

Franciscan Cynicism: *Bare Life* as a Transformative Cosmopolitics

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Abstract

As part of a wider project which looks at contemporary Italian Thought as a revival of Greek Cynic ideas, this paper identifies, within Giorgio Agamben's post-1990 work, the framework sustaining an innovative cosmo-political discourse. Whereas scholars rarely remark that western cosmopolitanism was founded as an antagonistic mode of thinking by Diogenes of Sinope and his disciples, in recent times authors such as Peter Sloterdijk and Luis Navia have highlighted numerous similarities connecting Greek Cynicism with contemporary European philosophies. Relying on these historical-theoretical presuppositions, this article explains why Agamben's Franciscanism should be seen as one of the most faithful revitalisations of cynic elements that western thought has carried out during the past few decades. Specifically, a 'cynic' interpretation of Agamben's post-1990 work is desirable inasmuch as it solves some of the aporias elicited by the *Homo Sacer* hypothesis, whilst also providing cosmopolitan political theory with effective critical tools.

For the happiness of the animal, that thorough
kynic, is the living proof of the truth of
cynicism.

Nietzsche, *Untimely Observations*, 2, sec.1

Awakening One's Own False Consciousness: the Kynical Turning Point

How cynical have we really become? Does cynicism truly represent the ultimate horizon encompassing all human thoughts? Are lack of empathy, social opportunism, and political resignation all that is left for us? It is indisputable that interpersonal disconnection has exponentially proliferated across the western world during the past four decades. The fading of the new social movements at the end of the 1970s undeniably led a relevant amount of collective feelings and genuine human bonds to an inexorable shipwreck. Those who expected both the expansion of the markets and the internationalisation of labour to enhance reciprocity, compassion, or moral progress are finding themselves largely disappointed. It is evident that globalising processes, narrowly dependent upon technological tools, are increasingly forcing social interactions within a virtual dimension, while confining the human psyche within spaces of estrangement and alienation.

Partly because of this simulated component, communication per se has been taken over by scepticism and mistrustfulness. Whereas political ideologies have surrendered to the rise of populist views and conspiracy theories, mainstream media have to a large degree lost their authority over ultimate ‘truth’, receiving on a daily basis a fair amount of contempt. Social networks, in turn, are progressively becoming the trashcan wherein people discharge their frustrations and dissatisfactions. Meanwhile, an evanescent dialogic exchange between cybernetic subjectivities serves as a counterpart to the indifference we maintain for the actual neighbour sitting next to us. A civilisation of isolated robotic sociopaths? Is this all we have been able to accomplish after all?

Going back to the beginning of the 1980s, one discovers that efforts had been made to escape this cynical labyrinth. German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk addressed some of the aforementioned issues, also stimulating the subsequent work of several other authors. In the provocative *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983), Sloterdijk characterises neo-cynicism as a disenchanting and opportunistic demeanour which propagates across contemporary capitalistic societies, infiltrating not only the world of business and media but also numerous intellectual realms. The typical neo-cynic is for Sloterdijk afflicted with an illness that is ironically baptised as *enlightened false consciousness*. This malady distresses those who have lost faith in the great ideologies of modernity – i.e. the ideals of the Enlightenment, the Marxian utopia, the Hegelian τέλος, etc. – but are incapable of converting their disillusion into pioneering values or social change. Due to this incapacity, neo-cynics direct their existential scepticism towards petty minded purposes such as materialistic goods, financial profit, or individual success: ‘The characteristic odour of modern cynicism is of a more fundamental nature – a constitution of consciousness afflicted with enlightenment that, having learned from historical experience, refuses cheap optimism [...]. In the new cynicism, a detached negativity comes through that scarcely allows itself any hope [...]’.¹

Despite these low-spirited postulates, Sloterdijk’s analysis is not completely devoid of hope. The *Critique* alludes to some conceptual and moral tools with which neo-cynical phenomena could presumably be turned against themselves, restoring to health those suffering from the sicknesses previously described. Sloterdijk suggests digging within the history of cynicism so as to unearth its primaevial roots. To defeat the neo-cynical malady, it is imperative that we retrieve the views defended in Ancient Greece by the Cynic school which flourished there. The rebellious principles and lifestyle adopted by Diogenes of Sinope, who is credited with being the most

¹ Sloterdijk (1988), p.6

representative exponent of this philosophical orientation, should serve as a paradigm.² Ideals of poverty, frugality, and self-sufficiency were all invoked by Diogenes as ways in which to condemn the corruption perpetrated around the Hellenistic urban centres, where greed, moral degradation, and injustice of all sorts occurred on a daily basis. Dismissing the cerebral abstractions that had distinguished classical Greek Thought, the Cynics conceived of philosophy as a practical pursuit of virtue. This could be attained exclusively through both the rejection of ordinary societal values such as wealth, fame and power, and the adoption of a minimalistic weekly routine emulating the simplicity of natural life. For this reason, the Cynics refused most superfluous comforts, while incorporating rigorous physical training, meditation, and ascetic rituals within their everyday practice.

