood as something very different from a neglected sermon: it is a laconic as well as precise practical instruction and a fruitful new interpretation of what we call "solidarity". Fallot conceived it as the ability to save oneself and others by escaping the grip of the capitalist apparatus. For this reason, he called it "*effective solidarity*" or "class struggle".

3. As Fallot wrote, the Marxist modality of the reduction of desires (or fears) consists, "thanks to the union of theory and praxis, [...] in gradually replacing our personal desires (for distinction, pre-eminence, possession, enjoyment) with a feeling for the needs of the masses [...] reducing our personal and insignificant desires, dissolving them into the immense sea of needs of the exploited and enslaved".<sup>2</sup>

We can proceed on this path. A potential dialectical development of Epicurean materialism concerns the conception and practice of friendship. For Epicurus, friendship is not based on an abstract moral ideal (in truth, as Dostoevsky explained, on humiliation), but on need, which is the material basis of morality itself. How to define this need? The famous motto answers: "It is not so much the help of friends that we need as the trust that we will be able to use it when needed". If the "need" is dissolved in the ocean of needs "of the exploited and enslaved", the "we" does not denote a group of individuals focused on their own interests but a class animated by mutual trust and solidarity. For this reason, any claim

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<sup>2</sup> Fallot, 1977, p. 116.

to base politics on the friend / enemy distinction, i.e., on the distinction between public and private enemy (hostis / inimicus), becomes ineffective: friendship is not the correlative of enmity, need for trust is neither private nor public.

The real mass of fearful and eager individuals and the mythical unity of the “people” belong to the same device. Only confident friends are able to escape this trap: their “need for trust” is synonymous with “effective solidarity”.

4. Finding escape also means hiding the traces. If true friendship is mutual reduction of desires, it requires a peculiar mode of life. Friendship is shared in containing oneself, living on the sidelines, honoring the Epicurean motto *lathe biosas*: “live so that no one notices that you have been there”. In other words: live dissolving your personal and insignificant desires into the immense sea of the needs of the exploited so that no one notices that you have been there. This is just a paraphrase, sure, and a paraphrase doesn’t get us very far. But as Walter Benjamin once wrote, “A neat sentence by Brecht helps us out here: ‘Erase the traces!’” (*Short Shadows II*, 1933). We must also remember that in one of his preparatory notes for the famous fragment *Capitalism as a religion* (1921), Benjamin mentioned the idea of the “overcoming of capitalism through migration (*Wanderung*)”, theorized by Erich Unger in *Politics and Metaphysics*. Although the note is extremely short and cryptic, the meaning of this “overcoming” becomes clear (and, for us, also in view of an effective solidarity with the masses forced to migrate) by reading a later and equally well-known essay, namely the *Commentary on Poems by Brecht* (1939). Here, commenting on the refrain of the first poem of the *Reader for Citydwellers*, Benjamin writes: “he who fights for the exploited class is an emigrant in his own country. For Brecht – a Communist aware of this situation – the last five years of his political work in the Weimar Republic amounted to a crypto-emigration. He experienced them as such. [...] Crypto-emigration prefigured the real one; it also prefigured illegality. ‘Erase the traces!’ – A rule for those who are clandestine”.<sup>3</sup>

Brecht’s “Erase the traces!” thus helps us to understand at least three essential aspects: first of all, Epicurean friendship – or pleasure as the reduction of desire – is a simple and convenient opportunity that prefigures (and therefore is in solidarity with) the condition of the migrant; secondly, it concerns the work – it requires a technique that must be constantly renewed (to hide each time the traces just left); thirdly, this technique is a survival and escape technique because it consists in concealing one’s own internal emigration (crypto-emigration means: live so that no one notices that you have been there even as a migrant).

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3 Benjamin, 2003, pp. 232-233 (translation slightly changed).

5. Tolstoy was able like no other to destroy the myth of the brilliant leader who leads his troops. Developing his microphysics of historical contingencies and minimal influences, he showed that no victory of the Grande Armée was the product of Napoleon's alleged genius as no defeat was an effect of his ill will. The personal activity of the Emperor during the Russian invasion did not in fact had an extraordinary strength, greater than that of any soldier: just like the latter, it simply "coincided with the laws under which the event took place".

