POLITICS IS A MUSHROOM
WORLDLY SOURCES OF RULE AND EXCEPTION IN CARL SCHMITT AND WALTER BENJAMIN

KAM SHAPIRO

Life is not a mushroom growing out of death.
—Carl Schmitt, *The Visibility of the Church*

To isolate death from life, not leaving the one intimately woven in the other, and each one entering into the other's midst—this is what one must never do.
—Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'intrus*[1]

Carl Schmitt's theory of the exception was bound up with a thoroughgoing critique of philosophies of immanence, materialism, and "atheism," which he treated as interchangeable. In his early writings, he adopted the Christian perspective according to which post-lapsarian nature cannot by itself yield a juridical order, or in his poetic phrase, "life is not a mushroom growing out of death." Yet—in accord with Catholic doctrine—he also found sources of life, or law, in this world. While he repudiated theories of collective self-legislation, he embraced a popular sovereign empowered to impose form on a chaotic society. In *Political Theology* (1922), he compared the form-giving power of the sovereign to an act of divine intervention. Law, he argued, can only function in a lawful or "normal" situation that precedes formalization, and the sovereign "produces and guarantees the situation in its totality" [13]. In *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (1923) Schmitt retained his theological terms: "A scientific study of democracy must begin with a particular aspect that I have called political theology" [32]. In the modern age, democratic constituent power (*pouvoir constituant*) replaces the will of God as the transcendent source of a substantial order, namely democratic homogeneity. Democratic will-formation thereby becomes an act prior to its subject, or as Schmitt wrote, "[. . .] only political power, which should come from the people's will, can form the people's will in the first place" [*Crisis* 28]. A variety of democratic theorists dwell on the paradoxical character of democratic sovereignty, sometimes tracing it back to Rousseau's well-known formulations [see esp. Connolly and Honig]. They highlight the gap between a transcendent (ideal or fictive) will in whose name political power acts, and the bounded, material consensus it forms, ostensibly rendering the latter vulnerable to challenge. As I argue, however, a closer look at Rousseau's discussion of democratic founding in *On the Social Contract* reveals instead a dynamic relay between dispersed substantial or immanent sources of affiliation, on the one hand, and various agents and techniques of political power that draw on and combine them in a collective will, on the other, or what I call *the virtual and the virtuosic*.[2] After briefly exploring this dynamic in Rousseau's

1. I thank Isabella Winkler for directing me to this passage.
2. This is a provisional title for another work in progress.

On the Social Contract, I will highlight similar dynamics at work in Schmitt's Weimar writings, examining three instances: the *complexio oppositorum* (1923), national myth (1923), and the polemical opposition of friend and enemy (1927), focusing especially on the first. Contrary to familiar readings of Schmitt's metaphysical "exceptionalism," I argue that for Schmitt, as for Rousseau, political power does not create a normative order from a vacuum, and the apparent transcendence of sovereign authority has a variety of worldly sources.[3] Finally, I consider what I call "democratic virtuosity," or virtuosity from below, focusing on Walter Benjamin's repudiation of sovereign acts of lawmaking or law preserving in favor of ongoing collective habit-formation. As I argue, Benjamin returns spiritual force to the material world not only to shatter human authorities, but also to democratize creation.

Rousseau—Anticipating the People

In the *Social Contract,* Rousseau formulated the paradox of democratic founding to which so many, including Schmitt, would return. "In order for an emerging people to appreciate the healthy maxims of politics, and follow the fundamental rules of statecraft, the effect would have to become the cause; the social spirit, which should be the result of the institution, would have to preside over the founding of the institution itself; and men would have to be prior to laws what they ought to become by means of laws" [Rousseau 69]. As Rousseau argues, a constitution can form a general will only if it commands the loyalty of the people, that is, if there is already a general will in favor of the constitution. The task of reconciling law and legitimacy falls to the great Legislator. The Legislator does not merely establish rules to be imposed by force, but "changes human nature," making man collective and dependent, ideally so much so that "every citizen is nothing, and can do nothing, except with all the others" [68]. How does the Legislator change human nature? As Rousseau writes of the social compact, "Men cannot engender new forces, but only unite and direct [*unir et diriger*] existing ones" [52]. What are these forces, and how are they united and directed? In order to gather public support for the constitution, Rousseau argues, the founder of the Republic can appeal to neither force nor reasoning [69]. Hence the paradox, for the strong cannot command unless obedience is (already) duty [48], and one cannot reason with those who are not (yet) rational. "Wise men who want to speak to the vulgar in their own language instead of in a popular way will not be understood [and] [. . .] there are a thousand kinds of ideas which it is impossible to translate into the language of the people" [69]. Hence, the Legislator must rely on "another order of authority, which can win over without violence and persuade without convincing," namely, religion. That is, he must "subjugate by means of divine authority those who cannot be moved by human prudence" [69–70].

