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**SPREADING THE “PLAGUE”: VULNERABILITY, SOLIDARITY AND
AUTONOMY IN THE TIME OF PANDEMIC**

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Abstract: In a series of reflections published in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis, Giorgio Agamben expresses a number of concerns related to the way the pandemic has altered the very fabric of our societies, potentially changing it forever. While maintaining a certain scepticism towards the threat represented by the virus itself, Agamben claims that the response to the contagion shows how easy it is for authorities to limit individual freedoms in the name of public health, and how readily they are willing to put such limitations in place. At the same time, the pandemic shows how easy it is for individuals to accept this situation as the new normal, and how readily they are willing to give up their freedoms and relationships.

In this paper I offer a brief overview of Agamben’s worries, focussing on two issues in particular: the loss of individual freedom of movement and association, and the moral and political implications of social distancing. I then approach these issues from a different angle, making use of relational theory to propose an alternative framework which relies on the notion of vulnerability. While agreeing with Agamben that there is reason to worry about the state seizing the opportunity to exercise unchecked power over its citizens, I argue that we should pay attention to the ways in which social distancing measures can be grounded in solidarity and respect for the autonomy of vulnerable individuals.

Keywords: Agamben; vulnerability; autonomy; freedom; solidarity; relational theory; pandemic; public health; social distancing; Covid-19.

RĂSPÂNDIREA „CIUMEI”: VULNERABILITATE, SOLIDARITATE ȘI AUTONOMIE ÎN TIMPUL PANDEMIEI

Rezumat: Într-o serie de reflecții publicate în urma crizei Covid-19, Giorgio Agamben exprimă o serie de îngrijorări legate de modul în care pandemia a modificat chiar țesătura societăților noastre, putând să o schimbe pentru totdeauna. Deși păstrează un anumit scepticism față de amenințarea reprezentată de virusul însuși, Agamben susține că răspunsul la contagiune arată cât de ușor este pentru autorități să limiteze libertățile individuale în numele sănătății publice și cât de rapid sunt acestea dispuse să apeleze la astfel de limitări. În același timp, pandemia arată cât de ușor este pentru indivizi să accepte această situație drept “noul normal” și cât de ușor sunt dispuși să renunțe la libertățile și relațiile lor.

În această lucrare ofer o scurtă privire de ansamblu a problemelor discutate de Agamben, punând accentul pe două aspecte în special: pierderea libertății individuale de mișcare și de asociere și implicațiile morale și politice ale distanțării sociale. Abordez apoi aceste probleme dintr-un unghi diferit, folosind teoria relațională, pentru a propune un cadru alternativ care se bazează pe noțiunea de vulnerabilitate. Deși sunt de acord cu Agamben că există motive de îngrijorare față de statul care profită de oportunitatea de a exercita puterea necontrolată asupra cetățenilor săi, susțin că ar trebui să acordăm atenție modurilor în care măsurile de distanțare socială pot fi fundamentate de solidaritatea și respectul față de autonomia indivizilor vulnerabili.

Cuvinte-cheie: Agamben; vulnerabilitate; autonomie; libertate; solidaritate; teoria relațională; pandemic; sănătate publică; distanțare socială; Covid-19.

1. Introduction

In a series of reflections published in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis, Giorgio Agamben has expressed a number of concerns related to the way the pandemic has altered the very fabric of our societies, potentially changing it forever. While maintaining a certain scepticism towards the threat represented by the virus itself, Agamben claims that the response to the contagion shows how easy it is for authorities to limit individual freedoms in the name of public health, and how readily they are willing to put such limitations in place. At the same time, the pandemic shows how easy it is for individuals to accept this situation as the new normal, and how readily they are willing to give up their freedoms and relationships.

In what follows, I will offer a brief overview of Agamben’s worries, focussing on two issues in particular: the loss of individual freedom of movement and association, and the moral and political implications of social distancing. I will then approach these issues from a different angle, making use of relational theory to propose an alternative framework which relies on the notion of vulnerability. While agreeing with Agamben that there is reason to worry about the state seizing the opportunity to exercise unchecked power over its citizens, I will argue that we should pay attention to the ways in which social distancing measures can be grounded in solidarity and respect for the autonomy of vulnerable individuals.¹

2. Spreading the “plague”

In this section, I will briefly outline Agamben’s worries about the Covid-19 pandemic, as he expresses them in a series of short pieces written for his column on the website of the publisher Quodlibet.² It should be noted that Agamben directs his critique primarily – if not

exclusively – towards fellow Italian citizens and the Italian state. However, the critique could be extended to other states and individuals in similar circumstances. Given the global reach of the pandemic, for the rest of the discussion I will talk about states, governments, citizens etc. without referring to any particular country (unless otherwise specified).

