From Inoperativeness to Action: On Giorgio Agamben's Anarchism

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Discussed in this Essay:

Giorgio Agamben, *What is An Apparatus? and other Essays.* Trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009. 80 pp. $15.95, paperback. ISBN: 0804762309.

Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009. 448 pp. $24.95, paperback. ISBN: 9780804761437.

The recent publication by Stanford University Press of Giorgio Agamben's *What Is an Apparatus and Other Essays* and Leland de la Durantaye's massive introduction to Agamben's works constitutes a very welcome occasion. The essays included in *What Is an Apparatus?* offer a very accessible pan over Agamben's latest findings; they give the English readers an anticipation of the move from sovereignty to governmentality performed spectacularly by Agamben in his *2007 Il Regno e la Gloria: Homo sacer II.2*, as well as providing some hints on the vectors that the announced *Homo Sacer* epilogue on forms-of-life will pursue. So while *What In an Apparatus?* in a certain sense is a projection into the future of Agamben's research, in his *Critical Introduction* de la Durantaye is looking backward, in a very brave attempt to reconstruct the trajectory of Agamben's thought up to the present

day. Yet, the importance of these two books reaches well beyond Agamben scholarship: they are also an opportunity to reflect on the status and on the mutation of critical theory today, as French can no longer claim hegemony over it and as its most lively centers are now located beyond the Alps, across the Rhine, and on the other side of the Atlantic rather than in Rue d'Ulm or Saint-Denis. I will say something about the future of critical theory at the end of my essay. For now, I would like to start by surveying what was left under-explored by de la Durantaye in his treatment of Agamben's work, not to belittle his enterprise—which is surely impressive—but only to sketch a reading protocol complementary to the one he so successfully deploys.

I. Beyond Politics

After meticulously reconstructing the political value Giorgio Agamben attributes to the practice of profanation and lawless use, Leland de la Durantaye confirms—for the last time in his critical introduction—that the proposals of the author of *Homo Sacer* cannot simply be understood as anarchic (356). This is not the first instance of such a gesture in de la Durantaye's book, which constitutes an invaluable resource for anyone looking for a roadmap to venture into the maze of Agamben's thought.

Commenting on Agamben's claim from *The Man Without Content* that only a destruction of aesthetics can lead to a necessary re-conceptualization of art, de la Durantaye asserts that "what [Agamben] is calling for is not merely anarchic" (27). De la Durantaye arrives at the same conclusion when he goes over Agamben's defense of Benjamin from Adorno's charges of anarcho-messianic incoherency: "Here, as elsewhere, Agamben's call [the call for an understanding of temporality different from that proposed by dialectical materialism] should not, however, be mistaken for anarchic ones" (110), since the interruption of the materialist conception of history is not achieved through an "anarchic activity [that] has sabotaged its machinery" (120). And again: "To advance an idea of 'means without end' is not to champion […] anarchy" (118). The downplaying of the anarchic thrust in Agamben's thought is a move de la Durantaye insistently performs. Moreover, it is a gesture that, in a certain sense, puts the book in motion and sets its overall pace.

The introduction of de la Durantaye' book, "The Idea of Potentiality," begins with a snapshot from Le Thor. It is 1966. Giorgio Agamben is 24 and he is in southern France with a very select group of scholars to attend Heidegger's seminar on Heraclitus. De la Durantaye recounts that it is during this summer that Agamben discovered philosophy: his vocation for philosophy and philosophy as a vocation. Before the encounter with Heidegger, Agamben was studying law at the University of Rome. Yet the experience in Le Thor would change his mind, convincing him that philosophy was his true vocation. But what do we mean by the term "vocation"? What did Agamben discover that

was so crucial during his 1966 French summer? The predictable answer is that Agamben, at Le Thor, met his destiny. De la Durantaye clears the field of this misinterpretation with precision and confidence by explaining that, for Agamben, the purest vocation is nothing more than the revocation of any calling whatsoever; the discovery what is truly human within humankind—its original calling—is the absence of any predetermined duty and unavoidable destiny. As Agamben observed thirty years later in *La potenza del pensiero:* "*Dasein* does not have a specific nature or a preconstituted vocation."[1] Here we find summarized the fundamental discovery that Agamben made in Le Thor: discovering Heidegger, Agamben also discovered that man, in reality, is a *Dasein*, that is to say a being absolutely without content, a being whose principal feature is the possibility of being. The assumption of this very fact constitutes the point of departure for Agamben's reflection on human acting. In fact, there would be neither actions nor decisions were humanity embedded with some task to assume or some destiny to absolve. Quoting a passage from *The Coming Community,* de la Durantaye reminds us that ethics and politics—and these two terms are inextricably linked in Agamben—are only possible since "there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize" (7). It is precisely against the backdrop of humankind's radical indeterminacy that any concrete determination must be theorized: "If we have no collective vocation, the question becomes, what, individually and collectively, are we to do? And it is this question that Agamben, from his first experiences of philosophical vocation in the 1960s to the present day, had endeavored to answer" (7).

