

○ ONLY AGAMBEN CAN SAVE US?

AGAINST THE MESSIANIC TURN RECENTLY ADOPTED IN CRITICAL THEORY

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In this paper, I offer a strong criticism of Giorgio Agamben's recent political texts. I argue that these texts bring to fruition a larger, contentious trend in the theoretical academy coupling one-dimensional, pessimistic accounts of modernity with strands of messianism. Since the political prospects of messianism, as Agamben's analyses show, are very thin indeed, I reflectively question the presuppositions that lead him to this prescriptive juncture. In Part I, recurring to Scholem's classic analyses of Jewish messianism, I show how Agamben's messianism borrows more or less directly (in *The Open*) from kabalistic, antinomian, utopian messianism. Having established this exegetical point, I argue two theses in parts II and III. The first, specifically theoretical thesis is that Agamben is driven into his political messianism by the transcendental logic of his analyses of 'the political', one which by its nature occludes meaningfully political distinctions by instead seeking out their ontological grounds. The second, specifically political thesis is that the widespread embrace of ontological messianism by thinkers in the post-Marxian academy is a symptom of, rather than a cure for, the wider *malaise* of the political left in the first world. If critical theory is serious about engaging with progressive *praxis*, one thing it must do is recall the difference between politics and *prima philosophia*, so that it does not continue to seek out 'redemption' – or at least an *apology* – in the bowels of the latter.

... there is no room for political philosophy in Heidegger's work, and this may well be due to the fact that the room in question has been taken by the god or the gods'.

– Leo Strauss, 'On Philosophy as Rigorous Science'

... a profound legend, not without cause, allows [the messiah] to have been born on the day of the collapse of the destruction of the temple.

– Gershom Scholem, 'On the Messianic Idea in Judaism'.

INTRODUCTION

This paper proffers a critique of Giorgio Agamben's work, read as a contribution to political theory. It is a critique in the Kantian sense, firstly, in that I will ask the *quid juris* question concerning Agamben's recent work on politics and law, its structuring principles and its limits. The essay is a critique in the Left Hegelian sense, secondly, in that I will locate Agamben's work in, and as reflecting, its broader socio-political and theoretical conjuncture. A reflection on this

context, it will be contended, is needed to explain the enthusiastic reception Agamben's political work has received from many theorists on the post-Marxian Left, given the avowed 'weakness' of Agamben's political prescriptions. Highlighting the transcendental or ontological apparatus underlying Agamben's thought, I shall argue that is thought is deeply *non-political*. Uniting these two meanings of critique is the contention that Agamben's position should be read as an example of what might today be called a 'left' or 'young Heideggerian' position. Characteristic of this type of position, as we shall detail in Agamben's case in II, is an ontologization of politics. According to this ontologization, political action, agency and institutions reappear in the lens of the theorist as a reified – yet at the same time lastingly *elusive* – realm called 'the political'. The political stake of this paper will be to suggest that the prospects of this post-Heideggerian hypostasization of 'the political' are as questionable as is its own political genealogy, the other foundation of which is the ill-famed 'political theology' of Carl Schmitt. The deepest theoretical stake of this paper will be to challenge the 'speculative' coupling to which this type of position invariably recurs. On the one side, there is a pessimistic and one-dimensional analysis of modernity framed by way of an ontological inquiry which takes its bearings from an epochal philosophy of history (modernity as the end of history, culmination of *technik*, metaphysics, bio-power, age of de-politicizations etc...) On the other side of this 'ontologico-messianic machine' (to adopt one of Agamben's modes of speaking), since this is all that *can* remain, the young Heideggerian is left sounding more and more openly messianic strains *in lieu* of any recognizably political reflection.

My orienting questions in what follows will hence be these. First: Agamben and other recent messianists (Heidegger, Derrida, with some qualifications, Alain Badiou¹) do hail from the critical heritage[s] of Kant if not the left Hegelians. So, this paper wants to ask: is it not time for us now to call into question whether there is something about the structuring *logic* of the argumentation of these figures and their follows that necessarily 'abandons' us to this set of deeply apolitical positions, when we try to descend back from the *theoria* into the political realm? Second: what might it say about the current state of our socio-political and theoretical conjuncture that these messianic strains of thought can be so widely received as meaningfully political and 'of the left' in any way?

