For Today: Against Redemptive Politics and The Politics of Redemption[[1]](#footnote-1)\*

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*“*Let us, therefore, live but one day at a time.”--*Anonymous*

What are redemptive politics and the politics of redemption? What forms do they assume? By what individual and collective desires are they shaped? How and why do redemptive politics and the politics of redemption sometimes reproduce, conceal and intensify the very suffering and injustices they seek to eradicate? How might we reshape our redemptive desires into something more productive and less damaging? These questions drive the larger project of which this paper is a part. It draws intellectual inspiration from—and shares some common ground with—George Shulman’s wonderful *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture*. However, while we agree about a lot of things, philosophically *and* politically, we part company in at least one crucial respect toward which I will only be able to gesture near the end of the paper: Shulman asks why we do not “simply renounce stories of redemption?” Why not? Because, Shulman says, pointing to the examples of Baldwin and Morrison, “human beings require a sense of purpose or meaning,” we need “ways to make life worthwhile.” We “must fashion a fruitful relationship to the past, or [we] live by amnesia, resentment, and repetition.” “Redemption,” he affirms, “is so intimately tied to freedom and meaning.”[[2]](#footnote-2)I agree whole-heartedly that we require a sense of purpose and meaning, a worthwhile, free life; and that this is tied in some important way to our relationship to the past and(though Shulman does not mention it here)the future. What I am less sure of is that we need *redemption* to find any of these other things; that life is meaningless unless and until we *make something* of or *find something in* it. Some of the authors Shulman cites—Arendt in particular, I think—are deeply skeptical of such a view because they think (as I do) that the world we share with others is too boundless, too unpredictable, too *human* for that, that making or finding meaning presumes a mastery over ourselves and the world that we should not presume. In leaving behind the desire for mastery, we may leave behind the burdens of redemption in favor of what I want to call a “politics of the moment.”

With this thought in the background, I want to explore two forms, two logics, of redemptive politics. They are animated by two different but related senses of redemption that come to us through monotheistic traditions. One is redemption as the cleansing of sin. Religious rites of penance and absolution (in Christianity) and atonement (in Judaism) serve this function. That Christ died for our sins; that the Jews wandered for forty years in the desert after disobeying God—these serve as redemptive moments in narratives of suffering that the faithful regularly reenact symbolically and to which they pay homage in order to cleanse themselves of the residues of transgression (though, imperfect beings that we are, that cleansing is only ever partial and always ongoing). The other sense of redemption is a search for coherence, for wholeness, for meaning—especially for the meaning of suffering. That in the book of Job the poor man suffered burden after burden, for instance, is widely understood to have been a test of his faith. Were his suffering senseless, it would have been intolerable; but upon learning that he had been tested, Job is held to have replied that

“I know that thou canst do every *thing,* and *that* no thought can be withholden from thee. Who *is* he that hideth counsel without knowledge? therefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not. Hear, I beseech thee, and I will speak: I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto me. I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor *myself,* and repent in dust and ashes.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Job’s suffering was redeemed because, as a test of faith, it was *meaningful*. Having survived it, faith intact, Job was rewarded handsomely: he lived “an hundred and forty years, and saw his sons, and his sons’ sons, *even* four generations.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

These two ancient understandings of redemption remain with us today, and not only in religious practices: They are inscribed in our politics as one symptom of the “secularization” of modern life.[[5]](#footnote-5) Max Weber first diagnosed this development as the “disenchantment” of modernity through the rationalization and intellectualization of human life, concretized in the development of scientific inquiry and bureaucratic politics.[[6]](#footnote-6) Describing the political implications of that thesis, the German legal theorist and political thinker Carl Schmitt famously claimed in 1923 that “[a]ll significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development…but also because of their systematic structure.”[[7]](#footnote-7) This is the status I want to claim for what I call *redemptive politics,* in which secularized Biblical notions of redemption animate political projects aimed at washing away the stains of history and making meaning out of otherwise senseless political suffering. Unsurprisingly, Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of God—and with it, the death of the possibility of spiritual redemption—unleashed desires for redemption through earthly means. This is especially evident after the Second World War and the Holocaust which still “confronts us with its overpowering reality and breaks all standards we know.”[[8]](#footnote-8) At once a political, philosophical and theological crisis, the linked phenomena of totalitarianism and the Holocaust signaled to many that human beings could turn nowhere but to themselves to navigate the perilous fragility of political life.

Redemptive politics have found expression in many places: In the post-Holocaust injunction, “Never Again!”; in the eruption of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs) in South Africa and Latin America in the wake of apartheid and dictatorship; in President Bush’s approach to the war on terror; in Barack Obama’s ascension to the US presidency; and in Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s recent official apology to Aboriginal peoples for the residential school system that ravaged their communities. I began this project because I think such politics are dangerous insofar as they impose crushing burdens of responsibility that fuel disavowals, evasions, and resentments; and insofar as they entail attempts to “master” horrific pasts that obscure traces of such horrors in the present.[[9]](#footnote-9) But I also want to claim that the terms on which we pursue redemptive politics today are invested with a *politics of redemption* in which some people are invested with the historical burdens from which others seek to relieve themselves—more disavowals, more evasions, more resentments. These perils do not reflect practical failures. They reflect the insuperable difficulty of fulfilling an all-too-human desire to achieve redemption through political means

