the race.[48] In other words, a revolution both anti-liberal and anti-Marxist, 'spiritual' and 'communitarian'.[49] It located itself at the opposite extreme from that of Communist revolution, which also carried an ideology, a world-view and a culture. As distinct from the Communist revolutions that had radically changed forms of property, all variants of fascism integrated the old economic, administrative and military elites into their system of power. The birth of fascist regimes always implied a certain degree of 'osmosis' with authoritarianism and conservatism. No fascist movement came to power without the support, whether enthusiastic or resigned, as the case might be, of traditional elites.[50] In short, any reference to a fascist 'revolution' should always be placed in quotes, to avoid sanctioning fascism's own rhetoric and aesthetic. Philippe Burrin is correct in defining fascism as a 'revolution without revolutionaries'.[51] The 'new man' that fascism and Communism respectively wanted to forge was not the same, but the desire for change that ran across the devastated Europe of this time followed the lines of a magnetic field whose two symbolic poles were Rome and Moscow.

'Dangerous Connections'

Extremes do not meet, but their opposition may proceed from the same starting-point – that of the European crisis, the definitive collapse of a political order and the need to find a radical solution for the future. The age of constitutionalism and deliberation seemed passé, swept away by a wave of destruction whose only recognizable characteristics were those of *nihilism*. This was the context in

48 George L. Mosse, *The Fascist Revolution: Towards a General Theory of Fascism* (New York: H. Fertig, 2000); Zeev Sternhell, 'Introduction. Le concept de fascisme', in Zeev Sternhell, Mario Sznajder and Maia Ashéri, *Naissance de l'idéologie fasciste* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), p. 23–4.

49 Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 289–91.

50 Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Knopf, 1994), p. 98.

51 Philippe Burrin, 'Fascisme: la révolution sans révolutionnaires', *Le Débat* 38 (1986), pp. 164–76.

which the 'dialogue' between Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt took place, a dialogue compromised in advance. Naphta could no longer escape a political choice. This figure from *The Magic Mountain* seems to unite in himself features of both the Jewish critic from Berlin and the Catholic lawyer from the Rhineland. Thomas Mann describes him as an apocalyptic philosopher simultaneously revolutionary and reactionary, an Orthodox Jew converted to Catholicism and trained by the Jesuits, a romantic socialist and an admirer of the counter-reformation, scathing about progress and prophesying catastrophes, for whom revolution and preservation found a meeting-point in 'the dissolution of all worldly orders, and the reconstitution of society after the model of the ideal, the communistic City of God'.[52]

It was Benjamin who took the initiative to contact Schmitt, in December 1930, writing him a letter in which he announced that he was sending him his book on German baroque drama. His interest in this right-wing, Catholic and reactionary philosopher was not surprising, on the part of an intellectual who had always paid great attention to right-wing thought, from Ludwig Klages to Stefan George and Marcel Jouhandeau. According to Gershom Scholem, who recalled his and Benjamin's friendship in Munich with the future Nazi philosopher Hans Heyse, towards the end of the Great War, Benjamin 'knew how to perceive the rumbling of revolution in the most reactionary authors', and showed a great sensitivity towards what he called 'strange interferences between reactionary theory and revolutionary practice'.[53] In a letter of June 1934 to Gretel Karplus, who was soon to marry Adorno, he confessed that his life and thought 'moved on extreme positions', taking shape as a result of the juxtaposition of antinomic points of view that his friends saw as 'dangerous relations' (*gefährliche Beziehungen*).[54]

52 Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 587.

53 Gershom Scholem, 'Walter Benjamin', in *Fidélité et Utopie. Essais sur le judaïsme contemporain* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1978), p. 134. On their friendship with Hans Heyse, see Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship* (New York: NYRB Classics, 2003), p. 99.

54 Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, vol. IV (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1998), p. 441. For a detailed exploration of the relationship between the two philosophers, see Susanne

Benjamin's book on the *Trauerspiel*, he explained in his letter to Schmitt, owed much to the writings of the Rhineland lawyer, particularly Schmitt's *Political Theology* (1921) and his book on *Dictatorship* (1922), and Benjamin's own studies of art history had only confirmed the postulates that underlay Schmitt's 'state philosophy'.[55] Schmitt failed to respond, but he kept the letter, mentioning it many years later in an essay on Shakespeare that was sprinkled with references to Benjamin's *Trauerspielbuch*.[56] What made for this affinity between two such different writers, in whom Jacob Taubes, one of the first to comment on this letter after it had long remained unknown (Adorno and Scholem decided against including it in the first edition of their friend's correspondence), believed he detected one of the 'most promising constellations of the Weimar Republic'?[57] Let us try to explore this 'dangerous relationship'.