For Agamben, the answer to this question—"What are we to do?"—is simultaneously philosophical, ethical, and political for one simple reason: philosophy, ethics, and politics have their condition of possibility in the abyssal void, which, as virtuality, determines the paradoxical essence of man. Therefore, philosophy, ethics, and politics can be true to themselves only if they are able to take up, develop, and safeguard the fundamental potentiality found at the heart of *Dasein*. And for Agamben, surprisingly at first glance, they can absolve such responsibility only thanks to "inoperativeness."

"Inoperativeness," comments de la Durantaye early on, is the term that is the most often misunderstood in Agamben's corpus (18). This is surely true, but perhaps this misunderstanding is not always a matter of misreading: the confusion is also motivated by a certain tension in the way Agamben, in different phases of his thought, configures inoperativeness (but also the potential not to, impotentiality). In some cases, impotentiality and inoperativeness refer to a potentiality that is never exhausted in an act: an action that can always be other than itself because it holds on to the potentiality not to be anymore and

1. Agamben, *La potenza del pensiero: Saggi e conferenze* (Milan: Neri Pozza, 2005), 326; quoted by de la Durantaye, 2.

to fall inoperative.[2] In other cases instead, inoperativeness and impotentiality seem to approach idleness and passivity: take for example "Bartleby, or On Contingency" from *Potentialities* and de la Durantaye's discussion of it (169). In order to avoid the equation of inoperativeness and inactivity, it is important to stress that for the Agamben of *The Coming Community* Bartleby does not "stolidly refuse to convert his potentiality (to write) into act," as de la Durantaye instead suggests (168). Bartleby does not simply stop writing: he writes, but he writes nothing other than his potentiality to not write—to refuse to work, in other words. Rather than focusing on the scrivener's idleness, the point worth emphasizing thereby is that Bartleby does live in actuality; he is actually "deeply engaged," but his acts do not take place in the symbolic space—Wall Street—inhabited by the other characters of the story. Agamben's Bartleby is not seeking understanding, recognition, or an ally to form a rhizomatic community with. "At the present," no one is allowed in his world: not even Melville's narrator, not even us, the readers.[3]

In this light, it is easier to understand why in *The Coming Community* Bartleby stands close to the Tiananmen protesters and Robert Walser's creatures: irremediably lost, without a destiny and without identity, they joyfully live their abandon. Abandon (respectively from Capital, State, and God) is in fact what they actively pursue. They do not need redemption, salvation, or help. They are not looking for new phantasmatic identities to cover up their essential indetermination. They just want to be left alone and enjoy their irrepresentable inoperativeness. And wherever this happens, there will be a Tiananmen, and sooner or later, as it was the case for "Bartleby, The Scrivener," the police will appear.

Two important connections get overlooked in the discussion of the role that inoperativeness plays in Agamben's thought. First of all, de la Durantaye does not register that Agamben, by depicting inoperativeness both as the essential feature of humankind and the ground for a politics to come, is also developing a critique to Toni Negri's productivist paradigm, which instead assumes the being-at-work of man as the obligatory starting point for any theorization of the political.[4] Secondly, de la Durantaye does not note the

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2. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 62.

3. Herman Melville, "Bartleby, The Scrivener. A Wall Street Story," in *The Silence of Bartleby*, ed. Dan McCall (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 174.

4. See for example Agamben, "The Work of Man," in *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*, ed. Matthew Calarco and Steven DeCaroli, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 10: "it will be necessary to put aside the emphasis on labor and production and to attempt to think of the multitude as a figure, if not of inaction, at least of a working that in every act realizes its own *shabbat* and in every work is capable of exposing its own inactivity and its own potentiality." For an acute analysis of the differences between Agamben and Negri, see Attell's forthcoming