Benjamin, for his part, showed that the right political tendency coincides with the right technical solution, and that only such a technique frees us from the false appearance of the passive mass, whether it is subject to the will of the leader or to the fatal constraint of the event. This technique, we could also say, erases all traces of personal desires for distinction, pre-eminence, possession... The activity (or performance: *Leistung*) of the revolutionary leader – i.e., the revolutionary performance as such – is thus the same but different from anyone's activity because it *makes itself* indistinguishable from any other.

The model of this operation is the Brechtian technique of estrangement. Its result is the loosening up (*Auflockerung*) of the suggestive tensions that shape the mass of spectators and therefore its transformation from a passive audience to a conscious class. In other words, the actor ceases to be admired by a passive crowd, dissolving his mythical primacy by exposing his performance to the scrutiny of a loose mass of active collaborators who meanwhile turn their attention to themselves.<sup>4</sup>

Now, not even the "theatrical" technique is of course sufficient in itself. Furio Jesi has rightly highlighted the tendency of epic theater to routine, or rather to the "regular exercise of the profession of playwright in the class struggle" consistent with the loss of contact with the proletarian public. Brecht tried to overcome this difficulty by multiplying the estrangement effects, but risking exactly in this way to reduce revolutionary innovation to a practice (one among many others) of bourgeois theater.<sup>5</sup> Every "artist" (every professional intellectual) must therefore hide his traces over and over again because even his best performance will only be the ephemeral paradigm of an ever-changing technique. But this is the truth: a complete transformation of politics into technique could only consist in constant experimentation, that is, in the continuous and rigorous examination, selection, modification of the same experimental performances. Once again, as we have been taught, realization and abolition coincide.

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4 On this topic see also Cavalletti, 2019.

5 Jesi, 1974, pp. 94-96.

Whether the technique can offer a solution or it becomes an empty and useless habit depends in turn on a technical solution. However, the reflective and self-critical attitude must not turn into an infinite regression. In other words, the technique itself must find its most sober and authentic *raison d'être*, that is, its true point of application or its one and only possibility of intervening, the point where the fuse burns. Benjamin defines “loosening up” as revolutionary solidarity. The two, moreover, strictly coincide for him with class consciousness. For us, even this definition has only one precise meaning: technique and politics coincide when survival is at stake.

6. As Benjamin observed, in the *Reader for Citydwellers* “the city appears as a vast theater of the struggle for survival and class struggle”.<sup>6</sup> The first corresponds to the “anarchist perspective”, the latter to the “revolutionary perspective”, and if the two perspectives are coherent it is because the two struggles in effect are one.

In this case too, Benjamin’s late political theory must obviously be distinguished but also strictly related to that of the early 1920s. In his great essay *Critique of Violence* (1921), he again quoted Unger’s *Politik und Metaphysik* to reject political compromise as “a product located within the mentality of violence”.<sup>7</sup> However, he distinguishes “with regard to the class struggle” a “nonviolent”, i.e., “anarchist”, undertaking. As we know, the paradigm of this undertaking is the general strike of the proletariat theorized by Georges Sorel, which “sets itself the sole task of destroying state power”. Benjamin writes: “Taking up occasional statements by Marx, Sorel rejects every kind of program, of utopia – in a word, of lawmaking – for revolutionary movement. ‘With the general strike, all these fine things disappear; the revolution appear as a clear, simple revolt, and no place is reserved either for sociologists or for the elegant amateurs of social reforms or for the intellectuals who have made it their profession to think for the proletariat’. Against this deep, moral, and genuinely revolutionary conception, no objection can stand that seeks, on grounds of its possibly catastrophic consequences, to brand such a general strike as violent”.<sup>8</sup>

Just like Sorel, Benjamin thus conceives the revolution as a clear and simple revolt, that is, regardless of the pretensions of realization; not as an end that is claimed to have been reached but as a “pure non-violent means”. And if “the critique of violence is the philosophy of its history”, this conception can be clarified by reading the famous lines of the *Fourth Thesis on the Philosophy of History*. “Seek first food and clothing, then the

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6 Benjamin, 2003, p. 233.