In his writings of the early 1920s, Schmitt theorized dictatorship as an anomic regime involving the 'state of exception' (*Ausnahmezustand*). The suspension of the legal state, accompanied by restrictions on personal freedom and the removal of certain fundamental rights, could be either a temporary measure designed to preserve the state and re-establish law, or else, in the case of the constituent power of modern dictatorships, to establish a new legal order.[58] In *Political Theology*, the state of exception was linked to a power of 'decision' (*Entscheidung*), which Schmitt saw as the ultimate foundation of sovereignty. In the formula with which he opens his book, 'Sovereign is he who decides on the exceptional situation.'[59] As distinct from the traditional dictator, constrained by law and possessing only a delegated and transitory power, the

Heil, *Gefährliche Beziehungen. Walter Benjamin und Carl Schmitt* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1996).

55 Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, vol. III (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1997), p. 558.

56 See Carl Schmitt, *Hamlet oder Hekuba. Der Einbruch der Zeit in das Spiel* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1985).

57 Jacob Taubes, *En divergent accord. Apropos de Carl Schmitt* (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2003), p. 51.

58 Carl Schmitt, *Dictatorship* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), p. xl.

59 Schmitt, *Political Theology*, pp. 16ff.

sovereign as defined by Schmitt possesses a power that is absolute, autonomous and unconstrained. In sketching the genealogy of the concept of sovereignty, he detects its origins in absolutism, the first expression of a secularization of political theology that replaces God with the sovereign. The initial steps in this process had been taken by Bodin, but it was Hobbes, according to Schmitt, who completed the transition from theology to the modern conception of sovereignty, by theorizing the state as a Leviathan that was both legislator and wielder of force (in Weberian terms, possessing both *Herrschaft* and *Macht*), requiring the submission and obedience of its subjects.

After the model of the church, whose legitimacy is based more on the faith of its believers than on established rules, and whose action is inspired by an omnipotent God rather than just the application of the law, the sovereign power depicted by Schmitt is not subject to any higher authority, as it possesses in itself the sources of its own legitimacy. In the context of the Weimar Republic, and particularly in its death-throes after 1930, this praise of sovereign and irrevocable decision sounded like an appeal to dictatorship, the imposition of which Schmitt called for by the application of Article 48 of the German constitution. This was in his view the only power in a position to overcome the paralysis of a democracy hemmed in by legality and its parliamentary institutions, and riven by internal conflicts, incapable of generating a stable executive and condemned to impotence. Decision was thus opposed to normativity and public debate, two constitutive features of the liberal tradition that had been identified at that time by Kelsen: a tradition whose Jewish roots (from Spinoza to Moses Mendelssohn and Stahl) Schmitt would go on to emphasize.[60] This appeal to decision against parliamentarism followed in a particular anti-liberal tradition – that of the Catholic philosophers of the counter-revolution, Joseph de Maistre and Juan Donoso Cortés, who had understood the fundamental alternative posed in 1789 and 1848: Catholicism or atheism, absolutism or socialism.[61] Liberalism was no longer

60 On Schmitt's anti-Semitism, see in particular Raphael Gross, *Carl Schmitt und die Juden* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2000).

61 Schmitt, *Political Theology*, pp. 53–66.

suited to an age that demanded another decisive choice: revolution or counter-revolution, socialism or the total state. In his writings of the 1920s, as we have seen, Schmitt laid down the theoretical premises for his future rallying to National Socialism.

