

# **The Politics of Nothing**

## **On Sovereignty**

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## The Ends of Stasis: Spinoza as a Reader of Agamben

Dimitris Vardoulakis

**Abstract** *Agamben contends that 'There is ... no such thing as a stasiology, a theory of stasis or civil war' in the western understanding of sovereignty. His own vision of a politics beyond biopolitics explicitly culminates in the end of stasis. How can we understand Agamben's political theology by investigating his use of stasis? Stasis is particularly suited to an inquiry into political theology. It is linked to politics, since its primary meaning is political change, revolution, or civil war, as well as to the theological, since it denotes immobility or immutability, which were attributes of God. Stasis, then, presents the simultaneous presence and absence that exemplifies the unassimilable relation of the sacred and the secular in political theology. The question is: Does Agamben remain true to this unassimilable relation? Or does he betray it the moment he calls for an end to biopolitics? Agamben's reading of Spinoza will provide useful clues in answering these questions.*

### I. On stasis

In a paper titled 'The State of Exception', Agamben contends that 'There is ... no such thing as a stasiology, a theory of stasis or civil war' in the western understanding of sovereignty (Agamben 2005a: 284–85).<sup>1</sup> His own vision of a politics beyond biopolitics explicitly culminates in the end of stasis:

Only a politics that will have learned to take the fundamental biopolitical fracture of the West into account will be able ... to put an end to the civil war that divides the peoples and the cities of the earth. (Agamben 1998: 180)<sup>2</sup>

Agamben first calls for the inclusion of stasis in the determination of the political only so that stasis is excluded from politics. This strategy is revealing, because Agamben's definition of the sovereign rests precisely on the logic of inclusory exclusion. Eva Geulen has called this 'the logic of the exception' but it can equally be called the 'logic of the sovereign' or even the 'logic of

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<sup>1</sup>This paragraph and its call for a stasiology can be read as a summary of Agamben's argument in the second sequel to the *Homo Sacer* project, *State of Exception* (Agamben 2005b).

<sup>2</sup>The same statement can also be found in Agamben 2000: 35.

politics' (Geulen 2005: 73–82). The present paper will examine Agamben's theory of sovereignty by comparing his call for an end to stasis with his logic of inclusory exclusion.

The word 'stasis' (στάσις) means, on the one hand, immobility, stability, status quo; and, on the other, it means mobility, upheaval, revolution.<sup>3</sup> Both these contradictory meanings of stasis underlie political discourse. Stasis is the root of the word for the 'state' in English – as well as the equivalent words in all languages which derive the name for the body politic from Latin, such as 'Staat' in German. Thomas Hobbes, however, rendered stasis as 'sedition' in his translation of Thucydides' *Histories*.<sup>4</sup> The same word, then, represents both the sovereign power and the power of revolt or even civil war. Stasis establishes the constellation of relations of the impossible possibility of the political (see Vardoulakis 2009).

As soon as the political is tied to the 'impossible possibility' of a word, the question inevitably arises of a politics of reading. The way words are read is symptomatic of the status of the theoretical construction of the political. In addition, as Bauman observes, 'resistance to definition sets the limit to sovereignty' (Bauman 1990: 166). This politics of reading arises from within stasis itself, because stasis has a third meaning, disease or infection. Disease will allow for the other two – mobility and immobility, the status quo and the revolution – to come in a productive relation. As will be shown, the way the third meaning of stasis is used within a discourse about politics determines how sovereignty as well as revolution is understood. I will argue that disease points to a nothing at the core of sovereignty, in the sense that there is something unconditional which organises political discourse.

The admonition to 'put an end to the civil war that divides the peoples and the cities of the earth' is, then, not a simple statement against civil war. Rather, it is indicative of the operation of stasis in Agamben's political philosophy. The different meanings of stasis enact the juncture between civil war and the sovereign – 'the proximity between civil war and the state of exception' in Agamben's formulation. For this reason, the way the three meanings of stasis – mobility, immobility, and disease – are related in a particular discourse is simultaneously the articulation of that discourse's notion of the sovereign. Agamben's logic of inclusory exclusion, then, is produced by stasis's dual aspect: being created, on the one hand, through the specific articulation of its elements, while being creative, on the other, of the sovereign.