**Two Logics of Redemptive Politics**

The logics of redemption as the cleaning of sin and the investment of meaning are distinct but related in their structures and aims. Both arise in the face of suffering, whose end may be uncertain and whose meaning is contested. This uncertainty and contestability fuels desires for the closure that is redemption’s promise. Consider, for example, the postwar condition of Europe as it was described by Hannah Arendt. She noted that

We no longer hope for the restoration of the old world order with all its traditions, or for the reintegration of the masses of five continents who have been thrown into a chaos produced by the violence of wars and revolutions and the growing decay of all that has still been spared. Under the most diverse conditions and disparate circumstances, we watch the development of the same phenomena—homelessness on an unprecedented scale, rootlessness to an unprecedented depth.[[10]](#footnote-10)

If the postwar present of Europe was chaotic, the future looked much the same:

Never has our future been more unpredictable, never have we depended so much on political forces that cannot be trusted to follow the rules of common sense and self-interest—forces that look like sheer insanity, if judged by the standards of other centuries. It is as though mankind had divided itself between those who believe in human omnipotence (who think that everything is possible if one knows how to organize masses for it) and those for whom powerlessness has become the major experience of their lives.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The meaning of redemption, in this context, is for Europe to cleanse itself of the sins of totalitarianism and genocide (to “[restore]…the old world order”), and for “mankind” to make some sense of the chaos, to make the suffering of so many human beings meaningful (by making sense of “insanity”). Arendt—wisely, in my view—counsels against both the path of redemption and the path of hopelessness: “Progress and Doom,” she suggests, “are two sides of the same coin.”[[12]](#footnote-12) But Arendt does not take this claim much further. Part of the aim of this project is to articulate more precisely the perils of redemptive politics.

Redemption as cleansing and as meaning-making have distinctive but related structures. To cleanse ourselves of our sins we must examine and own up to our past; engage in some ritual of purification in the present; and commit ourselves to maintaining our renewed purity for the future. This logic of redemption that says nothing about the sin to be redeemed, the practices of examination, the rituals of purification we enact, or the nature and substance of the commitment to the future. As we will see, these three moments are analytically distinct, but practically intertwined. They also have a temporal logic: We must own up before we purify; we must purify before can commit to maintaining our state of purity in the future. And we must repeat all of these practices over and over. These moments therefore tell a story whose arc takes us from the sin for which we need redemption to the promise of redemption, and whose plot projects an uncharted future in which that promise may, or may not, be fulfilled. Understanding our experience in these narrative terms “[reconfigures] our confused, unformed, and at the limit mute temporal experience.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Clarifying confusion, giving shape to the unformed, giving voice to what is mute—these functions of narrative are one link between redemption as cleansing and as meaning-making. I will show in later parts of the project that tying the functions of narrative so closely to the project of redemption (as, say, Arendt does, and perhaps Shulman too) obscures its potential as a medium through which to resist the seductions of redemptive politics.

Though this story has a linear logic to it—though it unfolds step by step, from a sinful past to a redemptive future—in it past, present and future meet, and intensify our experiences of all three. When we seek redemption we look to the past; but in that very act of looking, in the act of examining our sin, we bring it into our present; we make it present to ourselves so that we might purify ourselves of it. We bring the burden of the past into the present in order to relieve it. This moment of purification is at once retrospective and prospective; it is oriented to the past for the sake of the future. The future, meanwhile, will always carry with it a frozen memory, both of our sin and our promise. The temporal structure of this sort of redemption roughly corresponds to an Augustinian understanding of time. In his meditation on time in *Confessions,* Augustine actually *rejects* the idea that there exist a past, present and future, and wonders instead if “it might be fitly said, ‘There are three times; a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things future.’”[[14]](#footnote-14) The cleansing narrative of redemption, and of redemptive politics, contains each of these three presents.

In redemptive politics, the present of things past is the time of examining and owning up to one’s wrongdoing. It is not unlike the “comprehension” for which Arendt called so passionately in the wake of the Second World War. In the face of the “chaos,” “homelessness,” and “rootlessness” that marked for many people the European experience of the war and its immediate aftermath, Arendt proposed comprehension as means of “examining and bearing consciously the burden which our century has placed on us—neither denying its existence nor submitting meekly to its weight. Comprehension, in short, means the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality—whatever it may be.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Despite Arendt’s oddly passive construction—that we have had a burden “placed on us” by our century—we cannot but suppose that she understands it to be a burden that human beings placed upon themselves through acts of “radical evil,” and through failures to resist evil. Until we have confronted our political “sins,” she implies, we cannot begin to remake our shattered world anew.

The present of things present is the moment of commitment, the moment of decision—not of the sovereign decision associated most famously with Carl Schmitt,[[16]](#footnote-16) but of the decision to walk the path of redemption, the cleansing path. In the wake of the Second World War this moment came most clearly with the founding the United Nations with its mandate for peace; and at the meeting of the UN General Assembly on December 9, 1948, when the UN formally adopted the *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*. In force as of 1951, this convention— the result of much debate, negotiation, jockeying and compromise among the victors—codified the moral sentiment “Never Again!”, a phrase coined by the Swedish documentarian Erwin Leise in his 1961 film, *Mein Kampf.* Meir Kahane, founder of the militant Jewish Defense League and the Kach party in Israel, later used the phrase to advocate a more muscular and militant Jewish response to anti-Semitism. The *Convention* hewed closer to Leise than Kahane. It recognized “that at all periods of history genocide has inflicted great losses on humanity,” and affirmed a pledge “to liberate mankind from such an odious scourge.” With this recognition and affirmation signatories committed together, on that day in 1948, to eradicate genocide. It was their moment of commitment, of decision.

