On Complementarity in Agamben's Anthropological Machine and in the Scholastic Concept of *Relatio Subsistens* (as invoked by Illich in the context of Gender)

Nicola Labanca

Introduction

According to Agamben, an anthropological machine has been at work within human societies since antiquity and produces the main categories whereby western culture, science and politics operate (e.g., human life, language, power, etc.). In his view, the widespread diffusion of the oppositional relationality and states of exception resulting from the operationalisation of these categories by the machine represents the major challenge of contemporary societies.

Illich's views on gender and on its underlying complementary relationality are instead nourished by the scholastic notion of *relatio subsistens* whereby mediaeval theologians have described the mystery of the Trinity and relations among the three persons of father, son and holy spirit. Illich has provided insightful descriptions of this latter type of relationality in his interpretations of the parable of the Good Samaritan and has devoted the majority of his studies to investigating how this became increasingly perverted in modernity. By putting *relatio subsistens* at the root of gender, Illich seems however also to suggest that the expression of this type of relationality constitutes the genuinely and originary 'human' element in human life.

This essay argues that the perversion of *relatio subsistens* with which Illich is so concerned might be reflected in and explained by the operation of Agamben's machine.

The way in which signatures (e.g., human life) get attributed through Agamben's anthropological machine reflects how instruments operate according to Illich. In his *The Signature of All Things*, Agamben himself suggests this when highlighting the common origin of the theory of signatures and the theory of instruments also addressed by Illich. The large-scale presence of states of exception that can follow a signature's attribution through the anthropological machine then closely resemble those situations of instrumental counterproductivity studied by Illich where the large-scale application of given instruments generates temporary contradictory situations by producing effects that are the opposite of what was expected (e.g. whenever the widespread employment of means for mobility generates conditions of immobility). Moreover, the permanent conditions of indistinction between oppositional categories like human-non-human, human-animal, animate-inanimate that characterise the cybernetic views that Illich prophetically saw taking hold in the upcoming age of systems can probably be

considered as the final destination of the widespread application of Agamben's machine.

Further elements corroborating a close correspondence between insights and conclusions achieved by Agamben and Illich can also be found in Agamben's proposal for a modal ontology as a way to overcome the formidable challenges generated by the operation of the anthropological machine. Agamben's modal ontology is indeed hardly distinguishable from that at stake in *relatio subsistens*. The conceptual framework wherefrom he elaborates the need for such an ontology is precisely the one which scholastic thinkers referred to when addressing the mystery of the Trinity, i.e. it is the same conceptual framework whereby the notion of *relatio subsistens* that nourishes Illich's views on gender was produced and explained.

Overall, Agamben and Illich hence seem to conclude that fundamental challenges posed by western thought and societies can only be addressed through the cultivation of a similar type of complementary relationality.

If the hypothesis proposed in this paper is correct and the widespread application of Agamben's machine is actually perverting the complementary relationality that Illich places at the foundation of gender, this would however mean that this machine alone might not explain how anthropogenesis takes place, as Agamben seems to suggest. These different postures on how human relations are generated seem to be reflected also in the different approaches Agamben and Illich take when it comes to considering how to address the perverse mechanisms they see operating in contemporary societies. Agamben is indeed focused on a deactivation of his anthropological machine that can suspend and expose tensions between its oppositional categories (e.g., between constituent and constituted power) in such a way that a modal ontology can be freely expressed. Illich's writings and life represent instead a plea to counter the counterproductive effects of institutions and technologies by cultivating very personal relations of friendship. On a conceptual level, this plea can be considered as an exhortation to recover and practise the originary and complementary relationality that Illich finds at the root of gender in the form of the *relatio subsistens* which also seems to inform Agamben's modal ontology.

Complementarity in Agamben's anthropological machine

According to Agamben, an anthropological machine is constantly at work in Western culture and produces man through oppositional categories like man/animal, human/inhuman, etc. However, apart from these categories, this machine also produces states of exception representing a specific type of contradiction that can reveal the origins and inner mechanisms of Western politics.[1] If I understand him correctly, the functioning of his anthropological machine is reflected in the strategic thought device developed by Aristotle which

[1] G. Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*. Stanford University Press, 2004, p.37

consists in a series of splits and separations whereby every question concerning 'what something is' is reformulated as a series of questions concerning 'through what something belongs to another thing'.[2] For example, the question 'what is human life?' is reformulated by first setting a common background (i.e., inanimate life) against which human life is then defined 'through what' it belongs to and through a series of ever more exclusive sub-categories representing specific functional faculties (e.g. nutrition, sensation, thought). Starting from a common background, human life is in this way progressively separated from — whilst remaining included within — a hierarchy of ever more specific categories resulting from oppositions (e.g., inanimate-nutritive, nutritive-animal, animal-human) where a higher category is separated from but remains included in the lower (e.g. 'nutritive' is separated from but included within 'inanimate', 'animal' is separated from but included within 'nutritive', etc.).

