

OTHERWISE:

A RESPONSE TO BOŠTJAN NEDOH

Arthur Bradley

Finally, I am once again very grateful to Boštjan Nedoh for his acute and commanding --- indeed I'm almost tempted to say superegoic --- reading of my work. In replying to his essay, I am now placed in the guilty position of responding to someone whose claim is not that *Unbearable Life* goes too far, like Agata, but perhaps that it does not go far enough: "Enjoy!" he demands of me.

It is, again, hard not to smile reading Boštjan's essay straight after Agata's --- explicitly anti-psychoanalytic --- critique. After learning that I am too beholden to a thanatopolitical tradition that extends from Hegel to Lacan, I now find that what I really need to do is immerse itself still more deeply within this very same psychoanalytic tradition! For Boštjan, who is himself, of course, a leading young psychoanalytic theorist in his own right,¹ my reading of Benjamin in Chapter 7 even risks falling into the very messianic vitalism --- which is to say the affirmation of a happy, uncastrated, and pre-symbolic "life" --- that Agata finds most profoundly lacking within it. In response to such diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive challenges, I suppose my first instinct would be to say that both Boštjan and Agata are right -- which is, of course, a polite way of saying that I feel neither of them is (quite) right.

At the outset, it is perhaps worth recalling that what really lies behind Boštjan's question is the --- apparently controversial or outlandish --- hypothesis of Chapter 7 of *Unbearable Life*. To wit: I think Benjamin *really means what he says* about redeeming the past.² If scholars from Adorno to Žižek have interpreted Benjamin's messianic theory of history in somewhat normalizing metaphorical terms --- which is to say that redemption of past injustices can only take place symbolically by repeating them better or differently in the present --- I prefer to insist on its realist material force: everything that is un-lived, incomplete, or impossible in the past really does somehow become possible once again. Insofar as I unapologetically read Benjamin's messianism in metaphysical terms, then, I thus think Boštjan is asking me exactly the right question: what kind of metaphysical or ontological universe must exist in order to make the messianic redemption of history possible?

To reply in a little more detail to Boštjan's ontological question, I can see why it may well appear that my reading of the Benjaminian *restitutio in integrum* merely ends up establishing a kind of "meta-vitalism" --- where a guilt-free, pagan life lies full, complete, and waiting to be actualized by the subject --- over and above the vitalism-nihilism antinomy, but I hope I can persuade him otherwise. If Benjamin undoubtedly formulates his own messianism in quasi-vitalist terms in the "Theses on the Philosophy of History", I hope it is clear from the rest of Chapter 7 that this is by no means the only --- or even the most historically privileged --- way in which the whole question of sovereignty over history can be conceptualized. In Pietro Damiani's theory of divine omnipotence --- which constitutes, I contend, a significant political theological precursor to Benjamin's messianism --- this sovereign power expresses itself, not in the restitution or making whole of what has been lost, but in the form of a famous *reductio ad nihilum*: God has the power to return something to the void of an originary decreation.

What is the governing ontology of unbearable life? For me, the real answer to the "ontological question" in my book is neither Benjamin nor Damiani, neither something nor nothing, neither vitalism nor nihilism, but a radical and groundless *contingency*. It is my claim in Chapter 7 of *Unbearable Life* that what underpins sovereignty is neither life nor death, potentiality nor actuality, integrity nor castration, but nothing more nor less than the originary

possibility that *everything can be otherwise*. To borrow Bostjan's ingenious expression --- which I wish I had thought of myself --- what I am describing in this book is really a kind of universe or even "metaverse" which precedes the sovereign decision upon life or death and where the totality of possibilities that may (or may not) be politically actualized lie in a state of suspension. If "politics" as we understand the term has an origin, I see it as both the product of, and the response to, this originary state of radical contingency. In other words, what makes the political decision possible, necessary, and open to future decisions, is precisely the *absence* of any necessary order of being which we can, as it were, simply describe or read off.

In drawing this Roundtable on *Unbearable Life* to a close, then, I would thus argue that, for better or worse, this is the central claim of my book: what we call the politics of erasure are not merely the exhibition of a physics of power but also the outworking of this larger metaphysics of the void. To recall the conclusion of Chapter 7 of the book, for instance, what I find most disturbing about Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* is not actually the specific counter-factual possibility it presents --- what if a fascist anti-Semite had become President during the Second World War? --- so much as the novel's more general ontology of radical contingency in which, as I put it, "everything necessary becomes possible once more."³ For Roth, in other words, we readers are to be denied the false succour of being survivors of a "near miss" with history --- which is to say a catastrophe that could have happened but fortunately did not --- because, in the end, no-one escapes their fatal appointment with ontological contingency. If Charles Lindbergh never actually became President, it is not because we live in the best (or rather least bad) of all possible worlds, but because we live in a world in which absolutely anything --- including the worst --- can happen at any moment, in which the past, present, and future can always be otherwise. In our own parallel universe, after all, Donald Trump became President instead.

¹ Boštjan Nedoh, *Ontology and Perversion: Deleuze, Agamben, Lacan* (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2019).

² Arthur Bradley, *Unbearable Life: A Genealogy of Political Erasure* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

³ Bradley, *Unbearable Life*, 185-6.