The Archaeologist and the Historian: Dialogue with Giorgio Agamben

Patrick Boucheron

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[1] Original text: Boucheron, P. (2017/1–2), 'L'archéologue et l'historien. Dialogue avec Giorgio Agamben', *Critique*, 836–37, pp. 164–71. Available at https://doi.org/10.3917/criti.836.0164 (accessed 13th August 2024). This conversation between Patrick Boucheron and Giorgio Agamben took place in French. Its translation into English for the Journal of Italian Philosophy was funded by the Research Group in Critical Theory and Practice at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne.

Where the interview touches upon technical terms which have their own history in Agamben's *œuvre*, I have consulted the original Italian text, as well as its English and French translations.

I have translated *exiger* and *exigence* as 'to demand' and 'demand'. This is in keeping with Adam Kotsko's translation of *The Use of Bodies* (Stanford University Press, 2015) and Lorenzo Chiesa's translations of *The Fire and the Tale* (Stanford University Press, 2015), *What is Philosophy?* (Stanford University Press, 2017) and *The Adventure* (MIT Press, 2018), in which *esigere* and *esigenza* are rendered in the same fashion. The reader should keep in mind that the French *exiger* and *exigence* can, like the Italian *esigere* and *esigenza,* coincide with 'to require' or 'to necessitate', and 'requirement' or 'necessity'.

I have translated *puissance* as 'potency'. *Puissance* is the word generally preferred by Agamben's French translators to denote Agamben's *potenza*, a term for which most English translators prefer the term 'potentiality'. This English word does not adequately convey the meaning of *puissance*. For this reason, I have drawn from Chiesa's translation of *potenza* as 'potency' in *The Adventure* and used the same term here for *puissance*. That French translators have tended to translate *potenza* as *puissance* further indicates that the use of 'potentiality' to translate Agamben's work into English may be inappropriate.

In Agamben's work, the technical term *désœuvrement* finds its equivalent in Italian in the term *inoperosità.* As this latter is generally translated into English as 'inoperativity', I use the same term to translate *désœuvrement.*

In their general usage, I translate *langue* and *langage* as 'language', while noting the particular instance in brackets. In the context of its deployment in this dialogue, I have translated *parole* in its general usage as 'speech'. Where they are used in a technical, Saussurean sense, I follow Agamben in leaving the terms *langue* and *parole* untranslated.

Quotations have been rendered in conformity with existing English translations as much as possible (whilst also referring to the original texts). A notable exception to this is the term *surgissement*, which has been translated in Foucault's work as 'emergence' and 'arising'. These words do not, in my view, adequately convey the conflictual, de-spatialised and energetic activity which is at stake for both Agamben and Foucault, for which I prefer the term 'surging'.

I have not interrupted the dialogue with the inclusion of bibliographical references.

Preface

The œuvres of Giorgio Agamben and Patrick Boucheron have unfolded at quite a distance from one another. What do the Italian philosopher and French historian have in common? Perhaps precisely what seems to separate them: the language [*langue*] and languages [*langues*], French and Italian, that they share. Not only this, but also the field of mediaeval and Renaissance Italy, which both prefer to survey, although not exclusively. Of particular note is the importance that they accord to writing and to the diversity of its regimes in the exercise of thought. There is also a conviction shared by both which encapsulates the Foucauldian term 'archaeology', according to which it is necessary to interrogate the traditions of history if one wishes to forge concepts to parse the present. Archaeology, for Agamben and Boucheron, is inseparable from political concerns.

Critique took the initiative to propose that they enter into a dialogue which was undertaken throughout the Autumn of 2016. This interview, by way of questions and replies, took place with neither protocol, nor pre-established programme, nor assigned end. It has been discontinued or perhaps suspended only by the completion of this special issue. It is not the conclusion, but the fermata.

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Patrick Boucheron: In the prefatory note to *The Use of Bodies,* you explain how this book completes and does not complete the great undertaking of the *Homo Sacer* project. You say that such research, 'like every work of poetry and thought, cannot be concluded, but only abandoned (and perhaps continued by others)'. We must speak of abandonment, especially in its political implications. But first of all, let us focus on what you imply as a possibility. Once you form such a lofty (by which I mean supremely poetic) idea of the act of thinking, what can you expect from 'others' to inspire, to accompany and to continue your oeuvre?

Giorgio Agamben: All psychological implications, which would be misplaced, should be removed from your question. I say this because I have often been reproached for a certain pessimism — or what amounts to the same thing, an excessive optimism. It is no more about hoping than its opposite because if we despair of others — as nowadays we are quite permitted to — we also despair of ourselves and thus lapse once more into psychology.

We should firstly specify who the 'others' are. They are certainly not the future generations. Rather, I conceive of them in the future anterior, which is to say as a past in the future or a future in the past. They are, to return to your question, those who will have become possible, as soon as the archaeological work of thought will have been abandoned and left incomplete. This future past is the only present

that we can reach, if it is true — as it is true — that all history is always contemporary history. In that sense, the others are already there, they are always in the process of occurring, even if they are not there and perhaps never will be.

