

Before Agamben: Towards a Critique of Inoperativity in Luciano Bianciardi's *La vita agra*

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Abstract

This article offers a critical interpretation of inoperativity by drawing a comparison between the work of Giorgio Agamben and that of Luciano Bianciardi. The methodological strategy adopted here is to blur the line between philosophy and literature in order to show the ambivalent character of the inoperative form-of-life. The aim of this article is twofold. On the one hand, I intend to demonstrate how Bianciardi's narrative anticipates some fundamental principles of Agamben's theory of inoperativity. On the other, my aim is to identify two contradictory meanings expressed by this notion: (1) inoperativity as a strategy to free humans from capitalism; (2) inoperativity as an epistemological tool to describe the transformation of labour in the age of linguistic capitalism. In order to do so, this article focuses on the *Homo Sacer* project and *La vita agra* (*It's a Hard Life*) as the points of references for a discussion of inoperativity in the works of Agamben and Bianciardi, respectively. The first part of the article is devoted to an examination of Bianciardi's novel, addressing both his *philosophy of work* and his *philosophy of inoperativity*. The second part presents an analysis of inoperativity in Agamben, beginning from its Aristotelian genesis. Finally, the last section posits the double meaning of inoperativity: its promise of freedom is accompanied by the actuality of domination and submission. The wager of this article is that it is through a *critique of inoperativity* that we can achieve new strategies for the emancipation of active life from capitalist society.

Keywords: Language, Work, Inoperative life, Active life, Capitalism



1. Introduction

In this article my purpose is to explain how the Italian writer Luciano Bianciardi (1922–1971) theorises *inoperativity* starting from a lucid and coherent diagnosis of the metamorphosis of labour in late capitalism. And, moreover, I intend to present his proposal on inoperative life as a theoretical project that anticipates some of the reasons contained in Giorgio Agamben's mature philosophy.

Contaminating philosophy with literature and thus broadening inoperativity, the aim is to propose a critical interpretation of this theme, which, in both authors and especially in Bianciardi, seems to show an ambivalent feature. On the one hand, inoperativity constitutes the key-concept for the construction of an anthropology finally freed from the market economy; on the other, it represents a valid epistemological criterion for describing the new strategies used by capital to subdue living labour.

The article is developed in three stages. The first aims to present Bianciardi's most important novel entitled *La vita agra* (1962, *It's a Hard Life*), highlighting the links between the *philosophy of work* and the *philosophy of inoperativity* (§ 2, 3, 4, 5). The second stage focuses on the notion of *argia*, which is the word used by Greek philosophy to describe inoperativity, and it is divided in two ways: Aristotle's way (§ 6) and Agamben's way (§ 7). Finally, the third stage focuses again on Bianciardi's novel in order to isolate and to oppose two meanings of the concept of inoperativity, which demonstrate the contradictory nature of this notion: its promise of freedom is overturned into domination and submission (§8).

2. A scandalous novel

In *La vita agra*, Bianciardi tells the autobiographical story of a provincial intellectual who moved to the big city in the mid-1950's. The main character, anonymous, decides to leave his home and his work to go to avenge the forty-three miners who died in the Ribolla massacre (4th May 1954, Grosseto, Tuscany). His plan is to hide a bomb under the "*torracchione*", the building that houses the management offices of the company which is believed to be responsible for the disaster. But the bombing project steadily evaporates as the protagonist is absorbed by the rhythms of Italian neo-capitalism *produci-consuma-crepa*¹ and he begins his personal struggle against labour, against commodity, against smog, against the crowd, against political parties. In this solitary battle, he is supported only by his alter-ego Anna, and with her he establishes an extramarital relationship. Fired from a publishing house for poor performance, he gets precarious jobs as a freelance translator. He says no to both provincial and city life, and withdraws into the dream of an anarcho-socialist community with an "anti-agitative and copulatory" foundation. His only escape is sleep.

¹ In English: *produce-consume-die*.

