

Hannah Arendt's Embodied Theory in Giorgio Agamben's Biopolitics and Adriana Cavarero's Vulnerability Alessandra Montalbano

Hannah Arendt's use of 'natality' as a political category allows a fundamental shift in political philosophy, namely from the metaphysical construction of the universal Subject to his or her embodiment. By seeing in birth and death the 'general condition of human existence', Arendt defines human beings as incarnate and recognises in plurality (humankind is made of plural 'men' and not of a general Man) the condition for and of politics. In the introduction to *The Human Condition*, talking about the three human activities that her book analyses – labour, work, and action – Arendt writes:

All three activities and their corresponding conditions are intimately connected with the most general condition of human existence: birth and death, natality and mortality. [...] However, of the three, action has the closest connection to the human condition of natality; the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting. In this sense of initiative, an element of action, and therefore of natality, is inherent in all human activities. Moreover, since action is the political activity par excellence, natality, and not mortality, may be the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought.¹

Distinct from metaphysics, her embodied theory – an expression I use to refer to a theory for which the subject is embodied and not an essence – explores human activities as the ways through which human beings inhabit the world. Paraphrasing her words, we can say that labour, work, and action correspond to the incarnate condition of human beings in the sense that they are the correlate activities to natality and mortality: labour assures the life of the species; work (that is, human artifacts) bestows a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life; action creates the condition for remembrance and, therefore, for history. Natality is thus for Arendt a category that names the faculty of initiative, the human prerogative of being able to interrupt the biological circularity of natural life by beginning something artificial and historical. A phenomenological concept of

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 8-9.

activities, artifacts, and actions as extensions, expressions, and manifestations of the human embodied condition gives a foundation to Arendt's political reflections. Politics is for Arendt phenomenology in so far as it is men's appearance to others ('phenomenon' in fact means appearance, being visible to someone) not just through the body's visibility (the mere physical distinct existence of each man) but through the initiative that permits men to distinguish themselves. Natality is for Arendt the beginning of this link, body/initiative, and the 'newcomer' embodies for her the potential for the appearance/action link of politics and change.

The originality of Arendt's category of natality did not go unobserved by Giorgio Agamben and Adriana Cavarero, whose political theories can in fact be considered opposite reflections on 'the most general condition of human existence: birth and death, natality and mortality'. While Agamben's thought approaches birth through a biopolitical lens, and the human body therefore coincides for him with natural or biological life, Cavarero's thought approaches birth from an ontological perspective for which the human body coincides with the condition of being vulnerable. This article explores the impact of Arendt's embodied theory on Agamben's biopolitics and Cavarero's ontology of vulnerability. I argue that, although the theories of these two prominent Italian philosophers radically diverge, both of their interpretations of Arendt's political philosophy neglect to emphasise the phenomenological link, body/initiative, that her category of natality instead envisions, and focus, on the contrary, on the body as being exposed to power (Agamben) and care (Cavarero). As a result, initiative, action, and speech disappear in their reflections and with them the fundamental legacy of Arendt's view of politics. Indeed, even if the biopolitical and ontological elaborations by Agamben and Cavarero, respectively, recognise and consider the novelty of Arendt's natality within western political thought, they both base their arguments not on the initiative that the German philosopher sees as the human faculty for action, but, as we shall see, on the passivity of the concentration camp's inmate and the helpless victim.

The first half of this article will focus on the analysis of Agamben's 'bare life' as linked to both death and birth – that is, as linked to the figure of the *homo sacer* and the Citizen. I argue that the continuity which Agamben establishes between the camp's interns and the citizen as two forms of *nuda vita* exposed to and by power derives from his opposite interpretation of what Arendt considers the paradox of the refugees and the crisis of 'the Rights of Man' in her book *The Origin of Totalitarianism*. Moreover, my analysis demonstrates that the theoretical equivalence that Agamben institutes between the different situations in which a human being can find himself (interned, refugee, migrant, or citizen) risks neglecting the reality of those in search of political rights and leads him to take an un-inclusive position on immigration in Italy today. The second half will examine Cavarero's ontological approach to violence and the concentration camps in her book *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence* and to natality and the human condition in *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude*. By bringing together these two texts, my analysis shows how Cavarero shifts her theoretical reflection from the

political figure of the *inerte* (helpless) victim to that of the *inerte* infant and his/her mother. This shift, however, leads Cavarero to criticise Arendt's category of natality as solipsistic and abstract in order to emphasise the primordial human condition as ontologically relational as it is embodied in the relationship newborn/mother. Through an analysis of select passages from Arendt's *Origin of Totalitarianism*, I deconstruct Cavarero's claim and argue that Arendt's category of natality is not reducible to nativity (as Cavarero implies in *Inclinations*) simply because it does not coincide with birth.

By moving from the analysis of the camps' thanatopolitics to the constructions of their respective political theories, both Agamben and Cavarero consider the human condition as passive, which is the opposite of what Arendt's idea of natality envisions. Although their reflections offer a complementary lexicon and categories with which to elaborate the contradictions of our time, the agency that biopolitics and vulnerability leave out of Arendt's thought and her view of politics as a human artifact is, I argue, the legacy that our era most needs to explore.