In his work on *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1925), Benjamin, for his part, interpreted the birth of baroque allegory, with its images of melancholy sovereigns torn by insurmountable dilemmas, as the aesthetic reflection of an age of crisis. Contrary to the Renaissance, an age of cultural and artistic plenitude dominated by a harmonious ideal, in a context favourable to the rise of the sciences and arts, the baroque age was dominated by crisis. Its heroes were haunted by the sense of an imminent catastrophe, as if driven towards a 'cataract'.[62] The inner storm that troubled them was a function of an age of wars that made their dilemmas insurmountable. The hero of the *Trauerspiel* was indeed the prince who, like Hobbes's Leviathan, 'holds the course of history in his hand like a spectre',[63] but the drama stems from the fact that he embodies a sovereignty that is now empty. As prince, he possesses a 'supreme executive power' that allows him to decree the 'state of emergency',[64] yet the situations in which he finds himself implicated prove that he no longer has the capacity to take such a decision.[65]

Benjamin borrows his categories (sovereignty, decision, state of exception) from Schmitt, but he reverses the perspective. He sketches a portrait, in fact, of the baroque age, in which it is no longer Hobbes's all-powerful Leviathan that stands at the centre but a group of tragic figures who, like Hamlet, are the prisoners of their dilemmas, and thus unable to act. A cruel fate condemns them to be not loved princes, but either tyrants or martyrs. If, for Schmitt, the state of exception, as antithesis of uncertainty and passive discussion, follows from the ultimate and compelling decision of the

62 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 66.

63 Ibid., p. 65.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid., p. 70.

sovereign, for Benjamin, on the other hand, it seems to denote a state of permanent crisis. Giorgio Agamben correctly notes this deep cleavage between a conception of decision as restorative 'miracle' uniting sovereignty and exception, and that of the state of exception as *catastrophe*.[66] We must add, however, that this cleavage is deepened to the point of becoming unbridgeable when Benjamin interprets this catastrophe from the perspective of Jewish messianism, ascribing to it the characteristics of a redeeming apocalypse. In the view of the baroque world, he writes, 'all earthly things collapse into a heap of ruins'. But this fall also represents an 'allegory of resurrection'.[67] Thanks to the baroque transformation of death, hell is dialectically transformed into a 'divine world'; the fall bears within it the premises of a redemption that, in the words of a poem by Lohenstein, will finally give a death's head (*Totenkopf*) the countenance of an 'angel'.[68]

Benjamin's messianic nihilism corresponds here to Schmitt's decisionism. In his essay 'Critique of Violence' (1921), he drew inspiration from Sorel – another border figure, halfway between Marxism and fascism – to theorize a violence that was no longer restorative of order and law, but 'divine' (*göttliche Gewalt*), 'law-destroying' and irreducible to any external constraint.[69] He saw this 'unlimited' and thus anomic violence as 'revolutionary', 'the highest manifestation of unalloyed violence by man'.[70] It presented a double face, both theological and political. Theological, because it irrupted onto the stage of history, breaking its continuity like a redemptory apocalypse; and political, because of its revolutionary nature, analogous to Sorel's 'general strike' that destroys the bourgeois order and creates a new proletarian one. In an essay that was very likely written at around the same time, 'Theologico-political Fragment', one of his most obscure and enigmatic texts, Benjamin

66 Giorgio Agamben, *The State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 56.

67 Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 232.

68 Ibid.

69 Walter Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', *Selected Writings*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 249.

70 Ibid., p. 252.

gave this violence, both divine and revolutionary, the features of 'nihilism'.[71]

In this respect, Benjamin's theory is the very opposite of Schmitt's. It was precisely *against* this redemptory violence that the Catholic lawyer called for a state of exception. In the 1930s, Schmitt exhumed the Catholic concept of *katechon*, of Pauline origin, which designates Christendom as a 'restraining' power – a force preventing the advent of the Antichrist and thus permitting, in this delay wrested from the powers of Evil, the unfolding of History. Between the Christian middle ages and the twentieth century, this force had experienced, according to Schmitt, several incarnations. It was inevitably destined to resurge at the moment when the Antichrist appeared in the form of the civilization of the secularized West, or the extreme form of atheistic Communism: 'The belief that a restrainer holds back the end of the world provides the only bridge between the notion of an eschatological paralysis of all human events and a tremendous historical monolith like that of the Christian empire of the Germanic kings.'[72]

The figure of the Antichrist also runs through Benjamin's writings, particularly his 1940 theses 'On the Concept of History'. Recourse to this image of Christian theology, in an argument permeated from start to finish by Jewish messianism, constitutes one of the many surprises of this text, but the sense of the metaphor is scarcely ambiguous. In the sixth thesis, where he refers to the images of the past that resurge 'at the moment of danger', when the 'ruling classes' threaten to achieve a definitive victory by destroying the tradition and memory of the defeated, Benjamin designates the Messiah not only as 'redeemer' but also as 'subduer of Antichrist'.[73]

71 Walter Benjamin, 'Theologico-Political Fragment', in ibid., p. 313.

72 Carl Schmitt, *The* Nomos *of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum* (New York: Telos, 2003), p. 60. On Schmitt's use of the concept of *katechon*, see Christian Meier, *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt: Four Chapters in the Distinction Between Political Theology and Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 160–7; Gross, *Carl Schmitt und die Juden*, pp. 284–301; and Horst Bredekamp, 'From Walter Benjamin to Carl Schmitt, via Thomas Hobbes', *Critical Inquiry* 25: 2 (1999), pp. 252–4.