With *La vita agra* Bianciardi accomplishes the trilogy of anger, which began in 1957 with *Il lavoro culturale* (*Cultural Work*) and continued in 1959 with *L'integrazione* (*Integration*). Together they provide us with a pioneering anthropology of late capitalism. Neither apocalyptic nor integrated (Eco, 1964), the author describes the new *ethos* of metropolitan life in an age when capital was preparing to make linguistic work the pillar of the entire production process. Precisely because he looks on neither with optimism nor with resignation and suspicion at such transformations, he refuses to play a role in the Italic derby between Calvino and Pasolini and he produces a rather singular novel, which I propose to define as *scandalous*, according to the oldest meaning of this expression. The adjective derives from the Latin term '*scandalum*', which refers to the Greek word '*skandalon*'. According to the *Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell & Scott, 1843: 1604), the first meaning of '*skandalon*' is 'trap or snare laid for an enemy', usually for an animal; the second meaning, also used in Latin (Lewis-Short, 1879: 1639), indicates precisely a "stumbling-block", which causes the ruinous fall of those who are walking along the street. The scandal contained in *La vita agra* consists essentially of two elements: the first concerns the use of language, the second concerns the tale.

The use of language. '*La vita agra* is a translator's novel' (Varotti, 2017: 169) in the sense that it is a text which makes extensive use of metalanguage, filling itself with puns, false quotations, Latinisms and Tuscanisms, slang expressions, technicalities, stylistic contaminations. The linearity of writing is broken, the reader is bewildered and his is a living and tiring linguistic labour, as is that of the writer. An example of this scandalous language, which sets traps and involves pitfalls, is given by the famous incipit dedicated to the etymology of the term 'Brera', the name of the neighbourhood of Milan well known as a destination for intellectuals and artists:

On the whole I am inclined to agree with Adelung, because if we take as our point of departure a High German *Bretite*, the transition to *Braida* is plain sailing, as, indeed, is all the rest — the contraction of the diphthong into an open 'e' as well as the rhotacism of the intervocalic dental, which now, heaven be praised, is no longer a mystery to anyone. It occurs, for instance, in the speech of the American Middle West — there was the airman I knew at Manduria, for instance, whom I failed to understand when he showed me his middle finger covered with plaster and said *hospiral*. But there is no need to cross the Atlantic, because there was also that other member of the armed forces, on

Merola of headquarters company, who has born at Nocera Inferiore, and always said *maronna mia* instead of *madonna mia*. The other hypotheses, that is, that the name derives from a Low Latin *Braida* or a classical Latina *Praedium*, appeal to me less; and in any case there is general agreement about the meaning – *campus vel ager suburbanus in Gallia cisalpina*, or an open expanse adjoining the inhabited area, a green space *intra moenia*, the site of the cattle market and no doubt a haunt of prostitutes at night. As it was overlooked by some property belonging to one Adalgiso Guercio, it continued to be known as the Braida del Guercio. (Bianciardi, 1962: 7)

It is an *ex abrupto* beginning (Varotti, 2017: 160), where the colloquial tone of ‘on the whole’ is mixed with the typical digression of the philologist. Bianciardi recalls the work of the German linguist and polygraph Johann Christoph Adelung (1732–1806), known for having written the first dictionary of the German language and for having devoted himself to the comparative examination of hundreds of languages and dialects. Hence a succession of hypotheses and examples concerning the origin of the name ‘Brera’, with the author intent on showing off a hyperbolic, excessive erudition, which aims to mock and unravel every pre-constituted literary scheme and especially the monumental and classical ones. The beginning is already a stumbling-block, which tests the reader’s strength. In fact, the reader is engaged in facing and overcoming unusual linguistic games, now out of order, which are the prerogative of a few specialists and mostly represent a source of friction, an obstacle to run up against.

The tale. From beginning to end, the story is studded with stumbling-blocks because it consists of the hero’s obstacle course in the metropolis of the economic miracle. Every day the protagonist has to deal with the employers who demand so much and pay so little, with his unpleasant and careerist colleagues, with creditors, with the myths of the dawning society of the spectacle, including its selfishness, its false friendships and its flip-side of freedom. Here is a very significant extract, where Bianciardi imagines meeting an old friend, Tacconi Otello, animated by political fervour and revolutionary practice. According to him, he has no other choice than to confide his bitter defeat:

But, if I should now return to my native place and meet him, what should I say to him? I am certain that he would not say anything this time either, but I know already what I should see in his eyes. And what I should be able to answer? Look, Tacconi, I might say. Here they’ve

reduced me to a state in which I can hardly keep my head above water, if you fall here nobody helps you to your feet, my strength is barely sufficient to keep me afloat, and, if I manage to scrape through, believe me, life in this city is hard. (Bianciardi, 1962: 153)

