

The Profanations of Giorgio Agamben



The vanquishing of time as a prerequisite for redemption seems a pathological concern of Agamben. This is evident in the next three essays. 'Magic and Happiness' gives a brief discourse on magic, trickery and its necessity for happiness. Magic provides the key to overcoming the opposition of hubris and happiness where the immortal and the blissful coincide in a secluded and eternal moment. 'Judgement Day' presents a brief treatise on photographs.

Agamben is hard to pin down both theologically and philosophically. He attempts to construct miraculous minutiae out of un-miraculous things. Hence this work is the act of profaning the unprofanable. What ontological stature, what imaginative configuration and what spatio-temporal coordinates this move articulates are less than forthcoming. Indeed it is possible that Agamben disavows these entirely in favour of a Benjaminian eternal 'as if' structure, one which sees in the most mundane the traces of an eternal and secular redemption. But this remains problematic; this idiosyncratic moment seems devoid of any real comprehension or description of themes concerning the rest of us mortals, such as temporality, finitude or the spatial and imaginative presentation of that which promises to redeem us.

'Desiring' is a short essay, so concentrated that it is as impenetrable as the eternal shroud with which Agamben attempts to beatify us. 'Special Being' deals with medieval philosophy's effort to define specific regions of being in relation to images. 'The Author as Gesture' defines gesture as instantaneous epiphanies which exceed opprobrium 'with the luminous traces of another life'.

It is ironic, since Agamben clearly follows the aphoristic tradition of Benjamin and Nietzsche, that we find the most rewarding and philosophically original essay in the relatively lengthy 'In Praise of Profanation'. This is the jewel in the crown and the most philosophically wide-ranging of the collection. Agamben argues for an understanding of the profane beyond the dichotomy of the sacred and profane, the result being a fascinating mix of sociology, politics and theology.

One of the most exciting things about reading Agamben, aside from his innovative topical deployment of ontology in ethical and political spheres, is the sense that a radical departure is about to take place. With Agamben one always has the impression that previous prosodic work paves the way for more substantial philosophical description, one which boldly attempts to redefine the coordinates of ontology, ethics and politics. But while Agamben delivers elegance, range of reference and scholarly acumen, the promise of a singular and messianic eternal community is slow in materialising.

Agamben intends this configuration to overcome the malaise of modern commodity identification. What this may look like we are left unsure. 'The Six Most Beautiful Minutes in the History of Cinema' provides a fitting tragic-comic conclusion with a vignette of Don Quixote's full scale assault on a cinema screen.

Following Debord, Agamben attempts to clear a space beyond the society of the spectacle which as ultimate hubris

owes its existence to the self-perpetuation of capitalism, whereby all things may be considered sacred and where all people may become gods. Alternately Agamben proposes to profane the un-profanable, profaning the mundane sense of profane which makes worldly something holy. Agamben intends this configuration to overcome the malaise of modern commodity identification.

At the very end of the essay *Profanation*, Agamben writes: "The profanation of the unprofanable is the political task of the coming generation." The concept of profanation can be regarded as a political concept, and I regard Agamben's work on profanation as a reflection of this state of capitalism and biopolitics: is it possible to think of actions that create spaces and times that do not exclude people? Are there actions that make things, and also people, a part of the common or that can be related to a common future?

Agamben writes that the state that the western world today is in of capitalism (as a religion, drawing on Walter Benjamin's fragment "Capitalism as Religion") has the function of trying to find that which is unprofanable. This idea is different from – opposite to – the idea of the child playing with toys or the cat playing with yarn. The logic of capitalism is different, since its aim is to create spaces and places that are not profanable; rather, capitalism and consumption aim at creating spaces that are no longer separated: capitalism "realizes a pure form of separation, to the point that there is nothing left to separate". There are no longer sacred days and weekdays: every day is open to work, exploitation and maximization of profit. Agamben continues: "If to profane means to return to common use that which has removed to the sphere of the sacred, the capitalist religion in its extreme phase aims creating something absolutely unprofanable." Consumption is something that does not belong to the present, he writes, but to the past or the future. It belongs to our memory or to our anticipation. The call for profanation can, through this lens, be regarded as a way to open up the capitalist system, to see how it works and what its problems are.