Significantly, parties to the Convention pledged to “liberate” humanity from a “scourge.” Given the attention paid to the language of the Convention, *this* choice of language was probably not accidental. A “scourge” is a whip, or any tool of criticism or punishment. More broadly, it is any cause of great suffering such as disease or violence—or, in broader, theological terms, the suffering engendered by human sinfulness. In the ancient world, the scourge was a whip used to flagellate criminals before crucifixion. Perhaps most famously, Christ is said to have been scourged as he carried his own crucifix to the site of execution. The purpose of the scourge, according to some interpretations, was to hasten death upon the cross. To liberate humanity from a scourge, then, means more than just to work to prevent genocide. That work has a much more specific aim: To liberate humanity from the pain it inflicts upon itself through the horrific violence of genocidal slaughter; to cleanse itself of the stains of its murderous past; to redeem itself from sin. With the hope of redemption tied to this commitment to eradicate genocide, to cleanse themselves of the sins of the past on behalf of humanity, signatories to the Convention simultaneously called up the present of things future. They not only condemned genocide as a scourge from which humanity needed liberation; they “[undertook] to prevent and to punish it.” In that moment they invoked a future—apparently an infinite one—in which they would work constantly to expiate the sins of the recent past.

Sin, cleansing, and the ongoing work of redemption; this narrative arc tells one story of redemptive politics. There is another story we can tell, one that is related but distinct: It is the story, not of the wandering Jews, but of Job; the story of how apparently senseless suffering is invested with meaning. Recalling Arendt’s depiction of the post-war condition, to grasp this second sense of redemption we should focus on her invocations of “chaos” and “insanity.” Subsequent attempts to understand totalitarianism in general, and the Holocaust in particular, suggested that these phenomena confounded human beings’ senses of the possible, of the imaginable. We see this in the frequent descriptions of the Holocaust as “unthinkable,”[[17]](#footnote-17) “unspeakable,”[[18]](#footnote-18) “unimaginable,”[[19]](#footnote-19) and “ineffable,”[[20]](#footnote-20) descriptions that places those all-too-human events beyond the realm of human experience—in the realm of “radical” evil that “breaks all standards we know.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Similar language has been used to describe the events of September 11, 2001 and other horrors.

These descriptionsalways carry a sense of despair, even desperation; for, it is said, we humans are meaning-making creatures. The apparent meaningless of our world is frequently agonizing. From ancient religious myths to contemporary political ideologies (quasi-religious myths in secular garb), we put great effort into working the matter of our lives into meaningful stories that give us our senses of place in the world. This is why Arendt, for instance, expressed concern in the 1950s for the liberation of a “society of laborers” that “does no longer know of those other higher and more meaningful activities for the sake of which this freedom would deserve to be won.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Senseless suffering is especially painful. This is why, in the face of God’s tests, Job is at first ready to curse his life: “Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night *in which* it was said, There is a man child conceived. Let that day be darkness.”[[23]](#footnote-23) It is also one way of reading Christ’s lament, “Why hast thou forsaken me?” And, finally, it may also be why so many initial reactions to the attacks of September 11, 2001 were of “shock—how could this happen?” [[24]](#footnote-24) Why “us?” Why now? *Why?* Such desires for meaning fuel this second sense of redemptive politics: The investiture of human suffering with meaning, the attempt to make sense of the incomprehensible.

The struggle for redemption as a search for meaning—and it is always a struggle, for meaning is almost always contested—has an importantly different structure from redemption-as-cleansing. Whereas redemption-as-cleansing begins from an acknowledgment of political sin (it begins with an *assignment* of meaning) by wrongdoers or their accusers, the pursuit of redemption as a search for meaning begins in a confrontation with something unintelligible that renders *us* somewhat unintelligible (in psychoanalytic terms, abject) and calls into question our capacitiesas meaning-making creatures. The other, implicit side of Christ’s lament—“Why have you forsaken me?”—is “Why can I not understand why I suffer, that I must ask you?” The struggle for redemption-as-meaning-making is not a struggle to cleanse but a struggle to answer such questions, and a struggle between different and competing answers.

Redemption in this second sense partly shares the temporal logic of redemption-as-cleansing, but it also has one of its own. It shares with redemptive cleansing a logic of present-ing, because the search for meaning requires that we bring the past into our meaning-making present, and always for the sake of the future—for the meanings we make today always shape what comes next. But this is not its only characteristic dynamic. Its movement is not linear but staggered and staggering, comprised of tectonic shifts rather than forward motion: In the face and in the wake of suffering attempts at meaning-making proliferate and compete, some rising to prominence while others fade away, though perhaps never entirely. The crises of meaning that suffering can generate—like the crisis of meaning engendered by the Holocaust—are frequent sites of such narrative contestation, as a community seeks to sew up a tear in the fabric of their history either by trying to reinstate the old order or to consolidate a new one.[[25]](#footnote-25) At some point the new narrative may break down, and others may arise and take hold. Such dynamics bear more resemblance not to linear historical narratives that start from an original “sin”, but to genealogies that “dispel” such “chimeras of origin,” that account for “the events of history, its jolts, its surprises, its unsteady victories and unpalatable defeats.” [[26]](#footnote-26) These are dynamics not of incremental history, but “eventful” history—not gradual but eruptive, not linear but fragmented. The motor of such history is not progress toward truth, but shifting and historically contingent terrains of intelligibility.