73 Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, p. 247.

A genealogical study of this thesis seems to indicate that the reference to Antichrist is taken from Fritz Lieb, a Swiss Protestant theologian of socialist leanings with whom Benjamin had friendly relations and a fruitful intellectual exchange. In 1934, Lieb had presented Nazism as a modern secular version of the Antichrist, thus giving the antifascist struggle a strong religious dimension. For Benjamin, the proletariat, as historical subject of the struggle against Nazism, had to understand the theological scope of this apocalyptic confrontation, since the enemy, the Third Reich, did not flinch from presenting itself as a promise of salvation in a new millennial realm.[74]

Benjamin and Schmitt thus display two political theologies: one Jewish, the other Christian and Catholic; one revolutionary and messianic, the other conservative and ultramontane. For both of them, Antichrist embodied the enemy, but for one this took the form of Nazism, for the other that of atheistic Bolshevism. One hailed the advent of the Messiah, the rupture of the historical continuum inaugurated by the proletarian revolution; the other appealed to the *katechon*, buoyed up by a decisionist absolute power. One saw revolution as the concrete form of the Apocalypse – the transition from the present historic time to the messianic time of the future;[75] the other saw the *katechon* as the indispensable link between Christian eschatology and the life of Catholicism in a secular world.[76] These two political theologies faced each other on the basis of a common diagnosis of the crisis of the present, and the need to take a decision in order to escape from it – formulated moreover on the basis

74 On Lieb's influence in Benjamin's adoption of the image of the Antichrist, see Chryssoula Kambas, 'Actualité politique. Le concept d'histoire chez Benjamin et l'échec du Front populaire', in Heinz Wismann, ed., *Walter Benjamin et Paris* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1986), pp. 277–84; and Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 46.

75 See the definition of the Apocalypse suggested in Gershom Scholem, 'Pour comprendre le messianisme juif', in *Le Messianisme juif. Essais sur la spiritualité du judaïsme* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1974), p. 31.

76 Schmitt wrote in his diary of his belief in the *katechon*, in which, as a Christian, he saw 'the only possibility of understanding history and finding a meaning in it' (*Glossarium*, p. 63).

of the same analytical categories, but leading to opposite political therapies: revolution and counter-revolution.[77]

Benjamin's letter to Schmitt of December 1930 did not have a sequel. If a dialogue between them still seemed possible at that date, Hitler's seizure of power three years later would dig an unbridgeable gulf. For Benjamin, the nihilism sketched in his writings of the early 1920s led on to Marxism – a Marxism that is certainly unclassifiable, strongly tinged with messianism and resolutely anti-positivist, but possessing nonetheless a coherent political profile. Schmitt's political theology, for its part, found a political home in National Socialism.

In the eighth of his 1940 theses, Benjamin makes a final allusion to Schmitt, recalling the 'tradition of the oppressed' for whom the 'state of emergency' (he puts this in quotes) has now become the 'rule'. To put an end to the catastrophic continuum of a history that unfurls as an uninterrupted triumphal procession of the victors, he proposes the establishment a 'real state of emergency', the only one capable of waging properly 'the struggle against Fascism' – in other words, the revolutionary interruption of the course of the world.[78] Benjamin still uses Schmitt's concepts, despite distancing himself from them, but, as Taubes points out, he does so now with full awareness of having 'assimilated them and turned them into their opposite'.[79] Far from being an example of *coincidentia oppositorum*, the relationship between Benjamin and Schmitt thus illustrates the polarization that the European civil war exerted on the intellectual field in the interwar years.

The year 1933 constituted a watershed in German political culture. It marked not only the rupture between Heidegger and his left-wing disciples, from Herbert Marcuse to Günther Anders, but also between Schmitt and his own left disciples, likewise Jewish, such as Franz Neumann and Otto Kirchheimer. The latter believed

77 See Ricardo Forster, 'El estado de excepción: Benjamin y Schmitt como pensadores del riesgo', in Jorge Dotti and Julio Pinto, eds, *Carl Schmitt. Su época y su pensamiento* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 2002), p. 131.