According to Agamben, the mechanism of progressive separation that operates to produce human life lies at the root of Western culture, science and politics, and cannot work without entities situated on the boundary of categories that result from this separation.[3] For example, in order to separate the human from the animal, societies need to artificially create and maintain figures that are neither totally human nor totally animal and that, as such, come to represent a condition of exclusion by inclusion that Agamben names *bare life*. So called *homo alalus*, slaves, barbarians, and *homines sacri* are examples of different incarnations of this state of exception as created through language and categories established by law and politics in antiquity. Similarly, the *Muselmann*, comatose persons and bodies preserved for organ transplantation, represent other disquieting examples of bare life created in more recent times. These figures seem hence the necessary and perverse outcome of the operation of Aristotle's thought device through the definitions of human life adopted by Western thought and politics across history.

However, the application of operative definitions of human life represent for Agamben just a specific case of how a given *signature* can become generally attributed in different historical periods to natural entities through the operation of the anthropological machine (according to Agamben, other signatures include e.g., language, power, potentiality, poetry[4]). As seen in the case of human life, this

[2] Agamben, *The Open,* p. 14.

[3] Ibid., p.37.

[4] For a discussion on language as originary signature, see G. Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method.* Zone Books, 2009, p. 35. On language as signature, see also G. Agamben, *The Coming Community*. University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 9. There, Agamben discusses how the oppositional categories and the antinomy of *individual* and *universal* originate in language and how the concept of the *example* escapes this antinomy. On power as signature and the related articulation of the two oppositional elements of *potestas* and *auctoritas* that is suspended in the state of exception, see G. Agamben, *State of Exception*. University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp. 74–87. On potentiality as signature and the articulation of *potential* and *actual* that is suspended through impotentiality, see G. Agamben, *Potentialities.* Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 179. On poetry as signature and the articulation between oppositional semantic

attribution generally takes place through caesurae against a common background that determine the joint creation of oppositional categories (e.g. the caesura generated by the attribution of the signature 'human life' can generate the category 'human life' in opposition to 'non-human life'; the attribution of the signature 'language' can generate the category of 'language' in opposition to that of 'animal', etc.). As mentioned, this process of attribution inevitably also generates a third and singular element that does not belong to either of the two oppositional categories and emerges from the field of tensions that these determine. Agamben names *paradigm*[5] the state of exception where differences and dichotomies between the two categories generated through a signature coexist and are at the same time suspended.[6]

The same signature can however be operationalised differently across time, and different paradigms can hence emerge as this signature travels across time.[7] In the case of the signature human life, the slave, *homo sacer*, *homo alalus*, the comatose person, etc. therefore represent different paradigms that have incorporated the oppositional relation of this signature as it has travelled across time. Such paradigms are therefore different exemplary cases of what Agamben names 'bare life' and reveal how the anthropological machine and associated signatures work through history.

One might gain some insight into this revelatory moment by considering how, following Aristotle again, Agamben sees the paradigm as a model of inference that proceeds from particular to particular and goes beyond the particular-general couple whereby induction and deduction develop.[8] While induction proceeds from the particular to the general and deduction from the general to the particular, the paradigm constitutes a peculiar form of knowledge that proceeds through singular cases that represent the particular but also the general and that, as such,

---

and semiotic elements, see G. Agamben, *The End of the Poem*, Stanford University Press, 1999, pp. 109–115.

[5] G. Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method.* Zone Books, 2009, p. 9.

[6] See the definition of paradigm as provided in G. Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method.* Zone Books, 2009, p. 31.

[7] It is intriguing to observe how signatures, and the way in which they are supposed to be created and travel across time according to Agamben, reflect quite well what happens to *plastic words* as intended by Illich and discussed in U. Pörksen, *Plastic Words: The Tyranny of Modular Language*. The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995. The operation of signatures seems to recall how concepts employed by science, and reflected in their plastic words, operate (e.g. in the case of life, energy, etc.). Also the way in which signatures travel across time as floating signifiers being associated with different categories and states of exception as they travel seems reminiscent of the way in which plastic words lose their denotative power and become associated with different meanings, according to Pörksen. On this last point, see also Agamben's reference to Lévi-Strauss's theory of the constitutive excess of the signifier over the signified and to signatures as floating signifiers in Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, p. 78.

[8] Ibid., p. 19.

cannot be reduced either to the general alone or to the particular alone.[9] For example, the paradigmatic character of the state of exception, as generated through the attribution of the signature 'human life' in a given historical circumstance (for example, the paradigm *'homo sacer')*, is what allows a kinship with states of exception that are generated around this same signature in other historical circumstances to be revealed (e.g., the kinship of *homo sacer* with *homo alalus*, comatose persons and so on).

