

Thresholds: Sovereignty and the Sacred

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Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998. Pp. xii + 199 pages. \$45.00 cloth; \$16.95 paper.

For the first time in history, the possibilities of the social sciences are made known, and at once it becomes possible both to protect life and to authorize a holocaust.

—Michel Foucault qtd. in Agamben (1998:3)

Sacredness is a line of flight still present in contemporary politics, a line that is as such moving into zones increasingly vast and dark, to the point of ultimately coinciding with the biological life itself of citizens. If today there is no longer any one clear figure of the sacred man, it is perhaps because we are all virtually *homines sacri*.

—Giorgio Agamben (1998:114–15)

Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* is one of those books that comes along all too infrequently, unsettling conventional answers and inspiring new questions in a range of academic disciplines. We understand that this is a large claim with which to begin, but it is our hope in this essay to show the immense range and depth of Agamben's insights and the implications of these insights for anthropologists, historians, legal theorists, sociologists, and others. Indeed, if the rapid commission of translations of Agamben's works are any indication, our prediction of his increasing theoretical influence would seem already in the process of being fulfilled.¹

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¹ The history of the translation of Agamben's works from Italian into English is revealing. In 1991, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, originally published in 1982,

Our claims for this text are, in fact, matched by Agamben's own ambitious—and apocalyptic—declarations. *Homo Sacer* began, we are told in a cryptic aside, “as a response to the bloody mystification of a new planetary order”; but soon, “in the urgency of catastrophe,” Agamben felt the need to confront and revise “without reserve” a range of terms that are central and seemingly self-evident in the social sciences (p. 12). Amongst the points of critique, the “sacredness” of human life and the paradox of sovereign power are at the forefront. Between them, Agamben hopes to do nothing less than reveal the originary and true nature of the modern political realm.

His argument, succinctly summarized in the concluding chapter of the text, is organized around three main points:

1. The original political relation is the ban (the state of exception as zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion).
2. The fundamental activity of sovereign power is the production of bare life as originary political element and as threshold of articulation between nature and culture, *zoē* and *bios*.
3. Today it is not the city but rather the [concentration] camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West. (p. 181)

The precise meaning of these statements will become clearer in the course of our exposition. For now we wish to stress that “bare life” should not be confused with natural life, as bare life is what, in Agamben's view, is produced as the *originary* (both original and originating) act of sovereignty.² The production of this bare life thus establishes a *relation* that defines the political realm and which Agamben calls, following Jean-Luc Nancy (1993), the relation of ban, or abandonment. Bare life is produced in and through this fundamental act of sovereignty in the sense of being included in the political realm precisely by virtue of being excluded. And it is this same bare life, once abandoned by the law at the outskirts of the *polis*, that has today, according to Agamben, fully entered the *polis* to the point of rendering

was translated. In 1993, three of Agamben's works were translated into English: *The Coming Community*, originally published in 1990; *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, originally published in 1978; and *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, originally published in 1977. In 1998, *Homo Sacer* (originally published in 1995) was translated, and, in 1999, two more of Agamben's texts were translated: *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, originally published in 1996; and *The Man Without Content*, originally published in 1994. Thus, overall, the time interval between the original publication of Agamben's writings and the translation of these writings into English has been diminishing. Most recently, a collection of Agamben's essays and lectures from 1975 through 1996 has been issued under the title *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (1999). (After we had completed this essay, we discovered the even more recent publication in English of a work by Agamben entitled *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. The publication of this text illustrates the translation history just referred to, as the original Italian version of 1998 was published just a year before the English translation.)

² It is true, however, that, given his emphasis on biopolitics, Agamben himself does not consistently maintain the distinction between bare life and natural life.

outside and inside, life and law, truly indistinguishable from one another. It is in this way that the concentration camp, for Agamben, has become the “fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West.”

Our primary purpose in this essay is to trace the intellectual genealogies of each of the three claims outlined by Agamben in his conclusion. Before we turn to this task, however, some initial remarks further clarifying these claims and their relation to one another will be helpful.

* * *

Homo Sacer, simply put, asserts the unity of the West’s political history with respect to the “sacred man.” As the bearer of bare life, the eponymous figure of the book’s title is, Agamben maintains, the correlate of sovereign power. An “obscure figure of archaic Roman law” (p. 8), as Agamben describes him, *homo sacer* was understood as the one who could be killed by anyone without the commission of a homicide but who also could not be sacrificed. Yet it is not with Rome but with Greece that Agamben begins.³ *Homo Sacer* opens with Agamben’s observation of the lack of a single term in ancient Greece to signify what we today include under the term “life.” For Aristotle, as for other ancient Greeks, Agamben notes, *zoē*, referring to the natural life common to humans, animals, and gods (and confined, at least for humans, to the *oikos*, or home), was distinguished from *bios*, the qualified life proper to humans. To speak of a *zoē politikē*, therefore, would have been a conceptual impossibility.

Thus, Aristotle’s definition of man as *politikon zōon*, according to Agamben, must be understood simply as identifying the *difference* that marks off human existence from the existence of other living beings and not as designating a quality of human natural life. With regard to this definition, Agamben repeats the much-noted moment from Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*: “For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question” (Foucault 1978:143; Agamben 1998:3). And yet, although Agamben often makes statements that seem to confirm Foucault’s historical schematization (for example, Agamben proclaims that “the entry of *zoē* into the sphere of the *polis*—the politicization of bare life as such—constitutes the decisive event of modernity and signals a radical transformation of the political-philosophical categories of classical thought” [p. 4]), his “historico-philosophical” interpretation of the West is quite distinct.

³ We must leave aside the issue of Agamben’s uncritical stance toward the ideological function of Greek thought in producing a “coherent” political tradition in the West.