78 Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', in *Illuminations*, pp. 248–9.

79 Taubes, *En divergent accord*, p. 53. See also Heil, *Gefährliche Beziehungen*, p. 156.

they had seen a congruence between Schmitt's political theory and the Marxist critique of the liberal view of the state as 'neutral' entity, identifying legality and legitimacy in a political power separate from society and standing above the class struggle. From this perspective, the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, the journal of the Frankfurt School, had published very positive reviews of Schmitt's writings, in particular on his view of politics as a field of conflict.[80] This misunderstanding was now very rapidly cleared up. In 1934, in the same periodical, Marcuse undertook a thorough demolition of German political existentialism, whose main expression he saw in Heidegger's rectoral speech and Schmitt's theses on the total state.[81] As for Kirchheimer, he now took his distance from Schmitt in emphasizing that his critique of liberalism led not to a defence of democracy but to a championing of plebiscitary dictatorship.[82] On all sides, confrontation with Schmitt's work appears to have been an obligatory step. Mario Tronti was not wrong in asserting that 'in the twentieth century, Marx incorporated Schmitt'.[83]

Moral Dilemmas

In the aftermath of the Great War, European culture was a magnetic field traversed by high-tension currents. The confrontation between

80 See in particular Karl Korsch, 'Carl Schmitt, Der Hüter der Verfassung', *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* I (1932). On the influence that Schmitt's thought exerted on certain members of the Frankfurt School, see Ellen Kennedy, 'Carl Schmitt and the Frankfurt School', *Telos* 71 (1987), pp. 37–66; and Alfons Söllner, 'Disciples de gauche de la Révolution conservatrice. La théorie politique d'Otto Kirchheimer et de Herbert Marcuse dans les dernières années de la république de Weimar', in Gérard Raulet, ed., *Weimar ou l'explosion de la modernité* (Paris: Anthropos, 1984), pp. 113–28.

81 Herbert Marcuse, 'The Struggle Against Liberalism in the Totalitarian View of the State', in *Negations* (London: Allen Lane, 1968), pp. 3–42. On the turn that this article marked in the Frankfurt School's relationship with Schmitt, see Kennedy, 'Carl Schmitt and the Frankfurt School', p. 54.

82 See Kirchheimer, 'Remarks on Carl Schmitt's Legality and Legitimacy'. This critique of Schmitt began Kirchheimer's political evolution towards a rediscovery of classic liberalism.

83 Mario Tronti, *La politica al tramonto* (Turin: Einaudi, 1998), p. 155.

revolution and counter-revolution posed dilemmas of a moral order – the legitimacy of violence, the perpetual conflict between an ethic of values and an ethic of responsibility – but its actors very rarely shared a common public space in which to debate them. Despite being isolated and condemned to failure, certain attempts to do so deserve to be recalled here. There is Simone Weil's famous letter to Georges Bernanos of 1938, in which she expresses her admiration and solidarity towards the author of *Diary of My Times* (1938).[84] Both were among the first foreigners to take part in the Spanish Civil War, in 1936, one impelled by her desire to fight on the republican side, the other by his Catholic faith and conservative instinct. Both ended up disgusted by the spectacle of frenzied violence and a triumph of immorality that they saw as conflicting with the values of Christian morality (a morality that Weil, despite her Jewish origin, shared unreservedly). For both, this experience of bitter disenchantment marked a political turning-point. After seeing the bloodbath perpetrated by the Francoists in Majorca, Bernanos broke with Maurras, who had supported these Falangist massacres, and wrote a book that bears personal witness and offers implacable accusation. Simone Weil had gone to Barcelona in August 1936 and enrolled in an anarchist militia, 'an amazing mixture that absolutely anyone was allowed to join, and in which as a consequence immorality, cynicism, fanaticism and cruelty rubbed shoulders with love, the spirit of fraternity, and above all the demand for honour that is so fine among humiliated men'.[85] Her expectations, however, were very soon disappointed, after the first executions of priests and young people captured in clashes with the Falangist troops. In Bernanos's book she recognized 'this odour of civil war, blood and terror' that she had experienced herself – an odour that was now intolerable and that no cause could justify. Like the Catholic writer who broke with Action Française on his return from Spain, Simone Weil took her distance from the anarchists. The original ideas had given way to a cruel and brutal war, distinct from ordinary wars in