The sovereign in Agamben arises out of passivity, which is extrapolated in terms of disease – that is, in terms of one of stasis's meanings. Passivity or disease as the foundation of sovereignty results in a rupture between the

<sup>3</sup> See the entry for stasis in Liddell and Scott (1973). The most significant book on stasis is Nicole Loraux's *The Divided City* (2006). The most thorough philological study on the use of stasis in classical Greek sources is Hans-Joachim Gehrke, *Stasis* (1985); see also Kostas Kalimtzis, *Aristotle on Political Enmity and Disease* (2000).

<sup>4</sup> This translation, published in 1629, was Hobbes' first significant work.

political and law.<sup>5</sup> Agamben articulates this rupture as the separation of ethics from politics. Agamben's references to Spinoza will show the effect the politics of reading has on the political. Spinoza, the philosopher of joy, is incorporated in Agamben's opposing project that privileges disease. Thus the Spinozan corpus rehearses the logic of inclusion followed by exclusion that characterises Agamben's stasiology. Therefore, Spinoza's corpus allows for a critical reading of Agamben. Spinoza becomes a reader of Agamben in the sense that a critique of Agamben will arise out of his reading of Spinoza. There is no secured outside – no separate criteria – which affords a critique of Agamben. This is important because Agamben posits such an outside in order to legitimate both his notion of the political and his practice of reading.

I will first show how the three meanings of stasis organise Agamben's conception of the political. I will then demonstrate how Agamben's references to Spinoza are crucial in allowing for a theoretical perspective on stasis. The way this is done, I will argue, shows that singularity is absent from Agamben's notion of the political. At that point I will explain how the absence of singularity is interconnected with Agamben's practice of reading, leading to a politics of reading. I will conclude by indicating how stasis can allow for a different construal of sovereignty from the one espoused by Agamben.

## II. Passive politics

The arrangement of the three different meanings of stasis – mobility, immobility, and disease – is indicative of the construal of the sovereign in Agamben. The distinctive feature of Agamben's political philosophy is the privileging of passivity as disease. The paradigm of passivity for Agamben is the *Muselmann*. That was the name given to the most abject inmates in the Nazi concentration camps described by Primo Levi and others. The *Muselmann* is 'a being from whom humiliation, horror, and fear has so taken away all consciousness and all personality as to make him absolutely apathetic' (Agamben 1998: 185). Absolute apathy is disease.

Agamben's term 'biopolitics' signifies a double basis of the political: the exclusion of the biological or 'bare life' – the exclusion of passivity – from the public sphere, only for it to be re-introduced by sovereign power.<sup>6</sup> The separation of bare life from public life as 'the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power' (Agamben 1998: 6). The *sine qua non* of this logic of politics is a diseased body thoroughly separated from politics.

<sup>5</sup> See Agamben 1998: 1–3, and *passim*. Agamben often refers to bare life as *zoe* and to political life as *bios*, and he traces their separation back to Aristotle. It is curious – to the point of being spurious – to suppose such a distinction in Aristotle. The most cursory reading of either the *Nicomachean Ethics* or the *Politics* will show that Aristotle's favourite expression to refer to the aim of politics is *to eu zen*, the happy life, of the citizen. For example, in *Politics* 1280b Aristotle says: 'τέλος μὲν οὖν πόλεως τὸ εὖ ζῆν' [the aim of the polis is the happy life].

<sup>6</sup> The term 'biopolitics' is borrowed from Foucault. For a discussion of Agamben's curious reading of Foucault's last chapter of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* see Fitzpatrick (2001: 13–14). Fitzpatrick also questions Agamben's reading of the term *homo sacer* in Roman law.

