

Superpolitically Apolitical On Agamben's *Use of Bodies*¹

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1. *The Use of Bodies* coalesces around what Agamben calls, borrowing from Sophocles' *Antigone*, the 'superpolitical apolitical' (*hypsipolis apolis*). The phrase appears only twice in the volume, but it is absolutely decisive.
2. What is it to live as 'superpolitical apolitical'? It *is to live* and, at the same time, to *think* a politics 'set free from every figure of relation' (and representation), in which, however, 'we are *together* beyond every relation'.
3. This non-relational togetherness requires the 'use of bodies' – in the subjective sense of the genitive. That is: another body – unproductive, non-instrumental – is possible for the human being, whereby a 'zone of indifference' emerges between one's own body and that of another. Use becomes common use.
4. The 'superpolitical apolitical' also ambitiously involves deactivating the entire apparatus of Western ontology, beginning at least with Aristotle. Ontology, as inextricable from politics, is in fact founded on the relation of the ban, which ultimately founds every relation. *Homo Sacer I* argued that the separation between natural life (*zoë*) and political life (*bios*), i.e. our understanding of the anthropogenetic threshold as a *fracture* between life and language, is always concomitant with the banning of 'bare life' from the *polis* (or better, its 'inclusive exclusion') – 'bare life' as a life deprived of its form. *The Use of Bodies* complicates and substantiates this scenario. Ontologically, it is the very notion of the subject, the Aristotelian *hypokeimenon* as a singular existence that 'must be at once excluded by and captured in the apparatus'.
5. It is only through the destitution of traditional ontology that the form of life (more and more reducible to bare life in modernity and contemporaneity) can express itself as a hyphenated 'form-of-life', where life immanently lives its own mode of being in a non-relational 'contact' with its context, and finds 'happiness'.

¹ A shorter version of this review was originally published in 2016 on the Stanford University Press Blog (<http://stanfordpress.typepad.com/blog/2016/07/superpolitically-apolitical.html>) (accessed 14th March 2018).

6. The form-of-life as a non-relational commonality with the contextual other can also be grasped as the undoing of the Aristotelian relation between potency (or potential) and act. As use, the form-of-life is a potency which is not exhausted in the passage to the act (the being-at-work), but, contemplating itself as the deactivation of the act, it becomes inoperative, a potency of potency.

7. *The Use of Bodies* answers the central, and at the time rather enigmatic, question first raised in *Homo Sacer I* – that of a new politics understood as a non-relational relation – with the ‘superpolitical apolitical’ as a further oxymoron. But this is not a mere deadlock: the oxymoron (in its different variants) is both unfolded – through a thorough discussion of the concepts of use and form-of-life – and *used* as a concrete indicator of the radical crisis affecting our political and ontological categories, which functions as a practical call to render them fully inoperative.

8. In the opening pages of *The Use of Bodies*, Agamben opposes any strict division between the *pars destruens* and the *pars construens* of a work. He also rejects the very idea of a conclusion. And yet the reader cannot avoid the, perhaps naïve, impression that this book constructively – and obstinately – does conclude the *Homo Sacer* series, in a certain way. Here, one must first and foremost acknowledge and praise the tenacious determination needed to carry out a twenty-year project, a monumental enterprise that now displays a rare level of consistency. Agamben is all too often revered – and vainly emulated – for the supposed irreverence of his impressionistic, quasi-aphoristic, and circumlocutory style. This is highly misleading, especially when we consider retroactively the *Homo Sacer* series as a whole. Intentionally or unintentionally, Agamben stands out as one of the most systematic thinkers of our time. His fragmentary style (and the notion of style is closely associated with the idea of a form-of-life in *The Use of Bodies*) is probably nothing less than what Agamben would call a ‘signature’ of his philosophical system. Whether we agree or disagree with Agamben’s conclusions – and to what extent – is an altogether different matter.

9. Following Agamben’s own admission in *The Fire and the Tale* that ‘the genuinely philosophical element’ contained in the works of the authors he loves is their ‘capacity for development’, let us try to develop some of his conclusions – and thus also inevitably begin to challenge them.

10. At one point, *The Use of Bodies* peremptorily states that ‘ontology and politics correspond perfectly’. Elsewhere, it also maintains that modal ontology, i.e. the ontology of use, ‘coincides with an ethics’. The subject that is constituted in use as form-of-life and ‘contemplation of a potential’ is, in turn, in various circumstances, referred to as indiscriminately ethical and political. Moreover, the work of the late Foucault on the care of the self as the use of bodies would

positively conflate ethics and aesthetics. Given this vertiginous series of dazzling equations – which courageously updates the traditional branches of philosophy but also runs the risk of rendering them indistinguishable – how is philosophy, still explicitly entrusted with the supreme task of ‘construct[ing] a life at once “superpolitical and apolitical”’, to preserve its autonomous role here? Is it a question of *critically* ‘saying yes’ to language (as the greatly underestimated *Sacrament of Language* concludes)? Or – more problematically in my view – is it instead a question of a philosopher-poet, or poet-philosopher, who *contemplates* his dwelling in language (as is hinted at in *The Fire and the Tale*)? If the latter – in spite of Agamben’s rigorous distancing of his thought from Heidegger’s in *The Use of Bodies*, more so than anywhere else in his corpus – how might the philosopher avoid clumsily mimicking the Hölderlinian ‘inhabiting life’ or ‘life of dwelling’ (as form-of-life), which, for Agamben himself, also ‘destroyed’ Hölderlin’s language?