As readers will know, Heidegger's famous 1966 *Der Spiegel* interview, his last public testament, bore a portentous title: 'Only a God Can Save Us'. This paper's title means ironically to evoke this famous Heideggerian lament: one which frankly represents a claim more proper to a prophet than to a philosopher, let alone a critical theorist or source for the same. Having exposed the terms of Agamben's messianism from out of the heart of the kabalistic lineage in I, I will argue two theses in parts II and III. The first, specifically *theoretical* thesis is that Agamben (like other young Heideggerians) is driven into his political messianism by the transcendental logic of his analyses of 'the political'. This is a form of argumentation which by its nature relativizes or occludes meaningfully political distinctions by instead seeking out their ontological grounds. The second, specifically political thesis is that the widespread embrace of ontological messianism by thinkers in the post-Marxian academy is a symptom of, rather than a cure for, the wider *malaises* of the political left in the first world.

If we are serious about reconnecting with progressive *praxis*, this paper aims to suggest, critical theorists must first of all recall the difference between politics and *prima philosophia*.

The price of not doing so is that we shall continue fruitlessly to seek out our ‘redemption’, or at least an apology, in the bowels of the latter.

I. ‘AND ON THE SEVENTH DAY ...’: THE KABALA OF GIORGIO AGAMBEN

As Gershom Scholem has documented in ‘Towards an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism’, the messianic idea is not exclusively an esoteric kabalistic heritage. It has its place also in orthodox Judaism, hearkening back to the biblical prophets and the apocalypticists (Scholem, 1971, 5). The ‘messianic idea in Judaism’ looks forward to the coming of an exceptional figure or messiah: ‘anointed one’, or in Greek: *christos*. This figure, so it is hoped, will somehow or in some way – this being the issue within Judaism and between Judaism and Christianity – redeem the Jewish people (?), the nation of Israel (?), all humanity (?), or creation itself (?).

There are two strands of messianism which compete within and between rabbinic and kabalistic Judaism, according to Scholem’s account. The first is restorative messianism. Herein, messianic hope is ‘directed to the return and recreation of a past condition which comes to be felt as ideal’. (Scholem, 1971, 3) The second, more radical strand taken up by *kabala* is utopian messianism. This by contrast ‘aims at a state of things which has never yet existed’. We will see in good time that this is the heritage to which Giorgio Agamben and his followers have been drawn (Scholem, 1971, 3).

Alongside Voegelin (Voegelin, 1997) and Camus (Camus, 1962), Scholem notes the debt owed by the nineteenth century, modernist conceptions of historical progress to the utopian messianic idea. The enlighteners inherited this notion from Judaism and Christianity.² Yet Scholem, contra Schmitt (cf. Schmitt, 1985, 35ff.), also insists on the decisive rupture between these theological sources and the ‘the idea of the progress of the human race in the universe’ which might be read as their modern secularization. (Scholem, 1971, 37) The messianism of the bible, Scholem notes, harbors no notion of any more or less linear, if unwitting, historical progress. In it, the Hebrews or all humanity are not moving towards a final redemption that could be secured by human action. In a way which illuminates for contemporary readers the messianic heritage of Walter Benjamin’s theses on the philosophy of history (Benjamin, 1968), Scholem clarifies what he means. Redemption in the Judaic tradition:

... is rather a transcendence breaking in upon history, an intrusion in which history itself perishes, transformed in its ruin because it is struck by a beam of light shining into it from an outside source. (Scholem, 1971, 10)

In Jewish messianism, that is – as today in the Badiouian ‘event’ (eg: Badiou, 2001)³ – the coming of the messiah is absolutely *impossible* to predict. Nor is there anything we can do to ‘press for the end’, as this heretical stance came to be named within rabbinic Judaism (Scholem, 1971, 14–15):

