

In Defense of Agamben

By Maureen Winter

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21985/n2-gxz0-rd70>

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Over the course of the Coronavirus pandemic, philosopher Giorgio Agamben published a series of short essays through the Italian outlet Quodlibet, the most infamous of which remains the first set of reflections, entitled “L’invenzione di un’epedemia”¹. These writings were met with a barrage of criticism from philosophers and political commentators alike, all of whom emphasized the carelessness of his claim that the virus was a pure invention of the State, a pretense for the continued expansion of its powers of repression and control over the life of its citizens. But if we connect Agamben’s major claim – that the virus is yet another example of the normalcy of the state of exception and its decision upon “bare life” – to its more Marxist concerns, it is possible to glean some major insights that can carry us forward in our conceptualization of life beyond capitalism.

Although it is true that Agamben rarely frames his political-philosophical reflections in Marxist terms, his thought is certainly in line with the construction of an anticapitalist project, one that has always remained faithful to a Debordian Marxism

¹ Agamben recently published, also through Quodlibet, a collection of all of these “pandemic writings”: Giorgio Agamben, *A che punto siamo; l’epedemia come politica*, Quodlibet, 2020.

that sees biopolitics as fundamentally linked to the “society of the spectacle” (or the “total eclipse” of exchange-value over use-value). If Debord opposed capital to life, the latter defined as an emancipatory dimension capable of overcoming the alienation of the spectacle, Agamben too took up this utopian vision of the possible restoration of an authentic experience. Indeed, his entire *Homo Sacer* project is dedicated to theorizing the link between the expropriation (destruction, in Benjamin’s terms) of experience and the production of bare life in contemporary society. This production process, Agamben argues, takes place at the intersection between juridico-institutional forms of power (the State) and biopower (capital). At the site of this crossroads, power’s hidden center takes the form of the sovereign, but not because it is the State that is ultimately “more important” than biopower or capital; rather, it is only insofar as the figure of the sovereign produces biopolitical bodies that escape the terrain of the State that this figure becomes central. When Agamben speaks about bare life then, he is always referring to both the terrain of the State and the terrain of capital.

Building upon Foucault’s roughly sketched theses on biopower, Agamben points to the processes by which the realm of bare life begins to coincide with the political realm; bare life and politically qualified life enter into a zone of “irreducible indistinction” such that, at any moment, politically valid life can be transformed, in the eyes of the State, into bare life. This indistinction, although a transformation of an already-existing structure, is what would be a new characteristic of “capitalist modernity”. Importantly, it is not bare life itself but the decision on bare life that is the supreme political principle of modernity. It follows from this that “...politics knows no value (and, consequently, no nonvalue) other than life”.

In Marxist terms, we could compare bare life to the unwaged life that constitutes the inside-outside of capital (as a permanent oversupply of mostly racialized labor made up of “redundant populations”). The very structure of these unwaged relations puts these populations beyond the law (because outside of the official contractual guarantees of exchange managed by the State). But at the same time, it is the direct

domination of the State that carries out violence against these racialized and gendered populations (the security state, the carceral state, etc.)². The point is that this thesis is not incompatible with the logics of capital and its indirect form of domination. We can agree with Moishe Postone, for example, when he says that “social domination in capitalism does not, on its most fundamental level, consist in the domination of people by other people, but in the domination of people by abstract social structures that they themselves constitute”³. There is no incompatibility between the abstract domination of capital and the persistence of direct, overt forms of racial and gender domination. These latter forms of domination are carried out, quite freely and openly by the State, because capital has produced these subjects as part of a “global surplus humanity”⁴.

Those subjects that make up the global surplus humanity are those that merely survive at the edges of capitalist production processes; they are constantly on the verge of destruction or, on the other hand, of becoming “economically qualified life” by entering into a wage-relation. When Agamben refers to the expansion of the state of exception through the sacredness of biology and medicine, he is pointing to a fundamental paradox at the heart of capitalist modernity: survival is and has always been the name of the game under capitalism. The stop-gap measures that the state enacted during the Coronavirus are representative of a series of paradoxical procedures that reproduce bare life as at once inviolate (in its indistinction from politically qualified life) and killable without consequence, processes that necessitate a discourse of science as universal religion. This kind of paradox is as work, for example, in a statement made by the governor of Texas regarding the virus:

² See Chris Chen’s brilliant article on the subject: “The Limit Point of Capitalist Equality; Notes towards an Abolitionist Antiracism”, Endnotes, Vol. 3, <https://endnotes.org.uk/issues/3/en/chris-chen-the-limit-point-of-capitalist-equality>.

³ Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination; A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 30.

⁴ See: Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*, Verso, 2017.

“There are more important things than living”. A statement which of course is not only merely absurd but hides a darker meaning which could be translated as: there are more important things than certain people living; namely, other people living. In other words, once you’ve made the split and subsequent becoming-indistinguishable of bare life and political life (or unwaged and waged life) the thing that defines modern power, the State will always have a need to assert its power through a decision about who can be killed. Just as it needs crises so that this decision can be regarded as appropriate in measure as a response to objectively “extraordinary” circumstances. Obviously, the virus is in some ways objectively a crisis, and not one merely produced by the State (this, I think, is where Agamben totally gets it wrong). But he is right to analyze the crisis as something that (re)produces and condenses State power; indeed, without crises, the state cannot exist.

Ultimately, one of Agamben’s most important contributions to contemporary political thought, and indeed a complement to Marxist thought, is his reflection on the status of life in all of its political and ethical dimensions. Particularly in a post-Coronavirus world, it is important to keep in mind that inventing the commune requires not only a reflection upon how that political community should function or what we don’t want it to include (the value form, for example), but it also necessitates a thought of what a “happy life” is or would be. We must ask ourselves, as Agamben does, “is it possible to have a political community that is ordered exclusively for the full enjoyment of worldly life?” Even if we reclaim what has been appropriated by the state, and even if we live in a community in which the social is no longer mediated by labor, in which we have no value-form, if all of our ethical categories still allow us to separate biological life from politically qualified life, we will still be within a regime that reproduces bare life. The possibility of any non-statist politics will be determined not just by questions of how to overthrow capital, but also, by our ability to invent a form of life within which living itself is at stake. The return to Aristotle and his question about a “good life” is, in this sense, quite

necessary. Recognizing that a politics must always consider itself in relation to life, in relation to ways of living collectively, beyond use-value and exchange-value, is an essential part of our process of imagining an anticapitalist politics.

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