11. Elsewhere I have suggested that Agamben’s philosophy amounts to a sophisticated, elegant, and paradoxical kind of linguistic vitalism. His ultimate ontological aim, as stated in *Potentialities*, is an understanding of the ‘nature of thought’, and hence of language, from the perspective of ‘life [...] as a power that incessantly exceeds its forms and realisations’. The form-of-life – however ‘immanently’, and beyond the Aristotelian dichotomy between potency and act – still pre-supposes a *force-of-life*. But *The Use of Bodies* surprisingly and yet firmly *dismisses* vitalism: ‘to bring to light – *beyond every vitalism* – the intimate interweaving of being and living; this is today certainly the task of thought (and of politics)’. What nonetheless remains to be articulated is, quite bluntly, how the political onto-logy of the form-of-life does not grant life a precedence with respect to its form. This is an issue which very evidently affects a number of leading Italian biopolitical thinkers, independently of whether they openly endorse vitalism and whether they are aware of its lingering Christian connotations – the *evangelium vitae*, or *logos* of life as a silent (or not so silent) paradigm. In *The Use of Bodies*, Agamben quickly but neatly demarcates his stance from that of Franciscanism – in previous books, this demarcation was more difficult to notice, a fact which could give rise to ambiguities. The Franciscan concept of use relied on an act of ‘renunciation’, and thus on ‘the will of the subject’; use as form-of-life should, on the contrary, be founded on ‘the nature of things’. But, in opposition to the Christian ‘eternal life’ – which the laicised Church itself now tends to reduce to sheer bio-political ‘survival’ – how are we to conceive of such a ‘nature of things’? How does ‘the *vitality* or form of life of the [non-subjectivised] individual’, or the ‘impulse’ and ‘virtue’ of ‘life as such’, not relapse into vitalism?

12. Over the last two decades, Agamben has more or less persuasively been linked with a radical Left, which, through authors such as Badiou and Žižek, is attempting to promote a new ‘communist hypothesis’. The conclusion of the

Homo Sacer series makes it absolutely clear that Agamben is not a Marxist – but neither did he ever really lend himself to this equivocation. Marx’s ‘form of production’ is not Agamben’s ‘form-of-life’, quite simply because the latter rather amounts to a ‘form of inoperativity’, which renders works inoperative and thus uses them. Marx would not have thought inoperativity, as is allegedly evident in his understanding of ‘human activity in the classless society’ (Agamben), i.e. in communist life. This is, to say the least, debatable. More to the point, inoperativity (as the use of bodies of the form-of-life) would allow us to grasp the ‘classless society’ as ‘already present in capitalist society’. What Agamben has in mind is not the presence of the Marxian class-without-class in capitalist society (be it the proletariat or any of its contemporary figures). The classless society that is already present – ‘in possibly infamous and risible forms’ – is, again, a ‘common use’, where what is primarily at stake is ‘a communication not of the common but of a communicability’, i.e. of a potential. Can we really think and live in a community based exclusively on potentiality as commonality?

13. One could still rightfully debate whether the concept of form-of-life – as the use of bodies – tries to think a renewed twenty-first-century version of anarchism. However, two provisos must immediately be added. First, elaborating on Pasolini’s insights, the real anarchy is, for Agamben, that of state power and its ‘sovereignty’. Second, and in connection with this, Agamben’s anarchism – if it is one – resolutely thinks the *archè*. As he succinctly puts it in *The Fire and the Tale*, the origin (and principle) in question is not a remote point in time, but a ‘historical *a priori* that remains immanent to becoming and continues to act in it’. Why? Because the structure of the *archè* (not only in politics and ontology, but also in law, governance, and the very definition of the human) follows a precise strategy: ‘something is divided, excluded, and pushed to the bottom, and precisely through this exclusion, it is included as *archè* and foundation’. Yet, if, as Agamben himself insinuates, this ‘mechanism of exception’ is structurally linked to language and anthropogenesis, what would it truly mean for the speaking animal to render inoperative, archaeologically, the structure of the *archè* – that is, to exhibit the void at its centre? Is Agamben’s ‘anarchic’ form-of-life prepared to bear all of the consequences of ‘an inseparable life, neither animal nor human’?

14. The form-of-life does not yet ‘fully’ exist ‘in our society’. But examples of lives inseparable from their forms can be attested to in ‘unmedifying’ places. Hence *The Use of Bodies* abounds in positive references to sadomasochism as an inappropriable ‘intimacy’ which goes against the advance of jealous ‘privacy’; to sexual perversion in general as a ‘sort of [...] blessed life’; and to a certain Sade who would provide us with a parodic and yet ‘most serious’ paradigm of the use of bodies as commonality. What is at stake here is not simply, to follow Lacanian psychoanalysis, perversion as one possible basic form of subjectivation/sexuation, which is as such ethically ‘neutral’ (in fact, the form-of-life as the use of bodies

claims to have done with subjectivity tout-court, however split or vanishing the latter might be). In these *d*esubjectivised experiences where ‘life has been entirely put at stake [...] in [a] certain perverse behaviour’ we are rather confronted with what Agamben has to recognise as pathologies... at least ‘under present circumstances’. Is this ‘zone of irresponsibility’ – experienced in person by Foucault, according to Agamben – the closest we can get to a model of the ‘superpolitical apolitical’ for the time being?