Agamben's argument concerning the anthropological machine suggests to me that the operation of Aristotle's thought device must *necessarily* create states of exceptions. Rather than merely *logical*, the reasons for the necessary generation of states of exception seems to be mainly *practical* and pragmatic and concerns the procedures by which the machine is put into operation. Typically, states of exception seem to represent a necessary condition of un-decidability that must be created to make the machine work, as this machine necessarily relies on the application of the *universal categories* to specific instances. For example, whenever specific laws (e.g., on refugees) must be enforced, dedicated institutions and arrangements (e.g., refugee camps) creating a temporary condition of suspension and un-decidability become necessary to allow the application of related decisional processes and procedures. Similarly, whenever medical diagnoses or therapies must be decided or applied, people must undergo institutionalised medical procedures during which they come to represent temporary states of un-decidability and exception.

However, there seem also to be states of exception for which no specific process or procedure is envisaged by the anthropological machine. In principle, these states of exception might represent either exogenous events or unexpected or unforeseen outcomes of the machine itself. For instance, the application of specific laws or exogenous shocks can trigger the unforeseen collapse of enforcing legal institutions just as new diseases can emerge for exogenous reasons or as the unexpected yet verified consequence of the application of medical treatments. The reasons to relate such unexpected and/or exogenous events to the operations of the anthropological machine and for them to be included among its states of exception are again to be found in the assumed *universality* of the categories the machine relies on. Such universality cannot indeed envisage *exogenous* events, by definition (e.g. in the case of a machine defining and medically operationalising the universal category *human life*, any threat to human life must fall under its jurisdiction).

Either the possible generation of unknown events is explicitly contemplated by the machine (and therefore special operational rules are established to deal with them) or not, the universality of its categories apparently implies that the machine is expected to process unanticipated events. To function, this machine requires that both the states of exception created to make it function and the states of exception emerging unexpectedly be considered as *endogenous* phenomena that the machine

[9] Ibid., p. 19.

knows or will know how to treat. These two types of states of exception represent therefore the *same* condition of un-decidability and Agamben's machine can be understood as a specific type of *knowledge* machine whose potential knowledge is as unlimited as the applicability of the man-made universal categories it relies on. Within its framework, the manifestation of unexpected phenomena that can remain indefinitely unknown does *not* seem to be contemplated (the universality of its categories ensures indeed that any event falls either within a category, or within the complement of this category, or at the boundary between the two). Any unknown is in this way reconfigured as something that is *not yet* known. States of exceptions created to enable the machine to operate and states of exception that unexpectedly emerge are ultimately indistinguishable and both are expected to be processed by the machine.

The endogenous, and hence self-reflexive, character of the kind of unlimited knowledge associated with the anthropological machine seems to be confirmed by Agamben when he suggests in *The Open* that metaphysics and any problem of transcendent unity might be solved within this machine. Accordingly, rather than seeking for the nature of man in some transcendent unity of soul and body, the matter of what man is might have to be found in how man has been separated from the non-man within him through the divisions and separations mentioned above.

Overall, it can hence be argued that an essential character of Agamben's anthropological machine is represented by the *universal* categories by which it operates (human life being one such example). The mechanism whereby these universal categories are created and applied seems however to necessarily entail the production of *particular* cases (i.e. states of exception) that, through a process of exclusion by inclusion, end-up belonging both to the category at stake and to its complement and, as such, represent a living contradiction. There seems to be here an inevitable imbalance between universals and particulars that, if not counteracted, can become the main cause for a very curious fate and inevitable derailment of Agamben's machine, as represented by the creation of a general situation of contradiction and in-distinction between opposites. Probably because of the presumed universality of the categories the machine relies on, its application seems to be destined to become ever more extensive and pervasive and to concern an ever-increasing number of situations and individuals (for example, in the case of human life, its medical operationalisations seem to be destined to concern an ever-increasing number of individuals and an ever-increasing number of aspects of their health). It can hence be reasonably assumed that this expansion in its operations becomes inevitably responsible for a progressive increase in the number of associated states of exception and un-decidability. However, notice that until the machine has concluded its operation on a given case, this has to be considered as a case of un-decidability and hence included among the states of exception.