The main sources to which human beings have appealed in search of meaning have varied historically, from theology and metaphysics, to morality, economics, and even technology. The philosopher Carl Schmitt described these as “central spheres” in which Europeans historically (and unsuccessfully) sought to neutralize conflict.[[27]](#footnote-27) Insofar as they are discontinuous, Schmitt offers something like a genealogy. Insofar as these spheres have been sites of neutralization and conflict, they have also been sites of attempts at meaning-making. In the context of suffering we have looked to God, to the good or evil of man, to the market and the government, and to technological development as either the source of or answer to our (religious and secular) prayers. For the purposes of thinking about redemptive politics, religion has been one such powerful site for working out the meaning of suffering. Some have described political suffering in Jobian terms, as a test of faith. In his “Poem on the Lisbon Disaster”—the earthquake of 1755 that killed thousands and virtually destroyed the city—Voltaire cast the disaster in explicitly theological terms. Against the “philosophers, who cry, ‘All’s well,” Voltaire bemoaned the “Eternal lingering of useless pain.” After cataloguing a litany of suffering, he describes this problem of evil and asks “how conceive a God supremely good/Who heaps his favors on the sons he loves/Yet scatters evil with so large a hand?” Voltaire’s impassioned verse described the suffering wrought by the quake as a test of faith in the goodness of God. In the 20th century, the Holocaust provoked an even wider spiritual crisis. Perhaps the ultimate political confirmation of the death of God, the genocide provoked a major crisis in both Jewish and Christian theology as thinkers in both traditions grappled with the problem of how, if there is a God, He or She could have allowed such suffering.[[28]](#footnote-28)

In more recent times, too, suffering has provoked anguished and hotly contested searches for meaning in which several narratives attempting to make sense of events have competed for the public’s imagination. Different stories were told in order to make sense of the terror attacks of September 11, 2001. The story told by the Bush Administration was that the attacks were planned and carried out by religious fanatics who despised Western ideals of freedom and democracy. The story told by the political and academic left was that the attacks were predictable responses to aggressive American imperialism in the Middle East. Pat Robertson and Reverend Jerry Falwell chimed in as well with a theological explanation: Falwell suggested, and Robertson agreed, that the suffering engendered by 9/11 was the fault of a permissive American culture, and specifically blamed “the pagans and the abortionists and the feminists and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle.” The same search for meaning in suffering followed Hurricane Katrina: While some viewed Katrina as a purely natural disaster—a damaging weather phenomenon, nothing more—some viewed it as a random act of God. Others (like Robertson) viewed it as a not-so-random act of God, punishing New Orleans for its sinful ways. Still others claimed that its scale reflected governmental incompetence and/or bureaucratic (and sometimes very personal) ineptitude. Those who held this view repeated with withering sarcasm President Bush’s congratulatory words to FEMA director Michael Brown: “Heckuva job, Brownie!” So, too, with the devastating earthquake in Haiti in 2010, from which the island nation is still recovering. In addition to the whims of nature and lax construction regulations, Robertson returned to blame the earthquake on the Haitian revolutionaries who drove out the French colonialists in the 19th century. All of these stories were attempts to invest terrible human suffering with meaning so that the victims of these events would not have died in vain.

**Perils of Redemptive Politics: Bad Faith, Forgetful Blindness, and The Burdens of History**

Redemptive politics are seductive: Rituals of cleansing can purify and soothe a “bad conscience”—our tendency, diagnosed by Nietzsche, to see ourselves as sinners with a debt to repay. By that repayment we redeem ourselves—we cleanse ourselves of sin—and become pure.[[29]](#footnote-29) Nietzsche disdained guilt and bad conscience as products of a reactive slave morality forged in the face of oppression. In a moment, I will criticize this sort of bad conscience from a different perspective, for the impossible burden it places upon us. Finding meaning in suffering can protect us from experiencing our condition as absurd, or from adopting a nihilistic stance toward our world. Moreover, both cleansing and the search for meaning can serve as powerful motivations to respond to political suffering, and powerful ways of motivating others to do so as well. Yet the search for redemption by political means seems persistently to fall short; and more than that, to cripple and blind us in our efforts to respond to suffering. Indeed, this search can even exacerbate others’ suffering if we seek our own redemption at their expense. This is not because we are not trying hard enough, because we lack the resources or the political will to carry out our plans. It is because, I want to claim, this search reflects an impossible desire the pursuit of which is bound to be self-defeating and sometimes punitive.

These two forms of redemptive politics are crippling and self-defeating for different reasons. Attempts at purification through responding to suffering can impose unmanageable burdens that prompt us to flee our responsibilities to others.[[30]](#footnote-30) Attempts to invest suffering with meaning have tended toward the endorsement of political practices—like trials and truth and reconciliation commissions—that promote the suturing of historical ruptures as part of a process of “moving on.” In that movement, however, we are often blinded to the traces of the past we seek to leave behind, and that may erupt later on without warning. Elsewhere I have shown how the burdens of politics can tempt us into flight. There, however, I was primarily concerned with the burdens of responsibility imposed by our implication in others’ suffering. Here I am primarily concerned with the burdens we impose upon ourselves in pursuit of redemption. Elsewhere I have suggested that the burdens of responsibility can tempt us into bad faith—into assuming the status of passive object in the world rather than one of its active, free and responsible constituents. So, too, can the burdens of redemption. Finally, the pursuit of redemption through politics—the enactment of a redemptive politics—can become bound up with a politics of redemption, with an effort to insulate ourselves from the work of that pursuit by making others bear its burdens.