To put it another way, the 'others' do not fall under the jurisdiction of a necessity — they are of the order of what I call a demand. They are what thought demands, independently of their factual existence. Demand is for me the philosophical category *par excellence.* It is a demand of this kind that Averroes must have had in mind when he said that the human species demands that there always be a philosopher who would allow the human species to be united with the sole separate intellect.

PB: Averroes indeed says that one philosopher alone can suffice, that there will always be one philosopher in the world. But at the same time, Averroes situates thought outside, that is to say outside the interiority of the subject. It is of little importance, then, who thinks or who knows. What matters is that we think and we know — and relative to the human species all is already known. Is this the demand of philosophy such as you conceive of it? But in this case, how can it sustain such a radically anti-heroic form of life? In other words, in what manner does your philosophy accommodate the sovereignty of the proper name?

GA: I believe that the prevailing opinion which defines Averroism through the separation between individuals and thought should be reversed. It seems rather that Averroes' real problem consists in reuniting what he has separated, which is to say what he calls the *copulatio,* the private union between *hic homo* [each man] and the separate intellect. The solution that he gives is that what makes the *copulatio* possible are the phantasms which are found in the individual which is to say the imagination. I fully share this idea. What makes thought possible is the imagination and the imagination is what is most proper to each man. In other words, thought does not really belong to the individual, but through his phantasms he can unite with it, marking something like a signature there — on condition that the phantasms vanish immediately in the act of thought.

PB: Let us return to demand, which for Averroes makes the subject the sufficient and insufficient place of thought. What repercussions can it have upon our form of life? I'm thinking of the manner in which, still in *The Use of Bodies,* you comment on what Guy Debord said of the 'clandestine character of private life'. It accompanies us like a stowaway, which is to say in a separated and inseparable manner, and yet you say it is perhaps in this 'homonymous, promiscuous, shadowy presence' that the secret of politics resides.

GA: It is in one of his first films that Guy evokes 'this clandestinity of private life regarding which we possess nothing but pitiful documents'. It is this excessively private, clandestine life that Guy, just like the entire political tradition of the West, did not manage to overcome. And yet the idea of 'constructed situations' implies

that it was possible to find something like what he calls 'the North-West passage of the geography of real life'. And if in his films as in his books Guy always comes back to his biography, to the faces of friends and to the places in which he has dwelt, it is, I believe, because he sensed obscurely that it was precisely here that the mystery of politics was hidden, the mystery upon which all biography and all politics could only founder. The authentic political element insists in the clandestinity of private life, but if one tries to grasp it, it only leaves the dull, incommunicable quotidian in our hands. This was the political signification of this clandestinity — which Aristotle had at the same time included and excluded from the city — that I have first and foremost tried to interrogate. I too was searching in my own way for the North-West passage in the geography of real life.

PB: It would be fitting here if we could speak of another passage, the one which leads from one inquiry to another. How do you work? Is it always one book which refers to another or do you allow yourself to be taken in by a film, a work, or a conversation? Do you know how your ideas come to you, and why you suddenly plunge into this or that library — here patristic literature, there Franciscan rules?

GA: In each of the books that I have written or that I have abandoned, there is always an unsaid which demands that it be taken up again and developed, just as in every life there is something unlived which demands not so much to be experienced as to not be forgotten. Although often I am not aware of it, it is this I believe which obliges me, as you say, to plunge into — or rather to lose myself in — a particular investigation or a particular corpus. It is therefore from the past that ideas come, and it as such that archaeological inquiry is always doubled by another more private and secret archaeology.

PB: What does this other 'more private and secret' archaeology have to do with asceticism? If the politics of inoperativity aims at this deposition or this destitution which you seem to advocate, does the potency radicalised in the 'potency not to' do something other than carve out a small, contemplative enclosure in which we work to render ourselves ungovernable?

In other words, one is tempted ask if you have lost all political hope in instituted capacities to assure us of a desirable, collective life, once the constantly revived impulse of instituting energy has been slowed down or weakened? I am thinking, obviously, but not exclusively, of democracy.

GA: You touch here on a question — that of the relation between institution and destitution in every society — which falls under the jurisdiction of the very constitution of human culture. Language [*langage*] is a good example. It is something which is essentially double, divided as linguists say, between a spontaneous act of individual discourse (Saussure's *parole*) and a very complex institution which is called *langue.* Unlike *parole,* the latter is not some sort of immediacy, but an institution in the proper sense of the word, constituted through

a work of analysis and reflection that is hundreds of years old. Yet every genuine act of language [*langage*] results from a dialectic between these two inseparable and heterogeneous poles. If the instituted side becomes exorbitant, we will have stereotyped phrases and inert communication.

Similarly, I believe every human society results from a dialectic between an institutional pole and a pole which out of convenience one can call destituent or non-instituted, while specifying that the instituted pole does not necessarily coincide with the institutions of the state. If the dialectic between the two poles remains alive, society will be viable. If, on the contrary, as is happening today in post-industrial democracies, the instituted pole is intensified and technologised to the point of stifling the other, political life becomes impossible.

