

## BARE LIFE



“Until a new and coherent ontology of potentiality (beyond the steps that have been made in this direction by Spinoza, Schelling, Nietzsche, and Heidegger) has replaced the ontology founded on the primacy of actuality and its relation to potentiality, a political theory freed from the aporias of sovereignty remains unthinkable.”<sup>1</sup> – Giorgio Agamben

There are a number of peculiar revelations that come toward the end of Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, a work it is useful to recall that was first published in Italian in 1995, and a work laying out the origins of sovereign power and its putative surplus “bare life.” This surplus is also the very origin of sovereign power – this origin being the exegetical task of Agamben’s dissection and reassembly of the structural difference between mere biology and “life” (and social and political life as disclosed in “the city”).

It is the city that is formulated as the foundation of social and political life, insofar as its founding established the critical difference between physiological life (bare life) and community (polis). The difference seems to be the issue, as well, as Agamben finds in the course of his tour through the ontological foundations of social orders, social mores, and political structures a profound shift from

one form of life to another, always predicated on hidden and sometimes sinister ritual rites that signal sovereign power arrives through the state of exception, which is also apostasized in bare life (*homo sacer*), a figure that he describes as life “that may be killed and yet not sacrificed” (passim). Bare life is a secret analog for immemorial Power, yet power stolen.

The rites of passage of this decidedly Western topology run through various incarnations of law, or what constitutes a citizen versus bare life (which by definition is posited as outside all law, but secretly inside law, nation-states, and techno-biological life as delimited form of excommunicated being). This figure is determined by law, but as exception to law, and it is that exceptional state of being without rights that qualifies bare life.

But what is truly exceptional in Agamben’s analysis is how this bio-political frontier has been crossed today in the form of all life becoming bare life – or, how present-day politics and the metamorphosis of nation-states to economic machines has led to citizens being de facto exiles within states. This bizarre conundrum is an outcome of the evolution of a form of determinism within law that allows the definition of subjects to devolve to biological life in/for itself without recourse to supra-biological status (as ethical or moral beings, for example), an outcome of advanced nihilism, if you will, but also the natural outcome of law without signification (nihilism per se).

Thus, Agamben arrives late in the game describing bare life as reduced to birth and nation-state (the foundations of citizenship), while also showing that, “The political system no longer orders forms of life and juridical rules in a determinate space, but instead contains at its very center a *dislocating localization* that exceeds it and into which every form of life and every rule can be virtually taken.” In other words, exceptions are now the rule. Following upon his treatment of the appearance of internment camps (recourse to the exception during states of crisis), Agamben adds, “The camp as dislocating localization is the hidden matrix of the politics in which we are living, and it is this structure of the camp that we must learn to recognize in all its metamorphoses into *zones d’attentes*.”<sup>2</sup> It is this reading of spatial politics and abstract territoriality that signals what Agamben sees as the foundation of a

possible pernicious bio-political regime spreading its tentacles across the planet. Indeed, “The camp, which is now securely lodged within the city’s interior, is the new biopolitical *nomos* of the planet.”<sup>3</sup> The most potent mechanisms of capitalism are cities ...

What we see here is an evocation, no matter how direct or indirect, of the enslavement underway via advanced neo-liberal capitalism. Agamben names it so, when he delivers his *coup de grâce* regarding what constitutes a “people”: “Today’s democratico-capitalist project of eliminating the poor classes through development not only reproduces within itself the people that is excluded but also transforms the entire population of the Third World into bare life. Only a politics that will have learned to take the fundamental biopolitical fracture of the West into account will be able to stop this oscillation and put an end to the civil war that divides the peoples and the cities of the earth.”<sup>4</sup>

It is not difficult to substitute the word *consumerism* for bare life, the model that is sweeping the world and creating unparalleled divisions of wealth and poverty, luxury and squalor. All life in neo-liberal capitalism is reduced to consumption, and the gravity of the world-wide crisis of resources and environmental degradation is the outcome. The shifting sands of economic fortune and misfortune are tied to this model of reducing life to bare life, of placing at the center the bleak bio-political horizon of life reduced to biological units, to be exploited and disposed of. All citizens are now de facto “outcasts,” insofar as all citizens (and all people deprived of citizenship) operate within a narrowing field of deterministic economic and political functions. Agamben “sees” but hardly spells out that the only answer is that this “civil war” be ended by insurrection, versus catastrophe.