But there is another passage where the character literally affirms that he lives in a world where he cannot walk, where he moves awkwardly, admitting that he is clumsy and, therefore, disposed to stumbling. For these reasons they arrest him, and dismiss him:

Those who say I'm clumsy and don't know to get around are perfectly right. It's perfectly true, I don't know how to walk even, and once I was arrested in the street for just this reason. In the end I lost my job for the same reason [...]. I was given sack for the same reason, because I dragged my feet, moved slowly, and kept looking all around when there was no actual need to. In our business you have to lift your feet smartly, plant them down again solidly, move briskly and raise the dust, if possible a cloud of it to hide behind. (*Ibid.*: 104–105)

The life of *La vita agra* is a scandalous form of life, an existence always on the verge of falling and being trampled upon, with no one ready to help. For Bianciardi, once the revolutionary hypothesis is excluded, there are two exit strategies: either to reply through the irreverent, ironic and mocking use of language, or to imagine a form of life based on inoperativity, where politics and work are devoid of any existential centrality. An inoperative life that deactivates and overcomes the ancient opposition between action (*praxis*) and production (*poiēsis*),² ushering in the post-capitalist age that is the same as the end of history.

3. Bianciardi philosopher of work

The age of linguistic capitalism (Mazzeo, 2019) it is the time to interpret Bianciardi as a philosopher of work. In *La vita agra*, the author gives us a portrait of the metamorphosis of the labour process that has 'unmistakable theoretical merit' (Virno, 2002: 57). His philosophical merit consists in understanding the

² '[A]ction and making are different kinds of thing [...]. For while making has an end other than itself, action cannot; for good action itself is its end' (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140b: 3–7).

logical sequence that explains the concept of work in the contemporary world.³ His model can be synthesized in the formula *work as language*, a notion which distinguishes itself from the much better-known expression *language as work* coined by the Italian Marxist semiotician Ferruccio Rossi-Landi (1968). The becoming-language (*praxis*) of work (*poiēsis*) is opposed to the becoming-work of language. Bianciardi connects language to work and thereby obtains a *poiēsis* replete with qualities and characteristics typical of *praxis*, beginning with the identity between action and product.

The linguistic becoming of work has an *uncanny* (*unheimlich*) effect (Freud, 1919), because something extraneous is here revealing an element of familiarity in its features: language, as the foreign-enemy of work, becomes a very familiar element for human *poiēsis*. The new alliance creates an ambivalent notion of work, a *poiēsis* that is also a *praxis* and, therefore, a *poiēsis* without any product: the dominant labour process produces fewer and fewer things and more and more words.

The *philosopher* Bianciardi must be inserted within a pattern of authors and concepts concerned with the notion of linguistic work. A provisional list would include: the notion of *praxis* as action without any product (Aristotle, Arendt); the opposition between productive and unproductive labour (Smith, Marx); the relationship between language and cultural industry (Adorno, Horkheimer); the connection between labour and spectacle (Debord). From a philosophical point of view, Bianciardi's account is interesting because he isolates the main characteristics that distinguish cultural industry from agriculture and from the Taylor-Fordist factory that characterised Milan in the years of the economic miracle. The author outlines the cultural labour that leaves no objects behind, a labour without any product: public relations workers, advertisers, journalists, editors, TV and radio workers, teachers, priests, etc. That is the kind of activity that for Smith (1776) and Marx (1864) was classifiable as slavish and unproductive, and that instead, for Bianciardi, becomes the new basis for surplus value. For the classical economy, cultural labour was insignificant and marginal compared to the category of productive labour; it was rather the factory workers who made the greatest contribution to an increase in invested capital. Bianciardi, instead, overcomes the opposition between productive and unproductive labour and shows how new labours of the tertiary sector — and of the “quaternary” —

³ There is a large bibliography on the transformation of labour, especially in the field of the social sciences. Two reference studies are Marazzi (1994) and Zarifian (1996). For a more recent study combining social sciences with the history of philosophy, see Bodei (2019).

which are characterized by the absence of a visible production of goods, become the new origin of the wealth of nations.