Specifically, for Foucault the foregrounding of population and of life as such was the site of the disjuncture that defines modernity. The vocabulary of the final chapter of *The History of Sexuality* reflects this understanding: Foucault speaks of a transformation in the sense of a “supplanting” of older juridical models of power with new politico-discursive constructions; namely, with biopolitics. Agamben’s phrasing is often equivocal and his time frame for the passage to modernity seems to shift, such that at times he appears to hold a portion of ancient Greek politics and philosophy as the counterpoint to the process he describes. Nevertheless, in contrast to Foucault, Agamben casts the transformation at issue in terms of a revelation or a coming to light of what was present in the West’s conception of politics from the start, a process that, according to Agamben, links democracy and totalitarianism in biopolitical solidarity. As such, Hannah Arendt’s (1958) work on totalitarianism and the institutional form of rights is as much an inspiration and impetus for Agamben’s inquiry as is Foucault’s understanding of biopolitics. And yet, because for Agamben the political realm is *originarily* biopolitical, even if this has only recently come to light, the “correction” or “completion” of Foucault’s project is tied to a “correction” or “completion” of Arendt’s work.

The figure of *homo sacer* thus allows Agamben to explicate the process by which today *zoē* and *bios* have come to coincide exactly with one another in a “zone of indistinction.” If today it is the concentration camp that is “in some way . . . the hidden matrix and *nomos* of the political space in which we are still living” (p. 166), it is because, for Agamben, the camp, which not long ago carved out a particular zone in which bare life displayed its original political function, is no longer delimited in time or space, and in fact has come to be coextensive with the political realm itself. It is in all these many ways, Agamben provocatively declares, that the figure of *homo sacer* “has thus offered the key by which not only the sacred texts of sovereignty but also the very codes of political power will unveil their mysteries” (p. 8). The understanding of this figure requires a fuller sense of the genealogies of sovereignty and the sacred in Western thought. Here we address both in turn.

Sovereignty

It is fairly safe to say that not only has the concept of sovereignty been undertheorized but that, just as importantly, since the end of *ancien régime* monarchies and the rise and consolidation of liberal-constitutional states, the *need* for such theorization has been considered doubtful. The figure of the sovereign has been relegated to a repertoire of archaic images: the prerogative of kings and the ritualistic majesty of despots and absolutist

monarchs. Although the question of sovereign power is not entirely absent from contemporary scholarship, increasingly this question belongs either to strictly historical issues of the “king’s two bodies” and the like or to the legal theoretical problems of the distribution of sovereign power within a normative rule-bound framework. A clear and well-known example of the latter is H.L.A. Hart’s *The Concept of Law* (1961).

Written in response to a positivist theory inherited from John Austin, which defines law as a “command of the sovereign,” Hart’s “fresh response” in *The Concept of Law* aims to move definitions of law away from notions of “orders, obedience, habits and threats” and toward “the idea of a rule,” without which, Hart insists, “we cannot hope to elucidate even the most elementary forms of law” (Hart 1961: 78). Hart’s “concept” of law is a complex combination of primary rules of obligation with secondary rules, the latter which are found in more mature legal systems and confer powers and stipulate procedures. This picture is generally well known and we need not dwell on its intricacies here. What is important for our purposes is the way in which sovereignty in Hart’s schema is reduced entirely to a framework of rules. These rules, Hart contends, are not just descriptive of the sovereign and those who obey him but are fundamental and constitutive.

In a significant passage in *The Concept of Law*, Hart attempts to show how the notion of sovereign orders virtually disappears in the rule-bound format of a modern electoral democracy. Framing the explanation in the vocabulary of a historical *Bildung*, a developmental schema that unself-consciously subtends much of the text, Hart argues that in the case in which the sovereign is identifiable with a single person, it may be possible to concede that the rules of governance (for instance, the requirement that orders must be declared and signed by the monarch) exist in a descriptive mode. But in the more disseminated form of the electorate—indeed, in the case of procedures that members of a society must follow in order to function as an electorate in the first place—rules “cannot themselves have the status of orders issued by the sovereign, for nothing can count as orders issued by the sovereign unless the rules already exist and have been followed” (pp. 74–75). Such a circularity of logic and process effectively occludes the possibility of action outside the circle.

There can and have been, however, critiques of such a tightly knit normative universe. Foreshadowing Agamben, we focus on two of the more common ones. First, Hart’s theory does not seriously consider the conceptual and historical place of a constituting power, the function of the so-called “first legislator,” who must stipulate (under what authority) how all rules, including those of the franchise, are to be made in the first place. Second,

Hart does not attend adequately to the continuous problem of the exercise of authority in conditions of political emergency. Given the intense contestation of power between executive, legislative, and judiciary branches that attends moments of unpredictability (declarations of war and the like), even in the more stable constitutional democracies, can we really assert that the question of state power is exhaustively answered in predictive norms?

Because liberal regimes tend to diminish and even deny their exercise of sovereign power beyond formal rules, Agamben not surprisingly locates his discussion of sovereignty within the decidedly anti-normative thought of Carl Schmitt. It is a controversial choice, for Schmitt was to follow up his work as a jurist in the Weimar regime with a shift in allegiance to National Socialism. As such, the connection between Schmitt's work in the Weimar regime and his career between 1933 and 1936 is a source of much historical debate.⁴ *Political Theology* (1922), which belongs to the earlier period, opens with a succinct definition of sovereignty, which Agamben appropriates as his own point of entry: "sovereign is he who decides on the exception" (Schmitt 1985:5).

This definition already contains Schmitt's interest in the personal element of the decision and in the agonistic and borderline relation of exception and norm. Schmitt's understanding of the exception is related to a state of emergency, a situation of economic and political crisis that imperils the state and that would require the suspension of regular law and rules to resolve. But as Schmitt repeatedly emphasizes, this situation of danger can never be exhaustively anticipated or codified in advance, and thus the suspension of the law would have to be the result of a conscious decision. This decision and the space of exception that it brings forth takes us to a "borderline concept" that contains the "whole question of sovereignty" (Schmitt 1985:6). In this anti-normative decision, Schmitt insists, there "resides the essence of the state's sovereignty, which must be juridically defined correctly, not as the monopoly to coerce or to rule, but as the monopoly to decide" (1985:13).