The *Muselmann's* apathy offers, according to Agamben, an alternative politics. As an 'absolutely apathetic' body, the *Muselmann* 'no longer belongs to the world of men in any way. Mute and absolutely alone, he passes into another world' (Agamben 1998: 185). The disease of the *Muselmann* places him in a realm of the outside. Agamben defines this 'other world' as a space of 'an absolute indistinction of fact and law, of life and juridical order, of nature and politics' (Agamben 1998: 185). This enacts the traditional sovereign gesture of violence separating passion and action, the animal and the human; but it also reconfigures human agency as an auto-affection, leading to a new definition of the human: '[Fundamental passivity] undergoes and suffers its own being ... Every human power is *adynamia*' (Agamben 1999b: 182). Passivity indicates the negativity pervading Agamben's redefinition of the human.

Through fundamental passivity Agamben's new subject internalises the founding sovereign violence and hence coincides with the sovereign. Agamben's notion of sovereignty is located at the point where passivity and activity enter a zone of indistinction. This zone exhibits the internalised conflict – or stasis as immobility – between the *Muselmann* and the sovereign. In Agamben's challenging formulation, 'in the person of the Führer, bare life passes immediately into law, just as in the person of the camp inhabitant (or neomort) [i.e., the *Muselmann*] law becomes indistinguishable from biological life' (Agamben 1998: 187). In the zone of indistinction crystallises an immobility or stand off between the passive – bare life, the purely biological, the diseased body – and the sovereign. The two become indistinguishable, no effective difference remains between the *Muselmann* and the Führer.

A determination of the law is adjacent to the determination of the sovereign. Agamben insists on a rupture between passivity and law.<sup>7</sup> The sovereign's violence founding the political is grounded on disease or passivity. But disease is ungrounded. The 'naked life' of the diseased is not reducible to a citizen's body framed by statute. Hence an ethics does not coincide with rules and norms – an ethics is incommensurable with politics.<sup>8</sup> This move is crucial in understanding Agamben's stasiology, since it refers to mobility or upheaval – the third element of stasis. Politics and law are indistinct from the point of view of the body's passivity and the sovereign's violence.<sup>9</sup> But simultaneously, from the perspective of mobility, ethics and law are incommensurate. From this insurmountable gap, Agamben will infer that it is possible to separate ethics from politics. This separation is indispensable in Agamben's stasiology, envisioning a politics beyond biopolitics which will 'put an end to the civil war that divides the peoples and cities of the

<sup>7</sup>This separation is presented in various ways in Agamben's works. For instance, it is presented as the separation between constituent and constituted power in Agamben 1998: 43–4, referring to Negri. The same separation between constituent and constituted power is argued for in Agamben (2005b) with recourse to Carl Schmitt (Agamben 2005b: 33, 36, 50, 54)

<sup>8</sup>Bernstein (2004) has critiqued this position.

<sup>9</sup>Erik Vogt correctly notes that, for Agamben, 'boundaries between politics and law are equally indistinguishable, since sovereignty and the sovereign exception are marked too by an inclusive exclusion' (2005: 78).

earth'. For Agamben, the end, or aim, of stasis is the end, or cessation, of the correlation between ethics and politics. The end, in both senses of the word, is built upon the apathetic body of the *Muselmann* stranded in a zone of indistinction.

### III. Absolute immanence, or the passion for theory

There is no theory without recourse to a notion of generality or universality. Founding sovereignty on passivity to the exclusion of the divine entails that a generalised theory becomes problematic. To counteract this, Agamben resorts to the concept of absolute immanence. Absolute immanence is linked to stasiology because 'the extreme situation's lesson is that of absolute immanence'. Agamben defines absolute immanence as a state 'of "everything being in everything"' (Agamben 2002: 50). In his paper titled 'Absolute Immanence', Agamben (1999a) argues that Spinoza fails to present the proper relation between the three elements of stasis.<sup>10</sup> Through this reading, Agamben can forge his own claim to a theory of the political beyond biopolitics.