Oddly, then, it is this figure of bare life that Agamben wishes to furnish with an entirely different function if not dignity. Far from decrying its poverty, he seems to, in fact, see its value as irreducible fact of life (that it *found*s life). Denying mere facticity to determine life (as he emphatically demolishes Heidegger’s version of the same midway through the book), Agamben tries but does not quite reach the plateau at which bare life might actually be redeemed in/for itself. What is missing, and what is central to his entire argument, is a politics of bare life that is not also automatic enslavement by socio-economic means or by totalitarian-fascistic means, the latter being the shadow of the former, and both being the proto-condition of the disaster faced worldwide in the form of advanced capitalist determinism. What Agamben seems to be suggesting is that the enemy is not bare life but the reduction of bare life to a Darwinian state of total abjection – a global incident, and the outcome of entropic systems that can do nothing other than exhaust themselves.

“Here,” perhaps, is the much-vaunted, post-historical project par excellence, in a highly sinister mode, a project that slides dangerously toward a post-human project that seems almost apocalyptic in nature. The post-human is what is now dawning, regardless, and it is this zone called bare life that seems to be the battleground for total capitulation to bare life as slavery, and bare life as an at-once primordial and futural form of freedom.

Early in the book Agamben uses Franz Kafka to illustrate several points regarding “law” and its essentially arbitrary foundations.<sup>5</sup> What is critical in this passage is that law has been emptied of all content, and this is the state that we now inhabit. Yet Agamben points out that Kafka represents a figure who is faced with the ultimate truth that one must confront the mythology of law, law, and law’s future. This is analogous to facing “truth,” or to facing the bare facts of life. What is also implied here is that the law migrates inward, and that perhaps it is that process that produces a way out. This is all implied, and it is also what inhabits Agamben’s later writings, insofar as the works on sovereignty have given way to works on formal and inherently a-temporal themes. The specter of universality haunts Agamben’s work, yet it is the more recent *The Time that Remains*<sup>6</sup> that spells a possible future for subjects (for subjectivity). It is in this treatment of the first ten words of St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans that Agamben formulates the “place” of the insurrection he all but advocates. This place is the place of universality, a place where the law is “completed.” It takes the form of *various forms* – but it also takes a supernal form of time to bring it about. In his foremost evocation of this process of “the time it takes to end time” Agamben cites the sestina (a rigorous poetical form similar to a sonnet). Bare life is no different. In this sense, bare life is an extended sestina. The secret of the sestina is a rigorous internally composed time and structure that determines its own fate (end). Let us say, then, that bare life is the same – and that Agamben’s evocation of bare life as sacred life might actually provide not a new model of libidinal economy (a new Epicureanism) but a new model of taking one’s time seriously, or taking time seriously enough to preserve it within a mode and a metrical structure that is both artful, graceful, and profound. In other words, bare life offers the opportunity to reclaim life, to redefine life, and to return it to its foundational order outside instrumental reason and economic determinism. Universality provides the point of

purchase to make the effort.

Or, “There is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion.”<sup>7</sup>

GK (DRAFT 07/04/08)

Image (above) – Anselm Kiefer, *Jericho*, Annenberg Courtyard, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2007.

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<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 44

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>5</sup> See “Form of Law”, *ibid.*, pp. 49-62.

<sup>6</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005). First published *Il tempo che resta* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> *Homo Sacer*, p. 8.