1. From the *Homo Sacer* to the Citizen: Agamben's Biopolitical Birth

In *Means Without End: Notes on Politics* and *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben argues that the transformation of politics into biopolitics that the philosophers Michel Foucault and Hannah Arendt (although she never used this term) examine in their analyses does not belong to modernity but rather to the western political tradition since its beginning. Foucault in the 1970s and Arendt twenty years before him had observed that in modern politics, human life becomes central. For Foucault, this transformation happens in terms of the increasing attention paid by power to humans as a species. For Arendt, this transformation depends on the fact that labour – or, what we need to do in order to survive as a species – becomes in modern times the most important human activity.² Surprised that Foucault apparently did not know Arendt's work, Agamben compares and develops their ideas by thinking of them through the concept of *nuda vita* (bare life), which, as is well known, is human life exposed to death without any protection from the law. In his analysis of the concentration camps, Agamben brings together the biopolitical model with the study of sovereign power and the conceptualisation of the state, claiming that power and bare life have always been inseparable.

² Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 3–4. Agamben returns to Arendt's analysis of labour in his book *L'uso dei corpi* (2014), where in the first chapter, talking about slavery, he states: 'The slave's activity has often been identified with that which moderns have called "labour". As is well known, this is the more or less explicit thesis of Arendt: the victory of *homo laborans* in modernity and the primacy of labour over all other forms of human activity'. See Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 18.

Scholars have noted that Agamben gives to *nuda vita* different meanings depending either on the context or on the argument he proposes.³ He begins to elaborate the concept of ‘bare life’ by considering the distinction between *zoē* (natural life) and *bios* (the life of the individual or group) in ancient Greek.⁴ If *zoē* is the life we share with animals, as Aristotle articulates in his *Politics*, *bios* is a political life.⁵ Agamben sees in this distinction the foundation of the *polis*. The origin of politics begins with the exclusion of natural life (the reproductive life) from the city and its coincidence with the domestic sphere. It is the Roman juridical figure of *homo sacer*, though, that allows Agamben to show how human natural life can be excluded from and at the same time included by sovereign power. *Homo sacer* is a human being convicted of specific crimes, whose punishment establishes that he can be killed but not sacrificed (‘not put to death according to ritual practice’⁶). Whoever kills him will not be punished by the law and will not have committed a sacrilege. He embodies that suspension of law, in the Roman case human and divine, that only sovereign power can enact by imposing the state of exception. The *homo sacer* is therefore at the same time excluded from the law, which does not protect him from anyone’s violence, but also included by the law, which makes his body biopolitical. In short, a biopolitical body is a human body reduced to bare life by law. For Agamben, as we shall see, in modern biopolitics sovereign power and natural life come to coincide.

Agamben considers fascism and Nazism to be quintessentially biopolitical powers and the camp especially to be the biopolitical paradigm (or *nomos*) of the modern. The question that moves his analysis is juridico-political in nature and based on Carl Schmitt’s analysis of the ‘state of exception’.⁷ Rather than asking what made the camps possible in ethical terms, Agamben investigates what actualised them from a legal and political angle. The camp is a ‘space of exception’, he claims, a permanent space in which the state of exception (the suspension of the law) becomes the ‘rule’.⁸ The principle according to which ‘everything is possible’ – which for Arendt supports totalitarian rule and ‘comes fully to light in the camps’⁹ – becomes truly possible, Agamben states, because the camp is where ‘power confronts nothing but pure life, without any mediation’.¹⁰ While the Roman *homo*

³ Catherine Mills, ‘Biopolitics and the Concept of Life’, in *Biopower: Foucault and Beyond*, edited by Vernon W. Cisney and Nicolae Morar (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 82–101.

⁴ See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer and Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Cesare Casarino and Vincenzo Binetti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

⁵ See Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a.

⁶ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 72.

⁷ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).

⁸ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 169. Italics in the original.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 171.

sacer is a man reduced to *nuda vita* because anyone can kill him without consequence, and therefore his bare life is linked to death, Agamben's modern biopolitics, I will argue, links *nuda vita* to birth as well, establishing a parallel between the camp's inhabitant (the modern *homo sacer*) and the nation-state's citizen.¹¹

2. The Man and the Citizen (or the Biopolitical Subject)

To understand why 'the camp is the new biopolitical *nomos* of the planet',¹² Agamben argues, one needs to consider the continuity of its power with democracy and especially with the 1789 'French Declarations of the Rights of Man and Citizen'. It is at this point in his analysis that he places birth at the centre of his biopolitics and does so by departing from Arendt's examination of the problem of refugees, which she elaborates in the chapter, 'The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man' in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.¹³ Agamben notes that 'the paradox from which Arendt departs is that the very figure who should have embodied the rights of man par excellence – the refugee – signals instead the concept's radical crisis' and adds that 'in the system of the nation-state, the so-called sacred and inalienable rights of men show themselves to lack every protection and reality at the moment in which they can no longer take the form of rights belonging to citizens of a state'.¹⁴ The condition of the refugee sheds light on the French Declarations as the starting point of modern biopolitics because, Agamben argues, these declarations 'represent the originary figure of the inscription of natural life in the juridico-political order of the nation-state'¹⁵ – or, as we read in *Means Without End*, 'the inscription of the *native* (that is, of life) in the juridical order of the nation-state'.¹⁶ Closely analysing and quoting the text of the Declarations, he stresses:

it is not possible to understand the 'national' and biopolitical development and vocation of the modern state in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries if one forgets that what lies at its basis is not man as a free and conscious political subject but, above all, man's bare life, the simple birth that as such is, in the passage from subject to citizen, invested with the principle of sovereignty. The fiction implicit here is that *birth* immediately becomes *nation* such that there can be no interval of separation [*scarto*] between the two terms. Rights are

¹¹ Mills also notes that in *Homo Sacer*, discussing Hannah Arendt, Agamben links bare life to birth. According to Mills, this link generates a conceptual confusion between bare life and natural life. See Mills, 'Biopolitics and the Concept of Life', 87.