4. The becoming language of work

Bianciardi identifies the innovation of labours appearing in the 1960s not so much in the productive development of language, but in the exact opposite: in the ever-increasing inscription of political-linguistic features in labour activity. Bianciardi highlights how from a certain point onwards capital began to enhance the interweaving of communication and production, focusing on the becoming *praxis* of *poiesis*, on *work as language* and not, as Rossi-Landi teaches, on *language as work*. In this perspective, we read a passage where the writer illustrates with extreme lucidity the main lines of the phenomenon:

But the fact of the matter is that the peasant's is a primary job and the worker's a secondary one. The former produces something out of nothing, and the latter turns things into something else. In both cases it is easy to apply a yardstick, a quantitative one, the productivity of the factory or the profitability of the farm. But in business of our kind there is no quantitative yardstick. How can you calculate the value of the work done by a priest, an advertising man, a public relations officer? They neither produce something out of nothing nor turn one thing into another. Their jobs are neither primary nor secondary. In fact they are tertiary or, if Billa's husband did not object, I should call them quaternary. They are not instruments of production, or even conveyor belts. At best they are lubricants, or so much vaseline. How can one assess the value of a priest, advertising man or public relations officer, or calculate the amount of faith, acquisitiveness or good will that they succeed in stimulating? The only measuring rod that can be applied to them is the ability of each to remain afloat and rise higher, to become bishops, in fact. In other words, those who choose a tertiary or quaternary calling require gifts and attitudes of a political type [...]. In the tertiary and quaternary occupations, as there is no visible production of goods to serve as a yardstick, the criterion is the same. (Bianciardi, 1962: 105–106)

The theoretical purpose of this piece is moving *praxis* in the direction of *poiēsis* to the point that it is included within it. Bianciardi explains the effects produced by the transfer of acting to making when he states that labours with a high political attitude do not give rise to ‘any visible production of goods’, i.e. they are labours that do not end in a product. He therefore links the transition from *praxis* to *poiēsis* — not the contrary, not the becoming *poiēsis* of *praxis* — to the absence of an external end that survives the labour activity. The outcome is a very peculiar kind of human performativity that goes by the name of ‘ateleological activism’ (*Ibid.*: 62). Here there is an outline of the concept of “work without teleology”, which is the most suitable scheme to account for the changes in labour process in contemporary capitalism (Virno, 1986).

5. Vita agra, vita arga

Bianciardi is a lucid and unprejudiced pioneer in the diagnosis of contemporary labour, but he is unable to translate this socio-economic analysis into an affirmative political project. He remains irretrievably victim of a crisis of presence so powerful as to lead him, in the literary imagination, but even more so in real life, to the psycho-physical destruction and lastly to die. So, he yields to the temptation to escape from an *agra* life through a life as *arga*, that is, without *ergon* (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.7), devoid of a species-specific activity, an inoperative existence.

In the penultimate chapter of his novel, the writer proposes a manifesto of inoperativity by imagining an ‘anti-agitative and copulatory neo-Christianity’ (Bianciardi, 1962: 158). The author outlines an anarchist community, with a subsistence economy based on the gift and the products of the earth, where,

[p]eople must learn not to hurry, not to co-operate, not to produce, not to acquire new needs, but instead to give up their existing needs [...]. When paper and metal have been eliminated there will be no such thing as money, and with it the market economy will disappear and give way to an economy of a new type, based not on exchange but on giving [...]. All the quaternary occupations will disappear, and first of all typographers, public relations officers and demodoxologists. These will be followed into limbo by the tertiary occupations, and then the secondary ones. Work of the primary type, that is to say, cultivation of the soil, will gradually diminish, because we shall live chiefly on the

natural fruits of the earth. (*Ibid.*: 155–156)

Without labour and profit or private property, ‘men will cultivate noble passions, such as friendship and love. In the absence of the institution of the family, sexual relations will be free, indiscriminate, uninterrupted, frequent, or actually continuous’ (*ibid.*: 157).