As previously argued, other kinds of states of exception that are also destined to expand with the expansion of machine operations are then represented by all those cases for which no specific treatment is envisaged and by all those unexpected

cases whose generation must be attributed to the machine's operation itself (to refer to the previous example of medical applications, these cases might be represented by diseases generated by medical applications themselves). If not counteracted in some way, it can be presumed that, altogether, these dynamics of expansion can lead to a general and permanent state of exception and in-distinction, whose production Agamben's machine seems ultimately to be describing. Hence, the operationalisation of universal categories through Agamben's anthropological machine seems potentially to be able to lead to a general and diffuse condition of contradiction and in-distinction as initially represented by the individual states of exception which this machine inevitably generates. For example, in the case of *human life*, it can be presumed that the final destination of the operations associated with this signature corresponds to a situation in which all elements represented by this universal category become permanently indistinguishable from those of the complementary category *non-life;* those of the category *man* become indistinguishable from those of the category *animal*, etc.

Relationality embedded in Agamben's machine vs. *relatio subsistens* invoked by Illich in the context of gender

Illich interpreted gender as a mode of perception and as the expression of a specific type of complementarity in knowledge and human relations that can enable the radical questioning of certainties concerning equality between individuals, the existence of an abstract and universal human being, and concerning knowledge produced by science. According to Illich, gender incarnates a way of knowing in terms of opposed domains that reflects the truly complementary nature of reality. This type of relationality is well rendered by his reading of the parable of the Good Samaritan[10] and by the following statements, made during his lecture at a Presbyterian chapel in Chicago in November 1988:

> When I submit my heart, my mind, my body, I come to be below the other. When I listen unconditionally, respectfully, courageously with the readiness to take in the other as a radical surprise, I do something else. I bow, bend over toward the total otherness of someone. But I renounce searching for bridges between the other and me, recognising that a gulf separates us. Leaning into this chasm makes me aware of the depth of my loneliness, and able to bear it in the light of the substantial likeness between the other and myself. All that reaches me is the other in his word, which I accept on faith.[11]

[10] On this point, see, D. Cayley, *Ivan Illich: An Intellectual Journey*. Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021. Kindle Edition, p. 395.
[11] Ibid., p. 19–20.

According to Illich, this substantial difference and irreducibility between any person and the other, makes it possible to reach the other only in terms of metaphor and analogy.[12]

Although without much explanation, Illich states in *Gender* that his views on gender are nourished by the scholastic concept of *relatio subsistens.*[13] The kind of relation at stake here however clearly reflects that based on the surprise originating from the Other, which Illich roots in the Christian gospel. As noted by David Cayley,[14] the participal *subsistens* was used by scholastic philosophers to translate the Greek *hypostasis*, which indicates what subsists and has an independent status, while *relatio* refers to something that is in relationship and therefore not independent. Strictly speaking, a *relatio subsistens* is therefore a contradiction in terms. In so far as it concerns any being entering into a relation with the other, this type of relationality seems however to have a much wider valence compared to that of Agamben's anthropological machine and, as will be discussed in the following paragraphs, it might allow us more clearly to bring to light the kind of perversion which this machine can generate.

States of exceptions generated by Agamben's machine seem indeed to be produced by an original violence operated through cuts and caesurae. Agamben himself associates these cuts with the generation of a trauma in his *The Signature of All Things.*[15] By contrast, the scholastic concept of *relatio subsistens* that Illich invokes to understand what he calls gender concerns a kind of relatedness that is both fuzzy and felt. Such relatedness can be perverted when widely applied using sharp cesuras and rigid categorisations, as probably happens with Agamben's anthropological machine. Whilst Agamben's machine seems to be based on the creation of universal categories and presupposes a preexisting common background (wherefrom beings are generated through a process of division that nevertheless leaves beings closely linked to non-beings), the type of relationality Illich sees at stake in *relatio subsistens* seems to concern a sense of fragile commonality that develops instead from an initial and irreducible difference between two separate entities possibly entering a mutual relation through the unexpected recognition of the presence of a third.[16] Rather than presupposing the existence of universal categories that can be created through logical cuts in a

[12] Cayley, *Ivan Illich: An Intellectual Journey*, p. 335.

[13] See n. 7 in I. Illich, *Gender*. Pantheon Books, 1973, p. 48. On this point see also what is discussed in Cayley, *Ivan Illich: An Intellectual Journey*, p. 332.

[14] Cayley, *Ivan Illich: An Intellectual Journey*, p. 332.

[15] See, for example, the chapter section where Agamben reflects on how to regress to the origins of this cut and proposes an analogy between archaeological regression and psychoanalysis, in *The Signature of All Things*, Chapter 3, section 12, p. 102.

[16] As assumed by Agamben for his anthropological machine, the kind of relatedness expressed by *relatio subsistens* seems somehow to be connatural to humanity. As is implicitly suggested by its association with gender, this kind of relatedness might pre-exist and might not have to be identified solely with the relation with the incarnated Christ.

common background, Illich's *relatio subsistens* seems to presuppose the existence of irreducible singularities which might (or might not) acknowledge or fit with each other through a third. Accordingly, while contradiction embodied in people who represent a state of exception makes them aberrations that remain necessarily marginalised (at least as long as they represent states of exception), contradiction that can manifest itself within Illich's *relatio subsistens* seems to be what can potentially make two pre-existing and individual singularities related to a third and, therefore, genuinely human.