84 Georges Bernanos, *Diary of My Times* (London: Boriswood, 1938).

85 Simone Weil, 'Letter to Georges Bernanos', in *Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George A. Panichas (New York: David McKay, 1977), p. 77.

its total lack of respect for the enemy. Almost no one, she wrote in her letter, had been able to resist the impetuous rush of this civil war and preserve the principles of humanity. Among the exceptions was Bernanos, 'monarchist and follower of Drumont', to whom she consequently felt closer than to her former anarchist comrades of Aragon, 'those comrades whom, however, I loved', she wrote.[86]

The same themes lay at the centre of a wider moral–political debate that arose on the margins of the intellectual scene, among outsiders of both Communism and liberalism. This involved on the one hand the historic figure of Trotsky, on the other a writer and a philosopher who had each always played a discreet role away from power, Victor Serge and John Dewey. The Russian revolutionary was exiled in Mexico, where he analysed the international situation and continued the battle against Stalinism, despite calling for intransigent defence of the USSR as a new war approached. After having taken part in the Russian Revolution and civil war, Serge had been deported by Stalin to a Siberian gulag and was now in Brussels, freed as a result of an international campaign. Dewey, for his part, agreed, at age seventy-eight, to chair a commission of inquiry into the Moscow trials that would unmask their slanderous character and prove the innocence of Trotsky.[87]

In issuing the conclusions of this 'counter-trial', the liberal philosopher and leader of American pragmatism took the opportunity to add his personal reflections on the crisis and bankruptcy of Marxism, manifest in his view of Vyshinsky's sinister productions. This aroused an immediate reaction from Trotsky, in the form of a pamphlet with a sharp and polemical style, *Their Morals and Ours*, published in New York in 1938. Though he did not explicitly mention Dewey, there could be no doubt that he was the real target.[88] The former head of the Red Army conducted with Dewey

86 Ibid., p. 409.

87 See Commission of Inquiry, ed., *The Case of Leon Trotsky: Reports of the Hearings on the Charges Made against Him in the Moscow Trials* (New York: Merit, 1969). On the formation and work of this commission, see Alan B. Spitzer, 'John Dewey, the "Trial" of Leon Trotsky and the Search for Historical Truth', *History and Theory* 29: 1 (1990), pp. 16–37.

88 See Pierre Broué, *Trotski* (Paris: Fayard, 1988), p. 865.

a polemical debate on the moral foundations of Marxism and the socialist revolution. The American philosopher's positions were supported by the anonymous writer of the preface to the French edition, very likely Victor Serge, who had translated it. Trotsky wrote a further response, aiming this time at the libertarian critics of the Russian Revolution. This series of texts offers an extraordinary mirror of the moral–political dilemmas that beset the age of the 'second Thirty Years' War'. At the heart of this controversy lies civil war as a moral problem.

In the background to the debate were the Moscow trials, which as yet appeared only to a small minority as a monstrous falsification, and the Spanish civil war, whose violence already prefigured the horrors of the Second World War. These events, which Trotsky saw as part of an age of wars and revolutions, inevitably referred back to the Soviet experience and his own political choices, particularly during the civil war of 1918–21. In this essay, he undertakes an intransigent defence of his chosen course, rejecting the complaints of his liberal, social democratic and anarchist critics. At a time of triumphant reaction, he exclaims, these tend to emit 'more than the usual amount of moral effluvia, similar to persons who perspire doubly in fear'.[89] The exiled revolutionary rejected the formal symmetries so dear to the 'intellectual petite bourgeoisie', unable to see the difference between Communism and fascism, Bolshevism and Stalinism, Stalinism and Trotskyism. With his pen dipped in gall, but not devoid of humour, Trotsky takes up the defence of the Jesuits – attributing to them the aphorism that 'the end justifies the means' – and recalls how selective they were in the choice of their weapons. He thus emphasizes the extremely debatable character of the methods employed by their Protestant enemies who, following Luther, called for the massacre of the rebel German peasants. He goes on to defend the morality of the Kaffirs, a people often referred to as 'underdeveloped', detecting in them principles of justice that were far more human than those of their European colonizers. And he concludes his argument by reasserting his interpretation of

89 Leon Trotsky, *Their Morals and Ours* (London: New Park, 1968).

Stalinism: its crimes were not the result of 'Bolshevik amoralism' or atheistic Communism; they were the historical product of a revolution isolated and strangled by imperialism in a socially backward country.