¹² Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 176.

¹³ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harvest), 267–304.

¹⁴ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 126.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End*, 19.

attributed to man (or originate in him) solely to the extent that man is the immediately vanishing ground (who must never come to light as such) of the citizen.¹⁷

As we can see from this passage, according to Agamben, ‘the inscription of natural life in the juridico-political order of the nation-state’ turns natural life into the political subject by law. For Agamben, a nation’s political subject is not Man (not ‘man as a free and conscious political subject’, although the question here would be ‘who is this free and conscious subject/man? The man of thought?’) but is rather the Citizen who is a bio-political product. He is indeed the result of the inclusion of birth by law in the nation-state. Including birth in its own definition, the nation-state – the etymology of nation is *nascere*, to be born, Agamben recalls – makes the Citizen the sole (biopolitical) subject of rights. ‘If refugees [...] represent such a disquieting element in the order of the modern nation-state, this is above all because by breaking the continuity between man and citizen, *nativity* and *nationality*, they put the originary fiction of modern sovereignty in crisis’, Agamben concludes.¹⁸

Birth thus becomes for Agamben the key element in displaying the biopolitical fiction nativity/nation and man/citizen and helps us to understand why he claims that it is not the *polis* but ‘the camp [that] is the very paradigm of political space at the point at which politics becomes biopolitics and *homo sacer* is virtually confused with the citizen’.¹⁹ The continuity between the camp and the nation-state is thus the one that runs between the *homo sacer* and the Citizen. In other words, if the politics of the camp is a thanato-politics, a space in which man is turned into *homo sacer* exposed to the ‘everything is possible’ principle, the politics of the modern nation-state is a bio-politics, a space in which birth determines the subject of rights and turns Man into the Citizen. ‘The refugee must be considered for what he is’, Agamben concludes, ‘nothing less than a limit concept that radically calls into question the fundamental categories of the nation-state, from the birth-nation to the man-citizen link’.²⁰

3. The General Man According to Arendt

Agamben’s analysis finds its starting point in Aristotle, who in his *Politics* separates domestic and political spheres. Agamben not only seems to agree with the Greek philosopher about the exclusion of the natural (reproductive) life from the *polis*, and therefore from the foundation of politics, but the inclusion of birth within the definition of the nation-state generates a politics of man’s bare life (of nativity ‘invested with the principle of sovereignty’) rather than Man (the political subject).

¹⁷ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 128.

¹⁸ Ibid., 131.

¹⁹ Ibid., 171.

²⁰ Ibid., 134.

Although Agamben does not refer to Arendt's category of natality when he places birth as a foundational concept of modern biopolitics, his analysis of the camp and the figure of the refugee are clear indicators of Arendt's impact on the genealogy of his political thought. As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, Arendt's philosophy shifts the theoretical gaze from mortality to natality, from death to birth – a shift that Agamben also embraces within his biopolitics. However, whereas in her phenomenology Arendt does not focus on birth as natural life but rather reflects on natality as the human faculty of initiative and as the human condition of plurality (humanity is the plurality of 'men' born into the world as incarnate subjects, not the Man of metaphysics), in Agamben's biopolitics birth is natural life that immediately coincides with sovereign power (nation). Seen from Arendt's phenomenological perspective, birth becomes the category of natality; seen through Agamben's juridico-political lens (and from the standpoint of an Aristotelian dualism), birth is a matter of power (or bio-power). Yet, Aristotle leads Agamben to ignore any kind of gender consideration. The problem of the 1789 Declarations is not only that Man is more universal than the Citizen. It is that Man is less universal than men and women together. In short, the original exclusion from that declaration is the other half of human beings (the same half excluded by Aristotle). But the problem with identifying in birth the fiction of a modern biopower, I argue, is also the risk of ignoring the possible exclusion of citizens from rights. Being born in the same country, or with the same nationality, does not mean the same citizenship for everybody. That is to say that birth determines the relationship one has with power not just in terms of 'nation' but also in terms of identity. Gender, race, sexual orientation, and religion, for example, are all connected to birth, which never coincides with a neutral 'natural life'. Nationality is just one of these and, even if it is the one connected to citizenship, it is not the one that determines what kind of citizenship. In other words, identity can prevent a citizen from accessing those rights that citizenship guarantees.

My point is not to contrast Agamben's biopolitics with identity politics. It is rather to look at citizenship not as the reduction of the political subject to bare life – not to mention the fact that citizenship is not exclusively linked to birth – but as a right and a dynamic political status. The way Agamben frames citizenship in fact risks being negative and conceptual when it comes to embodied politics. Although the refugee theoretically reveals the paradox that Agamben aims to illuminate (Citizen excludes Man and includes birth in politics), he or she is never a 'limit-concept' but rather an incarnate human being who asks for political action. The result of Agamben's analysis – the connection *homo sacer*/Citizen – comes from his interpretation of the connection Man/refugee that Arendt recognises in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Yet the paradox that Arendt sees in the refugees is not the one that Agamben develops in his biopolitics.