The cosmopolitan utopia envisioned by Diogenes for the very first time in western history reflects this radical attitude. The idea of a universal political belonging was conceptually formulated by the Cynics as a virtuous space of *self-exile* from existing dishonoured societies. Freedom was defined mostly in unconstructive terms, as freedom from nation and social conventions, while the kynical³ ‘state’ required the readiness to live at the margins of established communities. In some circumstances this mentality appeared to be the symptom of a distrust in politics, which was a common tendency during the Hellenistic epoch. Nevertheless, in some other cases Cynicism displayed strong political connotations, inasmuch as cosmopolitan arguments were occasionally employed as forms of resistance with respect to the ruling authorities.⁴ This antagonistic standpoint did not prevent Cynic thinkers from embracing democratic and philanthropic values: the ideal Cynic is described as ‘just, lawful, prudent, temperate, brave, and magnanimous [...], gentle, mild, kindly, not only to his friends and allies’ but to all people.⁵

Importantly, because Greek thought and language did not possess a term denoting a universal mankind that would correspond to the Roman *humanitas*, kynical cosmopolitanism could not rely on humanistic presuppositions. Scholars point out that the Greek word *ἄνθρωπος* (*anthropos* = man) denotes in all cases an individual creature exhibiting theriomorphic characteristics.⁶ Therefore, it could not be used as

² A complete illustration of Greek Cynicism, which flourished during the Hellenistic age, is provided by Desmond (2008).

³ Adopting Sloterdijk’s notation, I will employ the adjective ‘kynical’, which stems from the Greek *kyón*, *kynos* (dog), so as to distinguish the ancient usage of the term from the way in which the word ‘cynical’ is conceived of by contemporary common sense.

⁴ In this regard, see Kennedy (1999).

⁵ Desmond (2008), p.198.

⁶ Nybakken is explicit in this regard: ‘From Homer down through the classical Greek writers the word *anthropos* remained a generic term for individuals. It signified a creature that, although having some characteristics of the lower animals, nevertheless possessed faculties and powers above them

a conceptual substrate for either the elaboration of comprehensive ethical systems, or for theorising an ontological separation between humans and other living forms. This means that western cosmopolitanism originated as a mode of thinking that posits an affinity between all living beings by means of a critical distrust of cerebral intellections and universalistic philosophical discourses: ‘Diogenes does not say that he is a “cosmopolitan” or a “citizen of the world”, that is, the *human world*. Rather, he says that he is a “citizen of the cosmos”. The *cosmos is not a human construct*, but exists beyond human control and even conception’.⁷ Such a non-humanistic essence is furthermore fully portrayed in the term ‘Cynicism’, recalling both Diogenes’ nickname *kyôn, kynos* (= dog) and the wild modes of living embraced by his followers.

Sloterdijk is convinced that the combative attitude exhibited by these dog philosophers needs to be retrieved as faithfully as possible in order to contain the squalor that is taking over present-day consumerist societies, wherein commodities turn into spiritual purposes and pathological attachment to material wealth repeatedly converts profit into moral rightness. Partly siding with this viewpoint, Luis Navia has also looked at ancient cynicism as the most efficient weapon to employ for dismantling ‘a system that creates and then panders to unnecessary desires and that increasingly establishes itself as the sole reality [...] [that] harbours terrible violence both to the natural environment whose dwindling resources support it, and to human beings who are progressively dehumanised’.⁸

What is the likelihood for these pleas to be heard? Is there a concrete possibility for a more virtuous type of cynicism to reemerge within western communities? Scholars reassure us of the fact that, from time to time, kynical elements have reappeared throughout history, acquiring a variety of different shapes. For instance, due to the importance that poverty, mysticism, and ascetic rituals acquired during the late Middle Ages, some view the diffusion of spiritual orders such as the Benedictines, Dominicans, and Franciscans, as a kynical reaction with respect to the corruption that had conquered numerous clerical environments around that time.⁹ Moreover, kynical elements have resurfaced during epochs which, similar to the Greek Hellenistic age when Diogenes’ ideas gained popularity, encompass factors such as the expansion of imperialistic powers, urbanisation procedures, economic growth, cultural fusion, and social instability. These features partly apply to the Roman imperial era, when the Stoics explicitly inherited the legacy of the Cynics. Even more significantly, the aforementioned factors distinguish the contemporary age of globalisation, in which a

[...]. The Greeks were familiar with this two-fold nature of man, and yet their word *anthropos* seldom, if ever, signified the ‘noble’ or ‘humane’ aspect of man; it was not used to mean ideal mankind’ (1937), pp. 397–98.

⁷ Desmond (2008), p. 204, emphasis added.

⁸ Ibid. p. 236.

⁹ Ibid. chapter 6.

shortfall of political independence experienced by western nation-states recalls the condition of the Greek *poleis*, which within the Hellenistic scenario were deprived of a large part of their autonomy.¹⁰

This historical association gains a more compelling significance when one delves into the kynical components characterising contemporary ‘post-modern’ and ‘post-human’ doctrines. Whether through a conflation of biological elements with technological devices that trans-humanists invoke, or by way of a system of power collisions that – from Nietzsche to Foucault and Agamben – anti-humanist and post-modern philosophers have identified as explaining the evolution of western knowledge, many of these discourses have contributed significantly to removing ‘man’ from the centre of the narrative space. In turn, this is now more inclined to harbour pre-humanistic kynical perspectives.