In Agamben's exegesis, the notion of the exception moves away from the issue of emergency provisions to a more irreducible, relational, and originary function. Agamben begins by explicating the "ordering" function of the exception. The sovereign decision, which Schmitt calls a borderline concept, creates a boundary of law, an inside and outside, precisely in declaring a state of exception. The claim that law functions through an inte-

⁴ Joseph Bendersky, for example, has argued for a reading of Schmitt's work that does not reduce all of Schmitt's ideas to his Nazi career from 1933 to 1936. See Joseph Bendersky, *Carl Schmitt: Theorist for the Reich* (1983). Others have maintained that Schmitt's notions of the structuring friend-foe distinction in politics and the decisionist role of the sovereign in states of emergency may be traced to the Nazi demonization of Jews and the use of Article 48 of the Weimar constitution to subvert the fledgling democracy. For this argument as a critique of Bendersky, see Martin Jay (1984).

riority, assigning the “value” of chaos or disorder to what lies outside, is a familiar one. Agamben, however, directs our attention to the more complicated and originary relation between the norm and the exception, which he calls a limit sphere. Following Schmitt’s insight that the peculiar status of the exception allowed for by law derives from the condition that it is a factual situation that cannot be normatively predicted, Agamben insists that the exception is neither a decision of law nor a decision of fact but rather a sovereign act that posits the relation between law and fact in the first place. “The ‘sovereign’ structure of the law, its peculiar and original ‘force’,” as Agamben puts it, “has the form of a state of exception in which fact and law [or the exception and the rule] are indistinguishable (yet must, nevertheless, be decided on)” (p. 27).

What follows from this—in a crucial movement—is that the exception is neither bound to the rule nor violates it, but is the evidence of a suspended relation that constitutes the rule: “[t]he exception does not subtract itself from the rule; rather, the rule, suspending itself, gives rise to the exception and, maintaining itself in relation to the exception, first constitutes itself as a rule” (Agamben 1998:18). The peculiar, non-linear temporality of this movement signals precisely how complicated sovereignty is in Agamben’s view.⁵ The point here, however, is that when an exception to a rule is declared, it would be a mistake to consider this outside of rules as something altogether exterior to the juridico-political order. Instead, the act of suspension itself creates a relation between the rule and its exception, declaring what lies outside the rule to be an exception and thus, and only thus, giving the rule a coherence and validity. The exception proves, or rather constitutes, the rule. This understanding of an “inclusive exclusion” is crucial to Agamben’s analysis of the force of the sovereign exception in the production of *homo sacer*.

The capacity to decide on the exception, then, is an essential and definitional feature of sovereign power. The idiom of capacity here is of some importance: it not only captures the multiple meanings of the Italian “*potere*” but also highlights Agamben’s argument about the potentiality and the actuality of such a power. The fact that such a power to declare an exception is always potential is what makes it less an episodic and regulative question and more a constitutive characteristic of sovereign power. The actual exercise of such a power neither exhausts nor determines

⁵ The peculiar temporality of Agamben’s understanding of sovereignty, by virtue of which sovereignty is “the originary structure in which law refers to life and includes it in itself by suspending it” (p. 28), corresponds in interesting ways to his analysis of language, for instance in *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity* (1991). Although Agamben makes several references in *Homo Sacer* to just such a correspondence, we unfortunately do not have the space here to conduct such an inquiry.

the potential, which is, as it were, held in reserve by the sovereign, thus determining all present and potential situations.

The Sacred

At the other end of the spectrum of social scientific verities that Agamben sees as urgently requiring revision lie notions concerning the sacred. Agamben's overall effort here is to sever the concept of the sacred from notions of holiness, sacrifice, and religious experience, revealing it as an originary political exercise—a setting apart. If life is made sacred by setting it apart, we can already see how such an activity would be linked to the idea of the sovereign exception, which is, after all, also a setting apart (“exception” comes from *ex-capere*—taken outside). “In modernity,” Agamben argues, “the principle of the sacredness of life is . . . completely emancipated from sacrificial ideology, and in our culture the meaning of the term ‘sacred’ continues the semantic history of *homo sacer* and not that of sacrifice” (p. 114). The idea that the concept of the sacred is linked to the practice of sacrifice—derived from *sacrum facere*, to make sacred—is familiar to students of anthropology and of religious studies. Although he credits this understanding of sacrifice, Agamben separates the meaning of the sacred therein at play from that which he believes prevails today in the West. In the one case, a life that as such is not sacred can be made sacred, in the sense of holy, through the operation of sacrifice; in the other case (that of the West), life as such—in the figure of *homo sacer*—is sacred in a sense that is prior to the division between the sacred (as holy) and the profane.

In holding steady *homo sacer*'s peculiar status as a life that can be killed but not sacrificed, a life that can be killed by anyone without the commission of homicide, Agamben daringly departs from previous interpretations of *homo sacer*. Because these interpretations are premised on the commonplace idea that the sacred necessarily designates the holy and inviolable, the notion of an “originary ambiguity of the sacred” thereby has been used to explain what appear to be *homo sacer*'s contradictory qualities. In his insistence that the figure of *homo sacer* “allow[s] us to uncover an originary *political* structure that is located in a zone prior to the distinction between sacred and profane, religious and juridical” (p. 74), Agamben unsettles the seemingly unquestionable meaning and function of the sacred. (Such an unsettling, we should point out, marks a shift in Agamben's own past view of the sacred as, in fact, ambiguous.)⁶