Taking into account Bianciardi’s ‘stylistic extremism’ and his linguistic experimentalism’ (Varotti, 2017: 164–169), it seems right to propose to interpret the title of the novel as an anagram where the word ‘*agra*’, which in Italian refers to someone or something ‘of sour, acidic taste, denoting malevolence or malice, which reveals discomfort’ and which is translated into English as ‘hard’, changes into the italianised Greek expression, ‘*arga*’. According to the Greek-English Lexicon (Liddell & Scott, 1843: 236), the adjective, *argos*, apart from having the technical meaning of ‘not working the ground’ is equivalent to ‘idle, lazy’.⁴ The *arga* life gives content to the new post-capitalist anthropology imagined by Bianciardi after having found ‘that is not enough to get rid of the political, economic, social and entertainment management in Italy. The revolution must begin elsewhere, in interior of man’ (Bianciardi, 1962: 155). With a theoretical choice similar to Agamben’s fifty years later, the writer extends the ‘ateleological activism’ that distinguishes contemporary production to the whole of human performativity, thus trying to remove it from the domination of the market economy and the myths of the society of the spectacle. From no longer recognising the concept of work as *poiēsis*, but conceiving it as something equal to action without product, the author derives a utopia based on inoperativity, which deactivates any performance. It is not so much the absence of products, but the complete suspension of the activity driven towards ends, which is characteristic of humans. However, salvation is by no means a foregone conclusion. Parodying his ‘anti-agitative and copulatory neo-Christianity’, Bianciardi minimises (but does not deny): ‘Pending all this [...] I still have to struggle to keep my head above water and make a living’ (*Ibid.*: 158).

6. The notion of *argia* in Aristotle

A coherent way to give an account of the notion of *argia* is to place it within the context of the Aristotelian reflection on the proper function of man (*ergon*),

⁴ Also see Rocci (1939: 237): ‘inoperoso; inattivo; che non lavora la terra; pigro; sfaccendato; disoccupato; che non fa nulla, ozioso’.

contained in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (I.7). The well-known ‘function argument’⁵ is useful as the basis for the construction of an anthropology of happiness (*eudaimonia*) which conceives of the *eu zēn* as the excellent fulfilment of *ergon*. Aristotle’s reasoning produces at least two consequences that overturn the thesis of the function argument, giving rise to as many meanings of the concept of *argia*. The first, which is the one postulated by the philosopher of Stagira, represents the narrow meaning and coincides with sleep or death. The second, assumed by Agamben, represents the broad meaning and it corresponds to the reverse of the active life.

According to Aristotle’s function argument, there is an operation that is proper to man and it is conceived as an activity performed in accordance with language (*logos*).⁶ The topic is posed in the form of a rhetorical question, making a comparison between the human being in general and some particular human types (the flute-player, the sculptor, the carpenter, the shoemaker) and between the human organism in its entirety and some parts of it:

[...] we could first ascertain the function of man. For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or any artist, and, in general, for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the ‘well’ is thought to reside in the function, so would it seem to be for man, if he has a function. Have the carpenter, then, and the tanner certain functions or activities, and has man none? Is he naturally functionless? Or as eye, hand, foot, and in general each part evidently has a function, may one lay it down that man similarly has a function apart from all these? What then can this be? (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097b: 25–32).

The affirmative answer, given a few lines later, is widely known and lies in connecting man’s *ergon* with the *logos*: ‘the function of man is an activity of soul in accordance with, or not without, *logos* (rational principle)’ (*Ibid.*, 1098a: 7–8). Perhaps less well-known is the negative answer that Aristotle gives at the end of Book I, and that Agamben himself never takes into account. The passage is the one where the author introduces the image of sleep (*hypnos*) as that state of experience which alternates with waking and is common to the biological cycles of all living organisms. Aristotle observes that in the case of human beings, during

⁵ See especially Baker (2015). For an overview see Warren and Sheffield (2014: 351–353).

⁶ Following Lo Piparo (2003: 5-6), I intended *logos* as *language* and not as ‘rational principle’ (see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098a: 7-8).

sleep, the difference between happy and unhappy life lapses. In fact, in the sleeping person, the activity whose fulfilment determines the *eu zēn* is no longer in question because: ‘sleep is an inactivity (*argia*) of the soul in that respect in which it is called bad or good’ (*Ibid.*, 1102b: 7–8). A little later, Aristotle adds that the *argia* of the soul is precisely that of dreamless sleep: there is inactivity or inoperativity of the soul ‘unless perhaps to a small extent some of the movements actually penetrate, and in this respect the dreams of good men are better than those of ordinary people’ (*Ibid.*, 1102b: 9–11). Aristotle dedicates to sleep and dreams certain of his short treatises on the philosophy of nature: one of these works is known simply as *On Sleep*. Here, sleep is defined as ‘a privation of waking’ (Aristotle, *On Sleep*, 453a26) and as what makes the human body ‘unable to actualise its powers’ [μη δύνασθαι ἐνεργεῖν] (*ibid.*, 458a: 29). For Aristotle, therefore, sleep captures a narrow meaning of *argia*, because it is equivalent not so much to the potentiality not to pass into actuality, but to the negation of potentiality as such, that is, to the denial of the possibility of passing and/or *not* passing into actuality. One reason why Agamben, in his research on *argia*, does not take into consideration the Aristotelian response on sleep lies precisely in the fact that the inactivity of dreamless sleep is synonymous with death.⁷ For Agamben, engaged in the construction of a new anthropology and a new political community, such an overlap of meanings is not acceptable and, therefore, he intends to derive a broader theory of *argia*.