Debatably, kynical elements resurface in Giorgio Agamben’s post-humanism more visibly than they do in many other philosophical and literary contexts. Such is the perspective defended in this article, which will explain why the evolution of the *Homo Sacer* project acquires a more eloquent significance when filtered through a kynical lens. The kynical standpoint is desirable because it resolves some of the aporias that the *bare life* assumption elicits: a) the incongruity between the cataclysmic aspects characterising Agamben’s discourse and the antagonistic aims it occasionally evokes; b) the question concerning Agamben’s *messianism*, which seemingly collides with the secular and immanent essence that his analysis embodies, and c) the uncanny appeal to the theme of monastic asceticism, which is discussed in one of the concluding volumes of the *Homo Sacer* series in order to address issues pertaining to globalisation, capitalistic bio-power, and juridical apparatuses. Additionally, the kynical hypothesis is auspicious because it assists in the extrapolation of an innovative and critical cosmo-political discourse which destabilises neoliberal ideological structures and dissociates principles of local autonomy from cultural protectionism and anti-immigration claims.

Anthropocentrism, Sovereignty, Law: An Ontology of Formlessness

Agamben’s post-humanism is commonly considered, on the one hand, as a reformation of Foucault’s bio-politics, and, on the other, as a debt owed to Hannah Arendt’s philosophical reflections. Inheriting from French post-structuralism the genealogical method, Agamben rejects the hypothetical transition between a ‘sovereign’ and a ‘bio-political’ power which, according to Foucault, took place at the

¹⁰ Kennedy (1999), p. 31.

end of the modern age.¹¹ Agamben expresses scepticism with respect to this account due to its perceived failure to explain the connections linking sovereignty, modernity, and the totalitarian shipwrecks that litter the 20th century. The *homo sacer* hypothesis resolves this dilemma by combining the two forms of power posited by Foucault into a single paradigm that nevertheless exhibits a dual essence. Agamben conceives of western sovereignty as a mechanism which, ever since ancient times, has functioned according to an *exclusion-inclusion* mechanism that regulates human life through a potential suspension of juridical rights. From Agamben's perspective, the human condition throughout western history has always coincided with the experience of a *bare life*; namely, a mode of existence which is produced and controlled politically through the possible revocation of legal status and which, consequently, lies in between *βίος* and *ζωή* (*bios* and *zoe*) – i.e. humanity and animality.

Following Hannah Arendt, Agamben believes that both the twofold nature of sovereignty and the related condition of naked 'sacredness' became more visible during the 20th century, mainly in consequence of the atrocities perpetrated by European totalitarianisms. Agamben is convinced that the massacres perpetrated under the Nazi regime in Germany cannot be interpreted as a historical anomaly which drastically deviates from the occidental tradition. Quite the opposite, they reveal a contradiction that has always been inscribed within western politics, and which was ultimately producing the most destructive outcomes. Despite this substantial continuity, Agamben identifies a significant difference that distinguishes the contemporary age from previous epochs. This is the fact that the *homo sacer* condition, representing a state of exception, has been in recent times proclaimed and applied in innumerable circumstances, to the point of becoming the rule. In other words, although bio-political power 'is at least as old as the sovereign exception',¹² it discloses itself more destructively within the contemporary age, when the disconnection between the 'human' and the 'citizen' has grown considerably larger, leading individuals to experience an ongoing state of vulnerability.

Because the *bare life* condition represents an exemplary model for interpreting contemporary sociopolitical phenomena, it goes without saying that Agamben's perspective readily lends itself to being interpreted in a catastrophic manner. As a matter of fact, more than one writer has referred to the *Homo Sacer* project in apocalyptic terms. However, the perspective defended here will rely on the cynical aspects that characterise Agamben's post-humanism so as to rectify the

¹¹ Foucault firmly distinguishes sovereign power from bio-power. Sovereign power discloses itself through readily identifiable rulers whose main authority over citizens is to take their life or let them live, whilst bio-power is characterised as a de-personified type of power, which relies on capitalistic dynamics, is substantially devoid of agency, and produces subjectivity by fostering life or disallowing it to the point of death. For a more comprehensive illustration, see Esposito (2008), chapter 1.

¹² Agamben (1998), p. 11.

aforementioned misreading as follows: 1) despite its cataclysmic connotations, Agamben's *bare life* also functions as an ontologically *transformative* tool that is potentially able to dismantle the violent device that generates the exceptional logic of sovereignty. 2) Such a displacement, which is mainly pursued through a deconstruction of history, does not give rise to implications with a merely religious significance. Rather, Agamben posits a Franciscan *poverty in time* which calls for a cosmo-political antagonism that thrives outside of all juridical domains. The justifications for these claims may be illustrated along the following lines:

Several scholars have evaluated Agamben's doctrine as an essentially pessimistic philosophical discourse. For instance, Alain Badiou disapproves of the fragile aspects which characterise the notion of bare life, which he sees as ultimately 'always sacrificed'.¹³ Even more disastrous are the considerations expressed by Ernesto Laclau, who perceives the Agambenian state of exception as 'the unavoidable advance towards a totalitarian society'¹⁴ and substantially condemns the *Homo Sacer* project as a form of mere 'political nihilism'.¹⁵ Within the Italian philosophical debate, Roberto Esposito may partially be aligned with these interpretations and highlights the destructive message delivered by Agamben's bio-politics, which in all cases produces thanato-political outcomes.