Overall, the cuts and caesurae of Agamben's machine relate to (and might perhaps be identified with) an original operativity and *endogenous* machine-like social construction that are assumed to work over an indistinct matter since the origins of humanity and that can create and lead to the large-scale diffusion of entities that are beings and non-beings at the same time. In the case of Illich's *relatio subsistens,* singular and irreducible beings seem instead to represent pre-given entities, whilst the glue and operativity that might keep them together is simultaneously *endogenous* and *exogenous* and might not necessarily materialise.

Whilst difference seems hence to emerge from a cut operated over an original homogeneity and through a process of exclusion in Agamben's machine, Illich's *relatio subsistens* presupposes an original difference and irreducibility between entities. These entities can then reveal their complementarity by generating a third through an erotic and fragile relationship that might always be perverted through the categorisations at work in Agamben's machine. A possible primacy of *relatio subsistens* over Agamben's machine could generally put into question the foundation of western politics on principles of equality and democracy together with the way in which it excludes and sacrifices difference so as to make order function. Acknowledging that difference, rather than equality and identity, is the fabric of social ties would indeed entail a complete re-conceptualisation and re-organisation of politics and societies.[17]

If not completely reducible to a perversion of this latter type of relationality, the anthropological machine seems at least able to clarify how the type of corruption to which Illich has dedicated most of his studies might be generated. For example, the situations of technical *counterproductivity* that Illich associates with the large-scale diffusion of tools and instruments closely resemble the diffused condition of exclusion by inclusion that follows the large-scale application of Agamben's anthropological machine and associated signatures. In *The Signature of All Things*, Agamben himself seems to implicitly suggest that the operation of his anthropological machine reflects that of technological instruments when he discusses existing correspondences between the theory of signatures developed during the Renaissance and the Baroque period and the notion of *causa*

[17] Agamben's anthropological machine can in my opinion be seen also as a sacrificial machine that excludes and sacrifices difference to establish identity and homogeneity. These considerations have been inspired by A. Caldwell, 'Transforming Sacrifice: Irigaray and the Politics of Sexual Difference', Hypatia vol. 17 no. 4 (2002).

instrumentalis elaborated through sacramental theory by theologians during the early twelfth century.[18] There, he suggests that we look at instruments and instrumentality as enablers of operations whereby specific signatures become attributed to natural things and specific conditions are assumed to be achieved by them. Based on this hypothesis, technologies and operational concepts employed by techno-science might have to be seen in a new light. *Immunity* might for example be seen as the signature conferred through technical instruments aiming at keeping people in healthy conditions; *information* might be the signature conferred through technical means aiming at education; *energy* might be the signature for labour; and *mobility* would be the signature conferred through means of transport.[19] If so, the operation of these signatures and their possible technical counterproductivity might have to be studied in terms of universal categories and associated states of exception as created through cuts over an assumed common and pre-existing background, according to the same mechanisms described by Agamben in the case of the signature *human life*. A situation of instrumental counterproductivity would in this way come to represent a situation where the state of exception associated with the related signature becomes a diffused and *temporary* condition of *coincidentia oppositorum* (e.g., in the case of mobility, this would be a situation of counterproductivity where, to use Agamben's terminology, mobility and non-mobility become temporarily indifferent).

Besides the question of whether Agamben's machine might represent a perversion of Illich's *relatio subsistens*, the simple possibility of a widespread presence of this latter type of relationality might put in question Agamben's idea of anthropogenesis. Even if it does not represent a late byproduct or perversion of Illich's *relatio subsistens*, the kind of relationality embedded in Agamben's machine might indeed have always co-existed with Illich's *relatio subsistens.* If so, the anthropological machine alone could probably not be placed at the origin of humanity, as appears to be implied by the qualifying adjective 'anthropological'. Considering 1) how Illich's *relatio subsistens* seems to rely on an *immanent* transcendental, and considering 2) that modernity might represent the age in which this transcendental has started leaving humanity while the social spheres of politics, religion, and science have apparently started separating and departing from each other, and lastly, 3) how the operation of Agamben's machine and the universal categories it relies on might well reflect this process of progressive detachment of

[18] See Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, p. 50.