It is true that Arendt notes that the refugee's condition challenges the concept of 'Rights of Man' but for the opposite reason that Agamben argues. For Arendt, the problem is not the banning of Man from the definition of the nation-

state, but the ‘abstract nakedness of being human and nothing but human’.²¹ The nakedness that Arendt recognises in the refugee is the abstract nakedness of Man as a concept. ‘The loss of a community willing and able to guarantee any rights whatsoever’, she argues, ‘has been the calamity which has befallen ever-increasing numbers of people. Man, it turns out, can lose all so-called Rights of Man without losing his essential quality as man, his human dignity. Only the loss of a polity itself expels him from humanity’.²² For Arendt, rights are rooted in a political community, not in an essence, and are constantly *in fieri* (in progress). Without a political space in the world, she argues, men no longer belong to humanity. ‘The conception of human rights, based upon the assumed existence of a human being as such’, she continues, ‘broke down at the very moment when those who professed to believe in it were for the first time confronted with people who had indeed lost all other qualities and specific relationships – except that they were still human. The world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human’.²³ The impossibility of being part of a polity is the embodied condition of the refugee, who, far from being a ‘limit concept’, shows that the Rights of Man are conceptual (or abstract).

If, for Agamben, the paradox is that the exclusion of the refugee is already included within the definition of the nation-state, for Arendt, ‘the paradox involved in the loss of human rights is that such loss coincides with the instant when a person becomes a human being in general – without a profession, without a citizenship, without an opinion, without a deed by which to identify and specify himself’.²⁴ As Arendt points out, the refugee ‘becomes’ a human being in general. There exists no preceding essential Man banned from politics by language or law. For Arendt, the human being in general is the *effect* of exclusion, not the Subject. And therefore for Arendt, the paradox is not that in the Nation-State biological life and not Man is the true bearer of rights, but that Man in general is the result rather than the Subject of exclusion:

The great danger arising from the existence of people forced to live outside the common world is that they are thrown back, in the midst of civilisation, on their natural givenness, on their mere differentiation. They lack that tremendous equalising of differences which comes from being citizens of some commonwealth and yet, since they are no longer allowed to partake in the human artifice, they begin to belong to a specific animal species.²⁵

²¹ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 297.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 299.

²⁴ Ibid., 302.

²⁵ Ibid.

If Arendt links the refugee to the general Man in the opposite way to Agamben, she also links the refugee (and not the Citizen) to natural life. Outside of the artificial world of men, human beings in general indeed belong to a species. Arendt, unlike Agamben, does not have an essentialist concept of the political subject. What makes humans political is their actions, not their essence. Politics is for Arendt an artifice. If someone cannot partake in this artifice then he or she is dehumanised.

At the end of *Means Without Ends*, Agamben sketches a possible substitute for the nation-state system, which he sees as the cause of the refugee's condition as well as today's migration crisis. In brief, his proposal is to dismantle the biopolitical structure of the modern state (the birth principle and the Nation-state-territory trinity) because it is inadequate and already challenged, in industrialised countries, by a 'permanently resident mass of noncitizens who do not want to be and cannot be either naturalised or repatriated'.²⁶ He imagines instead an a-territorial Europe, modelled upon the proposal for Jerusalem to become the capital of two different states, in which all the inhabitants alike would be in the position of exodus or refuge. Shared by different communities, Europe would overcome the coincidence between birth and nation and would instead be a land of the people, a space in which 'external' and 'internal' would no longer exist. Suggestive but remote, this idea leads Agamben to conclude that 'only in a world in which the spaces of states have been thus perforated and topologically deformed and in which the citizen has been able to recognise the refugee that he or she is – only in such a world is the political survival of humankind today thinkable'.²⁷ Neither the refugee nor the migrant, but rather the citizen, is at stake in Agamben's thought because modern citizenship, in his view, hinders Man's political life. Provocative and critical of the nation-state system, Agamben's biopolitical analysis leads him to refuse citizenship and law *tout court*. From his theoretical perspective, these are in fact the correlates of bare life and exception, respectively. Yet, I would argue that the overlapping of these elements is due to the fact that Agamben's arguments always have the structure of paradoxes, the logic of which, as we shall see, comes to indirectly support immigration policies that are not inclusive.

4. 'Not a Common Good to Share'

Agamben's refusal of citizenship comes from his biopolitical approach to birth and from his essentialist interpretation of Arendt's analysis of refugees. For the Italian philosopher, the refugee becomes a 'concept' that proves the exclusion of Man from the nation-state. In a 2017 public response that Agamben gave when his name appeared, without his approval, among those who signed a petition asking for the adoption of *ius soli* (that is, birthright citizenship) in Italy, Agamben asserted

²⁶ Agamben, *Means Without End*, 22.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

‘citizenship is not something to be proud of or a common good to share’.²⁸ Instead, he added, he would sooner sign an appeal to invite people to renounce their citizenship. Italy currently assigns citizenship according to *ius sanguinis* (blood right), which states that one is Italian if born to Italian parents. As a result, there are those born and raised in the country who cannot be citizens because their parents are not, while people of Italian descent, who perhaps have never been in the country, have the right to citizenship. In the last decade, *ius sanguinis* has been at the centre of divisive public debate. Agamben sees the problem as ‘social and economic’ rather than political and calls ‘migrants’ people who may have only ever lived in Italy. The true political issue is in fact for him citizenship itself. It does not matter which birth criteria inscribes human beings within the State-Nation, he asserts, because the result is the same: ‘a human being finds himself necessarily subjected to a juridical-political order, whatever it is in that moment’.²⁹ For Agamben, being subject to the law seems to be the real issue.