The burdens associated with cleansing rituals of redemptive politics can provoke flights into bad faith, self-protective disavowals of responsibility. I am using “bad faith” in Jean-Paul Sartre’s sense. According to Sartre, we are radically free beings who make what we will of ourselves and our world through self- and world-creating acts of choice. For Sartre, “existence precedes essence”: We are what we do. Human freedom “is a choice of myself in the world and by the same token it is a discovery of the world.”[[31]](#footnote-31) In choosing ourselves, we also choose, create *and* discover the world constituted by our choices. This constitutive freedom differs sharply from both the freedom from constraint characteristic of negative freedom, and from the self-determining character of positive freedom.[[32]](#footnote-32) Unlike the choices made in negative and positive freedom, for Sartre “the question is not of a *deliberate* choice. This is not because the choice is *less* conscious or *less* explicit than a deliberation, but rather because it is the foundation of all deliberation.”[[33]](#footnote-33) Moreover, unlike negative and positive freedom, which come to us as either a right (in the negative conception) or an achievement (in the positive conception) Sartrean freedom is no gift or bequest; it is a *burden*. We are “condemned to be free.”[[34]](#footnote-34) By virtue of being free man “carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Our responsibility is overwhelming since it is because of us that “*there is* a world.”[[36]](#footnote-36) So too may our responsibility be overwhelming if we must be responsible not just for the meaning of human suffering, but for its alleviation. If we are conscious of our radical freedom and our overwhelming, absolute responsibility we are in “anguish.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Sartre gives us two options in response to such anguish. One is to “assume our situation with the proud consciousness of being the author of it”—that is, to live authentically and assume our freedom and responsibility for the world and so for suffering.[[38]](#footnote-38) The other option is to flee our freedom and responsibility, to “[distract]” ourselves from the anguish of existence.[[39]](#footnote-39) That distracted flight constitutes bad faith—and Sartre observes that” most of the time we flee anguish in bad faith.”[[40]](#footnote-40) Sartre provides an extended example of bad faith in his discussion of the anti-Semite. Anti-Semitism, he argues, “is a free and total choice of oneself, a comprehensive attitude that one adopts not only toward Jews but toward men in general, toward history and society.”[[41]](#footnote-41) Of those who hold this attitude, he asks: “How can one choose to reason falsely”[[42]](#footnote-42) as the anti-Semite does when he gives “ridiculous reasons” for his hatred of Jews?[[43]](#footnote-43) The anti-Semite is driven to offer his ridiculous reasons by a “longing for impenetrability” as total as that of the stones in a mosaic.[[44]](#footnote-44) “Now the anti-Semite flees responsibility as he flees his own consciousness, and choosing for his personality the permanence of a rock, he chooses for his morality a scale of petrified values.”[[45]](#footnote-45) The ant-Semite prefers the permanence of a rock because it relieves him of the burden of being human.

Similarly, the pursuit of redemption through politics can saddle us with impossible burdens—even if self-imposed ones (although, for Sartre, *all* burdens are self-imposed because our lives and our world are what we make of them)—that may drive us to flee from our own redemptive desires, and thus from the political commitments to which they give rise. Just as the anti-Semite assumes the position of an inert object in a world beyond his control, we might likewise take the position that there is simply nothing we can do to mitigate certain forms of cruelty and violence in the world. And just as the anti-Semite offers “ridiculous reasons” for his anti-Semitism, so do we often offer ridiculous reasons for our political failures. We will see many examples of this dynamic in the chapters that follow, so for now I will return to the one that I described above: In 1948 the international community said “Never Again!” to genocide. And yet we know all too well that since then genocidal violence has continued to stain the globe: Kosovo, Rwanda and Darfur are just three of the more recent examples. “Never Again!” has become “Again and Again.” Politicians and scholars have offered many explanations for this lack of action: It is too expensive, or too difficult, or there is no point i interfering in age----old, so—called ““tribal” disputes, or powerful countries are preventing collective action for self-interested and self-protective reasons (through the use of a Security Council veto, for example). But these reasons may be too easy for some to give, and too easy for others to accept. We might interpret these and other offered reasons not—or not only—as excuses for inaction, but also evasions of the burden to act, a burden made eternal by the Convention’s pledge to eradicate—not just to prevent--genocide. If everything is against me, if there is nothing I can do, then I am *not* free and so surely not responsible. Thus our desires for redemption, our desires to cleanse ourselves of the sin of allowing the Holocaust by preventing genocide in the future, may collapse under the impossible weight of the burdens they impose.

Redemptive politics that seek to invest suffering with meaning are also perilous, but for different reasons. The idea of redeeming suffering, of ensuring that those who suffered and died did not do so in vain, honors the dead and memorializes the past, but always for the benefit of the living and the sake of the future. We need the suffering of others to be meaningful because we need our *own* suffering to be meaningful, for suffering and death to make sense and have value. We want to tame and mute the absurdity of existence, and to avoid the nihilism to which the existence of suffering and the foreknowledge of death can give rise. Otherwise, we are prone to anger, despair and resentment—diagnosed by Nietzsche, Camus, William Connolly, and others—in the face of the absurdity of our condition and of the senselessness (or disproportion, which is a kind of senselessness in a world that demands proportion) of suffering.[[46]](#footnote-46) What we need, in the end, is reconciliation, in several senses: We need the historical reconciliation that is Hegel’s and Marx’s bequest to us; we need for what we experience as ruptures and disruptions in history to be resolved, for the cutting edges of human existence—suffering, pain, death—to be smoothed. Oftentimes, this sort of reconciliation involves a second kind: Political reconciliation, in which a society divided violently along race, class or other lines agrees to find some way to share the world together. And finally there is what we might call existential reconciliation—reconciliation to a social and political order that may frustrate some of our competitive, even vengeful desires, for the sake of living together in relative peace.