As Rousseau recognizes, the turn to divine authority and irrational persuasion only displaces the original paradox, for not just anyone can "make the Gods speak or be believed when he declares himself their interpreter" [70]. Nor can just anyone successfully claim to speak for the People. In what lies the "miracle" of the Legislator's "great soul" [70]? As Rousseau suggests, the Legislator's ability to persuade without force or reason depends upon the resonance of his speech and laws with prevailing affections and ideas that are thereby "united and directed." Religious authority, for example, draws on existing traditions, which, if Hobbes is to be believed, were already cultivated by early leaders from "seeds" of anxiety and superstition [Hobbes 74]. The Legislator, like a God, who

3. My argument is more extensively developed in Carl Schmitt and the Intensification of Politics.

knows all passions but experiences none—is presented not with a fixed human nature (that of Hobbes's multitude, for instance), but a diverse array of talents, vices, and inclinations shaped by climate, population, and custom. The need to adjust laws for these factors restricts their value to a small area with a relatively homogeneous population in which these factors are relatively stable and perceptible [72]. It is this dynamic relation between an array of tendencies or traits traversing a plurality of individuals and a capacity for recognizing new ways to draw out and assemble them, that I denote *the virtual and the virtuosic*. My use of the former draws on Bergson's discussion of the virtual as elaborated by Gilles Deleuze and Brian Massumi, for whom the term denotes a plurality of incipiences rather than either a material or logical set of possibilities, or a latent "potential" that unfolds along a given line of development [cf. Massumi].

Rousseau's discussion of censorship provides a further illustration. He writes, "Just as the general will is declared by law, the public judgment is declared by censorship" [123]. Just as the law depends upon and organizes latent or incipient commonalities, censorship depends for its success on selective appeals to prevailing, if unthematized, sentiments and ideas. "The censorial tribunal, far from being the arbiter of the people's opinion, merely declares it, and as soon as this body departs from that opinion, its decisions are useless and ineffective" [123]. This declaration, like legislation, works not to form but "to settle [*régler*] [public] judgment" [124].[4] "Censorship maintains mores by preventing opinions from being corrupt [. . .] sometimes even by determining them when they are still uncertain" [124]. As an example of the latter, Rousseau mentions the use of seconds in duels, which, "carried to a mad extreme in the kingdom of France, was abolished by these simple words in an edict of the King: 'As for those who have the cowardice to appoint seconds.' This judgment, anticipating [*prévenant*] that of the public, determined it at once" [124]. Amplified by declaration, public shame crosses a threshold at which it became decisive, melding various sentiments and ideas into a coherent "opinion." The Legislator, too, both anticipates and determines a collective will. He selects and "declares" a judgment that is incipient or virtual, transforming a tendency into an actuality.[5]

Carl Schmitt—Combining Opposites

In which religious or secular sources does Schmitt find grounds for supralegal authority, and how are they united and directed? Schmitt's response to the democratic paradox is often oversimplified, read as a defense of the autonomy of a sovereign who produces social homogeneity. However, whereas in *Political Theology,* Schmitt describes a decision as a "miracle" that "emanates from nothingness," he elsewhere describes various strategic, discursive, and aesthetic means by which sovereign authority channels (unites and directs) circulating habits, affections, and ideas. This channeling is most explicit in *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* (1923), which grounds papal authority in an "ethos of belief" shaped by a variety of social and religious institutions. As I will argue, however, even at the height of Schmitt's "decisionism," in *The Concept of the Political,* secular struggles are not only sources of exception and disorder, but also provide resources for (and of) the sovereign authority that shapes a legal order.

In *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* (1923), Schmitt argued that the Catholic Church (and by implication the Catholic Center Party) was the only institution capable of

4. I modify Masters's translation here, which gives reglér *as "regulate" rather than "settle." Cf. Jean-Jacques Rousseau,* Contrat social ou principes du droit politique.

5. I take the language of the virtual from Gilles Deleuze. Brian Massumi describes the virtual in terms of incipience [see Massumi].