One should certainly accept that these exegetical suggestions are at least somewhat reliable, to the extent that finding optimistic messages within Agamben's texts is not a stress-free mission. And yet it is legitimate to wonder as to the degree to which these hermeneutical perspectives are able to capture the multifaceted nature of the *Homo Sacer* doctrine. Indeed, a closer look at Agamben's work after 1990, which certainly follows from tragic postulates, reveals nonetheless an argument pursuing emancipatory goals. These are explicitly confessed in *The Open* (2004), wherein Agamben identifies a correspondence between the detrimental logic of sovereignty and the anthropocentric aspects characterising western epistemologies which, throughout the centuries, have repeatedly separated man from other forms of life. In this context, Agamben explicitly utilises *bare life* as a post-human tool which has the capacity to neutralise both the *bios-zoe* opposition and the corresponding *inclusion-exclusion* framework:

To render inoperative the machine that governs our conception of man will therefore mean no longer to seek new – more effective or more authentic – articulations, but *rather to show the central emptiness, the hiatus that – within*

¹³ Alain Badiou, *Logique des Mondes*, quoted in Lorenzo Chiesa (2009), 'Giorgio Agamben's Franciscan Ontology' in Chiesa & Toscano eds. (2009), p. 153.

¹⁴ Ernesto Laclau (2007), 'Bare Life or Social Indeterminacy?' in Calarco & DeCaroli ed. by (2007), p.17.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 22.

*man – separates man and animal, and to risk ourselves in this emptiness: the suspension of the suspension, Shabbat of both animal and man.*¹⁶

It is an uncanny line of reasoning that leaves open the door for potential redemption after all. Let us then look at this fragment from the perspective defended by Lorenzo Chiesa, who also remarks that ‘what is scarcely investigated, or altogether overlooked, by countless analyses of the notion of *homo sacer* is the very fact that, beginning with the introduction of the first volume of his series, Agamben explicitly relates such a notion to the possibility of a “new politics”’.¹⁷ In view of this more hopeful perspective, what does Agamben mean by ‘Shabbat of both animal and man’? What does the *suspension of the suspension* entail?

The hypothesis that views Agamben’s *Shabbat* as a promotion of Christian religious tones, which is partly endorsed by authors such as Kelly Oliver,¹⁸ appears to be excessively simplistic. As I have clarified elsewhere,¹⁹ this perspective is one-dimensional because it does not take into account the relevant post-Christian and immanent components that characterise contemporary Italian Theory. Research shows that, particularly after 1990, Italian philosophers have displayed in numerous circumstances the propensity to explain religious concepts in secular terms, also relying significantly on Agamben’s thought so as to nourish this political-theological inclination.²⁰ The tension that materialises between Agamben’s mystical rhetoric and the lay personality characterising Italian Theory will not easily find relief if it is not considered as a cynical phenomenon. I will return again to this topic shortly. For now I will clarify that, far from advocating narrowly transcendent motives, what Agamben prioritises in order to accomplish moral and social progress is the necessity to carry out specific ontological shifts: ‘Ontology, or first philosophy, is not an innocuous academic discipline, but in every sense the fundamental operation in which anthropogenesis, the becoming human of the living being, is realised’.²¹

Specifically, Agamben’s discourse calls for the elaboration of an ontology that dismisses the taxonomic divisions perpetrated for centuries within western knowledge, and which describes ‘life’ in more fluid terms, preventing discrimination and stigmatisation of any sort from taking place on the political plane. Nancy Fraser’s thoughtful account of recognition strategies, distinguishing *affirmative* methods from *transformative* approaches, is worth recalling in order to obtain an exhaustive

¹⁶ Agamben (2004), p. 92, emphases added.

¹⁷ Chiesa (2009), p. 152.

¹⁸ See Oliver (2009), chapter 10.

¹⁹ Mosciatti (2017).

²⁰ I am referring in particular to Roberto Esposito (2012), *Living Thought*, chapter 5.

²¹ Agamben (2004), p. 79.

evaluation of the theory in question.²² An ‘affirmative remedy’ for injustice intends to rectify social disparities without modifying the fundamental structure that produces them. For instance, within the political context of the United States, an affirmative remedy for racism can be represented by black-identity strategies, endowing African American citizens with more relevant social weight. On the other hand, a ‘transformative remedy’ aspires to repair inequalities by reshaping their inner ‘generative framework’.²³ In the case of racism, such a method can be exemplified by political modes of thinking which prefer to dismantle the black-white dichotomy as well as ordinary conceptions of race and ethnicity. Fraser rightfully points out that affirmative recognition strategies are ultimately self-contradictory, inasmuch as they privilege one group over another, thus betraying the egalitarian premises from which they move. Concerning affirmative feminism, for instance, Fraser concludes: ‘Read through that lens, the cultural politics of affirming women’s difference appears as an affront to the liberal welfare state’s official commitment to the equal moral worth of persons’.²⁴ On the other hand, transformative approaches, which Fraser mainly associates with deconstructive philosophical manoeuvres, are more self-consistent because their implementation does not betray the universalistic conception of recognition they presuppose.