What is perilous about redemptive politics in this sense—in the sense of suturing over tears in the fabric of history for the sake of sharing the world—is that it may contribute to a present blindness that nurtures a historical forgetfulness. There is some merit in a kind of forgetfulness, insofar as it prevents us from being mired in a past from which we cannot move on—a fact which Nietzsche, again, knew well, and which contemporary writers on the Holocaust have also noted.[[47]](#footnote-47) But there is also a great danger—that a desire to close the door on the past, to make things whole again and move on, can make us unwilling and so unable to see the traces of horrors past that remain with us. I think the case of contemporary South Africa—which I explore in detail in a later chapter—illustrates this claim. As part of the country’s transition from apartheid to democracy, the government established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1995 through the *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act*. Its function was to provide a forum for South Africans to tell their stories, for some to confess their crimes, and to seek amnesty that could be granted if those confessions were deemed to be sincere and adequate. The purpose of the TRC—which became a model around the world for nations dealing with historical atrocities and injustices—was in part to engender a kind of national healing, an opportunity to move beyond the divisions sowed under apartheid toward a unified, desegregated, democratic South Africa. Reconciliation, amnesty, forgiveness—all steps on a path forward, leaving the ugly horrors of apartheid behind.

But this happy vision of a post-apartheid politics has been revealed to be just that: a vision. Racialized violence and economic inequality still plague the country. Later on I shall focus in detail on one particularly recent and glaring bit of evidence that though apartheid may be over, traces of it remain. I shall recount it only briefly here: In 2012, a group of black miners went on an illegal strike in Johannesburg over wages and working conditions. Interestingly, the strike was not cast as a mere labor dispute, but was viewed by some as part of a larger story of labor unrest that threatened South Africa’s status as an important destination for international investment. After the international boycotts during apartheid, the return of international investors to the country can be seen as part of the country’s own march to redemption: As it cleansed itself of the sins of apartheid, it could once again rejoin the “civilized” community. The emergence of the new South Africa also gave meaning to the suffering under apartheid—those who were shot, imprisoned, tortured, impoverished did not die in vain.

And yet the government’s response makes plain how thick is the residue of the past, how deep and bloody the wounds of apartheid remain. During the strike police opened fire on the miners, killing 34 of them, and claimed afterward that it had been in self-defense. They went on to arrest and charge the 270 remaining miners under an apartheid-era “common purpose” law, according to which the members of a crowd present at the commission of a crime (in this case, an illegal strike) can be prosecuted as accomplices. This move was widely condemned by lawyers and legal scholars as an abuse of law that harkened back to its use as a repressive tool during apartheid. As one legal scholar, Andrea Durbach, put it, “[t]he resurrection of any apartheid-era device escalating conflict over working conditions in South Africa's mines can only undermine the nation's bold struggle to break with a history characterized [sic] by ‘untold suffering and injustice.’”[[48]](#footnote-48)

Durbach’s response is compelling, but also troubling. It is compelling because it evokes the noble and heartening image of a country struggling mightily to shed its racist past, even as it warns of hurdles along the way. But it is also troubling because it tells a seductive story according to which, absent these uncomfortable reminders of a blood-and-tear-stained past, South Africans *could* “break with…history,” leave their past behind and move forward in a sort of (political manufactured) purity, ready to begin anew. There would be comfort, perhaps, in such historical forgetting; but it might also blind South Africans to the traces of apartheid that remain in democratic South Africa, and of which the miners’ strike is a painful reminder. Some responses to the charges against the miners show evidence of this tendency: Pierre de Vos, the Claude Leon Foundation chair in constitutional governance at the University of Cape Town blogged that “The NPA [National Prosecuting Authority] seems wrongly to conflate (either deliberately or out of shocking ignorance) allegations that the miners provoked the police, on the one hand, with allegations that the miners themselves incited the police to shoot at them because they had the intention to commit suicide by getting the police to kill them.” Police Commissioner Riah Phiyega, meanwhile, faced criticism for claiming that the police acted in self-defense. [[49]](#footnote-49) By casting the events in these narrow terms of criminal justice—provocation, incitement, self-defense—that incriminate the miners while exculpating the police—both Phiyega and de Vos obscure the larger and more troubling point that these events illuminate the persistent haunting of South Africa by apartheid’s ghost. It is a point that Durbach recognizes, but by clinging to her hope for a break with the past she reinforces interpretations that presuppose that the ghost has already been exorcised. That presupposition makes it more difficult to bear witness to and confront the legacies of apartheid in contemporary South Africa.

**The Politics of Redemption: Scapegoat and Totem**

These are some of the perils of redemptive politics that I explore in the essays that follow: Unbearable responsibility; motivated historical forgetting, and blindness to “forgotten” traces of the past in the present. They are perilous because they render redemptive politics self-undermining and they create space for and foster the sort of injustices and cruelties to which redemptive politics are supposed to respond, while simultaneously obscuring their persistence. In response to these perils, we resourceful humans have developed strategies for preserving the hope of redemption by disbursing its burdens onto others. That disbursement is often uneven, deeply unjust and intensely political. This disbursement of the burdens of redemptive politics takes place through what I am calling a politics of redemption.

