

A Thousand Agambens to Replace the One We Have

Tim Christiaens

Krisis 42 (1): 134-139.

Review of

Adam Kotsko. 2020. *Agamben's Philosophical Trajectory*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Keywords

Agamben, Kotsko, Potentiality, Museification, Homo Sacer, COVID-19

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.21827/krisis.42.1.37938>

Licence

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License International License (CC BY 4.0). © 2022 The author(s).

A Thousand Agambens to Replace the One We Have

Tim Christiaens

Whoever has read a Giorgio Agamben chapter or essay has probably wondered about one of his peculiar stylistic habits: he often writes disconnected paragraphs on widely diverging topics. On a single page, he mixes a philological remark about Aristotle, criticisms of Hobbes, and Benjaminian musings about divine violence. Nonetheless, readers are always struck by the intuition that these disparate paragraphs evoke a unified argument. They never doubt that these statements have a single clear message, however disconnected their topics. Agamben freely associates across the history of Western thought, yet every statement forms a microcosm bearing the signature of the entire chapter. Readers themselves are consequently tasked with reconstructing the underlying idea that animates these diverse remarks. They take on the role of psychoanalysts decoding the sentences as symptoms of an implicit apparatus pulling the strings from behind a curtain of words. This temptation to decipher an *arché*-text behind Agamben's explicit discourse has convinced many interpreters to look for a single philosophical problematic not only in Agamben's essays or chapters, but also in his overall philosophical oeuvre. Leland De La Durantaye, for instance, argues that Agamben's philosophical trajectory is one singular sustained meditation on potentiality (De La Durantaye 2009). He argues that Agamben journeys through metaphysics, political philosophy, and linguistics to ultimately come to terms with what it means for a human subject to have the potential to do something and to have that potential taken away from them when they are reduced to the status of bare life. Sergei Prozorov, on the other hand, reads Agamben's itinerary as a persistent attempt to escape sovereign politics (Prozorov 2014). In this reading, even books on arcane topics in animal biology or theology serve to reflect upon the political opportunities to escape the power of the State. Agamben himself has encouraged such readings by often presenting his oeuvre as if it were motivated by a single purpose. In the epilogue of *The Use of Bodies*, for instance, he writes that he wanted to "call into question the place and the very originary structure of politics, in order to bring to light the *arcanum imperii*" (Agamben 2015, 263). After all, one does not write a multiple-book project spanning 20 years and 9 books if one does not believe to be engaged in a single philosophical inquiry.

Such readings have become troublesome during the last few years due to the Corona Pandemic. Agamben has become notorious for his criticisms of governmental policies like lockdowns, vaccination requirements, and social distancing.¹ There are clear similarities between Agamben's opposition to these policies and his critique of modern biopolitics in books like *Homo Sacer*, so one cannot simply dismiss Agamben's controversial political interventions as somehow unrelated to his overall philosophy. There is no way of distinguishing clearly between Agamben the philosopher and Agamben the person in this debate. It is thus tempting to re-read Agamben's entire oeuvre as a prefiguration of his political missteps today. If Agamben's critique of modern biopolitics leads to wrongheaded opinions today was Agamben's approach then not absurd all along? The pandemic subsequently becomes the new *arché*-text for the interpretation of Agamben's philosophical development (cf. Bratton 2021). The downside of

this approach is that other, more interesting potential readings of Agamben's oeuvre are marginalized in favour of one master narrative.

Adam Kotsko's *Agamben's Philosophical Trajectory*, however, takes aim at this monolithic interpretive strategy. He even chooses not to mention the Coronavirus Pandemic to avoid such kind of distractions. The aforementioned reading strategy ignores the multifarious shifts and turns in Agamben's philosophical career and even in the "Homo Sacer"-project itself. Agamben frequently changed his mind about the ordering of the books in the overall project, often rephrased earlier arguments to fit newer concerns, and he even added chapters to *Stasis* and *The Use of Bodies* at the very end, when the project was published separately in an omnibus edition. These are not signs of a man who, with the publication of *Homo Sacer* in 1995, knew exactly how the project would end in 2014. Nor is it very likely that Agamben would have already developed his entire philosophy from the start of his career, as some claim. Many concepts vanish or are rearticulated over the course of a career that spans more than 50 years. Whoever reads about Aristotle's distinction between potentiality and act in *The Man without Content*, Agamben's first book, will not recognize the "official" Agambenian interpretation from almost 30 years later. Concepts central to his thought at some point, like "Voice", "whatever being", or "testimony", simply disappear in later books.