As soon as non-citizens (who in *Means Without Ends* challenged the state/nation) ask for citizenship, Agamben answers with the impossible (or paradoxical) solution of everyone becoming non-citizens. The urgent political question with regard to citizenship that history is posing to Italy today is not about the inclusion or exclusion of birth and Man from politics. It is about the inclusion of more than a million people waiting for their rights to be politically recognised and to become active in the country in which they live. It is a demand for a new law that reflects the social changes of the country, but especially, as Arendt would argue, a law that gives to the children of immigrants a community, and therefore, humanity. Agamben’s concept of bare life becomes in his thought the lowest common denominator that allows him to associate the figure of the *homo sacer* and the citizen. Yet, the lack of their distinction, I argue, puts the refugee, the migrant, and the citizen at the same level, as if we were all suffering from the same risk of losing our humanity. Although the association *homo sacer*/citizen can theoretically prove the contradictions of the nation-state or sovereignty, it politically prevents us from recognising the specific condition of being a refugee or a migrant and the urgency of change. Being a citizen in a democratic state does not only mean to be subject to the law, as Agamben states in his response to the *ius soli* appeal; it also means to be a subject of the law, and to act and speak – to use Arendt’s political lexicon – in order to initiate something new.

5. From the *Inerme* to the Mother: Cavarero’s Relational Natality

In *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*, Cavarero uses Arendt’s natality to think of the victim as the *inerme* (literally, the unarmed one), a political figure (that is, a figure of political philosophy) that turns the approach of theory on violence

²⁸ <https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-perch-on-ho-firmato-l-appello-sullo-ius-soli>

²⁹ Ibid., my translation.

from the agency of the actors (the warrior, the terrorist, the soldier) to the passivity of the victims.³⁰ In an open dialogue with Judith Butler and her *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*, Cavarero revises the vulnerable subjectivity that Butler delineates in her reflections on 9/11.³¹ As opposed to the vengeful reaction of the United States to the suffered terroristic act, Butler elaborates an idea of community which takes as its point of departure the original dependency of the ego (or pre-ego) in infancy. Against the traditional concept of a closed and self-sufficient individual, which, she states, determines the logic of revenge, she proposes the idea of a relational subject. The roots of this subjectivity are not the independence and autonomy of the constructed rational subject of modernity but instead the vulnerability of his or her body that exposes him or her to potential wounding and abandonment by others.

In contrast with Butler, Cavarero emphasises that the body determines the vulnerability of the subject not only in terms of *vulnus* (wound) but also, and no less importantly, in terms of *cura* (care): 'As a body, the vulnerable one remains vulnerable as long as she lives, exposed at any instant to the *vulnus*. Yet the same potential also delivers her to healing and the relational ontology that decides its meaning. Irremediably open to wounding and caring, the vulnerable one exists totally in the tension generated by this alternative'.³² In her discourse on the vulnerable subject, Cavarero discards any psychological reference and departs instead from an ontological interpretation of Arendt's category of natality. In the wake of Arendt's philosophy, Cavarero outlines a type of subjectivity which is not originally a mere biological body later shaped or included by a normative discourse, but is, instead, determined by its incarnate condition. The original condition of this subjectivity is infancy, which makes human relations necessary.

In Cavarero's reflection, though, the infant becomes not only the primary paradigm of vulnerability but also the paradigm of what she calls the *inermi*:

defenceless and in the power of the other, the helpless person (*inermi*) finds himself substantially in a condition of passivity, undergoing violence he can neither flee from nor defend against. The scene is entirely tilted toward unilateral violence. There is no symmetry, no parity, no reciprocity. As in the exemplary case of the infant, it is the other who is in a position of omnipotence. [...] Though she remains vulnerable as long as she lives, from the first to the last

³⁰ For an interpretation of 'natality' in Cavarero, see Peg Birmingham, 'Adriana Cavarero and Hannah Arendt: Singular Voices and Horrifying Narratives', in *Open Borders: Encounters Between Italian Philosophy and Continental Thought*, edited by Silvia Benso and Antonio Calcagno (New York: SUNY Press, 2021), 301–324.

³¹ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004).

³² Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 30.

day of her singular existence, an adult falls back into defencelessness only in certain circumstances.³³

Necessarily vulnerable, the adult can also be *inerte* due to contingency. When this contingency is not linked to a physical condition (old age or sickness), it is artificial. In other words, it is the product of a unilateral violence that recreates in its victims the lack of reciprocity that marks the newborn's relation with others. Cavarero's 'horrorism' names a crime against the vulnerable subject reduced to *inerte*. If Agamben finds in *homo sacer* – that is, in Roman law – the figure with which to frame the passivity of those exposed to the violence of the camp, Cavarero finds it in the ontological passivity of the helpless infant. Horrorism is an ontological crime, she claims, because it is a crime against a human condition. This condition is not that of a being situated between life and death. It is that of a being exposed to wounding and care. 'As every torturer knows', she argues, 'the vulnerable is not the same as the killable. The latter stands poised between death and life, the former between the wound and the healing care'.³⁴

6. *Horrorism*

Cavarero coins the neologism 'horrorism' because in her view the traditional lexicon of political philosophy lacks a term with which to name contemporary violence against the *inerte*. Arendt's natality is here crucial again not because it is the condition of human plurality but because it is the condition of humans' singularity and uniqueness. The victimised body is for Cavarero the physical referent that allows her to recognise in language a linguistic correspondence capable of signifying contemporary violence without falling into the gap of abstraction between words and lived experience. The victim's body is therefore the measure of her discourse, which she opens by differentiating the spheres of 'terror' and 'horror'. Terrorism, she argues, names a violence that threatens life. The etymology of terror recalls the act of trembling, indicating a physical dimension of fear. The physical reaction horror provokes is radically different. Its etymology recalls a bristling sensation. If terror alludes to the fear of dying violently, horror refers to the repugnance for a type of violence that exceeds killing. Horror reflects the physical reaction to a violence that, by attacking the body, does not attack the life of the subject but rather its incarnate condition, which is its singularity. Disfiguring the unity and wholeness of the body, as 'a violence that labours at slicing', the act of dismembering horrifies.³⁵ Becoming unwatchable, unrecognisable, and deprived of their bodily figures petrifies human beings, who, reduced to mere flesh, can no longer appear to the world through their uniqueness. With the neologism

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 32.