The injustice of the politics of redemption consists in the fact that vulnerable citizens are often made to bear the burdens of redemption from which more privileged citizens are insulated. This happens most clearly through the practice of scapegoating. Originally, the scapegoat (*azazel)* is an animal in the Old Testament—a goat—offered as a sacrifice on the Day of Atonement to bear and carry away the sins of the people. The sacrifice both redeems people by cleansing them of sin, and redeems the suffering of the animal by investing it with their unburdening. In politics, scapegoating has often contributed to discrimination, hostility, witch hunts and horrific acts of sacrificial violence. Here, scapegoats are blamed for an historical situation for which they are not responsible, and which has deep structural roots. Genocidal campaigns, for instance, have always involved scapegoating a vulnerable minority ethnic, racial, or religious group for a given state of affairs. Thus European Jews became scapegoats for Germany’s decline and eventual defeat in World War I. Tutsis became scapegoats for the effects of Belgian colonialism on Rwanda’s majority Hutu population Scapegoating has also played a role in ideological struggles. In the United States after World War II, communists became internal scapegoats for any perceived ill or weakness in the US body politic. More recently Muslims were scapegoated in the United States after September 11, 2001. In addition, some conservative commentators have used welfare recipients as scapegoats for US deficits, and irresponsible borrowers as scapegoats for the financial crisis.

Redemptive politics also give rise to another problematic, figure that is the scapegoat’s double: The totem. With his election as President of the United States in 2008, Barack Obama became such a figure. The election of the country’s first black President was heralded by some as the advent of a “post-racial” America, in which barriers to advancement for non-whites were shattered, and the race problem in this country essentially “solved.” Obama’s rise to the Presidency was seen by some to put to rest America’s ugly history of racism, from slavery to Jim Crow and beyond. And the progressivism he espoused during his campaign gave many people in America and elsewhere hope that Obama would also redeem the suffering of the poor and other disenfranchised groups in the country. Thus, would Obama cleanse America of its history of racial violence and discrimination, while giving meaning to the historic suffering of the poor, blacks, and other disenfranchised minorities by moving the country toward justice and equality. By both redeeming America and standing as a symbol of its future (and especially the future of Black Americans), Obama acquired totemic status.

Of course, Obama is a false totem, a false redeemer; in fact, a number of commentators—most notably Obama’s one-time friend and adviser Cornel West—have argued that Obama has fallen far short of his promises to unite America and has instead reinforced policies that contribute to poverty and inequality, has not done enough for African-Americans and the poor, and so on. The trouble with clinging to redemptive politics is not just that it overlooks and even obscures these painful truths. The trouble is that, *because* it does so it gives strength to the claim that the marginalized and disenfranchised are in that condition because of some failing of theirs—they don’t work hard enough, they rely on government handouts (thereby being a drain on an already weak economy), and so on: In a word, it gives strength to neoliberalism, racism, and classism. Since this is a new America, the class and racial structures that have contributed to poverty and inequality must be gone. But of course they are not. And the redemptive fantasy that they *are* gone unjustly burdens the disenfranchised with weight of their own disenfranchisement while releasing those who occupy sites of privilege from any political responsibility for their plight. Not only that: Once the terms of neoliberalism, racism, and classism have done their work, poverty and inequality look less and less like problems, and more like the natural residues of a free market and liberal democracy in action.

**For Today: Toward A Politics of the Moment**

We can respond in several ways to these perils. We might, for instance, cling uncritically to redemptive aspirations. Such hopes are manifest for, instance, on the evangelical right in the United States, some of whose members work tirelessly toward a world in which Americans will be cleansed of their sins against God—abortion, liberal education, homosexuality, atheism and agnosticism, and so on; and on the left, where working toward social justice is often cast as a project of redeeming the efforts of earlier movements while washing away a history of cruelty and injustice. Or we can regard redemption as a sort of ever-receding horizon, spurring us onward in its very unattainability—a messianism without consummation, like Derrida’s “democracy to come,”[[50]](#footnote-50) or Benjamin’s messianic historical materialism.[[51]](#footnote-51) Or, we can acknowledge the perils of redemption, bemoan them, and nevertheless come to grips with our redemptive aspirations as (practically) necessary and problematic—a tragic vision of life depicted by political theorists like William Connolly and Patchen Markell, and attested to by, for instance, Mandela’s controversial negotiations that ended apartheid in part through painful compromises with the outgoing regime over political power and land distribution. The first two paths seem to do nothing to address the perils of redemptive politics that I have outlined. The third may even exacerbate them. It leaves us caught in a tragic predicament in which we are encouraged to live, with which we are encouraged to wrestle, but provides little sustenance for the hopes to which we are still assumed to cling. To what can that lead, ultimately, but to frustration, resentment, quietism? And even as theorists like Markell and Connolly propose dispositions and practices aimed at forestalling these reactive formations—acknowledgment,[[52]](#footnote-52) responsiveness and generosity[[53]](#footnote-53)--they give us little sense of how to sustain such dispositions and practices in the face of our tragic condition.[[54]](#footnote-54)