Absolute immanence is nuanced with recourse to Spinoza's notion of the immanent cause: 'through Spinoza's idea of an immanent cause in which agent and patient coincide, Being is freed from the risk of inertia and immobility' (Agamben 1999a: 226). The coincidence of action and passion is auto-affection, which according to Agamben designates Spinoza's immanent cause. The whole argument depends upon the extrapolation of immanent causality. The example of a self-reflexive verb, *pascarse*, from Spinoza's *Hebrew Grammar*, is taken as the 'equivalent for an immanent cause' in the sense that in it 'agent and patient enter a threshold of absolute indistinction' (Agamben 1999a: 234). Thus, absolute immanence enters a zone of indistinction. Consequently, absolute immanence is 'a potentiality without action' thereby 'being instead the matrix of infinite desubjectification' (Agamben 1999a: 232–33). Agamben contends that this is what Spinoza calls beatitude or blessed life. In the end, Agamben's verdict is that beatitude 'once again produce[s] transcendence', because 'today, blessed life lies on the same terrain as the biopolitical body of the West' (Agamben 1999a: 238–39).<sup>11</sup> In Spinoza, there is no separation between ethics and politics.

Agamben argues that to escape the 'biopolitical body of the West', the experience of desubjectification must be radicalised. For this to be accomplished, a sovereign space must be created in which the subject overcomes the conjunction of the pleasurable and the political. The subject must first enter the zone of indistinction. Agamben presents Spinoza as a precursor, in the sense that the immanent cause is described as creating such a zone. However,

<sup>10</sup>The paper 'Absolute Immanence' is also an interpretation of Deleuze (1997), however, this interpretation will not be discussed here. Agamben also mentions Spinoza elsewhere in his work, but in many cases only as passing references (for example Agamben 1993: 18–19 and 90–91) that will not then be discussed here. Nor will chapter 7 of Agamben 1999b be discussed here, since it is really about Elsa Morante's reading of Spinoza and not Spinoza's work itself at all.

<sup>11</sup>The translation 'biological body' has been amended to 'biopolitical body', since the original text in Italian says 'il corpo biopolitico' (Agamben 1996: 57).

Spinoza is said to have not gone far enough. The subject must be placed *outside* the terrain of biopolitics and blessed life in order to overcome biopolitics. In other words, what is missing in Spinoza is the element of the diseased body – the body of the apathetic *Muselmann*. Only the diseased body can lead to a separation of ethics and politics that will show the end of stasis.

However, Spinoza is re-incorporated in Agamben's project. Rejecting Spinoza's presentation of the immanent cause as a possible description of God, while re-interpreting the immanent cause in terms of desubjectification, enables Agamben to present a unified subject that underwrites his own theory of a politics beyond biopolitics.

Agamben gives his argument a formality through decontextualisation. Such decontextualisation, achieved through the reference to Spinoza's *Hebrew Grammar*, makes generality possible. The desubjectified self is now described as unitary. The witness as a 'unitary center' witnesses only 'an irreducible negativity', that is, pure passivity or disease (see Agamben 2002: 86). What was missing in Spinoza is the grounding of auto-affectation of a purely passive body – an apathetic body whose sensations are internalised. Spinoza glimpsed at such a conception in his *Grammar* but did not fully develop it. This auto-affective state fully *in*-corporates biopolitics. This 'unitary centre' of subjectivity is in a zone of indistinction outside the political beyond rules and norms – in other words, designating stasis's mobility. Even though such disease is ruptured from the political, its inclusion in the zone of indistinction or immobility constitutes the ground of the political. This zone is, for Agamben, produced by the passive, apathetic, diseased body.

Spinoza is presented as Agamben's forerunner in the sense that he grasped biopolitics but was criticised because he did not go far enough.<sup>12</sup> Spinoza is included within Agamben's ambit only in order to be excluded. This reverberation of the biopolitical sovereign logic of inclusion *cum* exclusion elevates Spinoza to a figure of Agambian biopolitics. This is carried out in terms denoting stasis's constellation of meanings. Spinoza's position, Agamben contends, is infected by the lack of disease. Spinoza, especially in his *Grammar*, sets up the conditions to make disease central for the political but he does not include disease in his corpus. Thus Agamben re-enacts on the site of citing Spinoza's construal of embodiment – on Spinoza's body – the gesture *par excellence* of biopolitics. Agamben's stasiological practice of reading Spinoza, therefore, has to do with the body. Spinoza's incorporation ineluctably poses the question: how does Agamben's critique admit of embodiment in his politics?