anarchic overtones that clearly inform Agamben's elaboration of a politics grounded on man's inoperativeness. De la Durantaye does however point out that Agamben's election of inoperativeness as the paradigm for human politics has something to do with the refusal to work that characterized the most radical fringes of the Italian decade-long 1968. Nevertheless, he proceeds to state that even if Agamben's inoperativeness alludes to such a refusal to work, this term "denotes far more than the practical possibilities available to a group of workers" (18). Is de la Durantaye implying that Agamben's inoperativeness refers to practical possibilities available to humanity as such and not only to workers? Or rather that Agamben's use of the term extends well beyond the political? Agamben is obviously doing both: through inoperativeness, Agamben attempts to rethink politics as such; but inoperativeness is also the guiding concept in his philosophical inquiry into the ontology of man. De la Durantaye—and this is an absolutely legitimate, almost obligatory choice—is more interested in exploring Agamben's philosophy, at the cost of missing the opportunity to highlight the less abstract side of his work. In other words: a certain insensibility for the practical possibilities and concrete politics that Agamben's works open to or resonate with organizes the reading protocol set up by de la Durantaye. *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* finds in fact its broader genealogical context in a very authoritative, influential, yet specific reception of European philosophy in the United States, a tradition whose founding work is Jonathan Culler's *On Deconstruction*. It would be a blunt mistake to define this tradition "unpolitical," but we are obviously dealing with a framework that is less militant than the one set up, say, by Judith Butler or Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.[5] It is no accident then that in a book so rich with quotations and references, Agamben's anarchist prophecy is left out: "*The novelty of the coming politics is that it will no longer be a struggle for the conquest or control of the State, but a struggle between the State and the non-State (humanity), an insurmountable disjunction between whatever singularity and the State organization.*"[6] It is no accident that de la Durantaye does not take a deeper look into Agamben's anarchism even during his very thorough reconstruction of *The Coming Community*'s debt to Guy Debord, the "alcoholic anarchist" (173) who had "anarchically attacked" (82) the society of the spectacle. In my own reading of Agamben's texts, by contrast, I am interested in discussing what de la Durantaye decided, for the most part, not to tackle:

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diacritics article "Potentiality, Actuality, Constituent Power."

5. See Jonathan Culler, "Preface to the 25th Anniversary Edition," in *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

6. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 86. Agamben repeats this prophecy almost verbatim in "Marginal Notes on *The Commentaries On the Society of the Spectacle*," in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 88.

their political positioning. This is what I will do in my analysis of Agamben's recent *What is an Apparatus?*. But before getting to that, let me linger a bit more on de la Durantaye.

After noting that inoperativeness in Agamben is far more than a political proposal, de la Durantaye goes on to mention the different passages in which Agamben has employed such a term (*The Coming Community, Homo Sacer*, *The Open*, and so forth) and suggests a genealogical linkage between it and Bataille's *dèsoeuvrement* ("inoperativity" in English). Yet he does not spend much time clarifying the relationship between Agamben and Bataille's inoperativeness. True, we are still in the introduction and one cannot expect too much interpretive depth and closeness of reading in this context. However something similar happens throughout the book: as though moved by a sort of archive fever, de la Durantaye never tires in telling us of all the places in which Agamben dealt with a given problem or developed a certain concept; nor does he tire of reporting what Agamben said about this or that topic in books, essays, and even interviews. Such an abundance of references has a downside: The risk of this overload of information is utter frustration. We know what Agamben stated about inoperativeness and where he stated it, but it is difficult to grasp what is truly at stake in the argument, the problems connected with it, and the role it plays in the general economy of Agamben's thought. De la Durantaye's critical introduction might then not be introductory enough for the novices looking for a crash course in Agamben, while at the same time not critical enough for those readers who are already familiar with his work. The pages de la Durantaye devotes to Agamben's confrontation with Derrida, for example, would have greatly benefited from a more careful approach (184-191). Here as well as elsewhere in the book, de la Durantaye pays the price for a sort of methodological indecision. On the one hand, his introduction is a chronologically arranged series of close readings that starts with *The Man Without Content* and ends with *Profanations* (and it is not clear why *Language and Death* is left out of de la Durantaye's archive, given the importance of this text for the crystallization of Agamben's thought). Whenever de la Durantaye works on shorter essays or on specific conceptual articulations, his reconstructions are amazingly acute and illuminating.[7] Yet, his *explications de textes* are often upset by the irruption of history and the diachronic. If with one hand de la Durantaye scouts the philosophical space arranged by each of Agamben's text, with the other he provides a conceptual history of different keywords and problematics. This approach runs the risk of overlooking both the synchronic structural tensions that upset the architecture of each of Agamben's works and the diachronic shifts in his thought. For example, on the diachronic

7. See de la Durantaye's discussion of "The Prince and the Frog" from *Infancy and History* (104-110), *State of Exception* (335-351), "What is a Paradigm?" from *The Signatures of All Things* (223-226).