Conceiving of sociopolitical change as mainly dependent upon radical ontological alterations, Agamben grounds moral activity on a view that characterises life in terms of *potentiality* and *amorphousness*.²⁵ Call this an *ontology of formlessness*. This type of ontology clearly encompasses Fraser’s transformative component as it employs the *suspension of the suspension* with the intention of undermining the violent mechanisms that for centuries have distressed western politics, by modifying the conceptual structure which elicits those mechanisms.

Despite its destructive façade, Agamben’s discourse involves components that visibly restructure relations of recognition and destabilise group differentiation. From this transformative stance, the ultimate significance of the *Shabbat* rests within the comparison that *The Coming Community* (1993) establishes between the notion of a ‘whatever singularity’ and those peculiar spirits that Christian theology confines within Limbo. In this mythical dimension souls are neither blessed nor damned, but thanks to such an uncertain self-perception they represent a fertile terrain for the rise of new and more desirable modes of social life. Whether or not this ‘naked’ singularity offers

²² See Fraser (1997), pp.23–33.

²³ Ibid. p. 23.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 29.

²⁵ In this regard, Agamben is unequivocal: ‘This is why the only ethical experience (which, as such, cannot be a task or a subjective decision) is the experience of being (one’s own) *potentiality*, of being (one’s own) *possibility* – exposing, that is, in every form one’s own *amorphousness* and in every act one’s own *inactuality*’ (*The Coming Community*, p. 44).

a solid ground for the theorisation of the kynical cosmopolitanism that was previously postulated will be evaluated by taking into account Agamben's critique of history. This is regarded by Agamben as one of the most fundamental theoretical moves to carry out in order to accomplish the ontological adjustments that *Homo Sacer* summons.

Poverty in Time: Towards a Transformative Cosmo-politics

1.

In agreement with authors who include Walter Mignolo, Homi Bhabha, Boaventura De Sousa Santos, and Sheldon Pollock, who look at cosmopolitan theory from a critical viewpoint,²⁶ Agamben is also strongly convinced that a meticulous assessment of western conceptions of history is needed in order to dismantle euro-anthropocentric systems of thought. Traditional cosmopolitanism, inheriting the legacy of the Enlightenment and the correlated faith in human progress, mainly relies on the Christian-Newtonian representation of temporality as an entity which flows indiscriminately in all parts of the cosmos and is quantifiable in universalistic terms. This humanistic type of model, explaining time as a linear, regular, and cumulative progression of units ultimately leading all societies to develop along the same lines, is nonetheless an exclusively western construction which occasionally conceals imperialistic purposes. The anti-humanistic path that Agamben follows will not be able to reach its ultimate destination without an opportune critique of such a temporal paradigm. From this perspective, the *suspension of the suspension*, portrayed in *The Open* as a form of life 'without time and without world',²⁷ acquires a temporal value which indicates a hypothetical dimension wherein ordinary chronological measurements are inapplicable. Recalling Heidegger's notion of the human's 'world-forming' ability, and the animal's being 'poor in world', to which *The Open* clearly alludes, Agamben's post-human view discloses itself as *poor in time*.

It is important to clarify that Agamben does not envisage a conclusion of temporality as such,²⁸ but rather calls for a *messianic* reformation of the aforementioned western paradigm. Far from coinciding with the definitive dissolution of history, temporal messianism disrupts ordinary chronological sequences by intermittently conflating all temporal planes together; it is 'the time of the end [...], the time that contracts itself and begins to end [...], the time that remains between time

²⁶ For a detailed account see Taraborrelli (2015) and also Chakrabarty D., Bhabha H.K., Pollock S., and Breckenridge C.A. eds. (2002).

²⁷ Agamben (2004), p. 47.

²⁸ As Chiesa thoughtfully points out (2009), p. 157. Interestingly, Agamben's reflections on temporal *messianism* take shape as an interpretation of Saint Paul's doctrines, which were in turn heavily influenced by the Greek Cynics. This aspect should certainly be examined more accurately by considering the work of Gerald F. Downing, see (1992) and (1998).

and its end'.²⁹ Agamben thus relocates time within a suspended dimension wherein 'origin' and 'end', 'beginning' and 'conclusion' occasionally tend to overlap. This model moves away from the one-dimensional representation on which western common sense generally relies. Temporal messianism, signifying neither a progressive accumulation of instants nor a linear series of actions or achievements, spasmodically pulls together sequential openings and closures, and thus undermines both the capitalistic maximisation of production and the technocratic forms of control that the Occident has exhibited since the modern age. From this stance, it is easier to identify the semantic correlation that Agamben establishes between *ontological formlessness*, *temporal suspension*, and *Shabbat*. Because of a deficiency in qualitative and also quantitative attributes, messianic time is hardly conceivable in purely rational terms; nevertheless, one can perceive it as an existential experience on the Saturday (Shabbat) which interrupts work activities and puts on hold the ordinary gestures that people mechanically repeat during the week.