7 Benjamin, 1996, p. 244.

8 Ivi, p. 246.

kingdom of God will be added”: Hegel thus overturned the statement of the Sermon on the Mount. Benjamin quotes Hegel’s sentence to explain and develop it as follows: “The class struggle [...] is a fight for the crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist. Nevertheless, it is not in the form of the spoils which fall to the victor that the latter make their presence felt in the class struggle. They manifest themselves in this struggle as confidence, courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude. They have retroactive force and will constantly call in question every victory, past and present, of the rulers”.<sup>9</sup> As the end of the revolution is present in it, the revolution is not the ultimate, future goal of the revolt but is manifested in it.

Just as the struggle for survival and the class struggle can only be coherent, the anarchist perspective of the revolt and the communist and revolutionary one must coexist. Thus in the theater of the city the means are not subject to the end, and all the intermediate levels converge and overlap – consistent with Engels’ words of 1871: “Well and good, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat”. Thus the classless society is immanent in the struggle for survival, and survival is immanent in the struggle of the exploited and classless class of the vast theater of the world, where everyone and no one is an artist or a spectator, a leader or a follower.

7. In Sorel’s vocabulary “Utopia” has a definite meaning in opposition to “Myth”. As everyone knows, however, the adjective “utopian” is usually understood in a trivially negative sense, e.g. from the propaganda of neoliberal realpolitik which stigmatizes as unrealistic any purpose diverging from it (in the realized dream of spectacular capitalism, in fact, reality as such is a private good). So the “amateur of social reforms” of our day implicitly takes this reality / utopia opposition for granted while openly reject the accusation of naive utopianism. *Excusatio non petita*: if the sense of “real” is consistent with the preservation of dominant power, a “realistic” opportunity to change could only be utopian in the ordinary negative sense.

Of course, it could be argued that this critique of progressive reformism is itself trivial. Sometimes, however, even a banal remark is more than enough.

Even the theory of the progressive state of the post-growth economy, which accepts the limited availability of resources by trusting in governmentality as an unlimited capacity for imagination and adaptation, it is nothing but an internal (progressive) adaptation of the state system and political economy. It is a practical adoption of the border policy that all states implement (as long as possible) against the emergence of

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<sup>9</sup> Benjamin, 1969, pp. 254-255 (translation slightly changed).

exploited and migrating masses. In other words, such a theory is based on the violent limitation of the needs of those who are defenceless and voiceless in front of the power of states and their defence treaties. Solidarity itself is thus limited to a possible unilateral concession, while utopia – i.e., the petty dream of basic income, pension restructuring, fiduciary reform and so on – is a luxury paid for by those who cannot afford to be deprived of food and clothing. Precisely from the point of view of progressive reformism, they will always only need our help and will never simply be able to use it when needed.

It is true, however, that confidence in the potential utility of others express itself in struggle just as courage, humor, cunning and fortitude. In other words, the revolutionary quality of solidarity lies in reciprocity: only when the ability to make use of the help of others is perfectly reciprocal, both the need for help and the willingness to help turn into need for trust (in help), that is in friendship.

8. “Capitalism had reached a point on the world arena where it ceased to justify its costs of production”. This century-old sentence becomes perhaps more relevant than ever when the cost is the survival of the humanity as such. Similarly, the concept of “reactionary utopia” would still be useful to define the tendencies to reduce economic or environmental solidarity within state boundaries. However, if the current struggles against the exploitation of man and nature can overcome the phantasmagoric illusions (and relative disappointments) that would make them inoperative, it is because of their ability to escape the constraint of immediate feedback. They approach the issue from a different slant. The most urgent task, today as yesterday, is in fact not to resist or fight, but not to fall to the trickery of the governmental device which, continually provoking them, selects our resistances and neutralizes them in advance.

Therefore only those who are in solidarity will be safe, and free from fears as from desires. They will dissolve these burden in the immense sea of needs of those who are deprived of food and clothing, just before the tidal wave engulfs everyone.

9. The vertigo of the end of the world contains in itself and explains the current vertigo of war. As Roger Caillois explained, “one’s being is dragged to ruin as persuaded by the vision of its own annihilation not to resist the powerful charm that seduces one’s being by terrorizing it”.<sup>10</sup> The deeper the chasm, the greater the attraction it exerts. And the most looming danger frightens and attracts at the same time by inducing the most conflicting feelings: hope in delay and impatience for the end. So it is not surprising that in the current apocalyptic situation those who are primarily responsible for it are so panicked that they have to offset

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<sup>10</sup> Caillois, 1943, p. 53.



one danger with another: as everyone can see, in fact, they are simply trying to prevent the planetary environmental catastrophe by replacing it with the obstacle of nuclear world war. And just as removing danger means exactly approaching it, also the dilatory approach (or the agonizing slowness) of the “ecological transition” policy and the immediate effect of a nuclear blast at ground zero are two inseparable prospects.