level, how to reconcile the Heideggerian transcendental anthropocentrism of "Form-of-Life" and *Homo Sacer* with the Deleuzian/Spinozist vitalism informing "Absolute Immanence"? The failure to ask this and other similar questions leads de la Durantaye to the constitution of a conceptual plane in which all of Agamben can coexist, but at the price of erasing the specificity of each text. It is not a coincidence that an almost identical objection was made against the *Homo Sacer* franchise: what Agamben's genealogy leaves us with is an immobilized history in which the very same structure is stuck repeating itself, allowing no space for synchronic and diachronic differences, nor for local and temporal discontinuities.[8] In "What is the Contemporary?", one of the essays included in *What is an Apparatus?*, Agamben states that "there is a secret affinity between the archaic and the modern [...] because the key to the modern is hidden in the immemorial and in the prehistoric" (51). But doesn't this claim necessarily carry within itself an erasure of history as well? A similar erasure is created in de la Durantaye's book by the contamination of close reading and history of concepts, by the collapse of synchronic and diachronic approaches. And it is this very conflation that sometimes loses me in de la Durantaye's book, caught in a frustration very similar to that provoked by Agamben's erudition as it is deployed most dramatically in *Homo Sacer* or *Il Regno e la Gloria* (2007). Perhaps this introduction to Agamben is structurally too Agambenian (see the numerous *scholia* mirroring Agamben's ubiquitous use of glosses), as in the 1980s and 1990s so many good books on Derrida were arguably too deconstructive. In other words: de la Durantaye sometimes gives in to Agamben's stylistic strategy of overcomplicating the argumentative flow and ends up making it both too exhaustive and elusive.

The general question I would pose to de la Durantaye would then be: wouldn't it be more opportune to simplify the rhetorical strategy in order to ensure readability and understanding, especially given the fact that we are dealing with a reading guide? Isn't this particularly so, since for Agamben—as de la Durantaye states—"the task of the philosopher is...not only to realize that things *might* be different, but to conceive of how *things* might leave the realm of the conditional and enter the actual world of human affairs—not as abstract theory but as real potentiality" (17)? What is peculiar in de la Durantaye's admirable book is that while it demonstrates full awareness of the practical and public implications of Agamben's thought, it also repeatedly downplays the resonances between Agamben's proposals and less esoteric political positions. To put it quite abruptly: perhaps it would be a matter of translating Agamben's works in order to make their politics more evident. For

8. See for instance Dominick LaCapra, "Approaching Limit Events: Siting Agamben," in *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*, 126-142: the most convincing passages of LaCapra's critique are those addressing Agamben's reliance on etymology as a substitute for historical analysis and argument.

instance, instead of dismissing the "anarchic" in Agamben and thereby failing to notice the connection with what Akim Bay has dubbed post-anarchism and Todd May post-structural anarchism, it would be a matter of showing that a call for an anarchic sabotage of the "machines"—the machine of history, of sovereignty, of governmentality—lies at the heart of Agamben's vocation to philosophy and of his election of inoperativeness as the paradigm for the coming politics. *What is an Apparatus?* makes these claims undeniable.

II. The Touch of Evil

What is an Apparatus? includes three essays written by Agamben between 2006 and 2008. In "What is the Contemporary?"—the most epistemological essay of the group—Agamben clarifies the role and the task of the contemporary intellectual. Going back to Nietzsche's 1874 *Untimely Meditations*, Agamben explains that in order to truly be contemporary, you must inhabit your own time without belonging to it completely. In fact, those who are too close to the age in which they live and "are completely tied to it in every respect" (41), are not in the position to grasp the structure of their present. It is a problem of positioning and perspective, of distance and nearness, exactly as it was for Heidegger in *Being and Time* and *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*. An excessive closeness prevents some from seeing where they live; others, instead, collocated at the same time both near and afar from their own time, can take a look at its fundamental features, at the darkness hidden beneath the flashy lights which hold the rest in dull captivation. This darkness for Agamben is nothing else than the past: to be contemporary then means looking back to the past in order to discover the origins of one's present, the *archê* organizing its structure. The connection with Foucault's *Order of Things* is clear: the contemporary is an archeologist. He or she is able in fact to shed a new light on the present by putting it in relation to reminders from other times.