In opposition to [all such ideas] stands the ... powerful sentiment that the Messianic age cannot be calculated. This was most pointedly expressed in the words of a Talmudic teacher of the third century: ‘three things come unawares: the Messiah, a found article, and a scorpion’. (Scholem, 1971, 11)

There is much disagreement between the messianic texts as to what exactly will happen when the messiah comes, or if we can say anything about this time *a venir* at all. The problem is that if the present, unredeemed period of *galut* (or exile) is the period wherein the Law or *hallakhab* remains inviolate, the relationship between the law and human life will presumably change when the messiah arrives (Scholem, 1971, 19).⁴ The messianic idea within Judaism, in this way, opens ‘a window on the world which *hallakhab* rather preferred to leave shrouded in the mists of uncertainty’ (Scholem, 1971, 20).

Two tendencies emerged in medieval kabala, Scholem notes, which threatened to blow the orthodox edifice apart. (Scholem, 1971, 22) The first tendency, significantly for us here, is that which might be called a gnostic *ontologization* of the national messianism of the prophets. The second tendency is an openly *antinomian* interpretation of messianic time. According to this, after the coming of the messiah, the *torah* as fallen Jews know it will no longer apply. Both tendencies, as Scholem documents, came to their head in the Lurianic kabala of the 16th–17th centuries (Scholem, 1971, 43 ff.). The key figure was the notorious Sabbatai Zevi, a man widely received across the *galut* as the messiah, before (and even after) Zevi infamously converted to Islam in 1668 (cf. Katan, 1958).

Because it will take us through a straight gate towards Agamben’s work, let us illustrate the ontological parameters of this heretical strand of messianism by considering, with Scholem, the *Ra’ya Mekenna* of the 14th century. This mystical text sets out a utopian vision of the messianic time. It draws on the Biblical symbols of the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life. Since the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden, the *Ra’ya Mekenna* explains, the world has been ruled by the tree of knowledge. This tree is also the tree of death and of the Law, since tasting its fruit granted humans knowledge of good and evil, and with these, all the other metaphysical oppositions that rive the human condition as we know it:

Under the rule of this Tree, the world contains differentiated spheres: the holy and the profane, the pure and the impure, the permitted and the forbidden, the living and the dead, the divine and the demonic. (Scholem, 1971, 23)

Although the *torah* itself is one, the *Ra’ya Mekenna* explains, it is nevertheless revealed differently in the different ages of the world. So the *torah* appears to us now in the ‘shell’ of positive Law, and the regime(s) of things commanded and forbidden. (Scholem, 1971, 23) Yet the world of messianic redemption, and of the Tree of Life, will be very different. ‘In the Messianic redemption the full glory of the utopian ... breaks forth’, Scholem explains:

... when the world will again be subject of the Tree of Life, the face of *Hallakhab* itself will change. Where everything is Holy there will no longer be need of restrictions and prohibitions, and whatever appear as such today will either vanish or reveal a totally new, as yet undiscovered, aspect of pure positiveness ... (Scholem, 1971, 23–24).

Centuries before Benjamin or Agamben, the *Ra’ya Mekenna* already invokes the idyll of a ‘pure life’, unsheathed from the obstructing ‘shells’ of prohibition. Such an a-nomic world is what human beings can look forward to in the messianic time (Scholem, 1971, 23). This time in its turn is for the *Ra’ya Mekenna* a veritable ‘cosmic *Shabbat*’ comparable to the seventh day in

Genesis when the Lord rested, well pleased with his creation. (Scholem, 1971, 72) In Scholem's understatement on this text: 'the utopian vision in rabbinic Judaism was driven no further than this, and scarcely could have been' (Scholem, 1971, 24).