7. The notion of inoperativity in Agamben⁸

Agamben develops Aristotle’s function argument in several works.⁹ In the collection *The Fire and Tale*, published immediately after the release of the last chapter of the cycle *Homo sacer*, the author answers in a negative sense to the question posed in the *Ethics*:

Obviously, Aristotle soon leaves aside the hypothesis that man as an animal is essentially *argos*, inoperative, and that no work or vocation can

⁷ The paradigm of the equivalence between dreamless sleep and death is contained in Plato’s *Apology*: ‘Now if there is no consciousness but only a dreamless sleep, death must be a marvelous gain’ (40d). For a more recent reference, see Nancy (2007).

⁸ This section reworks themes contained in Nizza (2019; 2020).

⁹ See especially the essay entitled ‘The work of man’ (Agamben, 2004). In the *Homo sacer* project, see Agamben (2007; 2014a). For a more recent reference see Agamben (2017).

define him. For my part I would like to encourage you to take this hypothesis seriously and, consequently, to think man as a living being without work. (Agamben, 2014b: 52)

Through the concept of inoperativity Agamben intends to solve the ancient problem of overcoming the opposition between *praxis* and *poiēsis*. The main purpose of his theory lies in transforming the overcoming of this opposition into the direct nullification of the couple. If the borderline between action and production falls, then it makes no sense to keep the two notions. In this way, Agamben's inoperativity follows the broad meaning of *argia* and this sense it is equivalent to the unusual mode of an existence based on potentiality beyond actuality. An original conception of *dynamis*, which does not give rise to concrete realizations, which no longer distinguishes between actions and products and through which, therefore, human beings live the active life. In the Agambenian lexicon of inoperativity we can recognize three keys-words: use, potentiality and contemplation. Among these terms there is a family resemblance and real kinships, which is to say that there is a dense network of connections where the statement of one word immediately recalls that of the other two.

Use. According to Agamben, inoperativity does not simply mean the absence of products. The Western philosophical lexicon already has, in fact, the words to designate this particular kind of phenomenon: the Greek word *praxis* and its corresponding Latin term, *agere*. The author, instead, is interested in another meaning. He seems to move in two steps: in the first one, he extends the typical inoperative feature of *praxis* to the field of *poiēsis*, thus obtaining the deactivation of the finalism inherent in the activity that makes products. In the next step, thanks to an opposite movement, Agamben transfers the absence of teleology to action as well, obtaining the suspension of all ends, both the external ones, typical of *poiēsis*, and the internal ones, typical of *praxis*. The result of this complex operation consists in thinking inoperativity as a peculiar kind of human behaviour, to which the author gives the positive name of *use*:

Use is constitutively an inoperative praxis, which can happen only on the basis of a deactivation of the Aristotelian apparatus potential/act, which assigns to *energeia*, to being-at-work, primacy over potential. Use is, in this sense, a principle internal to potential, which prevents it from being simply consumed in the act and drives it to turn once more to itself, to make itself a potential of potential, to be capable of its own potential (and therefore its own impotential). (Agamben, 2014a: 1112)

Use and inoperativity are synonyms because, by placing themselves both beyond the sphere of actuality (*energeia*) and, therefore, not letting themselves be assimilated either to the alternation of potentiality and actuality, or to the articulation of experience in acting and making, they affirm the complete deactivation of both couples.