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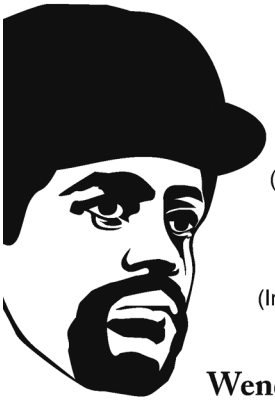

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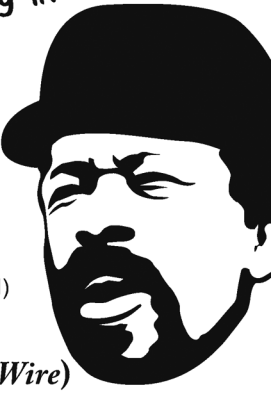

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reconciling a fragmented society. His explanation of this role centered on an intriguing notion whose exposition aptly illustrates the complications of his thinking throughout the period. The Church, he claimed, was possessed of a "*complexio oppositorum*" (combination or complex of opposites), derived from "*coincidentia oppositorum,*" a phrase coined by Nicholas of Cusa to describe the divine enfolding of differences and oppositions. For Cusa, a coincidence of opposites does not involve their rational or logical mediation, but a kind of catachretic unity whereby diverse individuals and qualities are copresent in God.[6] Schmitt attributed an analogous function to the Catholic Church, which could represent diverse values and positions at different times while maintaining an overarching unity. Citing Byron's description of Rome, Schmitt ascribed this ability to the Church's "hermaphroditic nature" [*Roman Catholicism* 8]. Its epicene composition could be embraced by those of diverse orientations, from the authoritarian (Donoso Cortes) to the radical (Padraic Pearse). According to Schmitt, the Church's *complexio* capitulates a series of analogous complexes that obtain throughout psychic and social reality:

> *The union of antitheses extends to the ultimate socio-psychological roots of human motives and perceptions. The pope is called the Father; the Church is the Mother of Believers and the Bride of Christ. This is a marvelous union of the patriarchal and the matriarchal, able to direct both streams of the most elemental complexes and instincts—respect for the father and love for the mother—toward Rome. Has there ever been a revolt against the mother? Ultimately, most important is that this limitless ambiguity combines with the most precise dogmatism and a will to decision as it culminates in the doctrine of papal infallibility.* [*Roman Catholicism* 8]

Much as Freud mapped psychic structures onto the sexual matrix of the heterosexual family, Schmitt identifies a parallel conflation of sexual difference in both "social" and "psychic" complexes. Both the individual psyche and the nuclear family comprise a *complexio oppositorum,* a supple unity consisting of a vague but intense combination of multiple associations that can infuse any number of concrete forms. The Church at once reiterates and channels these complexes—including the organization of instincts in the matrix of sexual difference—giving their force an institutional structure and vice versa. To foreshadow the conclusions to this essay, we can note the resemblance of Schmitt's hermaphrodite pope to the Gnostic godhead whose unfolding in the material world took the form of a catastrophic shattering rather than a continuous unfolding of the original *pleroma*. I will return to this theme in the work of Walter Benjamin, who inherited Gnostic conceptions of *pneuma* by way of the Kabbalah. At issue, for now, are the complexes and streams, as well as the agents and techniques that direct them to Catholic authority.

Whereas the sovereign decision described in *Political Theology* was figured as an "ungrounded ground," the infallible authority Schmitt describes in *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* draws on a plurality of attachments, channeled and dissolved in a "stream" that culminates in a fund of legitimate authority (a metaphor of confluence that recurs frequently in his writing). "No political system can survive even a generation with only naked techniques of holding power. To the political belongs the idea, because there is no politics without authority and no authority without an *ethos* of belief" [*Roman Catholicism* 17]. So much, it would seem, for sovereign autonomy. Yet, of course, Schmitt's recognition of the ethos that subtends authority involves no concession to immanence or

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6. "For thou art where speech, sight, and understanding are the same, and where seeing is one with being seen, and hearing with being heard, and tasting with being tasted, and touching with being touched, and speaking with hearing, and creating with speaking" [Nicholas of Cusa 47].

a self-organizing community. As he insists in *The Visibility of the Church* (1917), "life is not a mushroom growing out of death" [56]. Instead, the "lawfulness of the visible world"—and the ethical character of human action—flows from their continuous animation by the spiritual power of God [*Visibility* 56]. The Church oversees this process, institutionalizing a series of "mediations" of spirit, law, and the social order, of which marriage is the privileged example.