Arguably the most remarkable thing about what I want now to contend – namely that there is a direct lineage between Giorgio Agamben's work and the teachings of these marginal kabalistic texts (and the career of a false messiah) – is that critical examination of Agamben's texts renders this thesis uncontroversial. It is a little like 'violating' a prohibition that no longer stands, or pushing open a door that stands ajar, if only we care to look.⁵ In *Means Without Ends*, for example, Agamben explicitly bids up Scholem's 'ambiguous' assessment of Saint Paul as 'the most outstanding example known to us of a revolutionary mystic'. (at Agamben 2005a, 144; cf. Scholem, 1971, 58–59) We should, says Agamben, align Christ's: 'I did not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it' with Sabbatai Zevi's openly antinomian conviction that 'the fulfillment of the Torah is its transgression' (Scholem, 1971, 59–77; Agamben, 2000, 135).⁶ Agamben's 'Paulbuch', *The Time That Remains*, is meanwhile divided into six 'days'. The book opens by stating Agamben's immodest aim to blast out the messianic content in Paul's texts from beneath the sedimentations of two millennia of Christian orthodoxy (Agamben, 2005a, 1). And just as Agamben punctuates all his texts with 'Thresholds' – and subsections marked by a Hebrew aleph⁷ – the 'sixth day' in *The Time that Remains* issues in a final 'Threshold'. In this 'Threshold', *in lieu* of the seventh 'day' or *Shabbat*, readers learn that Benjamin identified with Paul, so a reclaiming of the Pauline legacy should pass by way of a reclaiming of Walter Benjamin. (Agamben, 2005a, 141, 144))

Putting Benjamin aside here, we can most concisely show the full depth of Agamben's identification with utopian, cosmic and antinomian messianism by examining his remarkable 2002 work *The Open: Man and Animal*.

The Open opens with Agamben reflecting upon the last page of a Hebrew Bible in the Ambrosian library in Milan. This bible features a miniature whose bottom half depicts the messianic banquet of the redeemed, on the last day or cosmic *Shabbat*. The pictured righteous feast, like God in the last three hours of the day⁸, on the flesh of leviathan. Moreover, they have animal heads. (Agamben, 2004, 1–3).⁹

The Open's closing three chapters, meanwhile, help themselves to Benjamin's enigmatic saying on carnal knowledge, which Agamben enigmatically suggests is 'something like the hieroglyph of the new in-humanity':

Sexual fulfillment delivers the man from his mystery, which does not consist in sexuality but which in its fulfillment, and perhaps in it alone, is severed – not solved ... (Agamben, 2004, 83).

The penultimate chapter of *The Open*, most openly of all, reads Titian's great painting *The Nymph and the Shepherd* as a pictorial intimation of this messianic 'happy life' or 'inhumanity'. The painting, Titian's last, presents a fluted shepherd and naked nymph in an Edenic setting. It hence stands in simultaneous relation with and contrast to an earlier work, *The Three Ages of Man*. As Agamben explains, in words that closely recall the *Ra'ya Mekenna* from the 14th century:

First of all, the figures of the two figures are inverted; for in the earlier work, the man is nude and the woman clothed ... In *The Three Ages* we also find, on

the right, the shattered and dry tree – symbol of knowledge of sin – on which an Eros is leaning but ... in the late work Titian has it blooming on one side, thus bringing together in a single trunk the two Edenic trees, the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. And while in the *Three Ages* the fawn is tranquilly stretched on the grass, it now takes the place of Eros and rises up the Tree of Life (Agamben, 2004, 86).¹⁰

So the question arises: is Agamben advocating a fairly undiluted return to the messianism of the most radical, spiritually closed and aristocratic streams of kabala as an answer for the post-Marxian Left?

The answer remains finally *no*, as we could still expect given Agamben's position of enunciation as a twenty first century secular intellectual. In the central chapters of *The Open*,¹¹ Agamben develops his position by way of an idiosyncratic reading of motifs from Heidegger, which (alongside *Homo Sacer* (1998) or *Language and Death* (1991)) unquestionably situate his work within the philosophical discourse of modernity in a way we shall detail in II below. So what is the force of Agamben's recourse to Heidegger in the heart of *The Open*?