The one who will be able to save himself from dizziness is not the one who tries to look away from the abyss but the one who fixes his gaze on the vertigo itself by examining it carefully. What will he discover? That there is no magic. What will he see? A mechanism invented by men. And he will calmly look at the scary and attractive abyss, recognizing a very well done set.

10. The danger is actual, as is the effect of dizzying deception. In other words, the abyssal depth is real precisely because it is painted on a surface, and the most dangerous of all tricks and traps is the one hidden behind the danger itself. Indeed, what is most feared will come true: the terror that paralyzes us and makes us dizzy will make us slip and fall. But he who calmly fixes his gaze on vertigo itself does not get stuck inside the mechanism: politics is still possible for him. He knows that the greatest and most real danger lies not in our banal, effective inability to stop the destruction, but in the process of subjectification that corresponds to it.

The danger lies in the machine of exploitation of men and nature which, extracting surplus value and producing commodities (i.e., expectations, civil behavior, good habits and so on), massively pollutes, destroys, and kills to the point of inducing terror and paralysis, that is, to produce the same apparent impossibility of being stopped. This machine projects both the illusions of progressivism and the illusion of fatalism, inducing both submissive reverence and desperate anger. It artificially produces both our aspirations and our fears, because it is based on their fundamental equivalence and interchangeability. By accustoming us to wanting what we should have feared and to fear what we were darkly wanting, that is, to desire and fear at the same time, it has pushed us to the brink. Almost a century ago, in 1934, Simone Weil would go on to enact her effort of critical analysis to escape from “the contagion of folly and collective frenzy” promulgated by the modern social machine, which is precisely “a machine for manufacturing irresponsibility, stupidity, corruption, slackness and, above all, vertigo”.<sup>11</sup>

Those who today calmly fix their gaze on vertigo have no illusions and will never seek partial satisfaction of needs through work, since they know that the greatest danger lies precisely in wage labor, that is, once again, in simultaneous exploitation and destruction of human life and natural environment in order to obtain surplus value. They are in fact still

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<sup>11</sup>Weil, 1973, p. 124.

awake and able to calmly observe all the seeming resistances, which are not only idle but also dizzying in turn (as in the famous film, idleness and vertigo are always closely linked). Therefore, who today calmly fix their gaze on vertigo will not ask for “external concessions and this or that modification of working conditions”.<sup>12</sup>

Whether we call it exploitation or destruction, the process is the same and can only be stopped by a “totally transformed work” which is also the only, still possible interaction between humans and the environment.

11. The only politics that is still possible, that is, the only non-destructive politics, coincides with the solidarity struggle for survival. The struggle for survival is a class struggle and the classless society is immanent in it. Of course, these sentences sound anachronistic. However, this corresponds exactly to the vertiginous functioning of the social machine. Precisely because it cannot definitively eliminate the possibility of class struggle, it must continually censor (whit carrots or sticks) the idea of struggle, the concept of class difference, and finally the word class itself by replacing it with “people”. Obviously the machine is always well-oiled and its different tools (suggestive persuasion, police repression, fascist violence and so on) will be used according to the circumstances. On the other hand, recognizing a sign of vulnerability in this obligatory movement is a classic task and a revolutionary virtue of meticulous and detached observation. At the same time, the inquiring gaze does not allow itself to be enchanted, that is, it will never be obsessed with the functioning of the machine.

This last consideration, rather trivial, is still only a way of reiterating that politics is a technique. And it is a way of returning to Benjamin’s suggestion that revolutionary performance (or technique) consists in letting oneself be immersed again and again in the mass or – we could even say, since this performance is called solidarity – in the ever-widening sea of the exploited. Now, that the classless society is immanent to the struggle means that the technical, non-violent solution of conflicts is immanent to it. Let us therefore try to follow again the ideal interweaving of Benjamin’s early and later texts. The dictation of the *Fourth Thesis on the Philosophy of History* actually seems to echo in one point that of the *Critique of Violence*. The first reads: “it is not in the form of the spoils which fall to the victor that [spiritual things] make their presence felt in the class struggle. They manifest themselves in this struggle as confidence (*Zuversicht*), courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude”.<sup>13</sup> The 1921 text further explains: “Nonviolent agreement is

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12 Benjamin, 1996, p. 246.