From the sociopolitical standpoint, this unconventional conception of time summons an alternative dimension wherein radical shifts are potentially set free. What Agamben describes is a temporal experience that is able to unravel the un-decidable riddle of sovereignty by suspending the juridical framework that sustains it. Messianic life, enabling human beings to 'carry out good works independently of the law',³⁰ completely disengages from both existing power relations and legal preconditions, thus generating, in Chiesa's terms, 'a new kind of sovereignty diametrically opposed to the sovereignty exercised by the anomic form of law'.³¹ Agamben's *poverty in time*, therefore, ultimately stands for a transformative bio-political discourse that adopts neither *dialectical* nor *affirmative* strategies, but triggers the emergence of alternative forms of political autonomy through both the deactivation of applicable normative provisions and the creation of extra-normative modes of action and interaction.

The kynical spirit that this discourse personifies comes assertively to the fore in one of Agamben's most revealing texts: *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form of Life* (2013) provides a detailed historical-philosophical reconstruction of the phenomenon of western monasticism, focusing in particular on the Franciscan order. The book takes into account the spiritual movements of the 13th century and discusses the lifestyle of the Franciscan friars by examining meticulously their rules, ascetic rituals and daily practices. Why would a philosophical project that explores the conceptual borders separating 'community', 'sovereignty', and 'law', devote its time to such an uncanny topic? What does the theme of monasticism have to do with issues pertaining to temporality, capitalism or sociopolitical transformation? These

²⁹ Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, quoted by Chiesa (2009), p. 157.

³⁰ Ibid. p. 160.

³¹ Chiesa (2009), p. 160.

perplexities can only be alleviated if they are supported by our kynical hypothesis, which is confirmed by the very first pages of the text, describing the ancient monastic orders in rigorously secular terms. Far from placing importance on transcendent entities or theoretical issues regarding the nature of divinity, these religious groups looked upon daily life as their main concern:

in any case what they state and claim does not actually concern theological or dogmatic questions, articles of faith, or problems of scriptural interpretation. Instead, what is at stake is life and the way of living [...]. The claim of poverty, which is present in all movements and which in itself is clearly not new, is only one aspect of this way or form of life.³²

Diogenes' insubordinate demeanour surfaces even more forcefully in the absolute primacy that the Franciscan rule gave to 'the actual exercise of the virtues',³³ which is in all circumstances more valuable than doctrinal abstractions or the 'profession of vows'.³⁴ Moving from the association that the Franciscan literature introduces between 'rule' and 'form of life', Agamben's bio-political perspective prioritises the living incarnation of ethical values over any written text. In particular, Agamben refers to the Franciscan example as an effort to elaborate a set of principles that are able to adhere spontaneously to all their concrete implementations, and which fill in the void that separates the universality of the norm from the particularity of each living being. The *ideal of poverty* is praised in order to reduce such a distance. Relying on the cathartic power that self-dispossessing modes of thinking convey, Franciscanism indicates the way to emancipate oneself from all types of property so as to step out of the sphere of law. Paradoxically, the Franciscan rule epitomises a normative code that dismisses *in toto* its formal structure, and which finds in the kynical actuality of practical virtue the one and only way in which it might be exemplified.

2.

Agamben's appeal to what is probably the most kynical phenomenon characterising Italian history suggests in all probability the effort to redirect western thought towards alternative targets. Of primary importance is the retrieval of critical tools which in some ways undermine the greedy logic of appropriation and materialistic accrual that the West has pursued for centuries. Agamben looks at Franciscanism as a revolutionary phenomenon that had pointed to a different path, which was irresponsibly ignored during subsequent epochs by European rulers and people. It

³² Agamben (2013), p. 92.

³³ Ibid. p.107.

³⁴ Ibid.

goes without saying that the praise of poverty in question has little to do with the invocation of an eternal life or the mere celebration of the Christian monastic tradition. Rather, it indicates an antagonistic instrument which has the capacity to undermine consumerist moral frameworks, whilst also weakening the alliance that capitalistic systems have established with juridical apparatuses:

In one case as in the other, what remained untouched was perhaps the most precious legacy of Franciscanism, to which the West must return ever anew to contend with it as its undeferrable task: how to think a form-of-life, a human life entirely removed from the grasp of the law and a use of bodies and of the world that would never be substantiated into an appropriation. That is to say again: to think life as that which is never given as property but only as common use.³⁵

Bearing in mind this significant paragraph, Lorenzo Chiesa's suggestion to look at the homo sacer as a political hero who carries out a 'silent form of resistance'³⁶ should definitely be welcomed. Additionally, it is important to clarify that the real essence concealed by this rebellious asceticism cannot be justified through the unworldly domain of 'faith' because it is rooted within the kynical atmosphere which has largely animated post-modern thought during the past few decades. Agamben's bio-political cynicism, materialising as 'an individual and solitary flight from the world',³⁷ then gives rise to 'a model of total communitarian life'³⁸ which challenges existing capitalistic and juridical establishments.