Potentiality. The notion of inoperativity appears for the first time in Kojève's review of Queneau's novels;¹⁰ later, it returned in the debate among Nancy, Blanchot and Bataille. For Agamben, inoperativity is equivalent neither to the simple absence of products (against the Kojève-Nancy-Blanchot account), nor to absolute negativity without content (against Bataille's account): 'The only coherent way to understand inoperativeness is to think of it as a generic mode of potentiality that is not exhausted (like individual action or collective action understood as the sum of individual actions) in a *transitus de potentia ad actum*' (Agamben, 1995: 53). In Agamben's account, to pass to actuality counts less and less and, on the contrary, it becomes more significant a concept of potentiality that is not teleologically oriented. That is, a potentiality that is not exhausted in an act, but that is preserved beyond actuality. In the inoperative life, the primacy belongs to *competence*, not to *performance*. More than the performative experience, what counts, if anything, is the training of the capabilities contained in a body, postponing each time the moment of their full realization. What the inoperative life is based on is the potentiality *not* to act and *not* to make anything: it is the potentiality not to pass to actuality. For Agamben, some representative models of inoperative forms of life are: the slave companion, Francis of Assisi, Bartleby the scrivener, prisoners in Nazi camps, stateless migrants.¹¹

¹⁰ See Kojève (1952). Queneau's novels are: *Pierrot mon ami* (1942), *Loin de Rueil* (1944), *Le dimanche de la vie* (1952).

¹¹ According to Agamben's account, it is the society of the spectacle that gives to us another example of inoperativity, through a video easily available on Youtube by typing the words 'Maradona live is life'. It is the film that shows perhaps the greatest? footballer of all time during warm-up exercises preceding the return semi-final of the UEFA Cup between Napoli and Bayern Munich, played on 19th April 1989. While the rest of the team performs warm-up exercises, Maradona dances with the ball, performing an innumerable series of dribbles and movements to the music of *Live is life* by Opus, transmitted at maximum volume from the loudspeakers of the Olympiastadion in Munich. If we watch the video with Agamben's eyes, Maradona appears as a champion of inoperativity because he breaks the chain that usually links means to ends in the behaviours and practices of the active life. His training is not match-oriented but consists in the free use of the body potentiality without any specific end. Maradona's gesture corresponds to the dance that 'undoes and disorganizes the economy of corporeal movements to then rediscover them, at once intact and transfigured, in the

Contemplation. The specific frame of inoperative life is neither *praxis* nor *poiēsis*, but contemplation (*theōria*):

Contemplation is the paradigm of use. Like use, contemplation does not have a subject, because in it the contemplator is completely lost and dissolved; like use, contemplation does not have an object, because in the work it contemplates only its (own) potential. Life, which contemplates in the work its (own) potential of acting or making, is rendered inoperative in all its works and lives only in use-of-itself, lives only (its) livability. (Agamben, 2014a: 1085)

By rejecting *praxis* and *poiēsis*, Agamben saves *theōria*, which, in the framework dating back to Aristotle, accomplishes the tripartition of experience. Thinking about the classic model, the Italian philosopher keeps the third term by placing it beyond action and production, though he interprets it as the impersonal potentiality for thought that inheres not in the individual man but in the multitude. In the *Homo sacer* project, the traditional solipsism of the *bios theoretikos* is replaced by the Averroist *multitudo* and is unfailingly connected with a thought that is never exhausted by any sum-total of single intellectual operations. Decisive for any understanding of the shape of this non-solitary thought, is the gesture through which Agamben distinguishes it from the Marxian *General Intellect* of the ‘Fragment on Machines’.¹² Where everything suggests a relationship between the potential thought of the multitude and the *General Intellect* of the social individual, the author writes: ‘The distinction between the simple, massive inscription of social knowledge in the productive processes, which characterizes the contemporary phase of capitalism, and thought as antagonistic potential and

choreography’ (Agamben 2009, 102). Dance, which from Agamben’s point of view is inscribed neither in the genre of making nor in that of acting, is precisely the gesture that highlights ‘the media character of corporal movements’ (Agamben 1996, 57). Its main characteristic lies in deactivating the alternation between means and ends, between potentiality and actuality. While dancing, Maradona belongs to the field of pure means, that is to say to the sphere ‘of the absolute and complete gesturality of human beings’ (*Ibid.*: 59), that same field where, according to Agamben’s philosophy, politics must be rethought. However, Maradona’s inoperativity, described above, is a state of exception inextricably linked to warm-up exercises (potentiality) separated from the match (actuality). Then, in fact, there is the landmark career of the Argentinean footballer. *El pibe de oro* played 491 games and scored 259 goals. With the Argentinian national team, he played 91 matches and scored 34 goals, winning the World Cup in 1986. With Napoli he was Italian champion in 1987 and 1990. In 1995, he won the Golden Ball Lifetime Achievement award (see <http://www.football-history.net>).