Kotsko chooses a different approach to writing an overview of Agamben's oeuvre. His concern does not rest on the discernment of a single philosophical apparatus animating all of Agamben's individual writings. Other interpreters tend to reduce Agamben's books to steps in a uniform argument about a single problematic, like potentiality, anti-sovereign politics, or pandemic biopolitics. But, if this were truly possible, then why would Agamben ever have written more than one book? If all his texts amount to the same argument anyway, it seems that Agamben could have spared himself the trouble of publishing almost 40 books. Kotsko, on the contrary, has read all books in chronological order and simply reports his findings without striving toward a unified message. Aided by personal conversations with Agamben, he carefully tracks the multiple thought processes, the promising hypotheses, and creative conclusions, but also the mistakes, hesitations, and inconsistencies across Agamben's texts to highlight the discontinuities. Kotsko's meticulous reading dismantles all hope of finding a single *arché*-text in Agamben. He rather divides Agamben's philosophical trajectory roughly into four periods, though he emphasizes that there is never any hard break akin to a Heideggerian *Kehre*. Old thoughts or assumptions never truly disappear, but become rearticulated into new contexts. Likewise, concepts that seem to be new are often already signaled in earlier texts without being fully elaborated upon.

In the first phase, between the 1960s and '80s, Agamben is an almost aggressively apolitical thinker interested in art and linguistics. If one would stop reading before the '90s, there would be no way of guessing that Agamben would become one of the most famous political theorists today. He was entirely enveloped in philosophy of art and the establishment of a so-called "general science of the human" built on a critique of structuralist linguistics. According to Agamben, the structuralist definition of language as a system of signs ignored that language actualizes itself only through human beings actually speaking that language. This created, for Agamben, a productive rift in language

itself between the fixities of its signifying system and its incarnation in human speech. Agamben believed, in that stage of his career, that (political) philosophy had ignored this rift and that poetry was a superior medium for reflecting on humanity's linguistic condition. Only in the 1990s did Agamben enter a second stage of his philosophical itinerary with a turn to the political. Though he previously had held the politics of his time in dire contempt, his friendships with Guy Debord and Jean-Luc Nancy, together with his worries about the emergence of refugee camps in Italy after the Yugoslav Civil War, convinced him to start studying politics. He fears that the state of exception is the ultimate truth of modern biopolitical government: once the State apparatus and the survival of the population is put under pressure, governments tend to suspend democratic participation and the Rule of Law. Ultimately, the State itself and its violent response to social disruption paradoxically becomes the main threat to people's survival. Here, Agamben embarks on the "Homo Sacer"-project that would define the rest of his career. This is also the period where Agamben reaches the peak of his fame with books like *Homo Sacer*, *State of Exception*, and *The Time that Remains*.