Curiously, in "What is an Apparatus?" Agamben does not mention the past's reminder whose discovery skyrocketed his academic status after 1995. Sacredness is not mentioned in the 2006 "What is an Apparatus?", an essay written ten years after *Homo Sacer*. Furthermore, we do not find any of the esoteric terminology to which Agamben has made us accustomed. No bare life, no *bios*, no *zoē*. I say curiously, because one cannot deny that the sex-appeal of Agamben's jargon has, to a certain degree, contributed to his success, having by now imposed itself as an almost obligatory language for any discourse on culture and politics. It is almost as if, adapting to our case Robert Nozick's famous remark on *Theory of Justice*, cultural critics now must work within Agamben's vocabulary or explain why they do not. I said "curiously" also and especially because "What is an Apparatus?" starts by noting that terminological questions are essential in philosophy, since they

are—as an unnamed great philosopher once said (Walter Benjamin)—the poetic moment of thinking. The terminological shift of this essay should then be taken seriously. My impression is that it marks Agamben's move from sovereignty to governmentality. In the first installments of the *Homo Sacer* project, Agamben had explored the conditions of possibility of sovereign power, concluding that it is founded on the biopolitical splitting of the individual body and the body politic into *bios* and *zoē*, authentic and inauthentic life. For Agamben, once the line between who, insofar as *bios*, properly lives and that which merely exist as *zoē* is drawn, the frontier keeps moving forward, transforming the camps into the paradigmatic spaces of modernity and creating an ever more inclusive group of people that can be sent to die in them. It is this preoccupation that lead Agamben to ask, at the end of *Homo Sacer*, how to overcome this catastrophic situation and liberate the living from the demanding blackmail of sovereign power. *Homo Sacer III* and *Homo Sacer II.1*—respectively, the 1998 *Remnants of Auschwitz* and the 2003 *State of Exception*—pick up from where the first installment ended: the analysis of the camp's structure and the attempt to formulate an alternative, effective state of exception which would overturn the fictive one produced by sovereign power. In the fictive state of exception, the formal suspension of a law is actually a way to preserve the grip of the juridical order on life. The effective exception Agamben—following Benjamin—has in mind would instead suspend the force, the being in force, not of this or that law, but of the juridical order itself. Such a suspension will hopefully bring forth a world liberated from sovereign power and camps. However, the problem with these analyses is that, perhaps, they are still trying to cut off the king's head: they are stuck at the level of sovereign power, incapable of framing specific governmental procedures which subject humanity. But the Agambenian treatment of sovereign power must necessarily result in a study of governmentality for a structural reason: once it has been determined that the exception is not something that happens sometimes and somewhere, in specific and localized contexts, but instead the way in which the law itself operates since "the application of a norm is in no way contained within the norm and cannot be derived from it,"[9] then the question cannot concern the law anymore, but the authorities and the apparatuses that govern in the generalized state of exception which is daily life. The arcane of sovereign power is that there is no sovereign power in itself, there are only governmental techniques. Not having accomplished this move beyond sovereignty is what makes Derrida deserve the anathema that Agamben reserves him in *Homo Sacer:* "Woe to you, who have not wanted to enter into the door of the Law but have not permitted it to be closed either."[10]

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9. Agamben, *State of Exception. Homo Sacer II.1*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 40.
10. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 54.

Therefore, the only way to confront sovereign power is to engage its concrete emanations. The door of the Law needs to be closed because the house of Law is empty, but this also means that the man from the country cannot be satisfied of having tricked the doorkeeper into closing it. After the door gets closed, the man from the country needs to return to his village and start deactivating all the apparatuses governing his fellow citizens' lives in order to make the emergence of elusive forms-of-life possible. It is in the context of the shift from sovereignty to governmentality that Agamben's "What Is an Apparatus? and his 2007 *Il Regno e la Gloria. Homo sacer II.2* abandon sacredness. The contemporary critic needs to find another remnant from the past to illuminate the darkness of our governmentalized present and highlight an exit strategy. What then can shed light onto governmentality? It is the *oikonomia*, stupid. And it is no surprise that "What is an Apparatus?" gets there from Foucault's works on the government of men.

The first gesture performed by Agamben in this essay is to highlight the role that the word *dispositif*—"apparatus" in English—plays "in the strategy of Foucault's thought" (1). According to Agamben, Foucault started using this term with a certain regularity from the second half of the 70s, in conjunction with his increasing concern for governmentality.

As Foucault notes in his 1979 "What is Critique?", starting from the fifteenth century Europe witnessed an explosion of knowledge concerned with the question of how to govern the multitudes that formed a nation: "how to govern children, how to govern the poor and beggars, how to govern a family, a house, how to govern armies, different groups, cities, States."[11] The demographic boom of the fifteenth century was one of the main reasons for which the attempt to govern souls and bodies shifted from a religious practice to a political project, moving from the Church to the State. State power, by secularizing the Christian salvation theology, supported the idea that in order to live a good life, to avoid guilt and be saved, a human being, whatever her age or status, had to let herself be governed. But since the population was increasing exponentially, the State needed new and more effective methods of governing its ever multiplying and diverse body politic. The demands of the post-feudal formations with their vast territories and diverse subjects required a new way of exercising its power. Punishment was not enough. Techniques were needed to shape the citizens' lives in order to control their natural indocility and exploit their bodily powers in view of a presumed common good.