13 Benjamin, 1969, pp. 254-255.

possible wherever a civilized outlook allows the use of unalloyed means of agreement. Legal and illegal means of every kind that are all the same violent may be confronted with nonviolent ones as unalloyed means. Courtesy, sympathy, peaceableness, trust (*Vertrauen*), and whatever else might here be mentioned are their subjective preconditions".<sup>14</sup> Now, just as the spiritual goods of the *fourth thesis* are inseparable from the material ones, these subjective premises are inseparable, in the nonviolent sphere, of pure means, from their objective manifestation. The latter, Benjamin points out, "is determined by the law (whose enormous scope cannot be discussed here) that says unalloyed means are never those of direct solutions but always those of indirect solutions. They therefore never apply directly to the resolution of conflict between man and man, but apply only to matters concerning objects. The sphere of nonviolent means opens up in the realm of human conflicts the most materially relating to goods (*in der sachlichsten Beziehung auf Güter*). For this reason, technique in the broadest sense of the word is their most particular area".<sup>15</sup>

From our point of view, expressions such as "trust" or "confidence" could be legitimately understood in the Epicurean (and Marxist) meaning clarified by Fallot. Furthermore, we could now put forward the hypothesis that the enormous field of indirect solutions (i.e., solutions freed from immediate feedback) is that of "effective solidarity" or "class struggle [...] for the crude and material things (*um die rohen und materiellen Dinge*)": if every conflict is resolved in relation to things, the environment itself ceases to be the unlimited source of their infinite extraction and the unlimited place of their landfill just as man ceases to extract surplus value from the other man's work. Then the agreement mediated by things and work simply coincide because the agreement extends to the environment itself. Politics therefore does not belong to the domain of desires (for distinction, pre-eminence, possession, etc.) but to the strictly material sphere of needs-goods mediation.

Deborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro recently wrote that the end of the world is not the end of everything. They pointed to the example of the Amerindians who survived the destruction of their world by Conquistadors. This population have survived thanks to their mythology, whose objective and material manifestation is a technique of mediation and negotiation of goods with animals, plants, and the needs of the natural environment. The Amerindians, who do not have a state and are not recognized as a people, think that everything is negotiation, everything is social, that each individual life is a true association of beings, and that politics and society do not concern the environment,

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14 Benjamin, 1996, p. 244.

15 Ibid.

but coincide in a sense with the environment itself: “They think that there are more societies in heaven and earth [...] than are dreamt of in our philosophy and anthropology. What we call environment is for them a society of societies, an international arena, a Cosmpoliteia”.<sup>16</sup> This example is of the utmost importance to us. Its relevant role is the same role of the class struggle in the struggle for survival beyond Valdemar’s suspended death. Its teaching is a “preparations to survive civilization” and can be summarized as follows: the one and only non-destructive policy is cosmopolitan loosening up which is also an anti-hierarchical performance: it is the continuous, meticulous destruction of the supposed hierarchy of creatures that culminates in mankind.<sup>17</sup>

We men of the Anthropocene cannot forget the words of Poe’s character: “Quick! — quick! — put me to sleep — or, quick! — waken me! — quick! - / *say to you that I am dead!*”. And the following lines clearly tell us about the way of reacting of the current capitalist technocrats who, despite everything, still dream of being alive: “I was thoroughly unnerved, and for an instant remained undecided what to do. At first I made an endeavor to re-compose the patient; but, failing in this through total abeyance of the will, I retraced my steps...”. Walter Benjamin’s words resonate here once again: “The interventions, dangers and tempi of politicians are technical”.<sup>18</sup>

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16 Danowski, Viveiros De Castro, 2017, p. 69. See also Cavalletti, Danowski, Viveiros De Castro, 2018.

17 See Benjamin, 1999, p. 546.

18 Benjamin, 1986, p. 84.

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Volume 9  
Issue 2