³⁵ Ibid., 12.

'horrorism', Cavarero therefore names an ontological crime that dehumanises the victims, depriving them of their embodied singularity.

A biopolitical paradigm for Agamben, the camp is for Cavarero the paradigm of horrorism. Within modern violence, Auschwitz represents the 'extreme horror' because the Lager is the place whose scope is the complete dehumanisation of its inhabitants and the production of the *inermi*. Cavarero, unlike Agamben, is not surprised that in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt does not analyse the Lager through a biopolitical frame and argues that instead she approaches it ontologically:

When the 'living dead' are her main topic, Arendt directs her attention to the classic question of ontology rather than to the questions of *bios* and 'bare life'. Even when she reflects on the Lager as a laboratory that manipulates the living so as to erase the discrimination between life and death, the very significance of 'death' and 'life' are decided on an ontological criterion. Extreme horror, for Arendt, has to do with the human condition as such. It consists precisely in the perversion of a living and a dying that, in the Lager, are no longer such, because they concern a living being understood as 'a specimen of the animal-species man' in which the uniqueness of every human being, and hence the necessarily unique dimension of a life that concludes with death, has been annihilated.³⁶

The violence of the Lager is an ontological crime because it 'kills the uniqueness' and singularity of human beings, of which, in the Arendtian political lexicon, natality is the condition. But it is also 'an attack on the ontological material that, transforming unique beings into a mass of superfluous beings whose 'murder is as impersonal as the squashing of a gnat', also takes away from them their own death'.³⁷ However, it is by using the figure of the *inermi* to analyse Primo Levi's testimonial narrative of the Lager that Cavarero shows why, in her view, Levi's accounts go further than Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in the 'comprehension of the horrorism of which Auschwitz constitutes the unrivalled paradigm'.³⁸ Arendt would develop later in *The Human Condition* the ontology in which the human being is 'exposed to the other and [is] thus the vulnerable'.³⁹

For Cavarero, the *Muselmann* (the camp's inhabitant that reaches the stage of the living dead) that Levi describes in *Se questo è un uomo* (If this is a man) is not only the vulnerable human being that the violence of the Lager turns into an *inermi*; the extreme horror of the Lager is that the vulnerable can no longer suffer the *vulnus*. The *Muselmann* is the *inermi* that is no longer vulnerable.

³⁶ Ibid., 43.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 46.

³⁹ Ibid.

‘Invulnerability does not occur in nature’, Cavarero states, ‘it has to be produced artificially’, and it is exactly what the Lager produces.⁴⁰ The ontological crime is here the dismantling of the vulnerable, the dehumanisation of a man who can no longer relate to others. Cavarero deliberately offers here a reading of Levi’s testimony far from the biopolitical lens through which Agamben reads it in his *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, where he sees the *Muselmann* through biopolitics. The living dead is ‘the final biopolitical substance to be isolated in the biological continuum’, Agamben writes, framing the *Muselmann* as a *homo sacer* beyond whom ‘lies only the gas chamber’.⁴¹ Instead of placing bare life at the centre of her analysis, Cavarero focuses on vulnerability, to the point that Levi’s image of the camp as a Hobbesian ‘struggle of each one against all’, a struggle for survival, is not for her Hobbes’ ‘state of nature’ but rather ‘an artificial condition that the Nazi system of horror, vastly exceeding the imagination of the English philosopher, produced in the twentieth century’.⁴² For Cavarero, in politics, as well as in the thanatopolitics of the camp, the ‘natural’ condition of humankind is not a biological condition that power manipulates. It is ontological and relational.

7. Relational Ontology

If Agamben’s biopolitical interpretation of Arendt’s thought leads him to criticise the modern nation-state and to identify in the ‘ban’ of Man from rights the original political relationship, Cavarero’s ontological interpretation of Arendt’s natality leads her to criticise and deconstruct the autonomy, independence, and rectitude of the modern political Subject – the philosophical construction responsible for the *horrorism* of contemporary violence. In contrast to this violent Subject, Cavarero elaborates a dependent, vulnerable, and relational subjectivity rooted in the original relationship mother/child. In her book *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude*, in fact, Cavarero shifts her analysis from the figure of the *inermis* to that of the infant and his mother and critiques Arendt’s natality because, she asserts, ‘the Arendtian newborn evokes an inhuman loneliness’.⁴³ On the contrary, the ‘stereotype of maternity’,⁴⁴ which Cavarero thinks Arendt sought to avoid, expresses the hermeneutical potential of the category of natality because it spotlights vulnerability as the ontological human condition.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 35.

⁴¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 85.

⁴² Cavarero, *Horrorism*, 38.