⁶ Agamben's interest in *homo sacer* is not recent. In *Language and Death* (1991), he had spoken of *homo sacer*, sacrifice, and the sacred in a manner that linked *homo sacer* to the very ambiguity of the sacred that is characterized as a misunderstanding in *Homo Sacer*. In the earlier text, the figure of *homo sacer* appears in the context of sacrifice, hence

As Agamben notes, the notion of the ambiguity of the sacred first was proposed at the end of the nineteenth century by William Robertson Smith in his *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1894). For Robertson Smith, it was curious that in primitive societies objects and persons deemed holy were treated in a parallel manner to objects and persons believed impure. The structure of *taboo*, he concluded, enclosed both the pure and the impure. From the ambiguity of the taboo was deduced the ambiguity or duality of the sacred, an idea that flourished especially in France at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries under the influence of the Durkheimian school of sociology. The attractiveness of this idea, however, was not confined to France nor to the fields of anthropology and sociology, traveling as it did from anthropology and sociology to psychoanalysis and finally to linguistics.

To be sure, the manner in which the various authors that Agamben discusses construed the originary ambiguity of the sacred is not identical. Rudolf Otto (1950), for example, does not particularly treat the sacred itself as ambiguous (as possessing contradictory qualities or as inhering in contradictory sets of objects or persons); instead, he focuses on the ambiguity of human *responses* to the sacred. What allows Agamben to treat the notion of the ambiguity of the sacred to which these authors have recourse as similar is the psychological basis of all their analyses.⁷ “What is at work here,” Agamben comments, “is the psychologization of religious experience (the ‘disgust’ and ‘horror’ by which the cultured European bourgeoisie betrays its own unease before the religious fact)” (p. 78). Thus the concept of the originary ambiguity of the sacred registers not the duality of the “primitive” sacred but the ambivalence toward religion felt by those Europeans for whom the sacred, as holy, had lost its meaning. Agamben does not mince words: the complex biopolitical fact of the sacredness of bare life has nothing to do with that “triviality . . . dress[ed] up as science” that announces that “the religious belongs entirely to the sphere of psychological emotion, that it essentially has to do with shivers and goose bumps” (p. 78).

Because in Agamben’s view the history of the term “sacred” in the West designates an originary *political* space or structure—the relation of abandonment—that precedes the constitution of

of *sacralization*. Agamben therefore interpreted the sacredness of *homo sacer* as ambiguous. As he wrote: “Thus the sacred is necessarily an ambiguous and circular concept. (In Latin, *sacer* means vile, ignominious, and also august, reserved for the gods; both the law and he who violates it are sacred: *qui legem violavit, sacer esto*). He who has violated the law, in particular by homicide, is excluded from the community, exiled, and abandoned to himself, so that killing him would not be a crime: *homo sacer is est quem populus iudicavit ob maleficium; neque fas est eum immolari, sed qui occidit paricidi non damnatur*” (p. 105).

⁷ It could be argued that Otto’s analysis of the sacred as ambiguous—to take one example—is not psychological, but *cognitive*. It is not clear, however, that this would alter Agamben’s conclusions.

a distinctly religious domain, to interpret the sacred as a religious category is to him misleading. Or, more precisely, we should emphasize that for Agamben to interpret the sacred *today* as such is misleading. Thus, he does not explicitly declare the more common understanding of the word “sacred” as a religious term meaning holy or inviolable to be mistaken in all of its applications, but he does insist that contemporary discourses of the sacredness of life do not engage this secondary meaning and instead revive that “most ancient meaning of the term *sacer*” (p. 80). In relation to this, we should point out that Agamben’s criticism of the notion of the originary ambiguity of the sacred does not challenge, though it alters the import of, the view laid out by Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995) that the opposition between the sacred and the profane is constitutive of religion. Agamben’s criticism goes rather to the claim that the sacred is originary ambiguous and that it is an originally religious category. In other words, Agamben seems to accept the opposition between the sacred and the profane as constitutive of the religious domain to the extent that the sacred here acquires its secondary (religious) meaning of holy.⁸

In *The Coming Community*, written prior to *Homo Sacer*, Agamben had dismissed the contemporary rhetoric of life’s sacredness as a “hypocritical dogma” linked to “the vacuous declarations of human rights” (1993:86). In *Homo Sacer*, he understands this rhetoric as involving something far more sinister than hypocrisy. “The sacredness of life,” he asserts, “which is invoked today as an absolutely fundamental right in opposition to sovereign power, in fact originally expresses precisely both life’s subjection to a power over death and life’s irreparable exposure in the relation of abandonment” (p. 83). In more Foucauldian fashion, he specifies that “[i]t is almost as if, starting from a certain point, every decisive political event were double-sided: the spaces, the liberties, and the rights won by individuals in their conflicts with central powers always simultaneously prepared a tacit but increasing inscription of individuals’ lives within the

⁸ We might point out here that for Durkheim the ambiguity of the sacred was not *exactly* originary. The religious domain, in Durkheim’s view, was forged from the radical heterogeneity between the sacred and the profane, with these categories possessing a purely formal structure (the relationship of radical heterogeneity, that is, creates the sacred and the profane as its two poles, with the sacred defined by its heterogeneity with respect to the profane and not by any content or properties it possesses in itself). The intensity of dual and opposed experienced states, is it true, is what generates for Durkheim the sense of the sacred, and makes the sacred ambiguous, but this experience is possible only on the basis of the *formal* prerequisite of an originary incommensurability between the sacred and the profane. Bataille, who Agamben is at some pains to credit for having tried to think “the very bare life (or sacred life) that, in the relation of ban, constitutes the immediate referent of sovereignty” (p. 112) even if the notion of the ambiguity of the sacred had the effect of “compromising Bataille’s inquiries into sovereignty” (p. 75), had observed that it was Robert Hertz (1960), not Durkheim, who in his *Death and the Right Hand* took a “‘step’ beyond the primitive dualism” of sacred and profane. See Bataille (1947:205, emphasis in the original).

state order, thus offering a new and more dreadful foundation for the very sovereign power from which they wanted to liberate themselves” (p. 121).