> *Marriage [. . .] has become the foundation of an allegory whose most profound significance lies in that* all its components are consecrated—*that the woman conduct herself toward the man as the man toward his Church, and as the Church toward Christ the mediator. It presents a whole hierarchy of mediation, the ground of which is none other than the Word of God. The consolidation of these relations as legal relations, the transition to the firmer foundation which religiosity obtains in the framework of the Church, as love in marriage, the limitation of the pneumatic in the juridical, also follow the rhythm of the origin of the visible in the invisible God. [. . .] The idea obtains its visibility in the Word, just as a breath of air becomes a sound when it is forced through a reed.* [*Visibility* 56–57]

Schmitt's remarkable depiction of this series of mediations conforms to Catholic doctrine and the medieval logic of a "graduated" universe in which the opposition of the sensible and intelligible (love and respect) is resolved by a continuous path of redemption.[7] The institution of the Church capitulates a series of mediations that give rise to the ethos on which its authority depends. Far from being the sole guarantor of a normal order, the authority of the leader draws on an ethos of belief embodied in broader institutions and its members. *Pneuma* already pervades these members and their relationships, which are governed not only by material interests but abstract (spiritual, consecrated) ideas. Schmitt goes so far as to claim that if the antichrist were pope, "true believers would remain even then the visible Church, would hold to the unbroken chain of the imitation of Christ in the priestly, educational and pastoral offices in a visible, that is, juridical continuity" [*Visibility* 55].

One might say Schmitt's conception of the juridical is "transubstantiational." Yet in *Roman Catholicism and Political Form,* Schmitt does more than mystify law and authority—or draw theological analogies. He also describes rhetorical and aesthetic practices of representation by which the mystical Idea is unfolded in the material world. The Catholic Idea, he explains, was communicated especially in *aesthetic* traditions of art, dress, music, and architecture. "What first strikes the attention of an age devoted to artistic enjoyment is that which is last in natural and historical development—the crowning fulfillment and ultimate gift, the aesthetic beauty of form. Form, figure, and visual symbolism arise independently from great representation" [*Roman Catholicism* 22]. As this passage indicates, the aesthetic consolidation of a visible Idea is the culmination of a long process of mediation. It draws on an ethos consecrated (linked to the spiritual idea) in a variety of institutions and rituals. In an age of technology, this link is broken, and the traditional representative function of aesthetics gives way to "enjoyment." Schmitt laments the broken link between art and religion in the modern age but suggests, "with respect to the Church, it is not an incurable illness" [*Roman Catholicism* 23]. While the Church may have lost its association with the creative arts, the power of the Idea ultimately derives from the sensuous power of speech. "The ability to create form, which is essential to aesthetics, has its

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7. On the relationship of Nicholas of Cusa's coincidentia oppositorum *to this tradition, see Cassirer.*

essence in the ability to create the language of a great rhetoric" [*Roman Catholicism* 22]. A rhetorical production of aesthetic form, in turn, consists of a discursive combination of opposites. "Most decisive however, is rhetoric in the sense of what one might call representative discourse, rather than discussion and debate. It moves in antitheses. But these are not contradictions; they are the various and sundry elements molded into a *complexio* and thus give life to discourse" [*Roman Catholicism* 23].

It would appear that the mystical power of representation circulates in "various and sundry elements," waiting to be channeled by anyone capable of virtuosic rhetoric, or "representative discourse." In typical fashion, however, Schmitt insists that the vital force of rhetoric "presupposes a hierarchy, because the spiritual resonance of great oratory derives from the belief in the representation claimed by the orator" [*Roman Catholicism* 24]. Indeed, "[. . .] the idea of representation is so completely governed by conceptions of personal authority that the representative as well as the person represented must maintain a personal dignity—it is not a materialist concept" [*Roman Catholicism* 21; *Römischer Catholicismus* 35–36]. A personal representative has "dignity" (*Würde*) insofar as he or she is the bearer of a spiritual Idea, rather than venal material interests. As Schmitt also suggests, however, the link between the spiritual idea and the worldly authority of a representative figure is sustained by an ethos of belief (in this case, belief in the representative status of the orator). This belief, in turn, is organized in aesthetic and discursive traditions, just as the dignity of a representative is sustained not only by titles but by style and comportment, even physiognomy (*die Würde* can also signify "portliness"). It is by virtue of their participation in these traditions that the members of the Church participate in the invisible realm represented by the visible figures of the Church. "The Catholic Church is the sole surviving contemporary example of the medieval capacity to create representative figures—the pope, the emperor, the monk, the knight, the merchant" [*Roman Catholicism* 19].

Schmitt's account of the *complexio oppositorum* is itself a combination of "opposites," traversing psychological, aesthetic/rhetorical, and personal perspectives. It describes a psychic blending of emotive attachments, the symbolic or rhetorical reproduction of such blending, and its personification in a "representative" figure. Logically, these different moments form a circle. Authority requires an ethos of belief, which requires an Idea formed by "representative discourse" that, in turn, requires the authority of a speaker, and so on. However, Schmitt unfolds the mutual dependence of power and form (or decision and norm) in a temporal process, negotiating the political "paradox" through a continuous relay between a plurality of traditions in which habits, ideas, and affections take shape and their appropriation or refiguring.