#### IV. Ineffective subjectivity

The answer is that Agamben needs no notion of embodiment for a politics beyond biopolitics. Agamben's stasiology is predicated upon the absence of singularity. This can only be maintained by eliminating effectivity from a theorisation of the political.

<sup>12</sup> As Adam Thurschwell (2005) has shown, Agamben uses a similar appropriation of Derrida.

The loss of singularity due to the abstraction of the body can be gleaned from the following statement: 'If ... the essence of the camp consists in the materialization of the state of exception, and in the subsequent creation of a space in which bare life and juridical order enter into a threshold of indistinction, then we must admit that we find ourselves in the presence of a camp *every time* such a structure is created, *independent of the kinds of crime that are committed there*' (Agamben 1998: 174). Agamben's ontology is premised on the general or the 'every time', not on effective singularity.<sup>13</sup> It will be recalled that Agamben defines the *Muselmann* as not belonging 'to the world of men' but being instead 'mute and absolutely alone' (Agamben 1998: 185). The sovereign subject resulting from apathy has literally taken everything in: passivity leads to impunity. At this place, instead of the plurality of men, instead of the singularity of each individual case, Agamben's gaze is fastened onto an immaterial image he calls 'the *Muselmann*'.<sup>14</sup> The definite article next to an abstracted substantive means that the syntagm 'the *Muselmann*' functions as an absolute immanence, a subject of 'everything being in everything' (Agamben 2002: 50). This is a subject *for, on, in, through, and by* – but *never with* – with which Agamben's politics of total immanence engages for the future cessation of all civil wars.<sup>15</sup> This totalised subjectivity becomes the ground of the political, despite being placed outside singularity. This is a solitary subject, stranded in its own other-worldly zone of indistinction. From this perspective, Agamben's call for an end to stasis denotes a subject standing alone, a subject that cannot effect any conflict outside itself. Everyone is in everyone, all distinctions – including that of the other and the friend – completely evaporate.<sup>16</sup>

Agamben critiques Spinoza on the grounds that he did not allow for separation. But Agamben's own critique – tautologically – presupposes separation and is separated from Spinoza's discourse. What is the effect of this presupposed mutual support between Agamben's critique and his theory of sovereignty? In other words, how does Agamben's ontology relate to his practice of reading? It would be too easy to point out that the loss of singularity and the effect is contrary to the whole of Spinoza's philosophical project, since both in politics and metaphysics it is crucial how the effects express the

<sup>13</sup> Andreas Kalyvas has also taken Agamben's conception of temporality to task, writing: '*Homo Sacer* returns to a representation of time – the tie of the sovereign – as uniform, one-directional, and rectilinear' (2005: 111). This general position on time, Kalyvas argues, becomes the ground for Agamben's historical extrapolation of sovereignty: 'Sovereign biopolitics ... has uninterruptedly accompanied the ancients and the moderns alike, remaining unaffected by critical events' (2005: 111). The upshot of this understanding of sovereignty as a perennial quality is a loss of singularity: 'By disregarding the distinct aspects of political power, politics is relegated to a single, pejorative version of sovereign power and state authority' (Kalyvas 2005: 115).

<sup>14</sup> Philippe Mesnard (2004) objects precisely to this structure of negative theology in Agamben's discussion of the *Muselmann*.

<sup>15</sup> In Catherine Mills' words: 'What Agamben fails to take into account, though, is that the taking place of enunciation can itself be seen as always a matter of 'being-with' others' (2005: 211).

<sup>16</sup> This corresponds to what Carl Schmitt (1998) calls political romanticism.

cause (see, for instance, Deleuze 1992; Negri 2002; Balibar 1998). What is more interesting is how Agamben's ontology is intimately linked with a practice of reading. Here, stasis brings together critique and the political.