¹² See Marx (1857-1858).

form-of-life, passes through the experience of this cohesion and this inseparability' (*ibid.*: 1219). Agamben, rightly, understands in the entry of intellect into production the true novelty of contemporary capitalism, but he renounces a development of the contradiction inherent in putting social knowledge to work. He apparently fails to see here a way in which to elaborate a model of public thought that does not have its proper form of realization in the society of the spectacle and market economy. Instead, he transcends history and calls into question the potentiality of thought immanent to form-of-life, to life, that is, already placed beyond action and making, inoperative by definition.

8. One concept, two meanings

Before Agamben's philosophy, it was Bianciardi's narrative that grasped in inoperativity the reverse of the active life and connected the exit from capital with the complete deactivation of human praxis.¹³ In the novel *La vita agra*, the liberation from market economy and the society of the spectacle coincides with the birth of an anarchist, unpolitical and unproductive community, which has no longer any end to achieve. Its livelihood is provided by mother-nature or by fully automated machines. It is an un-actual form-of-life, not so much because it is 'not actual', that is obsolete and anachronistic, but because it gives primacy to potentiality and not to actuality, to the virtual and not the real, and therefore it lives outside of history, in a dimension of eternal present.

But the decisive aspect does not consist simply in the pioneering and anticipatory gesture concerning the future developments of Italian philosophy. More interesting is that, in Bianciardi, the promise of the inoperative life issues from a lucid description of the metamorphosis of labour. According to the writer, the philosophy of inoperativity and the philosophy of work go hand in hand. For a specific reason: because late capitalism and inoperativity or, to use the author's words, 'ateleological activism', respond to the same problem regarding the overcoming of opposition between *praxis* and *poiēsis*. Today, the market exploits labour-power without distinguishing between acting and making, but it requires an inextricable mix. You are professional and productive of surplus value only if you show communicative and relational skills, problem-solving abilities, and familiarity in handling alphanumeric symbols. The attitudes that traditionally

¹³ Obviously, many scholars mobilise this meaning of inoperativity, taking Agamben's account as their point of departure, in order to think about radical politics. See Prozorov (2014); Watkin (2014).

defined politics, that is, the domain of praxis, and which at the dawn of the society of the spectacle were absorbed by the culture industry, now qualify every sector of *poiēsis*. In Post-Fordism, labour is inoperative because it mixes *praxis* and *poiēsis* and turns into a performance that no longer has its end in the external product. Such metamorphosis gives the illusion of *not* making things with words: labour and its products disappear, the virtuality of labour-power takes to the stage.¹⁴ What then would a more appropriate alternative be? To seize the mixture of action and production, deducing the suspension of the active life? Or should we also consider the opposite hypothesis? And that is: given the mixing between *praxis* and *poiēsis*, to develop a mature theory of human performativity that, precisely because it is based on the unity of acting and making, writes a new chapter of the active life, going beyond capitalism and, indeed, even beyond inoperativity. The question, in other words, is the following: how can we respond to the old and new forms of alienation, exploitation and enslavement that lurk in contemporary work? With the criticism that captures the unprecedented overlap between acting and making and deduces the complete deactivation of any concrete act? Or with the criticism that explores contradictions inherent in the mixing between action and production in order to design a new age of human praxis, freed from capitalism?¹⁵ A new image of the world based on the unity of intellectual and manual work, organised according to different rules than those thanks to which, today, profits and myths of progress originate. Agamben explores the link between action and production, but fails to deal with the transformations of the labour process in the current phase of the capitalist system. In Bianciardi, however, inoperativity emerges as the other side of the description of contemporary work. And it is precisely in the novel of the Tuscan writer that the ambivalence of the concept of inoperativity shows its dual and none too reassuring face. In this perspective, the critical interpretation of the theses contained in *La vita agra* leads to an even clearer alternative. Or we could say that inoperativity concerns an ontology that gives an account of human being by consigning it to a messianic, cenobitic and poor life, extracted from institutions and lowered into the non-performing use of things in the world. Or else we could say that inoperativity is precisely that tool by which critical thought can understand the

¹⁴ Of course, it is the opposite that is true: the inoperativity of the labour process does not in any way nullify the execution of concrete actions. In the capital of the 21st century workers have to do performative acts, they have to perform linguistic behaviours doing things and producing value (see Chicchi and Simone, 2017).

¹⁵ See Virno (2015).

salient features of Post-Fordist labour and, from there, theorise realistic strategies of liberation for the active life.



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