From Ethos to Pathos

In *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*—published the same year as *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*—Schmitt identifies something like a complex of opposites in the Marxist "myth" of class struggle. Schmitt takes up the language of myth from Georges Sorel, who distinguishes the stimulating force of myth—namely that of the "General Strike"—from the descriptive language of "utopia" [*Crisis* 71]. Whereas the former mobilizes collective action, the latter serves as a critical model by way of which action can be analyzed or administered.[8] Schmitt interprets Marx's critical writings in this light, emphasizing their irrational or polemical significance. As Schmitt argues, the Marxist unification of diverse struggles into a global opposition of two classes was achieved by

8. I examine Sorel's notion of myth further in "The Myth of the Multitude."

linking all in a messianic historical mission obstructed by a single enemy, the Bourgeois. As Schmitt describes it, the powerful "image" (*Bild*) of this enemy effectively combined the energies of a variety of antagonisms. As it migrated eastward, however, the image of the bourgeois became increasingly associated with national as well as class antagonisms. Ultimately, as Schmitt argues, the former would win out.

> *The more naturalistic conceptions of race and descent, the apparently more typical terrisme of the celtic and romance peoples, the speech, tradition, and consciousness of a shared culture and education, the awareness of belonging to a community with a common fate or destiny, a sensibility of being different from other nations—all of that tends toward a national rather than a class consciousness today. [. . .] Italian Fascism depicted its communist enemy with a horrific face, the Mongolian face of Bolshevism; this has made a stronger impact and has evoked more powerful emotions than the socialist image of the bourgeois.* [*Crisis* 75]

Schmitt's description of the image of the bourgeois enemy conforms in many respects with his description of the *complexio oppositorum*. By adopting Sorel's theory of myth, however, he effectively acknowledges the synthetic character of "representative" images. Rather than embodying a given "Idea" or a stable matrix of psychic and cultural forms, the image of the bourgeois emerges from a set of contingent historical events and processes, thus illustrating the increasingly mobile and artificial character of political symbols and values in the modern age. But this does not mean that the substantial basis of legitimacy is a mere artifact of power. Rather, we can see in Schmitt's treatment of "myth" a blend of constituent and organic dimensions. While myths capture intensities from various sources, creating new affiliations and antagonisms, they are constrained by the relative salience of various prepolitical sources on which they draw. Myths, we might say, do not form but "settle" social conflicts.

In *The Concept of the Political* (1927), Schmitt takes up a formal or "relative" definition of "the political." In this text, a political association is defined as such by an ontological or "existential" (*seinsmäßige*) confrontation with an enemy, that is, by one that poses the threat of war [33]. While allowing that any of a number of positive conflicts can combine in and give rise to such a confrontation, whether religious, economic, or ethnocultural, Schmitt no longer privileges territorial sources of collective affiliation. Instead, he describes a general logic or process of "the political" as such. Antagonism becomes political or "public" at a crucial *threshold of intensity* beyond which it transcends the normative or ideological distinctions from which it arose. "Emotionally the enemy is easily treated as being evil and ugly, because every distinction, most of all the political, as the strongest and most intense of the distinctions and categorizations, draws upon other distinctions for support. This does not alter the autonomy of such distinctions" [27].

The autonomy of the political, so described, is curious. Rather than having distinct characteristics or origins, the political emerges from the amplification or conflation of nonpolitical distinctions. "[E]very concrete antagonism becomes that much more political the closer it approaches the most extreme point, that of the friend-enemy grouping" [27]. The difference between politics and other forms of association would seem to be one of degree rather than kind. However, the heightened intensity of political conflict involves not only a change of quantity but also one of quality; just as at a certain temperature and pressure steam undergoes a "phase shift" and becomes water—or water, ice—in like manner, if you will, spirit becomes matter. When a conflict reaches this threshold (the political), it sheds the normative (moral, aesthetic, and so on) distinctions from which it gathered energy. One finds oneself confronted by an implacable opponent, and it no longer matters how one got to this point.