## V. The sovereign reader

Agamben concentrates on Spinoza's *Hebrew Grammar*. As grammatical examples, the examples from the *Hebrew Grammar* are syntagms uttered by nobody in no place. They are linguistic forms placed outside the effects and use of language. As Nicholas Chare puts it, 'For Agamben language is an out-of-body experience' (2006: 59). Agamben's reading of Spinoza through grammar is, then, violently decontextualised – and, yet, because of that, all the more symptomatic of Agamben's paradigm of reading. Crucially, Agamben rehearses in the theory of the grammatical example the theory of sovereign constitution through the exception: 'exception and example are correlative concepts that are ultimately indistinguishable and that come into play every time the sense of belonging and commonality of individuals is to be defined' (Agamben 1998: 22; see also Agamben 2005b: 36–37). The sovereign logic of inclusory exclusion, Agamben contends, is the same in grammar and in politics. Thus Agamben's references to Spinoza's *Hebrew Grammar* can be taken as the exemplary example of the theory of sovereignty based on disease.

The crucial point in Agamben's readings from the *Hebrew Grammar* is the correlation between self-reflexivity and the immanent cause. Agamben argues that in the *Hebrew Grammar*, 'the philosopher explains the meaning of the reflexive active verb as an expression of an immanent cause, that is, of an action in which agent and patient are one and the same person'. Agamben cites from Chapter 20 of the *Hebrew Grammar* the example of a verb in the middle voice, *pasearse*, which is translated as 'to walk-oneself' (Agamben 1999a: 234). Therefore, Agamben contends, Spinoza asserts a coincidence between immanent causality and the auto-affection of subjectivity – its passivity *cum* activity that characterises the zone of indistinction. This claim is problematic. Immanent causality as such is not the same as either the middle voice, or the activity and passivity of an agent or the subject of a sentence.<sup>17</sup> Thus, Agamben's claim must be that Spinoza *specifically* makes this point. However, Chapter 20 nowhere makes such a contention. Spinoza here merely describes the middle voice in grammatical terms – 'the accusative is not

<sup>17</sup> It does not follow from the distinction between nominative (the subject) and accusative (the object) that there is a positing of human agency independent of its environment. As Jacques Derrida put it, 'that which lets itself be designated *différance* is neither simply active nor simply passive, announcing or rather recalling something like the middle voice, saying an operation that is not an operation, an operation that cannot be conceived either as a passion or as the action of an agent or patient, neither on the basis of nor moving toward any of these *terms*' (1984: 9). This erasure of agency and the ensuing sense of community is the lynchpin of John Llewelyn's discussion of the middle voice in the most interesting recent book on the topic (Llewelyn 1991).

different from the nominative' – making no mention whatsoever of immanent causality.<sup>18</sup>

Immanent causality in Spinoza's writings clearly has nothing to do with human agency or subjectivity. Perhaps the most important discussion of the immanent cause is Proposition 18 from Part I of the *Ethics*. 'God', says Spinoza, 'is the immanent ... cause of all things'.<sup>19</sup> This Proposition immediately follows a significant Scholium in which Spinoza argues against anthropomorphism, or the attribution of intellect and will to God. In other words, the notion of the immanent cause is conceived in such a way as to be reducible neither to an action, nor to a passion, nor to a combination of the two. Agamben's concept of subjective auto-affection has nothing to do with Spinoza's immanent causality.<sup>20</sup>

A fundamentally passive subject does not exist in a world in which effect can be eliminated. To the question 'who can be such a subject?', the answer can only be Agamben himself as the reader of Spinoza. Agamben, as the 'unitary centre' of the reading self, reads Spinoza as his own auto-affection. Immanent causality loses any real references to particular texts by Spinoza. They are transported to the zone of reading whose sovereign is Agamben himself. The *effect* of this reading – because, *pace* Agamben, effectivity cannot be neutralised – is a liberal *free-for-all* disposition. What matters is not the text, but the examples excised from the text. Agamben, in a passage cited earlier, contended that the logic of inclusory exclusion can generalise his theory of