As mentioned earlier, Agamben remains skeptical of the actual extent of the threat represented by the virus. He sees it as an opportunity for governments to spread panic among the population and persuade individuals to accept special measures for its containment. It is not clear why Agamben should think that the pandemic is just an "invention"³ or a "risk that cannot be possibly specified".⁴ In any case, he claims that it constitutes an opportunity for governments to tighten their coercive control over citizens, creating the conditions for a "state of exception" that could persist indefinitely.⁵ This state of exception entails restrictions on individual freedoms, such as freedom of movement and association (a fundamental prerequisite for political freedom, in Agamben's view), but also a degeneration of the relationships between individuals, who are now afraid of any contact with their neighbours. In fact, the degeneration of all human relationships – a direct consequence of the limitations on individual freedom imposed by the state – is even more problematic than the restrictions on freedom themselves. Agamben laments that individuals now see others only as potential *untori* – an Italian word that roughly translates as "anointers" or "plague-spreaders".⁶ The term was used in times of epidemics, such as the ones that struck the Italian peninsula in the 16th and 17th century, to refer to individuals who were accused of spreading the "plague" by using poisonous ointments. Social distancing measures, in Agamben's view, transform all individuals into potential *untori*, making them a threat to other people. Those who have unknowingly contracted the virus and show no symptoms are seen as a particularly dangerous source of contagion.

As a consequence of state-imposed restrictions and individuals' fears, face-to-face contacts are being replaced with virtual ones, which do not allow for the same expressions of emotions and affection, stif-

ling political discussion and activity. Individuals no longer believe in anything apart from "bare life", and are ready to sacrifice everything – their freedoms and relationships – for the sake of survival.⁷ The "plague" which is spreading is first and foremost a moral and political disease, rather than a disease of the body. Worried about their own survival, individuals become a passive and rarefied mass, ready to subject itself to the tyrannical power of a Leviathan.

Agamben paints a rather gloomy picture of the human condition during and after the pandemic. While there is reason to reject the belief that the virus itself does not represent a serious threat to public health, it can be argued that Agamben raises some important criticisms against a particular way of responding to the health crisis – one that puts the blame for the contagion on the individuals, fostering a sense of distrust and division between them, at the same time that it reduces their freedoms and allows for the exceptional exercise of unchecked power on the part of the state. However, Agamben seems to miss an important implication of living in a society in which individuals can "anooint" others, infecting them with a terrible disease: this is the acknowledgement that each of us – ourselves as well as others – can potentially spread the infection. In other words, each of us is a potential *untore*. We are both vulnerable and the source of other people's vulnerability. Recognising this can be a step forward towards a better understanding of what the Covid-19 pandemic means for us as individuals and as members of a political community. It can also help to reflect on what kind of response is required to safeguard public health, consistent with respecting individuals' interests and autonomy.

In what follows, I suggest that instead of conceiving of individuals as separate and separable beings, and of collectivities as mere aggregates of such individuals, we should appreciate that our social conditions and the relationships we have with others are at least partly constitutive of who we are, as argued by defenders of relational notions of personhood and autonomy.⁸ The starting point for a discussion about pandemics should be the recognition that we are all vulnerable, and that some are more vulnerable than others. Seen under this light, social distancing measures become an act of

solidarity, rather than a form of egotism and blind subjection to state impositions.

3. Vulnerability, solidarity and autonomy

Vulnerability can be understood as the capacity to suffer harm, shared by all human beings,⁹ that is, an ontological condition of our common humanity.¹⁰ At the same time, vulnerability is relational in character: while everyone can be harmed, some individuals and groups are more susceptible to certain harms than others, in virtue of their relative powerlessness in defending their own interests.¹¹ Thus, vulnerability is both inherent to the human condition (or ontological) and situational (or relational), or context-specific.¹² In time of pandemics, each individual can be infected and infect others in turn. As mentioned, this means that everyone is vulnerable, at the same time that everyone is a source of other people's vulnerability. However, not everyone is equally vulnerable: the young and healthy are less vulnerable than the old and those with pre-existing health conditions; those with good access to healthcare are less vulnerable than those with inadequate access to healthcare; those from privileged backgrounds are less vulnerable than the less privileged; those who can continue to work remotely are less vulnerable than frontline and essential workers, and so on. The degree of one's vulnerability depends on one's situation, which is determined by one's social and economic circumstances, and the web of relationships one is part of.