All this symbolically merges within Saint Francis' legendary ability to speak with birds and wolves, whilst also mirroring his unconditional love for all other living creatures. Suspended between *bios* and *zoe*, the Franciscans created an alternative ground for the rise of a post-human 'coming community' that dismissed the peculiarity of social-juridical conventions and ultimately is identified with the wholeness of the cosmos. The cosmo-political connotations that characterise Agamben's discourse, which have been neglected by numerous scholars, partly follow from the Arendtian presuppositions that inspire the *Homo Sacer* doctrine. Because in our time all individuals are potentially *homini sacri*, Agamben certainly retrieves Arendt's idea of the Holocaust as 'a civilisational breakdown with global meaning',³⁹ while converting the figure of the Muselmann into an exiled political rebel. Moreover, the Franciscan

³⁵ Ibid. p. xiii.

³⁶ Chiesa (2009), p. 153.

³⁷ Agamben (2013) p. 9.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Lars Rensmann (2012), 'Grounding Cosmopolitics: Rethinking Crimes against Humanity and Global Political Theory with Arendt and Adorno' in Rensmann & Gandesha eds. (2012), p. 130.

communities he envisions display Arendtian characteristics to the extent that they are substantially devoid of specific identities, and yet still rely on concrete bonds as ‘preconditions of meaningful public life’,⁴⁰ urging political theory to ‘think and act within the limits’.⁴¹ In line with Arendt’s view, Agamben would hardly endorse ‘megalomaniac’⁴² cosmopolitan objectives such as the removal of all territorial borders or the idea of a world citizenship. It is no accident that in recent times he has expressed some scepticism with regard to the *Ius Soli* decree discussed within the Italian parliament.

Arguably, Agamben’s kynical departure from Arendt unfolds through a radicalisation of her unclear conception of the juridical. Despite Arendt’s reservations pertaining to the notion of ‘human rights’, which are often declared but rarely concretely enforced, she still acknowledges the importance of international law for protecting individuals from their governments and forestalling crimes against humanity. Because of this ambiguity, Arendt’s notion of a ‘right to have rights’, which emphasises the necessity of a unified humanity providing a reasonable solution to the problems of homelessness, statelessness and political abuses, can be interpreted in two different ways: either as a call for more sensitive juridical responsibilities or as a provocative dismissal of legal norms in general. Rensmann favours the second interpretation, describing Arendt’s work as a philosophical effort which, ‘rather than delegating global challenges primarily to formal legal principles or appealing to abstract morality’,⁴³ focuses on ‘situated political responsibility and particular politics of human dignity in order to realise, and rectify the universal’.⁴⁴ Moving in a similar direction, Balibar takes a step forward and identifies within the ‘right to have rights’ a polemical essence which makes it primarily a ‘right to disobedience’:

The right to have rights is not a moral notion; it is a political one. It describes a process which started with resistance and ends in the actual exercise of a constituent power, whichever particular historical form this may take. It should therefore also be called a right to politics, in the broad sense, meaning that nobody can be properly emancipated from outside or from above, but only by his or her own activity.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 129.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid. p. 131.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Étienne Balibar, ‘Ambiguous Universality’, quoted by Patrick Hannafin (2013), ‘A Cosmopolitics of Singularities’ in Braidotti, Hanafin, Blaagaard eds. (2013), p. 42.

Agamben's retrieval of Arendt radicalises this interpretation. The cosmo-political 'coming communities' he theorises are grounded on the *abdicatio omnine iuri* (abdication of all rights) which regulates the Franciscan rule and lifestyle. Relying on this postulate, Agamben converts Arendt's 'right to have rights' into the uncompromising 'right to renounce all rights' that is personified spiritually, practically, and politically by the monastic order. This means that, in the context of *Homo Sacer*, voluntary exile is not conceived of as the momentary space for intellectual reflection that Arendt envisions but, more cynically, as the exclusive domain wherein social transformation can ultimately succeed.

From Agamben's viewpoint, the opportunity for such a cosmo-political redemption is paradoxically offered by the dissemination of capitalistic bio-power, which in the present epoch repeatedly converts rules into exceptions, thus transforming human life into an experience of shared self-exposure. Despite the detrimental consequences brought about by globalisation, this also sets up the conditions for the rise of societies with no identity that challenge the arrogant authority held by local dynasties, interregional aristocracies, and national powers:

But this also means that the petty bourgeoisie represents an opportunity unheard of in the history of humanity that it must at all costs not let slip away. Because if instead of continuing to search for a proper identity in the already improper and senseless form of individuality, humans were to succeed in belonging to this impropriety as such, in making of the proper being-thus not an identity and an individual property but a singularity without identity, a common and absolutely exposed singularity – if humans could, that is, not be thus in this or that particular biography, but be only *the* thus, their singular exteriority and their face, then they would for the first time enter into a community without presuppositions and without subjects, into a communication without the incommunicable.⁴⁶

The alliance that the neoliberal bourgeoisie establishes with western state apparatuses is what sustains them and corrodes them at the same time. In fact, these apparatuses reproduce through detection, recognition and identification procedures, whereas neoliberal forces tend to nullify all modes of belonging, thus giving birth to a proliferation of unclassifiable communities and, in turn, to an ongoing 'struggle between the State and the non-State (humanity)'.⁴⁷

Concerning the concrete repercussions that such an argumentative thread brings on the political plane, thought-provoking clues materialise when taking into

⁴⁶ Agamben (1993), p. 65.

