

AGAMBEN, GIORGIO

Giorgio Agamben (1942—) is an Italian philosopher best known for his work on sovereignty and the state of exception, but who has written on a wide variety of topics, including language, aesthetics, ethics, and metaphysics. Some of Agamben's most important work takes up themes from Nancy's thought, sometimes explicitly and other times more indirectly. Agamben engages Nancy's thought most directly in his book *Homo Sacer*, where he argues that abandonment, an idea Nancy had developed in the essay 'Abandoned Being', constitutes 'the originary juridico-political relation' (Agamben, 1998: 109). Nancy advances a conception of abandonment on the basis of its etymological root, *bandon*, which has the sense of 'an order, a prescription, a decree, a permission, and the power that holds these freely at its disposal' (*BP*, 43-44). To abandon is to remit or turn over to the *ban* of a sovereign power. In abandonment, one is not answerable to any particular, contentful law, but rather to 'law as such and in its entirety' (*BP*, 44). The point that Agamben emphasizes in the account of sovereignty he develops in *Homo Sacer* is that the law applies in its withdrawal. The sovereign, according to Carl Schmitt's famous definition, is 'he who decides on the state of exception' (Schmitt, 2006: 5). As such, the sovereign occupies an ambiguous position, standing both within the political order (as the one who gives its law) and outside it (as the one authorized to suspend the legal order). In the sovereign, then, we find an excess of potential law over any particular posited law. Even if the sovereign does not make use of this excess, it remains present potentially. The excess of potential law corresponds to what Nancy had called 'the law as such and in its totality'. To live within a political state, structured by the logic of sovereignty, is to be delivered over to a pure potentiality of law, which 'is valid precisely insofar as it commands nothing and has become unrealizable' (Agamben, 1999: 127). Agamben believes it is important to move beyond the conception of abandonment that Nancy articulates, since that conception 'does nothing other than repeat the ontological structure' of sovereignty (Agamben, 1998: 59).

A second major Nancian theme that Agamben takes up is that of community. Although the text makes no explicit mention of Nancy, Agamben's *The Coming Community* can certainly be understood as responding to the problematic that Nancy developed in *The Inoperative Community*. Nancy's task in that book is to think community outside the model of immanentism, i.e., outside the ideal of the community as 'organic communion with its own essence', where 'each member identifies himself only through the supplementary mediation of his identification with the living body of the community' (*IC*, 9). Nancy argues that community is not, and could never have been, the kind of organic whole, fully present to itself, that is posited by the ideal of immanentism. Rather, community is constituted by the interruption of that presence. Agamben undertakes a similar project in *The Coming Community*, advancing a conception of community that would not be mediated 'by any condition of belonging (being red, being Italian, being Communist)' but that would be constituted rather by the co-belonging of singularities without identity (Agamben 1993: 85). In later works, including *Homo Sacer*, *Means Without End*, and *The Time That Remains*, Agamben makes explicit use of the idea of inoperativity, which must not be understood either as 'the simple absence of work' or as 'a sovereign and useless form of negativity', but rather as 'a generic mode of potentiality'

(Agamben, 1998: 62). Community, he argues, must be rethought on the basis of a conception of human beings as ‘beings that cannot be defined by any proper operation—that is, as beings of pure potentiality that no identity or vocation can possibly exhaust’ (Agamben, 2000: 141).

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