[19] While it is quite easy to infer how *immunity*, *energy* and *information* can represent signatures of health, labour and education and be technically operationalised, I don't have a clear idea about specific signatures that might be considered in case of means of transport. I do not exclude that they might concern the operationalisation of categories of *space* and *speed* as investigated by Illich. Besides the specific signs and words carrying them on and besides how these signatures might travel across time, this example is being made mainly to highlight how Agamben's machine might be at work also in case of universal categories operationalised through means of transport and might explain how their counterproductivity might be generated through associated states of exception.

the transcendental element from humanity, it cannot be excluded that Agamben's machine might just have started prevailing over Illich's *relatio subsistens* since modernity. Obviously, such an assessment does not rule out the possibility that the anthropological machine was also at work well before modern times (*homo sacer* and Agamben's studies indeed provide plenty of evidence in this respect). The key and seemingly exclusive role that Agamben attributes to his machine for anthropogenesis should however be contrasted with Illich's *relatio subsistens* that potentially offers another important and complementary dynamic that could also, in principle, limit and contain this machine.

To summarise this all too brief analysis, it seems to me necessary to acknowledge the following points in comparing certain aspects of Illich and Agamben: 1) due to a reliance on the operationalisation of universal categories whose diffused application can end up generating large-scale states of exception where these categories co-exist and become indistinguishable from their complements (as e.g. in the case of mobility, education, health care, etc.), Agamben's machine might very well represent modern perversions of unchecked technology including the progressive separation between subject and object and the relegation of a governing God to another world and that, consequently, 2) the possible presence of a transcendental but incarnated third is what renders Illich's *relatio subsistens* (and the type of contradiction associated with it) irreducible to and able to embed the kind of relationality embedded in Agamben's machine. Accordingly, Illich's *relatio subsistens* might therefore serve to limit and contain the anthropological machine.

Systems as the final destination of Agamben's machine

The connection between the two types of relationality addressed in this paper seems to be maintained also during what Illich names the contemporary age of *systems*. The main peculiarity of this age is described by him in terms of the possibility of the complete integration of people into their artificial tools and environment.[20] This is an age in which people's horizons can be completely closed to any transcendent third and any leeway for Illich's *relatio subsistens* and its immanent/transcendent third becomes therefore extremely narrow.

In general terms, the age of systems looks like the final destination where we might have been taken by the anthropological machine. As mentioned, the machine leads to a situation of permanent in-differentiation between the universal categories it operationalises and their complements. For example, human life seems destined to first become indistinguishable from (or, using Agamben's terminology, 'indifferent' to) animal life, then from nutritive life and, ultimately, from non-life. If it is true that the creation and operationalisation of universal categories by Agamben's machine have intensified with modernity and widespread

[20] See D. Cayley, (2005), *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich as told to David Cayley*. House of Anansi Press, Ch. 4.

technology,[21] then the age of systems might perhaps be considered as the final outcome of this operationalisation. This finality would consist in a diffuse and permanent situation of in-distinction between opposites (e.g., life/non-life, subject/object, man/animal, animal/vegetal, etc.). Somehow, the age of systems might have to be considered as the age where any being, as created from a common background (i.e. the inanimate) through the anthropological machine, potentially ends up becoming indistinguishable from this background. As I try to argue below, this in-distinction might be the outcome of the permanent exclusion of a transcendental element that had not as yet been achieved with instruments and that might instead manifest itself in the age of systems by conferring extreme porosity and plasticity upon beings.

As discussed by Agamben, ideas of instrumentality that take hold with modernity lead to the identification of being with operativity and effectuality[22] while producing a deep separation between subject and object that somehow reflects the stable separation assumed to exist between a still very present God and his creatures. Systems instead render this separation extreme by integrating people into their material environment and, in this way, closing themselves to the transcendental. They seem to rely on contingent/random couplings that precede and then constitute arbitrary subjects and objects that continuously mirror and redefine each other within a closed space where no room is left for an incarnated and/or transcendent third. With systems, potentiality or *dynamis* is indeed reduced to mere action or *energeia* without any possibility for resistance. Contrary to modern beings which are constituted through instruments, beings constituted through integration into systems seem to maintain their independence from a transcendent god through a constant integration into their material environment, this situation conferring upon these beings an extremely ephemeral and porous character.[23]

Qualitative transformations quite recently undergone by human artefacts with the extensive diffusion and employment of computer technologies might explain very well how this happens. Rather than means enabling the achievement of specific ends, computer technologies resemble artificial and interconnected prostheses enabling the achievement of an ever-increasing variety of ends and coming therefore to constitute a closed but ever expandable space wherein beings constantly live and modify themselves in conjunction with their non-living

[21] As in previous considerations, I am arguing here that this age might be characterised by the large-scale implementation of universal categories as enabled by instruments through the *distality* they have generated between subject and object and the consequent possibility of producing a wide variety of standardised artefacts that can be used by any person.

[22] As happens during the Eucharist, being is assumed to manifest itself only through its produced effects.