In a third phase, at the end of the 2000s, Agamben turns increasingly to the history of Christian theology. He becomes convinced that an adequate critique of Western modernity must reckon with the latter's roots in medieval Christianity. In books like *The Kingdom and the Glory*, *Opus Dei*, and *The Highest Poverty*, Agamben stresses the ways Christianity has given rise to modern capitalist government. This strategy allows Agamben not only to critique of (neo)liberal economics as secularized theology, but also to incorporate Foucault's newly published governmentality lectures and to finally articulate the link between his own critique of modernity and that of Debord, which was explicitly promised in the introduction to *Homo Sacer*. He argues that Debord's pessimistic analysis of the modern public sphere as a big capitalist spectacle was pre-figured in the way the medieval Church supported its popular legitimacy through strict rituals and grandiose iconography. Just like the Church kept up the illusion of an authoritative God through rituals that cunningly suggested God's glory without ever having to prove it, the State and capitalism sustain their legitimacy through the illusion of public debate and ceremonial displays of power. This is also the period that Agamben starts reflecting more thoroughly on his philosophical method, mainly in *The Signature of All Things*. *Homo Sacer* had given rise to multiple misunderstandings about the way Agamben formulated his political philosophy, so Agamben felt he needed to clarify the contours of his basic methodological concepts like "paradigm", "signature", and "archaeology". In phase four, which spans from when Agamben started working on *The Use of Bodies* to today, he has increasingly looked back on his philosophical life with more autobiographical writings, like his autoritratto, and books that discuss the fundamentals of his oeuvre or return to his earliest interests, like *What is Philosophy?* or *Adventure*. Now that the "Homo Sacer"-project is finished, Agamben has taken the opportunity to reflect on his philosophical career and to delve into some side-projects that he failed to incorporate in earlier volumes. Though Kotsko does not mention them, Agamben's Corona essays can also be understood as a late side-project where Agamben tries to come to terms with his own legacy. And one can rightly be skeptical about whether this Agamben succeeds at living up to his former self (Esposito 2020).

Kotsko discourages the reader to decipher a single master narrative hidden in all of Agamben's works. The entire oeuvre is rather a multitude of attempts to engage with manifold, different topics. Agamben has tried to balance his own personal creative insights with adequately responding to the challenges of his days, and both have shifted over the years. However, that does not mean all of Agamben's works are simply stand-alone pieces with no internal consistency. Agamben frequently recapitulates and rearticulates old ideas to put them to work in new contexts. He is, above all, interested in the so-called "Entwicklungsfähigkeit" of philosophical concepts. He takes concepts from their original contexts and puts them together to generate developmental capacities that were not present in the original context. By, for instance, confronting Foucault's analysis of biopolitics with Carl Schmitt's theory of sovereignty in *Homo Sacer*, Agamben managed to produce reflections that were only vaguely present in both of these authors' own texts. The aim has always been to experiment with the inherent productivity of concepts, which means Agamben has never been the master of his own discourse, but has rather been following where the concepts' developmental capacities led him.

Kotsko calls for a similar approach to Agamben's own concepts: "I aim [...] to prepare the ground for a thousand Agambens to bloom – in their own enigmatic, idiosyncratic, and fascinating ways" (Kotsko 2020, 13). In reading Agamben's oeuvre – or any philosophical text for that matter – the audience actively reconstructs the text's developmental capacities. This constitutes a creative encounter that cannot be simply replicated for everyone in exactly the same way. Each reader must uniquely gauge the potential of the text. Every singular encounter with Agamben's writings can give rise to a new Agamben that is not necessarily compatible to all other readings. This implies, for instance, that Agamben's particular response to the Corona Pandemic is not necessarily the only "Agambenian" response imaginable. Other readings of his work can be provided with other outcomes. To mention just one example, one could use his concept of "bare life" not to criticize lockdowns, but rather to criticize the precarization of essential workers. While many middle-class families have been working from home in relative comfort, working-class individuals have had to expose themselves to the risk of infection to keep themselves financially afloat (cf. Butler & Yance 2020, De Cauwer & Christiaens 2021). To use a Foucaultian metaphor, Kotsko repurposes Agamben's philosophy as a conceptual toolbox with which the philosophers of the future can build new theoretical edifices. Kotsko himself suggests to redirect Agambenian thought to issues of race, gender, or environmentalism, but one can readily imagine even more *Entwicklungsfähigkeiten* for Agamben, like digital ethics, neo-fascist populism, or financialization. As the Corona Pandemic has demonstrated, a single Agamben can be deeply flawed, but a 1000 Agambens might be up to the task of prying open the *arcana imperii* of contemporary politics.