It is in this framework that Foucault, according to Agamben, develops his notion of *dispositif*: an apparatus is a response to the emergence of a specific urgency in a play of forces; it is a concrete intervention in such a field which

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11. Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?", in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvane Lotringer, trans. Lysa Hochroth (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 44.

has the strategic function of blocking, stabilizing, defusing some of them at the expense of the others. As examples of *dispositifs*, Foucault mentions: discourses, institutions, city planning, police ordinances, laws, administrative measures, scientific or philosophical enunciations, moral or philanthropic proposals. In brief, for Foucault a *dispositif* is any practice or mechanism that can be employed to establish a certain power relation. For Agamben, however, it is much more: he, in fact, links Foucault's *dispositif* with the Hegelian notion of *Positivität* as it is found in "The Positivity of the Christian Religion" (14).

To track down the meaning of positivity, Agamben turns to "*Raison and histoire. Les idées de positivité et de destin,*" where Jean Hyppolite discusses Hegel's distinction between natural and positive religion: the distinction between the immediate relation with the divine and its mediation through contingent institutions and practices. Following Hyppolite—who was Foucault's teacher both in high school and at university, and whose chair at the *Collège de France* Foucault would "inherit"—Agamben suggests that for the young Hegel, positivity is an obstacle to the exercise of human freedom. What is important here is that Hyppolite suggests that *Positivität* is the name given to the historical element itself, the array of rules, rituals, and beliefs which are imposed on the living by external authorities and then interiorized as a *modus vivendi*. Given the fact that Foucault had already stated at the end of *The Archeology of Knowledge* that his object of inquiry was the field of *positivité*, given the etymological proximity between the two terms, and given that Foucault has often talked of Hyppolite as his *maître*, Agamben concludes that Foucault, by raising the issue of the *dispositif*, is thematizing the relation between "individual as living beings" and "the set of institutions, processes of subjectification, and rules in which power relations become concrete" (6). While Hegel wanted first to oppose and then to reconcile *Positivität* and freedom, Foucault is interested in studying the concrete ways apparatuses function in particular power games and the concrete effects they have on individual living beings. And it is at this point that *oikonomia* steps on stage: it is only by referring to such a context that the modern dispositifs can be fully understood.

"In Greek, *oikonomia* signifies the administration of the *oikos* (the home) and, more generally, management," but Agamben is more interested in the specific function such a term plays in theological discourses (8). The treatment of *oikonomia* in "What Is an Apparatus?" is rather elusive, but the point Agamben makes here is the same as that in *Il Regno e la Gloria*: Christian dogmas postulate a split between the creation and the administration of life because God did not assign worldly beings a destiny when creating them. "The Lord is anarchic," concludes Agamben in *Il Regno e la Gloria*; His grip on living is not founded in being, but it is something that needs to be asserted continuously in practice. This situation is obviously analogous to that faced by sovereign power. The authority of the sovereign on the living is not established

with the creation of *homines sacri*, but it needs to be enforced through a series of capillary interventions: "*Our research has in fact showed that the real problem, the central arcane of politics is not sovereignty, but government, not God, but the angel, not the king, but the minister, not the law, but the police—that is, the governmental machine that they create and keep in movement*."[12] As God needs angels, sovereign power needs the police. Not only God but also living beings are in fact marked by an ontological anarchy—the living is the "Ungovernable," notes Agamben at the end of "What Is an Apparatus?"—but for this very reason they need to be governed at all costs: the *oikonomical* machine succeeds when it is able to capture humankind's inoperativeness and put it to work for its own good. *Dispositio*, notes Agamben in "What Is an Apparatus?", is the term the Fathers of the Church resorted to for translating the Greek *oikonomia* into Latin and pointing out the necessity of a redemptive governance of the world and of human history. And it is within the framework of this theological legacy that one must situate Foucault's *dispositifs*: The term "apparatus" designates the device through which, and in which one realizes a pure activity of governance devoid of any foundation in being, a governance that seeks to orient and guide creatures toward the a presumed good (11-12).

The disconnection between being and governance leads Agamben to propose a massive partitioning of reality in two: on the one hand, we have living beings; on the other, we have the apparatuses which incessantly capture them. *Oikonomia* against ontology. And the subject is the result of the relentless hand-to-hand confrontation between living beings and apparatuses. Subjects, in other words, do not exist in nature; they are the artificial form in which a life is captured by virtue of its association with a certain governmental apparatus.