<sup>18</sup> Even though Spinoza does use the words 'immanent cause' in Chapter 12 of the *Hebrew Grammar*, whence Agamben derives a second example, Spinoza is nevertheless not making any philosophical claim about immanent causality here but merely trying to explain the middle voice. In fact, Agamben's translation of the Latin is rather misleading. In Latin it is clear throughout Chapter 12 that Spinoza is positioning the reflexive between the active and the passive mood (*ad agentem* and *ad patientem*). Thus, when Spinoza writes 'Ideoque necesse fuit Infinitivorum speciem excogitare, quae actionem exprimeret ad agentem, sive causam immanentem relatam' (Spinoza 1924, I: 342), this is accurately translated by Maurice J. Bloom as: 'Therefore it was necessary to devise another form of infinitive which would express an action related to the active mood or to the imminent cause' (Spinoza 2002: 629). Spinoza's point is grammatical, not philosophical, and it is a point about the relation between the different moods. Thus, Agamben's translation of the subordinate clause is rather surprising: 'which expresses an action referred to an agent as immanent cause' [*che esprime l'azione riferita all'agente come causa immanente*] (Agamben 1999b: 235; 1996: 52). Agamben's translation erroneously suggests that Spinoza is talking here about an individual which acts as (*come*) an immanent cause. Spinoza's point, however, is much more uncontroversial: in the active voice, the subject itself is the cause of the action. There is nothing in the text of Chapter 12 to suggest that Spinoza is advancing a theory of action, or of agency, or of individuation.

<sup>19</sup> God as 'causa immanens' is one of the important aspects of Part I of the *Ethics*. The definition of Proposition 18 is already implicit from at least Proposition 15, although the whole of the preceding of Part I can be seen as leading up to Proposition 18. On God and causality – including God as an immanent cause – see also *Short Treatise*, Part I, Chapters 2 and 3, as well as the final chapter of the *Short Treatise*. For the sources of Spinoza's understanding of divine causality, see volume 1 of Wolfson (1969).

sovereignty: 'we find ourselves in the presence of a camp every time such a structure is created, independent of the kinds of crime that are committed there' (Agamben 1998: 174). Following this his theory of reading as an effect of the example must follow a strictly symmetrical logic: 'we find ourselves in the presence of such a grammatical structure as the one derived from the *Hebrew Grammar* every time we read, independent of the text, and independent of the bodies who have written those texts in a particular place and time'. The sovereign as a reading or as a political entity is produced by the same logic. The body – as singular body *and* as body of work – has been internalised within the sovereign. That body – Spinoza's body – thus becomes the exemplary body for the sovereign reader: Agamben himself.

## VI. The reader of stasis

*Homo Sacer* concludes with a series of grand statements. The overcoming of biopolitics is part of the 'destiny of the West', says Agamben, followed by the apocalyptic warning that otherwise the West is facing an 'unprecedented biopolitical catastrophe'. These statements culminate in the call for an end to stasis – to 'put an end to the civil war that divides the peoples and the cities of the earth'. Such statements cannot hide the invidious and eroding circularity of a sovereign's vision of the future, both material and immaterial, both here and there, one moment triumphal, the next stern but always prophetic. The diseased body – the first element of stasis in Agamben's construal – has founded a politics that elects a sovereign who destines his own self-incurred destiny.

The same movement has been shown to take place in a process of reading that equates the grammatical example and the exception. The reading subject assumes a sovereign position of absolute impunity – a poetico-political licence for an endless internalisation of discourse. The end of stasis is also the end of critique as an activity that allows for a text to be effective.

Stasis, however, cannot be neutralised. The pronouncement of its end exhibits the ends symptomatic of a totalising – that is, sovereign – discourse. These symptoms have appeared through the mediation of Spinoza's corpus. Spinoza is a reader of Agamben because Agamben's critique of Spinoza's lack of a diseased body to found the political gives rise precisely to the means of