It might be argued in response to Agamben that the numerous demands for the protection of life, which we hear today with increasing frequency, and from many corners, and which are premised on an assertion of the sacredness inherent to life as such, are attempts precisely to close the spaces of exception. Agamben likely would counter that it is telling that such demands are attempts to compel the sovereign to decide on the exception. Thus, whatever their intention, they work to establish that “new and more dreadful foundation for the very sovereign power” that is disputed; they work, in the end, therefore, to expand the space of exception so that the exception increasingly becomes the rule. Indeed, it could be asked what these various movements register if not the infinite violability of life as such, of bare (or sacred) life. As Agamben says of the crisis in Rwanda:

It takes only a glance at the recent publicity campaigns to gather funds for refugees from Rwanda to realize that here human life is exclusively considered (and there are certainly good reasons for this) as sacred life—which is to say, as life that can be killed but not sacrificed—and *that only as such is it made into the object of aid and protection*. The “imploring eyes” of the Rwandan child, whose photograph is shown to obtain money but who “is now becoming more and more difficult to find alive,” may well be the most telling contemporary cipher of the bare life that humanitarian organizations, in perfect symmetry with state power, need. (pp. 133–34, our emphasis.)

These remarks could be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to other contemporary efforts to protect life.

Agamben’s concern is with the relationship of “sacred” life to the supremely unspectacular violence to which this life *as such* is ever-increasingly threatened. “What confronts us today,” as he says, “is a life that as such is exposed to a violence without precedent precisely in the most profane and banal ways” (p. 114). Such an exposure, he maintains, owes nothing to the operations of sacrifice, however loosely we construe the meaning of sacrifice. Agamben’s comments on sacrifice, however, are not altogether clear and at times appear contradictory.

At the end of Part One, he points to the need to uncover the origins of the view that life is sacred. “Life became sacred,” he writes, “only through a series of rituals whose aim was precisely to separate life from its profane context. In the words of Benveniste, to render the victim sacred, it is necessary to ‘separate it from the world of the living, it is necessary that it cross the threshold that separates the two universes: this is the aim of the killing’” (p. 66). Such an affirmation would seem to conform to the claim linking sacrifice and the sacred that Agamben disputes. What Agamben

intends, however, is to sever the meaning of the sacred as this meaning reveals itself in the West from the meaning the sacred possesses in societies that practice sacrifice (which would include ancient Greece). Unlike in the West, that is, in the latter type of society, life *as such* is not held to be sacred and thus the sacrificial victim may *become* sacred through the operation of sacrifice. It is in this sense that *homo sacer* can be said to figure the “historico-political destiny of the West.” “Life [for the West] is sacred only insofar as it is taken into the sovereign exception, and to have exchanged a juridico-political phenomenon (*homo sacer*’s capacity to be killed but not sacrificed) for a genuinely religious phenomenon is the root of the equivocations that have marked studies both of the sacred and of sovereignty in our time” (p. 85). Once such equivocations are dispensed with, Agamben is ready, in the third and final part of the text, to consider the import of his claims for a range of contemporary social and political issues.

Thresholds of Modernity

The architecture of *Homo Sacer* consists of three parts ending with transitive chapters that are each entitled “Threshold” (we will return to the question of the “final threshold”). The first and second parts, as we have already shown, deal with a rethinking of sovereignty and sacredness, respectively. As *Homo Sacer* moves into its third and final part—“The Camp as Biopolitical Paradigm of the Modern”—Agamben’s central insight into the production of bare life comes to focus on the intensification and proliferation of bare life within a series of new and varied situations. The power—and perhaps the flaw—of Agamben’s analysis lies in how it grasps, as part of a single movement, phenomena seemingly as disparate as the Holocaust, the situation of Karen Quinlan, and even the high rate of holiday highway deaths. In relation to this, Agamben fails to explore, though he does at one point note in passing, the role of technological development in linking what may be contingently but not necessarily (still less teleologically) connected; namely, the increasing sacredness of life and the increasing power of the sovereign. A distinct and, we think, valid criticism of Agamben’s diverse speculations in Part Three relates to his curious reticence to elaborate on what, if anything, is distinctively modern about our contemporary structure of sovereign power and bare life. Even if we agree with Agamben’s teleological, even messianic,⁹ mode of thinking, in which contemporary politics only unfolds a relation and a structure that were there from the very beginning, we are still forced

⁹ The messianic tone that suffuses so much of Agamben’s work, including *Homo Sacer*, has much to do with the influence upon his thought of Walter Benjamin. Daniel Heller-Roazen, in his Editor’s Introduction to *Potentialities* (see note 1 above), discusses certain aspects of this influence.

to ask, What is the importance of new conditions, such as technology, that facilitate such an unfolding? Be this at it may, however, in his general thesis that biological life in the form of bare life has become the object of politics in the modern world and that, perhaps more provocatively, the political realm constituted by sovereignty has as its originary—and thus continuous—aim the very production of this bare life, the scope and suggestiveness of Agamben's analysis are nothing short of stunning.

This focus on the contemporary forms of bare life, on its "modern avatars" (p. 120), prompts Agamben to return once again to Arendt and Foucault, in particular to Arendt's objection to the rights of man *qua* man (the claim of a natural or human right outside of any political context) and to Foucault's insistence that in the regime of biopolitics, the biological life of humans becomes the paramount object of political power. Agamben reads these authors in dialogue with each other, claiming that in the concept of bare life, their respective theoretical omissions will be mutually completed (p. 120). These are readings worth dwelling on briefly.