Although sovereignty so understood may not be eliminated, it becomes difficult if not impossible to locate. Every grouping not only carries protopolitical intensities but can also be a site of decision. Nor can one distinguish as political the grouping most relevant for other aspects of life. The entity that establishes the friend-enemy antithesis need not determine other aspects of the lives of its members [38–39]. It would seem that authority no longer rests on an ethos of belief. As Schmitt's emphasis on intensity suggests, a given grouping or conflict can become increasingly, even suddenly "political" [29]. "The political is the most intense and extreme antagonism, and every concrete antagonism becomes that much more political the closer it approaches the most extreme point, that of the friend-enemy grouping" [29]. It is by no means clear, however, when, or whether, it will reach the critical point and lead to physical violence, or who will be able to effect this break. Schmitt paradoxically describes a group as sovereign that is "oriented" toward the threshold—or that which first appears as such—but it is unclear just what this would mean. "However one may look at it, in the orientation toward the possible extreme case of an actual battle against a real enemy, the political entity is essential, and it is the decisive entity for the friend-enemy grouping; and in this (and not in any kind of absolutist sense), it is sovereign" [39]. We can compare the slippage from orientation to decision here to that from anticipation to determination in Rousseau's account of censorship. In this case, however, the shift is accomplished from within, making the decision an immanent, spontaneous event. "The weight of the political is determined by the intensity of alignments according to which the decisive associations and dissociations adjust themselves" [58]. Rather than traditional affiliations or the decisions of authorities grounded in an ethos of belief, ontological or political distinctions spring, unpredictably, from a plurality of social antagonisms in which they are incipient. *Politics, in short, becomes a mushroom.*

Schmitt's work in the late '20s and early '30s combines a search for legitimate sovereignty with an increasing sense of its synthetic character. In the turn from *complexio oppositorum* to Myth, and finally to the decision, the symbolic, rhetorical, and strategic channeling of affections or resentments breaks off from traditional sites of representation and begins to circulate. As Walter Benjamin famously argued, this mobility was enhanced, if not driven, by the global dislocation of culture in new media technologies that shatter the "aura" or "authority" of representation [Benjamin, "Work of Art"]. Along these lines, we can see Schmitt's move toward "relative" models of sovereign power as an adjustment to the heightened pace of social disintegration, a move that culminated in his turn to decisionism and plebiscitary dictatorship. However, George Schwab's characterization of this movement as a transition from "the church, the possessor of *veritas,* to the state, the possessor of *potestas*" obscures tensions in both Schmitt's juridical and "relative" models of sovereign authority [Schwab 135]. The paradox of "exceptional" sovereignty, whereby political power shapes the underlying ideas, interests, and values it purports to express, at once representing and constituting political form, was negotiated rather than dissolved by a clear choice between the two. Rather than a break, Schmitt's transition from Catholic to secular politics involves a continuum along which the "idea" or "substance" of legitimacy becomes increasingly vague, dissolved of content to the point where ultimately—starting with *The Concept of the Political*—a sovereign decision mobilizes an amorphous fund of popular energies, a kind of standing reserve of affective intensity. Schmitt thus found sources of "form" that rendered constituent power representative yet largely unaccountable, facilitating broad executive discretion in response to social conflicts.[9] The aura of legitimacy that sustained political authority was not abandoned but transformed from an ethos of belief to a pathos of identification.

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9. In Legality and Legitimacy *(1932) Schmitt found sources of presidential authority in the popular trust (*Vertrauen*) of the people in the personal competence of their leader.*

Benjamin makes for a fascinating contrast with Schmitt at many levels. The most straightforward reading emphasizes the contrast between Benjamin's predilection for the messianic as a critical or even destructive force, and Schmitt's for the conservative, legitimating force of political theology, a contrast aptly summed up by the juxtaposition of the former's Angel of History and the latter's *Katechon,* or restrainer; the first is carried along with the ruin of secular history, the second holds in chaos, delaying the apocalypse. Whereas Schmitt seeks to infuse a secular, material world with spiritual order, Benjamin proposes an active "nihilism," facilitating the messianic by enhancing ruin and the profane. The destructive forces Benjamin associates with the Messiah circulate in secular time, shattering conventions and hierarchies. Thus, both Schmitt and Benjamin place transcendence in the world, whether as a legitimating or delegitimating force. For some readers, this places them at opposite ends of a spectrum between authority and anarchy, a view that conforms to Schmitt's predilection for strict oppositions, whether between norm and exception, law and chaos, or friend and enemy. Giorgio Agamben, for example, refuses Schmitt's "pleromatic" concentration of lawfulness in the sovereign decision in favor of a "kenomatic" version of the exception as a space of pure agency or events emptied of sovereign legitimacy [Agamben 5].