<sup>20</sup> Agamben also offers a similarly curious reading of beatitude. With reference to *Ethics*, Part III, Proposition 51, Agamben argues that beatitude is the same as the immanent cause (see for instance Agamben 1999a: 237). But towards the end of Part III of the *Ethics*, Spinoza has already defined affectivity and is well on the way to providing a typology of emotions. In the end of the Scholium to Proposition 51, cited by Agamben, Spinoza defines passions which are conceived by the mind as being self-caused. The two passions are repentance (*paenitentia*) and self-contentment (*acquiescentia in se ipso*, which Agamben translates as 'being at rest in oneself'). The former gives the impression that the self causes its own pain, while the latter its own pleasure. There is no direct or indirect reference to beatitude, and the idea of beatitude – a joyful union with God – is entirely out of place at this point of the *Ethics*. According to *Ethics* IV, Propositions 54–57, repentance and self-satisfaction belong to the first kind of knowledge because they are self-caused, and not to the third kind of knowledge and to beatitude, whose cause of pleasure is the idea of God.

unravelling Agamben's own political discourse about the end to stasis. The effect and singularity can be retained – Spinoza can be a reader of Agamben – only if there is no constitutive separation within or through stasis.

To resist such a separation is to retain responsibility for the political and for reading. Spinoza as a reader of Agamben points to responsibility, first of all, by pointing to an unconditional remainder in reading practice. There is no sovereign reader who is immune from the traces left by his own reading practice. To read 'disease' is to effect one's own reading with that disease. There is no position from which a comfortable separation of disease from the norms and rules of a community can offer a secure foundation. But this is already to suggest that stasis allows for a positive articulation of reading practice: Spinoza the reader of Agamben suggests that *critique* must always be a response to the text read. This critical response *includes* rules and norms, even though it does not coincide with them. The fact that disease remains unconditional entails that disease is a principle of reading, a principle of response to the text, which puts into question every effort to transform it into a foundation. Disease, in this set up, negates presence. It functions as the nothing wherein presence cannot be secured.

The political can also be articulated positively as the praxis of responsibility. A responsible politics incorporates the unconditional. It incorporates disease as the element which – *pace* Agamben – confounds all foundations. To be responsible is precisely to remain vigilant about any discourse that seeks to find a foundation. A responsible politics is above all a politics that eschews the violent act of separation instituting the sovereign. Stasis solicits a politics of friendship. This is a politics that views as central the intertwining of the ethical and the political. Both ethics and politics refer to praxis, to acts of particularity. But such practice is 'infected' with singularity, irreducible to all-encompassing abstractions. Stasis, then, does not lead to a nothing as pure absence either. Rather, stasis becomes the responsibility to infinitely respond in such a way as to retain the singularity of the response.

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## The Late Althusser: Materialism of the Encounter or Philosophy of Nothing?

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**Abstract** *The 'late Althusser,' above all the posthumously published 'Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter,' is often regarded as a 'break' with his earlier work. The late works are read as a rejection of the 'determinism' supposedly characteristic of such texts as For Marx and Reading Capital. This essay seeks to show in contrast that a 'materialism of the encounter' is at work in the early texts, and that what is new in the late works is a return to a philosophy of origins, of an originary void as the guarantee that all that exists will pass away. There is thus a Messianism which remains the unthought residue of the late Althusser and which calls for analysis.*

And I heard, but I did not understand, and I said, 'my Lord what is the end of these?' And he said, 'go, Daniel, for the words are closed up and sealed until the time of the end'. (Daniel 12: 8–9)

The text of the 'Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter' poses serious challenges to anyone who seeks to read philosophical works according to the protocol initiated by Althusser himself. To read it carefully is to confront the fact that the published version consists of two sections, a short autobiographical preface and what the editor Francois Matheron describes as '*le coeur*' or core of the work (Althusser 2006: 164), some 37 pages of what appears to be an uninterrupted discourse, both excerpted by Matheron from a 142-page typed manuscript. Althusser's protocol of reading assumed that philosophical texts presented the dissimulation of coherence and consistency, not simply in order to supply to the reader what is normally expected of philosophy, but also and more importantly as a defence against the force of their own conflicts, a sort of obsessional and therefore imaginary mastery of an irreconcilable antagonism. As an 'a posteriori construction' (Althusser 2006: 163–64) to cite the words of the editor, it differs not only from texts such as 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', but even the 1970 version of 'Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses' which consisted, according to Althusser himself, of 'fragments of a much longer study' (Althusser 1976: 80). The latter text, although a composite, was carefully edited by Althusser and, however we may evaluate it today,