Agamben's analysis of the re-emerging figure of the "plague-spreader" seems to miss the importance of the relational dimension of vulnerability. No consideration is given to the idea that distancing oneself from others is also a way to protect *them*, as well as a means for self-protection. This willingness not to put others at risk may stem from an awareness that others are as vulnerable as, if not more vulnerable than, one is. Sometimes different levels of vulnerability are involved. High-risk health workers who choose to isolate themselves from their families in order to avoid infecting their loved ones are an

example of this – especially when their family members are themselves vulnerable.

This is not to say that concern for the vulnerability of others is what moves most people to respect the various measures that have been put in place to limit the spread of coronavirus. However, a focus on vulnerability rather than a more egocentric perspective can help to make sense of the fact, sometimes overlooked, that reasons for abiding by the rules and regulations that may be imposed during a pandemic are not simply a matter of egotistical interests. While it is undoubtedly true that respecting such rules and regulations may have an egotistical component, shifting the attention to vulnerability (understood in the terms suggested above) has the advantage of showing that it is possible to conceive of social distancing as an *act of solidarity*, stemming from the recognition of both our ontological and situational vulnerability. Solidarity, it has been argued, is itself a relational concept, grounded in our "shared interest in survival, safety and security".¹³ Seen under this light, Agamben's claim that individuals' acceptance of restrictive measures shows that they are ready to sacrifice their freedom and relationships for the sake of mere survival is not as conclusive as he takes it to be. It may be precisely to protect meaningful relationships that individuals are willing to sacrifice a degree of freedom. A relatively healthy and young person may, for instance, find that it is reasonable to abide by social distancing and other health and safety norms to protect individuals at risk whom they care about and whose health they want to safeguard. Besides, there is reason to doubt that preserving one's "bare life" is an individualistic endeavour with negative connotations only. Survival in the time of pandemic requires a collective effort, and cannot be realised at the expense of other people's interests. Again, this shows why focussing on egotistical reasons for respecting (or resisting) health-related rules and norms may be unhelpful, as it would force us to adopt a rather narrow understanding of what survival entails, for us as a community as well as separate individuals.

This brings us to a further issue in Agamben's view. Social distancing, according to him, is to be resisted, as it implies a significant loss of freedom. Agamben does not elaborate on his notion of freedom,

but what he says could be interpreted in terms of the three traditions of negative, positive and republican freedom. It may be argued that by virtue of social distancing measures individuals lose their freedom to move around as they wish; in other words, they lose their negative freedom, or freedom from external obstacles.¹⁴ More importantly, individuals lose their freedom to associate and talk politics; in other words, they lose their republican freedom, or the freedom not to be arbitrarily interfered with, in this case by a state power they can no longer keep in check.¹⁵ State imposition is, however, only part of the problem: because of their "irrational" fear of the virus individuals lose their ability to be guided by their higher, rational self; in other words, they lose their positive freedom, or the capacity for rational self-determination.¹⁶ It is not clear that Agamben would privilege any of these understandings of freedom. Regardless, it may be argued that, as a result of restrictive measures and personal fears, individuals experience a loss of autonomy – intended as the capacity to be part author of one's life¹⁷ or, more modestly, as the capacity to resist rule by others.¹⁸ Autonomy is usually taken to require the availability of an array of acceptable, meaningful options. When a significant number of such options are taken away – as it seems to be the case during a time of lockdown – individual autonomy is diminished, and with it the well-being of individuals.

Autonomy, too, can be understood in relational terms. Feminist philosophers have argued that autonomy is *constitutively* relational: it is only through our relationships with others that one can develop and exercise autonomy.¹⁹ Relational accounts of autonomy are sensitive to the idea, discussed above, that human beings share a certain *vulnerability* to others – and that some are in fact more vulnerable than others. Again, this means that one's degree of autonomy is dependent on one's social circumstances (including those determined by public health policies) and the relationships one can have in such circumstances.

Conceiving of autonomy as relational has the advantage of bringing to light the fact that one's autonomy can be compromised by the autonomy of others. The freedom Agamben talks about is the

freedom of those who have little to fear from the virus, or are willing to risk being infected. It is not the freedom of the vulnerable or those who, albeit not vulnerable themselves, work or live with vulnerable individuals. The autonomy of the vulnerable, and of those close to them, can be endangered by the behaviour of individuals who fail to take their vulnerability seriously. The options open to the vulnerable may be significantly reduced not only by social distancing measures, but careless others as well. Focussing on the freedom to move around and meet in person to talk politics disregards the reality of those with already limited mobility, fragile health, or care commitments, who are amongst those most at risk of harm in times of crisis. It narrows political concern to include only the healthy, able-bodied, and socially privileged.