Against the latter reading, I argue that both Schmitt and Benjamin describe virtuosic extralegal modes of politics that are neither pleromatic nor kenomatic but *pneumatic*. The formative acts they describe are neither full (directly embodying a divine order) nor empty (devoid of limits or guidance) but involve a channeling of diverse energies and materials. Thus far, I have explored the pneumatic in Schmitt's authoritarian politics, where spiritual authority is drawn from precipitates of secular practice, combining beliefs, habits and affects. Rather than a wholly autonomous power exercised over wholly abject subjects (Agamben's "bare life"), Schmitt describes the authoritarian channeling (pneumatics) of more or less stable enmities and affections that are already organized in civil institutions and discourses. In Benjamin, I find an account of nonauthoritarian, critical, and collective pneumatics, a kind of "democratic virtuosity." I therefore read Benjamin differently than, say, Jacob Taubes, insofar as he knows something of immanence as well as transcendence, and something of the "soteriological role" of secular aesthetics and politics [cf. Taubes 74]. For Benjamin, the messianic circulates in the everyday not only as a destructive but also a redemptive force, what Benjamin calls our "*weak* messianic power" [Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" 390]. A theological model for this redemption appears in the Kabbalistic image of a gathering of divine sparks of spirit dispersed by the catastrophe of material creation, an iconography Scholem traces to Gnostic mythology [see Scholem]. The Gnostics, who saw themselves as agents of this gathering, called themselves "pneumatics" [Grimstad 75]. You can see how this suits my purposes here. The virtual, in this story, are the sparks, nascent generalities—beliefs, habits, affections—that subtend conceptual and personal representation.

What then is democratic virtuosity? Is it a capacity exercised by subjects, or a process that constitutes them? How do collectives unite and direct the habits, ideas, and affections that define them? How can they proceed and anticipate themselves? In Benjamin's writings, the activity of collective becoming typically happens in a "halfway," whether that of a psychic state or a space, or both. Thus, for example, artworks liberated by the deconsecration or "shattering of tradition" in modern media meet recipients "halfway," a space Benjamin identifies with the replacement of ritual by politics [Benjamin, "Work of Art" 254, 257]. I have explored these themes at some length elsewhere, focusing on Benjamin's discussions of collective habit-formation [Shapiro, *Sovereign Nations,* ch. 4]. Here I will focus briefly on Benjamin's use of "politeness" to denote a virtuosic resolution

of conflict by other means than law or a sovereign decision, beginning with a remarkable passage under that heading from his "Ibizan Sequence," written in the spring of 1932.

In between moral law and a struggle of material interests, Benjamin situates what he calls "*the true mediator,*" politeness (*Höflichkeit*).

> *If a negotiating room is entirely surrounded by barriers of convention, like the lists of a jousting tournament, then true politeness comes into its own, since it tears down these barriers; in other words, it widens the conflict past all bounds, while at the same time granting entry—as helpers, mediators, and conciliators—to all those forces and authorities it had excluded. Anyone who allows himself to be dominated by the abstract picture of the relationship in which he finds himself with his opponent will never be able to make anything but violent attempts to gain the upper hand in this conflict. He has every opportunity to remain impolite. Whereas an alert openness to the extreme, the comic, the private, and the surprising aspects in a situation is the advanced school of politeness [. . .] finally, he will be able to astonish his opponent by manipulating the conflicting elements of the situation as if they were cards in a game of patience [*solitaire*]. Patience is in any case at the heart of politeness and, of all the virtues, is perhaps the only one that politeness adopts without modification. As to the others, which a godforsaken conventionality imagines could receive their due only in a "conflict of duties," politeness as a muse of the middle way has long since given them this due—that is to say, a real chance for the underdog.* ["Ibizan Sequence" 587]

Politeness, as Benjamin describes it, is not dictated by conventions; nor, however, can it dispense with them. Instead, it modifies conventional virtues, except perhaps for patience, shaping the situation of agents in conflict through a virtuosic *bricolage* of forces and authorities. Politeness cannot therefore be practiced in a "kenomatic" void, that is, in the absence of institutions, norms, and habits. It is instead a passage through which conventions are combined (united and directed) in new forms, "a muse of the middle way," that is, *pneumatic*. Rather than spontaneity or autonomy, politeness therefore requires "alert attention" to potential sources of transformation already in play within prevailing conventions. Politeness gives the underdog—meaning not only lower classes but also different social forms—a real chance; it is a weapon of the weak messianic.