You perceive correctly that it is not about conserving a small contemplative enclosure, but, on the contrary, about making political life possible. The contemplation of which you speak would in this sense be political activity *par excellence.*

PB: There is a contrast, in your *œuvre,* between short, incisive works (often born of lectures or seminars) and books structured like treatises. What sense do you have of this two-fold regime of writing? And in the case of *Homo Sacer,* what do you anticipate from the assembly in a single volume of different books whose order of publication does not correspond to the complex numbering which was undoubtedly put together after the fact? Is this merely an arrangement, or a way to generate other surprises, to set out on the 'adventure' in another way (to take up the title of a short book of yours recently translated into French)?

GA: It is important to specify that these volumes have not been assembled retroactively: they unfolded according to a conception — or, if you like, an 'adventure' — which was present from the start. As for the double regime of my writing, I believe that there is something there which is consubstantial with philosophy. The history of philosophical 'form' — or of philosophy as a literary genre — has yet to be carried out. The case of Plato is in this sense exemplary. By the time he chooses dialogue as a philosophical form (drawing inspiration from the mimes of Sophron, an altogether minor prose style), Plato had behind him the tradition of the presocratic 'physiologists', who, like Parmenides, wrote poems in which the author did not pose the problem of form and spoke directly in the first person with the shifter 'I'. It is against this that Socrates in the *Phaedo* explains that one could not speak simply of nature, but that it was necessary above all 'to search in discourses, in *logoi*, for the truth of beings'. As Kojève said, philosophy is that discourse, which, all the while speaking of something, must also speak of the fact that it is speaking. It is because of this that dialogue became for Plato an extremely complicated form, in which often someone relates a conversation which had formerly taken place, such that the dialogic form is doubled by an internal narration which interrupts it and subtracts it from all theatrical fiction. Hence also the false legend according to which alongside exoteric dialogues reserved for the

non-initiated there would have been esoteric writings in the academy reserved for students. On the contrary, I believe that the exoteric and the esoteric, discourse on things and discourse on language [*langage*], ceaselessly intersect and diverge in philosophical speech.

PB: Regarding this philosophical speech, I return to the republication of *Homo Sacer* in a single volume, which permits it to be experienced wholly beginning from the index of names. That of Émile Benveniste, for example, affords a singular reading experience. One realises how much etymological reflection (or reverie) often serves as a springboard for your argumentation — it is also the case, for example, in 'What is a Command?' Is the *archē* of words [*mots*] at the same time a beginning and a commandment?

GA: Since my first encounter with it at the end of the sixties, Benveniste's œuvre has never ceased to accompany me. What struck me especially then is the moment Benveniste becomes more and more conscious of the insufficiency of Saussurean semiology and radicalises the Saussurean opposition between *langue* and *parole* as a fracture between the semiotic and the semantic which cannot be sutured. Human language [*langage*] is divided, as we have seen, into two inseparable, and at the same time, incommunicable planes, and it is this rupture that in the last years of his life Benveniste sought to overcome without succeeding. There resides in this work an inescapable statement on which I have never ceased to reflect: 'The world of the sign is closed. From the sign to the sentence there is no transition, neither by syntagmatisation nor otherwise. A hiatus separates them'. Philosophy has been for me the effort which consists in overcoming this division, of recovering a voice and a material for *langue*.

PB: Historians of the texts that you enlist in your philosophical inquiry (notably patristic literature in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, liturgical sources in *Opus Dei* and monastic rules in *The Highest Poverty)* are often fascinated — and occasionally angered — by your capacity to pierce the stratum of accumulated interpretations in the scholarly literature to go straight to the source. How do you identify it? Why do you always wish, at some point, to be alone with it? Do you think that the work of research can emerge from the same mystery as literature, such as you magnificently evoke it in *The Fire and the Tale?*

GA: Here you touch upon an absolutely decisive point, which concerns the signification that the work of the philologist has for me. The title of the major work of a great Italian philologist, Giorgio Pasquali, is instructive in this sense: *The History of Tradition and the Critique of the Text.* Only the critical understanding [*connaissance*] of the tradition that has been transmitted to us grants us access to the text we wish to read, but this is almost never original; it is only what we can reach by reassembling the history of this tradition against the grain. Hence the political lesson of philology for me. What it shows us is that we receive our

culture — as we do, for that matter, our language [*langue*] — without exception by way of a historical tradition which is always already more or less consciously modified and corrupted. The original is not what philology calls the archetype: unlike this latter, it is not situated in the past but takes place in the present, in the moment when the philologist confronts tradition in hand-to-hand combat which is necessarily political and philosophical at the same time. And it is here that we find what I would like to call, with Michel Foucault, the moment of surging, which does not coincide exactly with the source that tradition has passed down to us. And it is at this point that the archaeologist parts ways with the historian, with whom he had up to this point shared a path and a method without wavering.