When Agamben declares that Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1958) is "altogether lacking in any biopolitical perspective," it is not entirely clear what he means. Interestingly, returning to the relevant sections of Arendt's text, one finds a number of references to what Agamben would consider bare life. For Arendt, the entire problem with human rights is that they are invoked at the precise moment at which the rights of a citizen, the political artifice that bestows human dignity, are stripped away, leaving one with "the abstract nakedness of being human and nothing but human"—a condition that, despite the best-intentioned humanitarianism and the loquacious declarations of human rights, is for her essentially "worthless" (1958:297). The calamity of human rights in this regard thus is registered for Arendt by the appearance of what is assuredly bare life in Agamben's sense. Arendt's images of this life alternate between the animalic and the savage. Early declarations of an international rights of man, she astutely notes, bore an "uncanny similarity in language and composition to that of societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals." She ends the chapter by once again denouncing the loss of political community—"our human artifice"—a loss that reduces human beings to mere "savages."

When he asserts the absence of a biopolitical perspective in Arendt's work, therefore, Agamben cannot be thinking in terms of a perspective that foregrounds the naked and natural life of human beings. Instead, what he seems to object to is that in Arendt this foregrounding of the natural state of humanity is resolutely rejected as a political condition. And here we again encounter one of Agamben's key points: bare life is not the same as natural life, but is to be understood as the result of an unavoida-

ble political power that blurs the distinction between political and natural. And if Arendt's vocabulary is sufficiently apocalyptic—she speaks of calamities and global danger—matching Agamben's messianic tone, she nonetheless insists on a solution that is not a working through of the indistinction between *bios* and *zoē* but a return to an understanding of political community for which these terms will maintain their conceptual distance.

Foucault's understanding of biopolitics was shaped by an insight into the multiple modes of power whose focus was the life of the species. In his seminar description for the *Collège de France*, Foucault described biopolitics as the study of rationalizing procedures focused on "a group of living human beings constituted as a population: health, sanitation, birthrate, longevity, race" (1997:73). Such a history of "normalization" was broad enough to inspire diverse research not only by Foucault but also by others, such as Ian Hacking (1991, on statistics) and François Ewald (1991, on risk). In Agamben's text, however, with the central focus on the conditions of living and dying and on the threshold figure of bare life, biopolitics takes on a more narrow (even literal) and sinister guise. Here we do not deal with the comparatively benign questions of urbanism and probability, but the more basic issues of what life is "worth living." It is not the more quotidian and municipal sites of the prison and school, but rather the concentration camp that appears as the space of biopolitics. Indeed, at certain points when Agamben discusses euthanasia or reads the condition of neomorts, biopolitics seems more like a politics of biology.

We are now in a better position to understand how Agamben, in an effort to explicate the concentration camp as the paradigm of modernity, hopes to push the insights of Arendt and Foucault further. For the camps emerged out of the same "perplexities" that Arendt observed in the modern structure of the rights of man and the nation-state—perplexities that, in her example, produce refugees and the exceptional spaces they inhabit (Arendt 1958:290). As Agamben notes, the concentration camps emerged not out of a random lawlessness or disregard, but instead out of a legal accommodation for the sovereign exception: the Prussian concept of *Schutzhaft* (literally, protective custody). What Arendt neglects, according to Agamben, is the extent to which such a situation is tied to the *raison* of bare life, to the biopolitical priority that enabled the totalitarian state and accorded to it the biological care of the national body. The exceptional space of the concentration camp and the genocidal catastrophe that took place there, says Agamben, marked its victims in the final instance with neither enmity nor criminality but with mere existence. Thus, he comments on the Nazi genocide of the Jews:

The wish to lend a sacrificial aura to the extermination of the Jews by means of the term “Holocaust” was, from this perspective, an irresponsible historiographical blindness. The Jew living under Nazism is the privileged negative referent of the new biopolitical sovereignty and is, as such, a flagrant case of a *homo sacer* in the sense of a life that may be killed but not sacrificed. His killing therefore constitutes, as we will see, neither capital punishment nor a sacrifice, but simply the actualization of a mere “capacity to be killed” inherent in the condition of the Jew as such. The truth—which is difficult for the victims to face, but which we must have the courage not to cover with sacrificial veils—is that the Jews were exterminated not in a mad and giant holocaust but exactly as Hitler had announced, “as lice,” which is to say, as bare life. The dimension in which the extermination took place is neither religion nor law, but biopolitics. (p. 114)

Whatever the disturbing force of this analysis as it applies to the Nazi genocide of the Jews, however, some certainly will chafe at seeing here an event that confirms the West’s political *destiny*, an event that constitutes the teleological conclusion to the Western conception of politics.

On the other hand, “sacrificial” interpretations of the Holocaust (we leave aside the issue of the use of the word itself) do not necessarily maintain that the Nazi genocide was in fact a sacrifice.¹⁰ One cannot help but think of the work of René Girard, whom Agamben does not mention. A Girardian analysis would assert the universal structure of the scapegoating mechanism, linking the practice of sacrifice, as a particular form taken by the scapegoating mechanism, to other incidents of scapegoating, without reducing the latter to the former.¹¹ In basic terms, Girard’s argument, articulated consistently through several works such as *Violence and the Sacred* and *The Scapegoat*, is that scapegoating is necessary to the formation of human communities (with the exception for Girard, we should add, of the *genuinely Christian* community that does not [yet] exist). The exclusion (killing) of a liminal member of, or of a stranger to, the community is necessary in Girard’s view to regenerate the system of differences upon which the continued existence of the community is believed to depend, a system of differences that is dissolved in the course of a “sacrificial crisis.” “[T]he phrase ‘modern

¹⁰ An exception to this would be the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who is reported as saying the following in Seminar XI: “I would hold that no meaning given to history, based on Hegelian-Marxist premises, is capable of accounting for this resurgence [Nazism]—which only goes to show that the offering to obscure gods of an object of sacrifice is something to which few subjects can resist succumbing, as if under some monstrous spell” (1977:275).