After having dissociated Bolshevism from Stalinism, and thus revolutionary violence from the violence of a Thermidorean power that had in his view usurped the revolution, Trotsky championed the former, of which he had been one of the leading lights, and condemned the latter, in the name of a socialist morality aiming at human liberation. Defence of the revolution meant unconditional approval of all the political and military measures adopted by the Bolsheviks during the civil war. Since morality had a class character, it was impossible to provide an abstract definition of it, suspended in the void and untouched by social conflicts. As a consequence, 'civil war explodes into mid-air all moral ties between the hostile classes'.[90] Recalling the 'excesses' that inevitably accompany any civil war, Trotsky thus justified the summary executions of the Cheka, the imposition of censorship, the outlawing of parties opposed to the Bolshevik regime, the taking of hostages, and even the execution of their family members (such as the children of the tsar).

To give him his due, as a good disciple of the Enlightenment, Trotsky does not deny certain 'elementary moral precepts ... worked out in the development of mankind as an integral element necessary for the life of every collective body'.[91] But he rejects as naive illusion the idea that these can be translated in Kantian terms into a categorical imperative, which would be bound to break on the rocks of class struggle. Universal human morality can exist only in the concrete reality of a society divided into classes, and in each conflict it is embodied by one of the classes in struggle. The ideal of a universal morality could spread in the age of 'liberal and progressive capitalism' (Trotsky forgets the revolutionary origins of the Declaration of the Rights of Man), but when the world enters a new age of wars and revolutions – of civil war – its conflicts are bound to destroy, 'definitively, irrevocably', this morality valid for

90 Ibid.
91 Ibid.

all. It is replaced by two opposing moralities: on the one hand that of fascism, on the other 'that of the proletarian revolution'.[92] In other words, in the age of European civil war, universal morality is embodied by Bolshevism.

Accused of championing a Machiavellian amoralism summed up by the formula 'the end justifies the means', Trotsky replies that Marxism does not know any dualism between end and means, the two being connected by a link that is not technical or purely functional but eminently dialectical. This formula, he adds, only raises a new question: What justifies the end? And if the end is human liberation, overcoming the oppression of man by man, this does not mean that all means are acceptable in order to achieve it. Means that are incompatible with the end aimed at must be excluded, as 'organically the means are subordinated to the end'.[93] After this essential clarification, one would expect Trotsky to go on to establish necessary distinctions, spelling out for example which means are unacceptable on the part of those fighting to defend an emancipatory revolution. On the contrary, however, he proceeds to an apologia for terror as the ineluctable corollary of any civil war. As he presents it, this war is an anomic space in which the moral rules are suspended or transgressed in the name of a higher morality possessed by one of the parties in struggle:

> Under conditions of civil war, assassination of individual oppressors ceases to be an act of individual terror. If, we shall say, a revolutionist bombed Franco and his staff into the air, it would hardly evoke moral indignation even from the democratic eunuchs. Under the conditions of civil war a similar act would be politically completely expedient. Thus, even in the sharpest question – the murder of man by man – moral absolutes prove futile. Moral evaluations, together with those political, flow from the inner needs of the struggle.[94]

92 Ibid.
93 Ibid.
94 Ibid.

In their reply, Trotsky's interlocutors take up the contradictions in his argument. In a short but incisive text, Dewey, as a rigorous analytic philosopher, abstracts from any consideration of a historical nature in order to attack the logic of the Russian revolutionary. After having postulated the subordination of means to an ethically based end – the liberation of humanity – Trotsky confuses this end with its means – the class struggle. Then, making the latter an absolute norm, he ends up reversing his original position and thereby subjecting the end to the means. This logical reversal enables him to free the means from a higher end. If the class struggle is a kind of 'absolute law', then this means transformed into its own end no longer needs any higher justification, as 'it is automatically absolved from all need for critical examination'.[95]