Agamben's emphasis here on the governmental dimension of anthropogenesis surely refers back to his 2002 *The Open* and even more decisively to his 2008 *Homo sacer II.3*, *Il sacramento del linguaggio*. However, in "What Is an Apparatus?"—at least at the beginning—the distinction is not between men and animals, but between living beings and subjects: man is not produced out of the animal, rather a subject is produced out of a living being. Does it mean that animals are also subjects in as much as they are the result of the contact between certain living beings and certain governmental apparatuses? It is as if the study of the government of the living would oblige Agamben—consciously or unconsciously, willingly or unwillingly—to put aside for a moment his Heideggerian anthropocentrism and assume the "ontological difference" between men and other living beings as historic and contingent, rather than natural and necessary. The ontological difference could itself be considered the effect of *oikonomia*, and living being as such could be awarded inoperativeness: not only man, but also the living is without content.

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12. See Agamben, *Il Regno e la Gloria: Per una genealogia teologica dell'economia e del governo. Homo Sacer II. 2* (Milan: Neri Pozza, 2007), 217-304, here 303.

Agamben in "What Is an Apparatus" takes instead the opposite route, at odds with what he claimed in the Deleuze-driven 1994 "Absolute Immanence." In that occasion, Agamben attributed desire and potentiality not to human life, but to life in its basilar stage of *threptiché psyché*.[13] "What Is an Apparatus?", on the other hand, claims that potentiality is introduced in the living thanks to the apparatus: apparatuses divide the living being from itself and from the dull captivation with its environment. Language, the first *dispositif* in which a particular species of living beings stumbled upon, made them inoperative, while all the other living beings were left without potentiality. A primate—Agamben's story goes—inadvertently let himself be captured in language, "probably without realizing the consequences that he was about to face," and in this way the process of humanization started (16). Yet, if living beings before being touched by apparatuses exist in the total absorption with their environment, does it make sense to affirm that the primate "probably" did not realize the consequences of language? If the capacity to "realize" is assigned to the pre-human, then potentiality must be a feature of the living as such, independently from its interaction with apparatuses. Also, Agamben states that the condition for the possibility of each apparatus, is the all-too-human desire for happiness. But how is it possible that apparatuses are both the condition for humanization and its effect? If apparatuses pre-date humankind, their explanation and origin must be located in the realm of the living.

It is clear that Agamben is solely interested in reconstructing the fights and the processes of subjectification which affect human living beings. Nevertheless, I am suggesting that his bi-partition of the real does not prevent but actually authorizes the broadening of his framework to animal subjects as well. A history of the government of men could then be supplemented by a history of the government of animals. One could combine the archeology of prisons, schools, hospitals, mental asylums, and factories, with that of battery farming, kennel clubs, slaughterhouses, and training schools. In this way, it would be more evident that the captivity of animal lives is deeply intertwined with that of human living beings. The living as such is captivated in a *dispositif* history; the living as such is controlled by *oikonomia*. Therefore the project of a liberation of the living cannot only address "us." Yet, Agamben does embark on the line of thought his own framework momentarily launched and the division between men and animals is soon superimposed over that between subjects and living beings, producing all sorts of interpretative difficulties. As it happened in *The Open*, Agamben ultimately falls within the specism characterizing political theory at large. In fact, he only takes into account the harmful effects of apparatuses on men: the fight between living beings and apparatuses did not go too well for us if the forms of subjectification at

13. Agamben, "Absolute Immanence," in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1999), 237.

our disposal are the cell-phone user, the web surfer, the writer of stories, the tango aficionado, or the anti-globalization activist.[14] However, the bleakness of the situation should not make humankind fear and tremble. Anything but. Agamben has taught us all too well that where there is danger, the saving power also grows.

As if scared by their fundamental inoperativeness and lack of content, living beings find happiness in becoming a subject and acquiring a fixed identity. And in the past, apparatuses and *oikonomia* were able to intercept this all-too-human desire by providing living beings with satisfactory modes of subjectification (the workers, the bourgeoisie, the revolutionary, and so forth). Now, instead, governmentality is facing a crisis of overproduction: we are intercepted by so many apparatuses and therefore so many alternative lines of subjectification, that we cannot commit to any subjectivity in particular. No matter the intensity of the desire which has driven us into an apparatus, we will not be able to acquire a new subjectivity and we will not be satisfied by the larval subject we will have become: there cannot be joy in being an Facebook profile or a guitar hero. This unhappiness plays the role of a historical-cosmic event in Agamben's narrative: it is the *a posteriori* in which one can eventually discover the *a priori*, the fact that a living being is not a subject, and in the process of subjectification one can find only a temporary distraction from one's own lack of content. To the eyes of authority, nothing looks more like a terrorist than the ordinary man, because no one is more unhappy with his life than the man that has surrendered all his living potentialities to the governmental apparatuses: "The more apparatuses pervade and disseminate their power in every field of life, the more government will find itself faced with an elusive element, which seems to escape its grip the more it docily submits to it" (25).