¹¹ Andrew McKenna, in his *Violence and Difference: Girard, Derrida, and Deconstruction* (1992), seems at times to perform precisely this kind of reduction or conflation. To the extent that Girard’s analysis of scapegoating has changed over the years, however, it has been to move in the direction of such a reduction.

world,” Girard comments, “seems almost like a synonym for ‘sacrificial crisis,’” though he concedes that the modern world has succeeded somehow in maintaining society without succumbing to the reciprocal violence of individuals against one another (1977:188).

It is not our purpose here to debate the merits of the Girardian interpretation of events of persecution relative to Agamben’s interpretation of the specific event of the Holocaust. The point is to underscore how Agamben’s discussion departs from any anthropological approach to violence, stressing as it does the uniqueness of the West and, as typically accompanies such assertions of the West’s uniqueness, its decisiveness for the rest of the world. But Agamben does more than contest the existence of a sacrificial impulse at work in the violence to which we are today exposed. He also disputes the adequacy of Jean-Luc Nancy’s argument (on an issue that perhaps will be more familiar to European readers) that the Western fascination with sacrifice—revealed in the notion that existence is given (it is a gift) and therefore can be sacrificed—determines the particular nature of the West’s violence, more precisely (or more inclusively) that it determines, as Nancy says, “all of the West, in some sense” (1991:21). It is thus as a response to Nancy’s claim that “veritable existence is unsacrificeable . . . the truth of existence *is* that it cannot be sacrificed” (1991:38), with which Agamben agrees, that we should understand Agamben’s statement that “the concept of the ‘unsacrificeable’ too must be seen as insufficient to grasp the violence at issue in modern biopolitics. *Homo sacer* is unsacrificeable, yet he may nevertheless be killed by anyone” (Agamben 1998:113).

The concentration camps for Agamben, therefore, are not the site of a sacrifice, nor of a violence determined by a fascination with sacrifice, but of the invocation and exceeding of the originary political act of sovereignty that produced bare life at the margins of the political realm. Earlier, we pointed out how Agamben’s reading of the sovereign exception draws on Schmitt but also moves the sovereign decision away from particular exigent circumstances, emphasizing instead an originary potentiality. It is in this regard that the juridical “novelty” of the camps should be understood. Certainly, the Nazis inherited and utilized emergency provisions from the preceding Weimar regime. Article 48 of the Weimar constitution permitted the President to suspend fundamental rights “in the case of a grave disturbance or threat to public security” (cited in Agamben 1998:167), and, indeed, different Weimar governments utilized this provision on numerous occasions. To this extent, the Nazi “protective” decree of February 1933 was not without precedent. Its difference, however, as Agamben stresses, lay in the omission of any reference to a factual state of emergency. As such, it was a “willed excep-

tion”—a permanent state of emergency that dissolved any coherent distinction between norm and exception. Agamben writes:

The sovereign no longer limits himself, as he did in the spirit of the Weimar constitution, to deciding on the exception on the basis of recognizing a given factual situation (danger to public safety): laying bare the inner structure of the ban that characterizes his power, he now de facto produces the situation as a consequence of his decision on the exception. . . . *The camp is a hybrid of law and fact in which the two terms have become indistinguishable.* (p. 170, Agamben's emphasis)

Here once again we are forced to question Agamben's teleological mode of thought. Is this sovereign power represented in the concentration camps really a constitutive feature of sovereignty *tout court*? Even limiting ourselves to the remarks above, we can imagine a liberal critique of this position that asks from where come the limitations that Agamben concedes previous Weimar governments had observed. Surely, one does not have to accept in its entirety a normative liberal conception of sovereign power in order to appreciate that the demand for a factual accounting for the decision on the exception, and institutional checks upon the totalization of the space of exception, can nonetheless—at least in certain instances—be effective. Indeed, one could go further and suggest that a liberal theory of sovereign power understands full well the paradoxical relation between law and fact, norm and exception; and, precisely in light of such an understanding constructs an institutional system that cannot resolve the paradox but nonetheless attempts to prevent it from reaching an intensified and catastrophic conclusion. Given that Agamben is a nuanced and fair-minded thinker, one must wonder about why he largely ignores such a system. We think that one possible answer is that, just as for Agamben the source of the problem is not the institutional operation of sovereign power, but its object—bare life—so too the solution is not a proliferation of institutional safeguards but a rethinking of that mode of being. In this regard, we find his concluding musings on Heidegger to be suggestive.

If we accept Agamben's general thesis, however, we must ask what consequences necessarily flow from it: "When life and politics—originally divided, and linked together by means of the no-man's-land of the state of exception that is inhabited by bare life—begin to become one, all life becomes sacred and all politics becomes the exception" (1998:148). The issue is whether or not it is possible to deny that questions of law are becoming indistinguishable from questions of fact, that death (as in the case of the "overcomatose" patient) is becoming indistinguishable from life, and so on. If, in fact, it is not possible to deny this, the issue becomes whether or not we can maintain that this indistinguishability has less to do with the blurring of previously dis-

tinguishable objects (and with what specifically these objects are) and more with a general inability to delimit clear boundaries that attends the modern “condition.” In other words, a liberal critique such as we have just discussed would demand simply that distinguishability be maintained—if necessary, reestablished—as the sufficient response to the situation Agamben describes. At its most basic level, beyond being directed against Agamben’s understanding of potentiality, this criticism asks how the constitution of the political realm could operate otherwise than *either* through the separation of bare life at the margins of the *polis* as the condition of any political life as such, *or* through the placing of life as such at the center of the political sphere as the bearer of politically meaningful characteristics. Yet another version of this same question would ask if the citizen is really a fiction, as Agamben asserts (1998:131), or rather a precarious reality that grants (even if the fiction, perhaps necessarily, describes this as a preservation of) our “natural” rights. Nonetheless, if we follow Agamben, we are confronted with (ourselves as) “a new living dead man, a new sacred man” (p. 131). This is the logical and seemingly unstoppable logic of democratization. As Agamben says:

If anything characterizes modern democracy as opposed to classical democracy, then, it is that modern democracy presents itself from the beginning as a vindication and liberation of *zoē*, and that it is constantly trying to transform its own bare life into a way of life and to find, so to speak, the *bios* of *zoē*. Hence, too, modern democracy’s specific aporia: it wants to put the freedom and happiness of men into play in the very place—“bare life”—that marked their subjection. (1998:9–10)

If for Agamben we stand today at the final threshold beyond which we cannot pass without unleashing disaster, and if this situation has been produced by the conclusion and exhaustion of thought as much as if not more than of politics,¹² he does offer us an alternative to crossing this threshold. The categories of Western thought, whether in the form of metaphysics or of various disciplines such as medicine, politics, and jurisprudence, have reached their limit in confronting the biopolitical situation of today, and herein lies the promise of renewal. “If life, in modern biopolitics,” Agamben writes, “is immediately politics, here this unity, which itself has the form of an irrevocable decision, withdraws from every external decision and appears as an indissoluble cohesion in which it is impossible to isolate something like a bare life. In the state of exception become the rule, the life

¹² The “‘politicization’ of bare life,” Agamben states, is “the metaphysical task *par excellence*,” a task through which “the humanity of living man is decided. In assuming this task, modernity does nothing other than declare its faithfulness to the essential structure of the metaphysical tradition” (p. 8). We do not have time here to explore the objections that might be raised in connection to this characterization.

of *homo sacer*, which was the correlate of sovereign power, turns into an existence over which power no longer seems to have any hold” (p. 153). A “new politics,” that is, is possible, starting from a break with the metaphysical tradition of the West and its politicization of bare life.

What are we to make of such a possibility? Agamben has in mind a politics that would begin from the indistinguishability today of life and law, of *zoē* and *bios*, and from the impossibility of returning to a time when any such distinction could be maintained, to a time, that is, when bare life could be “separated and excepted, either in the state order or in the figure of human rights” (p. 134). This new politics would be a politics *without relation*, for, as we recall, it is *as* relation that the politics of the West (or the West *as* politics) are (or is) destined to exhaustion in the ever-present potentiality of (bio)politics for totalitarianism. For all that, though, this “new politics” and the promises it enfolds remains obscure. There is in this regard something disappointing about the final paragraph of *Homo Sacer*, in which, after the frequently brilliant exegesis that led up to it, Agamben concludes that

[j]ust as the biopolitical body of the West cannot be simply given back to its natural life in the *oikos*, so it cannot be overcome in a passage to a new body—a technical body or a wholly political or glorious body—in which a different economy of pleasures and vital functions would once and for all resolve the interlacement of *zoē* and *bios* that seems to define the political destiny of the West. This biopolitical body that is bare life must itself instead be transformed into the site for the constitution and installation of a form of life that is wholly exhausted in bare life and a *bios* that is only its own *zoē*. . . . Today *bios* lies in *zoē* exactly as essence, in the Heideggerian definition of *Dasein*, lies (*liegt*) in existence. Yet how can a *bios* be only its own *zoē*, how can a form of life seize hold of the very *haplōs* that constitutes both the task and the enigma of Western metaphysics? If we give the name form-of-life to this being that is only its own bare existence and to this life that, being its own form, remains inseparable from it, we will witness the emergence of a field of research beyond the terrain defined by the intersection of politics and philosophy, medico-biological sciences and jurisprudence. First, however, it will be necessary to examine how it was possible for something like bare life to be conceived within these disciplines, and how the historical development of these very disciplines has brought them to a limit beyond which they cannot venture without risking an unprecedented biopolitical catastrophe. (p. 188)

It is difficult, given what has preceded, to understand how “[i]n the state of exception become the rule, the life of *homo sacer*, which was the correlate of sovereign power, turns into an

existence over which power no longer seems to have any hold” (p. 153). But the reference to Heidegger is crucial.

In his discussion of the overlaps of Nazism and Heideggerian philosophy, Agamben determines the point of divergence to be the former’s attachment of values to what are posed as facts:

Nazism determines the bare life of *homo sacer* in a biological and eugenic key, making it into the site of an incessant decision on value and nonvalue in which biopolitics continually turns into thanatopolitics and in which the camp, consequently, becomes the absolute political space. In Heidegger, on the other hand, *homo sacer*—whose very own life is always at issue in its every act—instead becomes Dasein, the inseparable unity of Being and ways of Being, of subject and qualities, life and world, “whose own Being is at issue in its very Being.” (p. 153)

Whether we find this resolution to the problem of a (dangerous) proximity between Nazism and Heidegger’s thought to be adequate cannot be decided here. The point is that the alternative to “unprecedented biopolitical catastrophe” that Agamben offers depends upon the ability to maintain precisely such a distance between *homo sacer* and Dasein. Beyond the issue of the difficulties that may or may not attend the maintenance of this distance, we might also ask whether Dasein in this sense is truly able to resist the exercise of power, to *except itself* from the sovereign’s decision on the value or nonvalue of life as such—and, if not, whether this very inability is important to Agamben’s sense of the “new politics.” And finally, how is this distance and its maintenance less problematical than the maintenance of the distance supported by the liberal position as essential to its sense of politics or the maintenance of the distance demanded by Arendt as requisite for her view of the political? Agamben’s resolution of the problem is in fact reminiscent of his description of modern democracy.

Should we conclude, then, that the new politics is different from modern democracy in that the new politics *subjects us* to our “freedom and happiness?” This is a very real possibility (one that we see at work everywhere around us), but it is not so new after all and not necessarily political in any important way. It is perhaps unlikely that this would be Agamben’s view, but here we simply note that the answer to the question of what the “new politics” is about awaits a fuller treatment from Agamben and that such treatment is eagerly anticipated.

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