In place of these common, counterproductive reactions to redemptive politics, I propose an alternative that I will only sketch here before developing it more fully in the final chapter. I call this alternative a “politics of the moment.” A politics of the moment aims to lighten—without eliminating—the burdens of the past; and to shrink—without obliterating—the shadow of the future. If redemptive politics bring the unbearable weight of past and future to bear upon an already overburdened present, a politics of the moment aims to keep the past in its place and the present at bay, to draw *from* awareness of the past and consciousness of the future without being drawn *in* by them. A politics *of* the moment locates the burdens of political life where their negotiation is most urgent—*in* the moment. The mistake of the TRC did not lie in its effort at reparation and reconciliation. Those were and are urgent and necessary. It was in the hope that reparation and reconciliation would *solve* anything, that any compensation could be anything more than a token, that exposing the past would redeem it; and that, after all that, South Africans could move forward into a post-apartheid era, leaving the past behind. The mistake in conceiving the Genocide Convention was not in the commitment to prevent genocide, but in the fantasy that a genocide prevented today or tomorrow would wash away the stains of the Holocaust, and redeem the suffering of millions who perished at the hands of the Nazis and the Stalinists. The mistake was in confusing a history that was easier for us to bear with a present and future that were easier to live in and with. The question we must ask in response to suffering in political life is not, how can we make sure that this never happens again, that we rid mankind of this “scourge?” The urgent questions for politics are, first, what must we do *today;* and, second, what *can* we do today for the sake of tomorrow? This position does not amount to a retreat into a sort of crude pragmatism or a politics of compromise. A politics of the moment is momentary, momentous, and driven by its own momentum. It is momentary in the sense that for a politics of the moment, political time is conceived of *as* a series of moments—not disconnected ones that erupt out of historical time, like a Derridean “event”[[55]](#footnote-55) or like Benjamin’s “time of the now” that “blasts out of the continuum of history.”[[56]](#footnote-56) Rather, it constitutes history asa series of connected moments, each full in themselves of promise and peril. It is momentous because of this fullness, because of the pregnancy of the present with its multiple happenings and possibilities; but the momentousness of such momentary politics does not stem from either the weight of the past or the shadow of the future. It is momentous because of what is happening *right now*. And that *right now* is what drives a politics of the moment forward; not the hope of redemption, but the urgency of *today*.

By advocating this sort of politics I make myself an easy target for charges of irresponsibility: A politics of the moment lacks seriousness and depth, critics might say, it is an immature politics that is blind to both precedents and to consequences; it is bound to end in ruin. My answer is: And what of redemptive politics? How responsible is it to abandon the weight of the present for the shadow of the future? How serious is it to imagine, in the 21st century, that we might eradicate forms of violence, cruelty and injustice for all time, how blind to precedent and consequence? How ruinous is such a politics? A politics of moment is serious and deep indeed—its depth lies in the fact that puts down roots in the present. A politics of the moment is not blind to the past or to the future; but it *does* refuse to be bound to either of them. This refusal to be bound rescues the *now,* the present, *today,* from both the unbearable weight of the past, and the terrifying shadow of the future. Let us, therefore, live but one day at a time.

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1. \* Paper prepared for the Western Political Science Association’s Annual Meeting, March 2013 in Hollywood, CA. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Shulman, 2008: 252 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Job 42: 3-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Job, 42: 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. That I find Biblical resonances in contemporary politics is not to suggest that there is *a* politics to be inferred or derived from the Bible. As Michael Walzer has recently suggested, the Old Testament contains no one coherent politics (Walzer, 2012). Given the rich variety of Christian political theologies (from the conservative version offered by Carl Schmitt to Marxist-inspired liberation theologies that grew out of Africa and Latin America), the same is surely true of the New Testament as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Weber, 1919/1958 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Schmitt, 1923/2005: 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Arendt, 1948: 459 . [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Habermas, 1998; Lara, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Arendt, 1948: vii. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ricoeur, 1983: xi [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Augustine, 11(20). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Arendt, 1948: viii. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Schmitt, 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Charny, 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Mandel, 2001. A 2008 exhibit about the Holocaust at the Imperial War Museum in London, England, bore the arresting title: *“Unspeakable: The Artist as Witness to the Holocaust*.*”* [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Avisar, 1988. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Pia Lara, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Arendt, 1948: 459. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Arendt, 1998:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Job, 3:4, 3:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Jonathan Safran Foer, quoted inOwour, 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Bourdieu (1977) describes how crises generate contests between “orthodox” narratives that seek to restore an old order, and “heterodox” ones that seek to replace it. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Foucault, 1977: 144 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Schmitt, 1929/2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See Rubenstein, 1992; Cohn-Sherbok, 2002; Dietrich, 2003; Katz, 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Nietzsche, 1992. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Shulman, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Sartre, 1956: 594. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Berlin, 2002 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Sartre, 1956: 594, my emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Sartre, 1956: 707. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Sartre, 1956: 707. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Sartre, 1956: 70, 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *Ibid,* 707-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. *Ibid:* 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. *Ibid:* 711. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. *Ibid:* 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. *Ibid,* 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. *Ibid¸*20. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. *Ibid*: 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. *Ibid*: 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Connolly, 1991. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Nietzsche, 1997; Burg, 2008 [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/4244446.html [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/aug/31/south-african-miners-charged-murder [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Derrida, 2006, 2005, 2004, [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Benjamin, 1978. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Markell, 2003, Conclusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Connolly, 1991, 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Schiff, forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Derrida, 2007 [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Benjamin, 1978: 261. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)