While public health should be about the population as a whole, special attention needs to be given to the most vulnerable. Instead of lamenting the loss of freedom of the privileged, we should ask what social distancing measures (including isolation and quarantine) can achieve for the vulnerable: these include those who need care and those who provide care (including vulnerable immigrant workers and women). Restrictions of freedom and autonomy are *prima facie* problematic, so there must be a sound justification for them. Whether a specific restriction is justified is in part an empirical issue, which depends on the general conditions of society and the particulars of the proposed policies. As a rule, there is a burden of proof on policies that restrict individual freedom and autonomy. This does not amount to saying, however, that such policies are *never* justified. Sometimes a trade-off between different goods may be necessary.

What does a concern for vulnerability, solidarity and relational autonomy mean for state authorities and the legitimate use of coercive powers in exceptional times? As noticed, Agamben rightly worries about a permanent extension of the state of exception brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. Social distancing measures can make political activity more difficult and reduce individual autonomy. As such, they need a strong justification to be put in place. Acknowledging our mutual vulnerability, and the greater vulnerability of some of our fellow human beings, can be a first step towards giving a justification

for restrictive measures, provided these are proportionate to the threat, limited in time and transparent. The possibility of discussing and contesting such measures should always be guaranteed. Individuals need to remain vigilant, and hold government agencies accountable for what they do. At the same time, individuals should take responsibility for their actions, and accept that some limitations to their freedom may be necessary to protect others as well and themselves. Sacrifices may be needed, but they should be less hard to make if done in the spirit of solidarity, instead of mere self-interest.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I discussed and objected to some of Agamben's worries about the moral and political dangers of resorting to restrictive measures in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. I argued that issues of public health policy can be better understood through the lens of relational theory. In particular, I claimed that the starting point of a meaningful discussion about the pandemic should be the recognition that, as human beings, we are all vulnerable – and that some of us are more vulnerable than others. Complying with (justified) restrictive measures can be an act of solidarity which protects our relationships and autonomy instead of destroying them. This is why a focus on vulnerability – especially its relational aspects – is preferable to one that privileges egotistical interests in the time of pandemic. While it is necessary to remain vigilant to prevent state power to overstep its measure, individuals should take responsibility for their own actions – for their own sake as well as that of others.

Notes

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² Giorgio Agamben, "Una voce", in *Quodlibet* [online], 2020. Available at: <<https://www.quodlibet.it/una-voce-giorgio-agamben>> [Accessed 30th April 2020.]

³ Giorgio Agamben, "L'invenzione di un'epidemia", in *Quodlibet* [online], 26th February 2020. Available at: <<https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-l-invenzione-di-un-epidemia>> [Accessed 30th April 2020].

⁴ Giorgio Agamben, "Una domanda", in *Quodlibet* [online], 14th April 2020. Available at: <<https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-una-domanda>> [Accessed 30th April 2020].

⁵ Giorgio Agamben, "L'invenzione di un'epidemia", in *Quodlibet* [online], 26th February 2020. Available at: <<https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-l-invenzione-di-un-epidemia>> [Accessed 30th April 2020]. For a more in-depth discussion of the state of emergency, see Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁶ Giorgio Agamben, "Contagio", in *Quodlibet* [online], 11th March 2020. Available at: <<https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-contagio>> [Accessed 30th April 2020].

⁷ Giorgio Agamben, "Chiarimenti", in *Quodlibet* [online], 17th March 2020. Available at: <<https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-chiarimenti>> [Accessed 30th April 2020]. For a more in-depth discussion of the notion of "bare life", see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

⁸ For a relational account of personhood, see Françoise Baylis, Nuala P. Kenny and Susan Sherwin "A Relational Account of Public Health Ethics" in *Public Health Ethics*, 1, 3 (2008): 196-209. For a relational account of autonomy, see Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, "Autonomy Reconfigured" in Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000): 3-31.

⁹ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004). Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009). Martha A. Fineman, "The Vulnerable Subject and the Responsive State" in *Emory Law Journal*, 60, 2 (2008): 251-275.

¹⁰ Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers and Susan Dodds, *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹¹ Robert E. Goodin, *Protecting the Vulnerable: A Reanalysis of Our Social Responsibilities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

¹² Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers and Susan Dodds, *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹³ Françoise Baylis, Nuala P. Kenny and Susan Sherwin "A Relational Account of Public Health Ethics" in *Public Health Ethics*, 1, 3 (2008): 196-209, p. 205.

¹⁴ Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹⁵ Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

¹⁶ Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹⁷ Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1986).

¹⁸ Michael Garnett, "The Autonomous Life: A Pure Social View" in *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 92, 1 (2013): 143-158.

¹⁹ Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers and Susan Dodds, *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 17.

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