At the very beginning of *The Coming Community*, Agamben writes: "The coming being is whatever being." The whatever being is related to a singularity, such as it is. It is a being that is not related to a concept: "being red, being French, being Muslim, but only in its being such as it is". Therefore, the ideal of inhabiting the common is, for Agamben, a state where we have the possibility of entering the common without our identity.

Agamben's understanding of profanation is different from what Ahmed talks about with fetishism. Agamben is speaking of different aspects and things, such as a toy, or a museum, and Ahmed is speaking of historical wounds, such as the loss of a child because of racism in Australia. On the other hand, both of them are giving a Marxian critique of the capitalist system of creating injustice, but where Agamben, as well as Masschelein and Simons, tries to think of a future and a school beyond social class and gender, that is, identity, Ahmed, as well as Chen and Weheliye, instead puts these social categories at the centre – since the opposite, again, puts these experience in the footnotes and in the margins. And even if Masschelein and Simons do not deny that schools are a part of reproducing an elite as well as a working class, they put the ideal of the scholastic school at the centre. As I have shown in this article, this argument has some problems, especially regarding social injustice and cases of historical wounds.

Educational institutions are a part of shaping students into social beings. Through the understanding of education in connection to biopolitics, I argue that bodies (with their different aspects of social class, gender, sexuality, ability, emotions and affects) do not exist beyond their own bodies, but through them and, perhaps, because of their own bodies. They do not "let go of all kinds of sociological, economic, familial and culture-related rules and expectations", but rather live them, from within.

Education as free time, suspended from the other time that is productive, is, however something that is important to highlight, not only because it tries to defend the public, common school, but also because it can highlight the other language that does not speak of free time, but rather about competition, maximization and production. And, even if I am sympathetic towards Masschelein and Simons' defence of the public school, I disagree with that there exist a possibility of inhabiting schools beyond our social ladder and social being. An education that is free from productivity and effectiveness is something different from being free from social and cultural aspects. Let's not put these aspects in the footnotes any longer.

Building upon Walter Benjamin's posthumous "Capitalism as Religion," Agamben then shifts from a religious context to a political one and argues that capitalism too is characterized by separation between the sphere of the sacred and the sphere of the profane; capitalism "is essentially a religious phenomenon" (80). Unlike in religion, however, in which objects can move back and forth between spheres, in capitalism both spheres are localized within each and every object. The separation in capitalism, thus, is the separation of "every thing, every place, every human activity [...] from itself" (81).

In this aspect of his critique, Agamben is clearly motivated by Debord's notion of "spectacle." (Agamben does not specifically mention Debord in "In Praise of Profanation," but he has long been a champion of the ideas Debord developed in *The Society of the Spectacle*. (See, for example, his earlier *Means Without End*.) For Debord/Agamben, life directly lived—to use Debord's phrase—has been displaced by a false unity of life mediated by a

proliferation of common images. As a result, people live separated from their own selves. Life, now, is both life and the image of life (spectacle), and, he suggests, this logic has been followed long enough that all is now always already image. It is this separation that Agamben posits is parallel to the sacred/profane separation found in religion. For capitalism, the profane is that which was once directly lived, and the representation/image of that life has been set apart and made sacred as capital.

He begins by explaining that religion—derived from *relegare*—is not the process of unifying god and man (*relegare*) but of preserving the separation of the sphere of the sacred and the sphere of the profane while entities move between them (74-75). Agamben posits that the most complex method by which to move objects from the sacred to the profane is to "play" with them, to "use" them in an "entirely inappropriate" way (75).

In "The Author as Gesture," Agamben does not speak directly of theatre and performance, but the influence that Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault have had in Theatre and Performance Studies makes this essay particularly interesting for these disciplines' scholars. This essay is Agamben's response to Foucault's response to Barthes' seminal essay, "The Death of the Author." In 1969, Foucault presented a lecture entitled, "What is an Author?", in which he suggests that an "author" is less an entity and more a function at work in various discursive formations. Foucault calls this the "author-function." Agamben, in turn, re-reads the "author-function" in light of "gesture," a concept that he has been developing in his work for some time (see, for example, his *Means Without End*, 48-59). For Agamben, a gesture is a communicative act in which not only a message but also a "communicability" is transmitted (see *Means Without End*, 58). In the context of authors, Agamben uses gesture to posit that the declaration of an author for a given text limits how one approaches that text and also limits how one thinks about the capacity of future texts to communicate.