The time has then come to take action against the voluntary servitude to governmental apparatuses and to reclaim what until now humankind has contracted out to them: its inoperativeness. "What we are dealing with—writes Agamben—is the liberation of that which remains captured and separated by means of apparatuses, in order to bring it back to a possible common use" (17). The power to act and to live awaits us beyond governance. While governmental *oikonomia* removes potentiality from our control, politics is the counter-apparatus which returns to humankind what had been alienated from it: its power to be. Such a politics is an anarchic for two reasons: on the

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14. The inclusion of the "no-global" in this list might be interpreted as an indirect attack against the hegemonic role of "Negrism" in recent anti-globalization movements in Italy and France. For a discussion of the oblique dialogues and polemics taking places "What Is an Apparatus?", see Timothy Campbell, *Improper Life: Technology and Biopolitics from Heidegger to Agamben* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

one hand, it is moved by the desire to not be governed and it can occur only thanks to the sabotage of the machines responsible for the enforcement of governmentality and for the put to work of man's inoperativeness. Yet it is anarchic also because it does not assign an identity or a subjectivity to living beings, but—by deactivating their presumed social or biological destiny—let them enjoy their own boundless inoperativeness. At stake in this deactivation is the contemplation of being and life in their purest form: eventually, once the sabotage of the "pure activity of governance" is activated, one will be able to perceive being and life as pure potentiality. And this sensation, Agamben concludes following Aristotle in "The Friend"—the second essay from *What Is an Apparatus?*—is itself "sweet" (32). The pay-off of the flight from apparatuses consists therefore in a more authentic happiness than the alienated, repressive one induced by *oikonomia*. The form-of-life that begins on earth after the last day of providential governance is, for Agamben, simply good life. But since apparatuses are a machine of governance only because they are primarily a subjectifying device, the fight against apparatuses also implies a struggle against the processes of subjectification carried out by each of them. For Agamben, differently from Negri, it is not a matter of providing, to use Foucault's words, the confused and anonymous Western man "who no longer knows himself, the possibility of alternative identities, more individualized and substantial than his own."[15] From within the framework elaborated in "What Is an Apparatus?", the attempt to reconstitute a new political subject appears a paralyzing capitulation to the logic of governmentality. The form-of-life emerging from the jamming of the governmental machine will then have to be a man, yet a man who is not a subject. We are impatiently waiting for the announced, conclusive *Homo Sacer* installment to get to know better such "a life."

In 2001 the collective Tiqqun published an article called "Une métaphysique critique pourrait naître comme science des dispositifs…" in the second issue of its short lived review. Such an essay—which heavily informs "What Is an Apparatus?" and was discussed by Agamben in a 2009 Paris presentation—is introduced as the founding document of the Society for the Advancement of Criminal Science, a non-profit organization dedicated to the anonymous collection, classification, and diffusion of knowledge/powers useful to anti-imperial war machines.[16] After describing critique as a resentful

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15. Foucault, "Nietzsche, genealogy, and history," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 160.

16. See Tiqqun, "Une métaphysique critique pourrait naître comme science des dispositifs…", in *Tiqqun 2. Zone d'Opacité Offensive* (2001), online at http://www.bloom0101.org/tiqqun.html. A rough, anonymous, English translation can be found at http://www.bloom0101.org/tiqqun.html. David Kishik – one of the translators of *What Is an Apparatus?* – had made available on his blog the videorecording of Agamben's

denunciation of contemporary life that ends up sheltering what is so fiercely attacked from any concrete intervention, Tiqqun concludes: "A science of apparatuses, a critical metaphysics, is thus indeed necessary, but not to depict some appealing certainty behind which one could hide oneself, nor even to add to life the thought of itself. We do need to think about our lives, but in order to dramatically intensify them."

Perhaps here there is a lesson to be learned for critical theory as well. Critical theory will be a science of apparatuses or will not be. An intensification of non-imperial forms-of-life; an anti-governmental war machine. — • —

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public remarks on Tiqqun: see http://notesforthecomingcommunity.blogspot.com/2009/04/agamben-apropos-of-tiqqun.html; an English translation of the lecture can be found at http://anarchistwithoutcontent.wordpress.com/2010/04/18/tiqqun-apocrypha-repost.