There is, however, one serious risk in Kotsko's strategy that his book leaves untouched. Though I agree with his proposal to repurpose Agamben's oeuvre as a polyvalent toolbox, I doubt whether Kotsko has adequately identified his intellectual opponent. It might be true that, in the past, many Agamben scholars have organized his thought under a single header. The same trend can be found in the earliest introductions to Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, or Michel Foucault. Many

secondary literatures on “new” thinkers go through a phase of scholars presenting the philosophers’ thought as a uniform project. Once this overview has been established, however, critics emphasize the uniqueness of particular books or discontinuities in a philosopher’s development. Especially when archives open up and collected works are being published, scholars leave the general narrative behind to focus on the particulars. With Agamben as well, the last few years have predominantly seen publications on particular themes in Agamben’s overall oeuvre rather than general overviews. Though such attention to detail delivers fascinating new insights, there is also a looming danger of reducing the writings of these thinkers to stand-alone museum pieces that communicate nothing but their mere useless presence. Like a Greek vase in a museum only presented in order to be admired and catalogued but never used, philosophical concepts can suffer from sclerotic museification as well. Instead of putting philosophers like Wittgenstein or Foucault to use as conceptual toolboxes, scholars subsequently argue over whether the word “game” has the same meaning in two different aphorisms of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* or they merely list the 14 different meanings of the word “norm” in Foucault’s lectures from January 1974 to February 1975. These concepts are withdrawn from the sphere of general use and put on a pedestal to be admired, described, and categorized. Such detailed philological scrutiny is essential to proper philosophical research, but if the underlying concepts lose their connection to the world they describe, the whole endeavour becomes pointless. Agamben himself is no stranger to the minutiae of philology, but he has also been the victim of a professorial class that endlessly complains about his creative readings not being “true” to authors’ original intentions. Agamben’s interpretations of impotentiality in Aristotle, boredom in Heidegger, or bare life in Benjamin might not have been entirely up to date with contemporary philological research, but they have withheld these philosophers from becoming useless museum pieces in an entirely self-referential hall of the Western Canon. *Philosophical Investigations*, *Discipline and Punish*, or *Homo Sacer* have been written to reflect on the human condition, not to be archived in a sterile history of the philosophy curriculum. By defending the chronological reading of Agamben with a focus on the discontinuities, Kotsko might encourage the blossoming of a 1000 Agambens reflecting on issues of race, gender, or the environment, but he might likewise be playing in the hands of the museum curators who want to keep the 1000 Agambens safe behind protective glass. The emphasis on discontinuity should thus be coupled on an equally vocal emphasis on use over curation. Though Kotsko himself explicitly makes this connection, it is up to future Agamben scholarship to keep this project alive.

Notes

1 See Agamben (2021). Some of the initial responses are collected in Castrillón & Marchevsky (2021).

References

- Agamben, Giorgio. 2015. *The Use of Bodies*. Translated by Adam Kotsko. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Agamben, Giorgio. 2021. *Where Are We Now? The Epidemic as Politics*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Bratton, Benjamin. 2021. "Agamben WTF, or how Philosophy Failed the Pandemic." *Verso Blog*, 21 July, 2021. <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/5125-agamben-wtf-or-how-philosophy-failed-the-pandemic>.
- Butler, Judith & George Yancy. 2020. "Interview: Mourning Is a Political Act Amid the Pandemic and Its Disparities." *Bioethical Inquiry* 17: 483–487.
- Castrillón, Fernando & Thomas Marchevsky. 2021. *Coronavirus, Psychoanalysis, and Philosophy*. London: Routledge.
- De Cauwer, Stijn & Tim Christiaens. 2021. "The Multitude Divided: Biopolitical Production during the Coronavirus Pandemic." In *Pandemic and the Crisis of Capitalism*, edited by Yahya Madra et al, 118–127. Brighton: ReMarx Books.
- De La Durantaye, Leland. 2009. *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Esposito, Roberto. 2020. "The Biopolitics of Immunity in Times of COVID-19: Interview with Roberto Esposito: Interview Conducted by Tim Christiaens & Stijn De Cauwer." *Antipode Online*, 16 July, 2021. <https://antipodeonline.org/2020/06/16/interview-with-roberto-esposito/>.
- Kotsko, Adam. 2021. *Agamben's Philosophical Trajectory*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Prozorov, Sergei. 2014. *Agamben and Politics: A Critical Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Biography

Tim Christiaens is assistant professor of philosophy of culture and economic ethics at Tilburg University. He has written his PhD on the history of governmentality in Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben and he is currently working on the impact of platform capitalism on work and workers' autonomy.