⁴⁷ Ibid. p.85.

consideration the main tendencies expressed by the *Global Justice Movement*.⁴⁸ Disregarding the perspectives represented by *supporters* and *reformists*, who for the most part neglect truly radical transformative purposes, it is worth focusing on both the *isolationist* and the *alternative* orientations. Isolationists include groups such as *Focus on the Global South*, *Global Exchange*, and *50 years is Enough*,⁴⁹ which call for a total dismantling of globalisation and defend values of economic and political autonomy. These collective units align with the belief that all transnational capital flows are detrimental and that a return to an economy administered locally and nationally is the only option. Representatives of this view are generally not interested in building cross-border networks,⁵⁰ and claim that policies should be elaborated in all circumstances according to principles of self-sufficiency. The *alternative* faction, on the other hand, embraces organisations such as *Zapatistas*, *Adbusters*, and *Reclaim the Streets*,⁵¹ which do not necessarily seek to overthrow capitalism as much as they aim at developing unconventional and more desirable ways of life. Those who belong to this school of thought assign primary importance to cultural and environmental themes. Additionally, they refuse ‘the existing institutions and centres of global powers’,⁵² and ‘concentrate on building separate, alternative arrangements and mechanisms whose viability is important in environmental and community issues’.⁵³

The cynical cosmo-political view that has unfolded here appears to identify a complementary area in between these two orientations. Because of both the Franciscan elements and the transformative components characterising the *Homo Sacer* doctrine, this retrieves the claims pertaining to a self-sufficient and subsidiary type of economy advanced by the *isolationists*, while also valuing the international mentality exhibited by the *alternatives*. The resultant line of thinking is valuable to the extent that, as present-day de-territorialised media repeatedly generate connections between events which occur far away from one another, the attainment of a subsidiary and locally organised type of economy requires a significant degree of intercultural awareness, ideological exchange, and transnational cooperation, which cannot be obtained by means of a merely separatist demeanour. Dismissing *in toto* large-scale

⁴⁸ On this subject, I refer the reader to Anheier Helmut, Glasius Marlies, & Kaldor Mary eds. (2001).

⁴⁹ Meghnad Desai and Yahia Said (2001), ‘The New Anti-Capitalist Movement: Money and Global Civil Society’ in Anheier, Glasius, and Kaldor eds. (2001), p. 65.

⁵⁰ See Mario Pianta (2001), ‘Parallel Summits of Global Civil Society’ in Anheier, Glasius and Kaldor eds. (2001), p. 189.

⁵¹ Meghnad Desai and Yahia Said (2001), ‘The New Anti-Capitalist Movement: Money and Global Civil Society’ in Anheier, Glasius, and Kaldor eds. (2001), p. 69.

⁵² Mario Pianta (2001), ‘Parallel Summits of Global Civil Society’ in Anheier, Glasius and Kaldor eds. (2001), p. 189.

⁵³ Ibid.

networks, purely isolationist perspectives promote a rhetoric that is merely contradictory and oppositional and, at the same time, risks endorsing the regressive view according to which cultural protectionism and anti-immigration claims need to be defended in order to undermine economic exploitation. In so doing, it might ultimately prove both ineffective and violent. Quite differently, the kynical post-human approach relies on the *alternatives*' conviction that 'the resistance will be as transnational as capital',⁵⁴ while also pursuing transformative forms of dissent that replace self-assertive strategies with ideals of creativity, uniqueness and exceptionality.

Conclusion

A kynical interpretation of Agamben's post-1990 work is auspicious to the extent that it solves some of the stalemates elicited by the *Homo Sacer* hypothesis, whilst also providing cosmopolitan theory with valuable critical tools. Despite its catastrophic appearance, Agamben's bio-politics encompasses transformative factors which have the capacity to convert 'exiled' life-spaces and areas of dislocation into forms of collective antagonism. Pivotal is the Franciscan value of 'poverty', which mainly stands for a way to engage with the temporal flow and exhibits the ability to undermine the bridge linking bio-power, consumerist ideologies, and juridical apparatuses. Displaying in numerous circumstances immanent as well as polemical connotations, Agamben's mysticism cannot be merely explained in religious terms, but needs to be understood according to the kynical atmosphere that has enlivened post-modern thought during the past few decades. Above all, the kynical reading is promising because it points towards a cosmo-political model that challenges neoliberal ways of thinking and deprives principles of political self-sufficiency of their regressive and identitarian meanings.

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⁵⁴ One of the mottos adopted by *Reclaim the Streets*, see Meghnad Desai and Yahia Said (2001), in Anheier, Glasius, and Kaldor eds. (2001), p. 75.

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