[23] On this point, see N. Labanca, 'Imitation Games: When Who You Are is Reduced to What You Do', Conspiratio, Fall 2023.

counterparts.[24] The pre-existing and contingent couplings wherefrom these beings get constituted in conjunction with their material environment might just come to consist of *negative feedbacks* whereby contingent variations and differences emerging from an otherwise totally homogenous and flat substratum get temporarily established and maintained. In so far as they are completely integrated into and cannot be isolated from their environment, these beings must modify themselves by chasing changes occurring therein and cannot suspend action,[25] this condition, among others, conferring upon knowledge itself the same rarefied and porous texture as prosthetic beings that populate systems.[26] Such extreme porosity and required malleability might hence be an outcome of the aforementioned integration and exclusion of the transcendental element that ultimately correspond to a situation where it is impossible to distinguish being from non-being and that is characteristic of a permanent state of exception and contradiction.[27]

The extreme character of the type of contradiction embodied in this permanent state of exception might however not only be reflected in permanent in-distinctions between being and non-being, subject and object, etc., but also in a permanent contradiction affecting *action*.

These aspects seem quite clearly reflected in how *systems* counterproductivity might differ from *instruments* counterproductivity. Whilst instrumental counterproductivity mainly concerns the end associated with a given tool and the effectuality of the specific action undertaken thereby (e.g. the counterproductivity of cars concerns mainly how cars and actions undertaken therewith become an impediment to mobility), systemic counterproductivity seems to concern more generally how actions undertaken through whatever means can permanently rebound also on ends not directly addressed by that means and how these actions can put the very survival of certain systems at risk. Instrumental counterproductivity seems indeed mainly limited to the operationalisation of an associated conceptual category (e.g. mobility, education, etc.). Systemic

[24] In so far as any function comes to be performed through these protheses, the space wherein they constrain people is closed. In so far as new functions can always be added and reproduced therein, this space is always expandable.

[25] This characteristic can be grasped very well in my opinion by looking at how the production of stocks and reserves of materials, competences and energy sources is being progressively substituted for by integration into information networks whereby we expect to get whatever we need on demand. This progressive reduction of reserves is probably what obliges the chasing being described here and what makes the suspension of action harder and harder.

[26] Such a situation is analogous to what is potentially happening with virus mutations induced by mass vaccination. People are called to continuous action because changes induced by the vaccines they synthesise and use to inoculate on a large scale can change their environment and select mutations calling for further action, generating in this way a continuous chase that cannot produce any definitive outcome.

[27] I have tried to describe this condition of permanent contradiction through the paradoxes discussed in this article in N. Labanca, 'Coronavirus and Enaction of Human-made Complexity Paradoxes', International Journal of Illich Studies, vol 7 no. 1 (2020), pp. 122–50.

counterproductivity seems instead to relate to action in general. Accordingly, actions undertaken for whatever purpose can potentially affect any part of a system, the whole system, and the very possibility of that system's survival.

Therefore, the prosthetic character of artefacts whereby people are integrated into systems[28] might render any purposeful action not only potentially and disruptively self-reflexive (within these kinds of system any part of a system can be tightly coupled to any other part and any action I undertake can unexpectedly and disruptively rebound on me) but might also render action constantly full of unintended and potentially disruptive implications for the whole system (within these systems you cannot intervene in one function without also potentially and unintentionally altering other potentially vital functions).

Overall, Agamben's machine and the specific type of contradictions it generates might show how both instruments and systems counterproductivity can ultimately represent the outcome of processes of extensive *homogenisation* associated with the multiplication of given universal categories and technologies. In the case of instrumental counterproductivity, homogenisation is indeed achieved through the radical monopoly exercised by a single means over all alternative ways of achieving the same end. In this case, Agamben's machine reveals how this radical monopoly can be associated with the universalisation and standardisation of the conceptual category operationalised through the means in question and how this universalisation corresponds to the generation of temporary states of exception and contradiction where the category at stake and its complement become temporarily indistinguishable (e.g. when cars exercise a radical monopoly over mobility, mobility can temporarily become indistinguishable from immobility). In the case of systems counterproductivity, Agamben's machine might show instead that homogenisation concerns the common and inanimate background that all universal categories may be destined to be permanently reduced to, this common background being nowadays mainly reified through the negative feedback loops of material, energy, and information flows through which artificial prostheses are put into operation.[29] Though these prostheses seem to enable unprecedented levels of

[28] As mentioned, by 'prosthesis' I intend here a single means whereby a multiplicity of ends become achievable.