One might understandably suspect the political significance of politeness for an author who combines messianic theology with anarchist strains of Marxism. How can a term (*Höflichkeit*) denoting civility or even "courtliness" serve such a radical agenda? Is the general strike supposed to be polite? I would argue that it is, meaning that politeness, as Benjamin understands it, is precisely what makes possible the collective negotiation of conflict under conditions of anarchy (that is, without traditional, legal, or coercive authority). Reading the term this way, I follow Samuel Weber's suggestion that "When one remembers that the German word for 'court,' *Hof,* that Benjamin uses [in the *Trauerspiel*] in order to describe the collecting and dispersing of emblems around their allegorical center can also [. . .] be translated as aura, certain aspects of his later work emerge in a somewhat different light" [Weber 93–94]. Politeness, in this light, is another name for the practice by which one assembles the fragments of shattered customs and authorities. Along these lines, politeness makes an appearance in Benjamin's "Critique of Violence," where it serves as a "subjective precondition" for turning conventional forces and authorities (extralegal and legal violence) into "nonviolent means."

> *Is any nonviolent resolution of conflict possible? Without doubt. The relationships among private persons are full of examples of this. Nonviolent agreement*

> *is 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. Politeness [*Herzenshöflichkeit*], sympathy, peaceableness, trust, and whatever else might here be mentioned, are their subjective preconditions. Their objective manifestation, however, is determined by the law. that unalloyed means are never those of direct, but always those of indirect solutions.* ["Critique of Violence" 244; *GS* 2.1.191][10]

Nonviolence is a technique of indirection that transforms conventional forces and authorities (legal and illegal means) from instruments of antagonists—abstractly conceived as contradictory ends or a "conflict of duties"—into what Benjamin calls indirect solutions, or "techniques" for producing new situations. Politeness—when taken seriously, or "heartfelt" (*herzlich*)—is a subjective orientation to such indirection.

Agamben reads Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" as "ensuring the existence of a pure and anomic violence," of "wholly anomic human action," or "a pure violence removed from the dialectic between constituent power and constituted power" [Agamben 54]. He attributes these qualities to the Roman legal notion of the *iustitium,* the exemplary case of an exception without legitimate authority, where "actions are mere facts" [50]. More interestingly, he takes Benjamin's reference to pure or "unalloyed" means (that is, those not instrumentally linked to ends) to indicate the possibility of a "new law," one that appears "after its nexus with violence and power has been deposed." This new law will not be an instrument of use value, but a subject of "play" [63–64]. But in what sense can this play be pure, that is, unconditioned by constituted powers? As Benjamin understood, the past still has a claim on our weak messianic power. Indeed, it gives us that power, providing the forces and authorities (means) we combine and channel to fashion the present, the sparks we arrange in new constellations. In "On the Concept of History" Benjamin explains that "Spiritual things" are alive in material (class) struggles, that is, as means, not their ultimate reward. "They are alive in this struggle as confidence, courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude, and have effects that reach far back into the past. They constantly call into question every victory, past and present, of the rulers. As flowers turn toward the sun, what has been strives to turn—by dint of a secret heliotropism—toward that sun which is rising in the sky of history" [390]. Whereas the rhetoric and symbolism of the Church consolidates traditions, these "spiritual" things redeem their alternative potentials.

Democratic virtuosity cannot dispense with traditions, forces, and authorities; it cannot be wholly anomic. The critical collective Benjamin describes does not act in a void but gathers the detritus of shattered traditions in which transformative powers still live. In doing so, it is not so much the author as the medium of the new. "The masses are a matrix from which all customary behavior toward works of art is today emerging newborn" [Benjamin, "Work of Art" 267]. Benjamin thus finds life, spirit, and birth in the midst of death. Like Rousseau's Legislator and Schmitt's superlegal sovereign, everyday politeness selects and combines available forces and authorities in new configurations. However, it does so from below, meaning on both a collective and a nonsovereign basis. We might compare it with the "self-organizing" process Schmitt ascribes to Parliament, "the place in which particles of reason that are strewn unequally among human beings gather themselves and bring public power under their control" [Schmitt, *Crisis* 35]. The collective virtuosity Benjamin describes, however, operates at the base of sensuous practice rather than its rational critique or representation. It shapes what Schmitt calls the

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10. I alter the Harvard translation here, which gives "Herzenshöflichkeit" as "courtesy."

"normal situation," before or outside the law. The collective is a gathering of not only particles of reason but habits, affections, ideas. It was this capacity of collective becoming that Benjamin hoped an avant-garde might facilitate. It is worth noting in this context that he associates negative theology with the "idea of 'pure' art, which rejects not only any social function, but any definition in terms of a representational content" ["Work of Art" 256]. One could say that secular aesthetics, for Benjamin, plays the soteriological role of cultivating politeness. The same can be said for his own writings, which alert us to potential techniques of experimental and collective self-modification in contemporary social and technological circumstances. They take a polite politics to heart.

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