Giorgio Agamben, tr. Adam Kotsko

**The Use of Bodies (Homo Sacer IV, 2)**

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What happens to Marxist theory after the demise of what Georg Lukacs called ‘orthodox Marxism,’ following the collapse of the Soviet regime in 1989-1991? The answer, of course, is that it becomes what is called ‘Post-Marxism,’ of which there are a plethora of un-orthodox variants, ranging from the crypto-orthodox theories of Alain Badiou, Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, and Fredric Jameson, to the wildly divergent heterodoxies of Deleuze and Guattari, Michel Foucault, Roberto Esposito, Massimo Cacciari, and Slavoj Zizek. Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* series, for example, might be described as an attempt to formulate a Post-Marxist critique of the 20th Century Western European totalitarian State, in which the Marxist critique of the Hegelian State is supplemented by Foucault’s critique of the biopolitical body, the Marxist critique of Adam Smith’s political economy is displaced Carl Schmitt’s critique of political theology, Marxist/Leninist dialectics are replaced by Derridean deconstruction, and the international working class is replaced by the radical anarchist subject. And so on.

Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* series, then, is a classic textbook case of what might be called ‘the Post-Marxist turn’ in Continental philosophy, which describes a series of displacements in orthodox theory that have largely been followed by contemporary philosophers. This Post-Marxist turn clearly makes a major contribution to 21st Century Marxist theory, by bringing orthodox theory up to date with the changed conditions of political existence in the contemporary multinational military-industrial techno-capitalist system, which are obviously drastically different than the dismally grueling conditions described, for example, by Friedrich Engels’ *Condition of the English Working Class in 1844*. But whether Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* series can actually support a Post-Marxist *praxis* of effective political resistance against the contemporary multinational military-industrial techno-capitalist system, with its bio-technological prostheses directly installed within the objectified bodies of its subjected individuals, and its international security-apparatuses still nightmarishly caught up the self-defeating cycles of counter-terrorist/terrorist warfare, is a whole other question, which is only obliquely addressed in Agamben’s *Stasis: Civil War as a Political Paradigm* (*Homo Sacer II,2*)*.*

This Post-Marxist turn is especially clearly evident in *The Use of Bodies* (*Homo Sacer IV, 2*), which begins with a scathing analysis of the sovereign master/slave dialectic in Aristotle’s *Politics* and Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, comparing ‘the use of bodies’ in the Greek and Roman slave-states to Marx’s analysis of capitalist wage-slavery and its current bio-techno-logical variants, and then proceeds through a whirlwind deconstruction of ‘the ontological apparatus’ of Western metaphysics, which, Agamben argues, actually creates the schizophrenic split between soul and body, essence and existence, public and private, and so on, characteristic of the Western metaphysical-political system. *The Use of Bodies* then concludes with a rousing manifesto on the ‘destituent potential’ of contemporary autonomist radicalism to bring about a spectacular breakthrough from the current multinational military-industrial techno-capitalist State, with its bio-techno-logical controls implanted in the objectified bodies of subjected individuals, into the utopian condition of what Agamben elsewhere calls ‘the coming community,’ in which self-conscious individuals will be empowered to use their bodies in whatever ‘form-of-life’ they choose, without submitting to their crushing (ab)use by the sovereign power of the contemporary multinational military-industrial techno-capitalist system.

In *The Use of Bodies,* Agamben’s theoretical position poises precariously between the scathing critique of sovereign power’s use of the bodies of its citizens and subjects as un-sacrificial victims (‘sacred men’ or *homines sacri*) ‘who may be killed, but not sacrificed’ in *Homo Sacer* (1995), and the distinctly more utopian belief in a spectacular revolutionary breakthrough in the contemporary capitalist system espoused in *The Coming Community* (1990). This utopian belief in some great world-historical change to be brought about from within the contemporary sovereign State, which accompanies the paradigm-shift from what Michel Foucault called ‘the Law-and-Sovereign paradigm’ of 16th and 17th Century Western European absolutism, centered upon the sovereign body of the monarch or king, to what Foucault called ‘the bio-political paradigm,’ derived from the democratic political body of the Nation or the People, resembles the utopian critique of the Karl Marx of the 1840s, when the Young Marx still believed that the world-historical transformation of the *Ancien Regime* by the French Revolutions of 1789 and 1830 would bring about a radical change in contemporary human beings, who would cease to be subconscious objects of sovereign power, but would become the self-conscious subjects of world history, thereby empowering them to create the utopian communist State proclaimed in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). Whether the utopian belief of the Young Marx in the spectacular world-historical changes to be brought by those early heroic bourgeois-democratic revolutions would survive the great disillusionment of 1848, recorded in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1852), is a question beyond the scope of this brief review. But it might simply be observed that, following the triumph of the bourgeoisie in the French Revolutions of 1830 and 1848, the Young Marx’s utopian belief in subjective agency as the driving force of political change was supplanted, first by the orthodox belief in class struggle as the ‘motor’ of world-historical change, and finally by the radical belief in the dictatorship of the proletariat, which, Agamben remarks in the ‘Introduction’ to *Homo Sacer*, is “the reef on which the revolutions of our century [sic] have been shipwrecked” (HS, 12).