[29] Notice that, when intended as means enabling the achievement of an increasing variety of ends, artificial prostheses integrating people into systems might in principle result from circulations of information, monetary, material and energy units. These entities can indeed in principle be considered as single means whereby an increasing variety of ends can be achieved and hence might in principle come to co-constitute the common and uniform background that systems rely on. Besides potentially revealing homeomorphisms between the realms of economics, energy physics and information science (Philip Mirowski has already provided some insight into this in P. Mirowki, *More Heat than Light: Economics as Social Physics, Physics as Nature's Economics*. Cambridge University Press, 1989), this common prosthetic functioning might imply, among other things, that monetary systems and energy systems can somehow represent forerunners of the systems being discussed in this text. What I am suggesting is that the large-scale diffusion of this kind of prosthetic functioning might represent a necessary precondition for the generation

diversification while representing and embedding any conceivable singularity and particularity, the systems they constitute rely on material, energy, and information flows whose creation reflects the achievement of unprecedented levels of standardisation and homogenisation. Rather than resulting from pre-existing differences, systems hence seem actually to result from an extremely diffuse and socially constructed *sameness* that, contrary to what is happening with instruments, can potentially be highly variable and appears (while actually being anything but) very immaterial. The socially constructed *sameness* that constitutes the ever more invisible background that systems rely on might be responsible for the generation of ever more frequent disruptive and unexpected events that put large parts of the survival of systems at risk and that most probably represent the hallmark of systems counterproductivity.

On the other hand, the assumed presence of pre-existing and irreducible singularities (that possibly acknowledge each other through a third) seems to make Illich's *relatio subsistens* intrinsically irreducible to the kind of relationality embedded in Agamben's machine that might have started dominating societies with the advent of modernity, instruments and, more recently, with systems. The complementary and embedding character of Illich's *relatio subsistens* might perhaps still represent a safeguard against the ever more extensive and unsustainable processes of homogenisation and technological multiplication entailed by instruments and systems. Compared to the age when instruments prevailed, the cultivation of this kind of relationality and associated possibilities to limit the diffusion of systems might nevertheless require markedly different and still mostly unexplored approaches.

Notably, Agamben himself discusses exactly the conceptual framework from which *relatio subsistens* emerges in his *The Use of Bodies*.[30] There, he associates this type of relationality with a specific modal ontology whose constitutive ambiguity is described in terms of a very weak relation that 'constitutes its elements by at the same presupposing them as unrelated'[31] or as a relation where 'being precedes relation and exists beyond it, but it is always already constituted through relation

---

of systems. If so, this necessary precondition could be equivalently intended as a condition of large-scale reproduction and employment of single 'artificial' entities (as represented by monetary, energy, or information units) that, through the establishment of some principle of equivalence, come to constitute means for the achievement of an increasing number of ends, this simple fact seeming to me sufficient to render these particular means *scarce* by definition.

[30] The scholastic concept of *relatio subsistens* is a re-description of the Christian mystery of the Trinity and of how the trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is captured in the potential of God by maintaining God as formally distinct from these three persons. Agamben dedicates a whole chapter to a discussion of how the problem of thinking the relation between unity and trinity in God can be solved by attributing a specific ontological rank to a type of relation that corresponds to *relatio subsistens*. See G. Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*. Stanford University Press, 2016, p. 146.

[31] Ibid., p. 270.

and included in it as its presupposition'.[32] Moreover, he argues that the possibility of cultivating this type of relationality presupposes the deactivation of the mechanisms whereby the anthropological machine defines and operationalises its own categories and states of exception through an appositional relation[33] where these categories cannot pre-exist their opposites (e.g. when law gets defined on the basis of bare life and *anomia* and vice versa, or constituent power gets defined on the basis of constituted power and vice versa, etc.). In his view, this deactivation would make these categories inoperative without destroying them while bringing them to appear in their free forms and disclosing the potential to use them differently. Contemplation and inoperativity are seen by Agamben as 'key metaphysical operators of anthropogenesis' which can make this deactivation possible by liberating living human beings from every biological and social destiny assigned by the anthropological machine.

Illich, instead, roots the possibility of recovering the special type of relationality embedded in *relatio subsistens* and gender in the cultivation of 'a very personal relationship of friendship that can replace what was formerly a culturally defined relationship between men and women'.[34] According to him, this however necessarily requires a reduction in the scale and intensity of economic activities that have progressively hindered the expression of this type of relation by flattening existing differences and dis-symmetries between persons.

Overall, Agamben and Illich seem therefore to have achieved surprisingly similar conclusions concerning the need to cultivate the type of relationality at stake in the scholastic concept of *relatio subsistens* in order to overcome major limitations and problems of Western culture and politics. When however we come to consider how this might be achieved, Agamben focuses his attention on how the deactivation of the anthropological machine might liberate existing potentials to express the aforementioned relationality; Illich, on the other hand, associates the expression of this relationality with gender and the exercise of a very personal relation of friendship, and his writings and life can be considered as an exhortation to its practice.

[32] Ibid., p. 270.
[33] Ibid., p. 272.
[34] Cayley, *Ivan Illich: An Intellectual Journey*, p. 361.