Victor Serge's critique, far more tormented, proceeds not by a logical deciphering of texts but rather from lived experience. His difference with Trotsky, whom he defends against the slanders of the Moscow inquisitors, derives from a critical rereading of the first years of Soviet power, in which he now sees the germs of Stalinism. His defence of the Revolution takes on a self-critical tone that leads him to believe that the degeneration of Bolshevism began when the Cheka obtained the right to sit in closed session and decide on the elimination of enemies as it saw fit. In his prefatory note to the French edition of *Their Morals and Ours*, he recalls the decision of the head of the Red Army to authorize the system of hostage-taking, and deduces that, for Trotsky, 'executing hostages takes on a different meaning according to whether the order is issued by Stalin or by Trotsky or by the bourgeoisie'. In short, as a good disciple of Machiavelli, Trotsky had transformed 'ruse and violence' into virtues. Placed 'at the service of a justified goal', these were perfectly legitimate means that became in the last analysis sources of 'good'.[96]

A serious doubt had arisen in Serge's mind as to the methods adopted by the Bolsheviks during the civil war. Had not the

95 John Dewey, 'Means and Ends', in Leon Trotsky, John Dewey and George Novack, *Their Morals and Ours* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), pp. 70–1.
96 Victor Serge, 'On Their Morals and Ours' – English translation by Mitch Abidor provided at marxists.org.

extra-legal violence of the Cheka, the suppression of democracy and the repression of opponents, favoured rather than obstructed the rise of Stalinism and the transformation of the Soviet regime into a totalitarian dictatorship? Were these means not politically and ethically illegitimate for achieving a goal of human and social emancipation? Serge had already given his response to these questions in 1933, in a letter written in a Siberian camp that he would later include in his memoirs. This sounds an impassioned plea for a libertarian communist ethic: '*Defence of man. Respect for man.* Man must be given his rights, his security, his value. Without these, there is no Socialism. Without these, all is false, bankrupt and spoiled. I mean: man whoever he is, be he the meanest of men – "class-enemy", son or grandson of a bourgeois, I do not care. It must never be forgotten that a human being is a human being.'[97]

Trotsky responded to these criticisms with biting irony. He proposed to appoint Serge and his friends to head a commission charged with 'drafting a moral code for civil war'.[98] He would then have the leisure to prescribe a series of morally unchallengeable norms – public trials, press freedom, a ban on bombing, on taking hostages, on heavy artillery, and even, why not, on firearms that 'unquestionably exercise a baleful effect on human beings' – fated to remain a dead letter as soon as hostilities erupt. This was a way of condemning oneself to 'wander in confusion between two camps', defending the cause of the oppressed without however being able to escape the morality of the class enemy.[99] Serge's unease is clear, as proved by his attempt to deny having been the author of the preface attacked by Trotsky. He had already shown this unease the year before, in an article he wrote on Kronstadt. He acknowledged that the rebel sailors, brutally repressed by a 'horrible massacre', were not counter-revolutionaries, but added that their victory would inevitably have opened a breach for the counter-

97 Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (New York: NYRB Classics, 2012), p. 327.

98 Leon Trotsky, 'Moralists and Sycophants against Marxism' (1939), in Trotsky, *Their Morals and Ours*.

99 Ibid.

revolution.[100] In short, he simultaneously condemned and approved the repression of Kronstadt as an inescapable tragedy, politically necessary but morally detestable.

Serge's meditation, melancholy and luminous, charged with the weight of defeat, was inspired by the experience of revolution, civil war and gulag. Trotsky, for his part, perceived in it the vestiges of a humanism that had been felled in the trenches of the Great War and buried by a new age of tensions and conflicts. Today, we can see it as the witness of an anti-totalitarian spirit. And yet, beyond their apologetic character – Trotsky defending his own political itinerary – it is the arguments of the former head of the Red Army that best convey the spirit of civil war, with its morality and its excesses. At bottom, he was not wrong to ask what Serge wanted: 'to purge civil war of the practice of hostages, or to purge human history of civil war'.[101] Like Machiavelli, whom historians have seen sometimes as an 'apostle of evil', sometimes as a representative of civic republicanism, and also like his French ancestors of 1793, Trotsky remains an enigmatic figure, both inflexible dictator and persecuted revolutionary. His prose is marked by the breath of an age of iron and fire.

100 See Victor Serge, 'Kronstadt' (1937), in Léon Trotski and Victor Serge, *La Lutte contre le stalinisme en URSS* (Paris: Maspero, 1977), pp. 177–81.

101 Leon Trotsky, 'Moralists and Sycophants against Marxism' (1939), in Trotsky, *Their Morals and Ours*.