In *The Use of Bodies*, then, Agamben draws upon Antonio Negri’s theories of ‘constituent’ and ‘constituted’ power, and upon Foucault’s analysis of ‘bio-power,’ to propose a Post-Marxist theory of sovereign power’s ‘use of bodies’ in the contemporary techno-capitalist State, while also proposing an anarchist practice of political-aesthetic resistance to that sovereign power. According to Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* paradigm, sovereign power is a mechanism or an apparatus that operates by a crypto-dialectical *exceptio*---a subjectivizing process of ‘exclusive-inclusion’ or ‘inclusive-exclusion’ of the ‘bare life’ of biological individuals in the sovereign political body---to describe ‘the threshold of the politicization’ of those subjectified/objectified individuals, which converts their ‘bare life’ into the ‘politically qualified life’ of the citizens and subjects of the sovereign State. But this process of politicization also converts the objectified bodies of those subjectified individuals into the ‘embodied instruments’ or ‘en-souled tools’ (cf. Aristotle’s definition of the slave as *ktema ti empsychon*) of the contemporary capitalist system, and finally converts those subjectified individuals into what Agamben, in *Homo Sacer*, called the ‘sacred men’ (the *homines sacri*): the un-sacrificial victims of the Western metaphysical-political system. Agamben’s autonomist belief, in *The Coming Community,* that a spectacular world-historical change in the different modes of sovereign power might create the possibility for the emergence of a future utopian community, is thus overshadowed, in *The Use of Bodies*, by the dystopian belief that this world-historical change will simply bring about a change in ‘the use of bodies’ in the Western European metaphysical-political system: from Greek and Roman classic slavery, through Western European industrial-capitalist wage-slavery, through Stalinist slave-labor-camp and Nazi concentration-camp slavery-unto-death, into the bio-tech ‘use of bodies’ in the contemporary multinational military-industrial techno-capitalist system, which, despite its utopian promise, has only “ended up producing new and unheard-of forms of slavery” (UB, 79).

But Agamben’s description of ‘the use of bodies’ in the Western metaphysical-political system does not clearly explain how the mechanisms or apparatuses of sovereign power might work differently on the objectified bodies of its subjects or slaves in different world-historical conditions---in the Greek and Roman slave-state, in Western Christian medieval serfdom, in Western European industrial capitalism, in Stalinist Russia or Nazi Germany, or in the contemporary techno-capitalist system---although these striking differences clearly play a crucial role in ‘the use of bodies’ in these different world-historical situations. And despite the obvious influence of Foucault’s bio-political theory, Agamben’s paradigm of sovereign power, like Carl Schmitt’s sovereignty theory, is still basically that of the 16th and 17th century absolutist State, as described in Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, in which the sovereign monarch holds an absolute monopoly on violence, while his citizens and subjects are exposed to the sovereign’s decision over their life or death: an obsolete paradigm that still arguably obtained in the 20th century totalitarian states, especially in the Nazi death-camps and the Stalinist Gulag. But if sovereign power is still caught up in a world-historical change from ‘the sovereign-and-law paradigm’ of the 16th and 17th century Western European absolutist States, to ‘the bio-political paradigm’ of the 19th and 20th century Western European democratic nation-states---and, perhaps, beyond that, to the still-undescribed paradigm of sovereign power in the 21st century multinational military-industrial techno-capitalist system---then that world-historical transformation should be clearly discernable in the bio-technological mechanisms and bio-physical apparatuses which exert their sinister violence upon the objectified bodies of subjected individuals in the contemporary multinational military-industrial techno-capitalist system. And if Agamben’s sovereign power, like Foucault’s bio-power, is not some crypto-metaphysical agency which works its clandestine violence without leaving scars or marks upon the objectified bodies of its citizens and subjects, then Agamben’s sovereign power must still work through the bio-tech mechanisms and bio-physical apparatuses that exist within this specific world-historical situation, and must still exert a discernable force upon the objectified bodies of its citizens and subjects, even in the 21st Century multinational military-industrial techno-capitalist system.