⁴³ Adriana Cavarero, *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude*, trans. Amanda Minervini and Adam Sitze (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 120.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 120.

To contrast a biopolitical reading of Arendt's natality, according to which Arendt gives a biological foundation to freedom,⁴⁵ Cavarero states that 'in Arendt's reflections, birth, rather than being a biological phenomenon (incorporating, for example, the process of conception, pregnancy, and childbirth), is essentially a scenario, a given of the human experience – a theme for the imaginary in much the same way as death has been a theme for philosophy'.⁴⁶ Cavarero recalls that Arendt turned to natality specifically to contrast the concept of mortality in metaphysics and to ontologically ground politics, but her category of natality remains open to interpretation given that she never offered a clear definition of it. What strikes Cavarero is that even if Arendt looks at the Christian tradition to elaborate her idea of natality – she repeatedly refers to Augustine's sentence *initium ut esset homo creatus est* (that a beginning be made, man was created) and to his interpretation of the Creation story – she completely ignores the Christian iconographical tradition of nativity and the Madonna with the child. On the contrary, by analysing the Virgin's inclined posture toward the infant in Leonardo da Vinci's painting *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*, Cavarero elaborates her concept of 'maternal inclination' – an image that geometrically pictures the dependency of the child on maternal care. Although Cavarero recognises the originality of Arendt's natality within the western tradition, she believes that without the mother natality remains a rather abstract philosophical concept. Arendt's infant, she argues, incarnates the *initium*, but the true *primum logicum* of her argument is what she calls the second birth – that is, the birth of the agent who, through his actions and speeches, 'appears' to others:

Even the most distracted interpreter easily will see that the Arendtian newborn, which is completely defined by the function of being a beginning, does not inspire any tenderness. Her representation of natality is, to say the least, quite abstract and cold; lacking in credibility, it is almost an homage to the old philosophical vice of sacrificing the real world's complexity to the purity of the concept. This is probably connected to the way that Arendt calls upon the analogy between first and second birth, which she narrates in numerical order but actually constructs backward. But in fact, despite this logical enumeration, the main scene – which is also central for the entire parable of her political thought – remains the one she designates as the second birth, which is to say, the theatre of action. Symptomatically, only this political theatre justifies a representation of appearance that, because it is reciprocal and occurs horizontally, can

⁴⁵ Cavarero refers here to Miguel Vatter's article, 'Natality and Biopolitics in Hannah Arendt', in *Revista de Ciencia Política*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2006.

⁴⁶ Cavarero, *Inclinations*, 113-14.

afford to classify those who are present under the generic category of others.⁴⁷

What happens, Cavarero asks, if we put the mother next to the newborn that Arendt sees as the beginning that interrupts the circularity of biological life? The original relationship would no longer be reciprocal and horizontal, but it would rather be a scene of dependency in which the mother, as in Leonardo's painting, inclines toward the vulnerable infant. The conceptual critique that Cavarero makes of Arendt, therefore, is that birth stands for her solely as an image of beginning, as a first appearance of men to others, while the relationship of the incarnate infant with the world cannot be the one of men in the 'political theatre' but the one with his caregiver who, in Cavarero's view, coincides with the mother. It is interesting to see how Cavarero, unlike Aristotle, puts reproductive life at the centre of her political thought, even if she does so by using a cultural mediation of motherhood and not maternity as biological (at least in *Inclinations*). This is to say that the body is ontological in Cavarero's reflections. If in Agamben's view Arendt's category of natality disappears into (or coincides with) biological or natural birth, in Cavarero's view Arendt's natality appears as (or coincides with) the nativity of Christian iconography. Yet, is birth truly just a scene of beginning in Arendt's thought?

While in *Inclinations* Cavarero focuses on *The Human Condition*, I would argue that a passage from Arendt's text on the refugees and the Nation-State (the same one that we read in the section on Agamben) illuminates why she later elaborates on the category of natality and her view of what politics is. Arendt is here analysing the condition of the human being who has lost his community, political status, and legal personality and 'is left with those qualities which usually can become articulate only in the sphere of private life', that is, he is left with his mere existence.⁴⁸ In a few lines, she offers the core of what would be her theoretical analysis in *The Human Condition*:

the public sphere is as consistently based on the law of equality as the private sphere is based on the law of universal difference and differentiation. Equality, in contrast to all that is involved in mere existence, is not given to us, but is the result of human organisation insofar as it is guided by the principle of justice. We are not born equal; we become equal as members of a group on the strength of our decision to guarantee ourselves mutually equal rights. Our political life rests on the assumption that we can produce equality through organisation, because man can act in and change and build a common world, together with his equals.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Ibid., 115.

⁴⁸ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 301.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

If for Cavarero the thanatopolitics of the concentration camp is artificial, for Arendt politics itself is artificial. 'Our political life, our human artifice',⁵⁰ she states in one effective sentence that leaves no room for any biological or natural interpretation of her thought. It is not only the 'theatre of politics' that is the result of human actions, as Cavarero pinpoints in *Inclinations* when analysing *The Human Condition*; it is the possibility for equality to exist that results from action. Birth in the passage above is not a scene that reproduces the horizontal relationships among equals necessary for politics. 'We are not born equal', Arendt asserts, but 'we can produce equality'. If something is ontological for Arendt, it is the faculty of action, the ability to initiate and create something that is not given to us biologically or ontologically and not even taken from us bio-politically. Initiative is a human faculty, according to Arendt, and natality is the category through which she envisions this human prerogative. Natality is the faculty of action that comes with birth and the newborns, but it is not in itself birth. It is the faculty that permits action to exist, because action, unlike labour and work, does not have an object – that is, it does not have an end but rather a beginning, an initiative.