In contrast to Agamben’s description of sovereign power’s ‘use of bodies’ in the *Homo Sacer* series, an example of a Post-Marxist theory that actually helps to demystify the workings of contemporary sovereign power is provided by Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1,*  which graphically describes how sovereign power penetrates into the objectified bodies of subjected individuals to demarcate erotic zones or implant perversities, to install its sovereign subjectivity within the objectified body itself, thereby making the subjected individual submissive to the workings of sovereign power. Following Foucault’s example, a Post-Marxist analysis might then describe the dehumanizing conditions of ‘the use of bodies’ in contemporary bio-technological research, in electronic warfare exercises, and in techno-industrial wage-slavery, making Agamben’s metaphysical analysis of sovereign power more directly relevant to the contemporary multinational military-industrial techno-capitalist system. But, unlike Foucault, Agamben describes no strategies of resistance against sovereign power, and can only fall back upon subjectivist aesthetic practices, like Guy DeBord’s situationist politics or Michel Foucault’s sadomasochism, which clearly pose no real challenge to the contemporary multinational military-industrial techno-capitalist system. Agamben’s autonomist theory of the subversive role of subjective aesthetic agency in bringing about political change is then susceptible to a Post-Marxist critique of ‘subject-centered theories’ of world-historical dialectical process, which predicate social change upon the transformation of individual subjects, without addressing the enormous obstacles placed against that subjectivist political change by the contemporary multinational military-industrial technocratic capitalist system. And as the Young Marx pointed out in his critique of the Young Hegelians in *The German Ideology* (1845-1846), the contemporary capitalist system is unlikely to be changed simply by changing one’s mind about it, or even by changing one’s ‘use of bodies’ to adopt a Parisian aesthete’s avant-garde ‘form-of-life,’ like, for example, Guy Debord’s spectacularly cinematic situationist/anarchist lifestyle: a ‘form-of-life,’ which, however ‘radical,’ is still produced, directed, and promoted by the selfsame multinational military-industrial techno-capitalist system.

From a Post-Marxist standpoint, then, Agamben commits the theoretical *faux pas* of attempting to supersede the stark contradictions between the contemporary multinational military-industrial techno-capitalist State, and the objectified bodies of its subjectified individuals, by a crypto-metaphysical agency of spontaneous aesthetic transformation, which is hopelessly set against the stupendous sovereign power---and the colossal violence---of the contemporary multinational military-industrial techno-capitalist system. But if the stark contradictions between the contemporary multinational military-industrial techno-capitalist system, and the objectified bodies of its subjected individuals, is not created, as Agamben suggests, by the scission or divide within the subjectified/objectified subject created by ‘the ontological apparatus’ of Western metaphysics, but is produced by the contemporary multinational military-industrial capitalist system itself, then those contradictions cannot simply be resolved by the subjective agency of those objectified individuals, but can only be superseded by a directly political change in the contemporary multinational military-industrial techno-capitalist system, which is a far more daunting prospect than the subjectivist self-transformation proposed by Giorgio Agamben’s *The Use of Bodies*.

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What Georg Lukacs called ‘orthodox Marxism’ has been largely discredited by guilt-by-association with Stalinist totalitarianism; and it is doubtful if Marxism/Leninism can be rehabilitated after the scathing critiques of Soviet dissidents, which have exposed its clandestine connections with The Great Terror and the Stalinist Gulag. But there are certain lessons of orthodox theory that cannot simply be discarded without throwing out the newly-scrubbed baby with the dirty bathwater. Among those pertinent lessons are the Young Marx’s critique of the Young Hegelians in *The German Ideology*, which cautions against subscribing to subjectivist theories that premise political change upon changes of mind, and therefore cannot create real changes in the capitalist system. Post-Marxist theory, like modernist poetry, as W.H. Auden cautioned, makes nothing happen---unless, of course, it is translated into a Post-Marxist political *praxis* which helps to define effective resistance against the contemporary multinational military-industrial techno-capitalist system, which still remains, after all, the sinister adversary of Post-Marxist theory in the 21st Century globalized world-system.