What brings together Agamben and Cavarero is that they both try to give a foundation to politics, a substance, a general subject or subjectivity that is for them the condition for and of politics. Agamben identifies this foundation in the banned Subject/Man, Cavarero in the *inermis*. In short, their reflections reconstruct a general subject that precedes politics and makes politics possible. Arendt's thought, I argue, does not do so. For Arendt, the subjects will always be the newborns, and politics the space produced by their actions and speeches. In her view, as seen above, the human being in general is not an essence but a person 'without a profession, without a citizenship, without an opinion, without a deed by which to identify and specify himself – and different in general', Arendt continues, 'representing nothing but his own absolutely unique individuality which, deprived of expression within and action upon a common world, loses all significance'.⁵¹ Even his uniqueness, the dismantling of which is for Cavarero a horrifying ontological crime, loses significance if deprived of the possibility for action and speech – or, in Arendt's lexicon, the possibility that men have to 'distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct'.⁵² Although Cavarero's ontology puts more emphasis on the natality/singularity link, the link natality/plurality is the political one. Plurality and not the Subject is indeed for Arendt the condition of politics.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 302.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 176.

8. Conclusion

As this article has demonstrated, following Arendt both Agamben and Cavarero place birth at the centre of their political thought. For Agamben the birth/nation link brings natural life and sovereignty to coincide. The human body becomes a biopolitical body constantly included and excluded by law and exception. For Cavarero, natality shows that the incarnate subject of political thought comes to this world as an infant, and therefore we must consider the primary ontological condition of human beings as *inermi*. Moreover, life does not come into this world by itself, and care shows human beings as relational. These diverse approaches to the body are the result of opposite ways of looking at politics. Agamben sees politics through the lens of power. For Cavarero, the political does not coincide with institutional power but is *altrove* (elsewhere), in the space of relationships and particularly in the space of the relationships among women. Her feminist experience and theory are the core of her ontology. It is striking how the main political concepts of both Cavarero and Agamben – care and ban – resonated with the politics of the United States, where after the 2016 election of Donald Trump millions of women protested on the streets in front of institutions and a new ban (the Muslim ban) was imposed by power. However, if the relationships that Cavarero and Agamben posit as original illuminate their different visions of politics, they also show us their shadows, so to speak. Care and ban are in fact relationships that place the subject in a very passive position, which, if it gives us the categories through which to interpret our time, it denies us the agency to change it.

The biopolitical and gendered interpretations of Arendt's category of birth do not emphasise her phenomenological approach, which allows her to consider the novelty of the newborn, who appears in this world to act according to his or her embodied uniqueness and singularity. Agamben and Cavarero, unlike Arendt, separate birth from the body. For Agamben it becomes a biopolitical birth. For Cavarero, the subject can no longer say 'I was born' but 'I was birthed'. Natality is indeed connected to the nation and to motherhood more than to the physical act of coming into the world. Conversely, it is the body/world relationship that for Arendt is the original one. Natality is the action of appearing to others that interrupts the repetition and circularity of biological life by introducing a new beginning, the potentiality for change and therefore for politics and history. 'Men, though they must die, are not born in order to die', Arendt states, 'but in order to begin'.⁵³ If Arendt looks at natality to contrast the mortality of metaphysics, to think of a human condition for a *vita activa*, for Agamben and Cavarero *vita* is *passiva* – subjected to the law (citizen/*homo sacer*) and dependent (*inermi*). Yet in Cavarero the passivity of the *inermi* is what moves care and therefore what moves ethical actions. Arendt's category of natality, in fact, allows Cavarero to ontologically ground ethics in the primordial mother/child relationship. The vulnerable

⁵³ Ibid., 246.

subjectivity, however, is a mover rather than an agent (the subject of action is the caregiver, not the infant).⁵⁴

Instead of refusing institutions or citizenship (without them we become the general and abstract human being of philosophy, Arendt warns), and without theoretically creating any universal subject, Arendt's thought urges us to resist the risk of totalitarianism through action and speech.⁵⁵ To renounce political phenomenology, the common world that appears and results from men's initiative (or natality), means today to give to authoritarian forces the power to isolate and psychologically pressure people through propaganda, and violence that bring loyal individuals to behave according to their leader's will. Seen through Arendt's lens, today's historical time calls for men and women to live an active citizenship (the *polis*) in order to protect themselves and democracy from the dehumanising threat of autocracy.

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⁵⁴ It is worth noting that by looking at Arendt's natality as a category of plurality more than singularity, in her last book, *Democrazia sorgiva: Note sul pensiero politico di Hannah Arendt* (2019), Cavarero goes beyond the dual relationship child/mother and considers instead the collective and democratic experience of political action. See Adriana Cavarero, *Surging Democracy: Notes on Hannah Arendt's Political Thought*, trans. Matthew Gervase (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021).

⁵⁵ For a recent emphasis on Arendt's concept of natality as initiative and of politics and citizenship as action and speech, see, among others, Samantha Rose Hill, 'When hope is a hindrance: For Hannah Arendt, hope is a dangerous barrier to a courageous action. In dark times, the miracle that saves the world is to act', in *Aeon*, 4th October 2021; and Roger Berkowitz, 'What Are We Fighting For?' in *The Philosopher*, Spring 2020, 'Questioning Power', Vol. 108, no. 2.

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