Reflecting on the 4th commandment to 'remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy', Lacan once cited a 'humorous proverb.' According to the proverb, this 'extraordinary commandment' leaves the common man with 'no happy medium between the labor of love and the most stultifying boredom'. (Lacan, 1992, 81) Just so, Chapters 12 through 15 of Agamben's *The Open* enact a strange appropriation of Heidegger's notion of 'profound boredom'. As readers will know, the *Stimmung* of boredom is mentioned in *Being and Time* and *What is Metaphysics?* alongside *angst* as a mood wherein a *dasein* (human- or 'there-being') can become reflexively aware of its own ontological 'homelessness'. Nothing, or 'no thing' bores us, Heidegger notes. If some-thing or project occupied us, we would not be bored. The world bores us. (Heidegger, 1973) Or more precisely, our own being-in-the-world does, insofar as it freights us with the *ek-static* 'freedom' from essence whose downside is the 'guilt'-ridden *jegemeinigkeit* of having to frame our *own* (*eigentlich*) projects or have others (*das man*) frame them for us (Heidegger, 1962, #9, 38–40).

In *The Open*, however, Agamben radically inverts the, apparently profoundly melancholic, Heideggerian motif of 'profound boredom'. In Heidegger's 1929–30 lectures, Agamben notes, Heidegger famously asserted that animals lack the ability (or 'openness') to see entities meaningfully, which is distinctive to humans. Yet, despite this programmatic emphasis, Agamben stresses how Heidegger at a certain moment in the lectures cites – yes – *Saint Paul's* saying at *Romans* 8:19 concerning animals' 'yearning expectation for fulfillment'. What Paul veridically indicates at *Roman* 8:19, Heidegger enigmatically suggests, is a kind of 'essential disruption' in the animals' closedness to the *da* of human *da-sein* (Agamben, 2004, 60–61).

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Agamben charges this enigmatic moment in Heidegger's lectures with truly messianic hope. Western thought epochally has been defined, Agamben has argued (chapters 7–9) by a conceptual operation which he names the 'anthropological machine'. This 'machine' works by thinking the difference between humans and animals (and in this way the *meta-* in the *metaphysics* of our being a *human* animal) by stipulating a liminal 'missing link' between the two. For the ancients, the missing link lay in figures of animals in human form ('... the slave, the barbarian, ... the foreigner ...' (Agamben, 2004, 37)). In the modern period, there are instead figurings of 'the nonhuman in the human' (for instance, the

non-speaking human or ape, the Nazis' 'Jew' and today's 'neomorts' (Agamben, 2004, 37)). By contrast, Agamben glimpses in Heidegger's conceptions of boredom and the 'non-open' of the animal the 'mysterious' possibility of conceiving 'simply living being', free from the *ex hypothesi* restrictive shell of the metaphysico-anthropological machine. 'The open and the free-of-being [lived in boredom] do not name something radically other with respect to the neither open-nor-closed of the animal environment', Agamben strikes out from Heidegger. Instead, he claims that *both* human boredom and animals' instinctual 'capitulation' by their specie-al objects (or 'disinhibitors') open up 'the appearing of an undisconcealed as such' (Agamben, 2004, 68). As such, they disclose nothing less than the very *lethe* which 'holds sway in *aletheia*' (Agamben, 2004, 69) and that remained Heidegger's topic throughout his career.

With these remarkable propositions established, we can finally restore all the pieces of Agamben's *The Open* to their proper places. Heidegger's texts after 1933 increasingly distanced themselves from the language of active resolve he had used up to the National Socialist speeches. What takes its place as what would ground the critical force of Heidegger's later thought is the sense that the modern age of the 'consummate nihilism' that issues out of the exhaustion of metaphysics, may nevertheless harbor a 'saving power'. (eg. Heidegger, 1977) Chapters 3 ('Snob') and 16 ('Animalization'¹²) of *The Open* for their part directly align this text with Agamben's more ostensibly political texts, as well as this later-Heideggerian *kulturpessimismus*. (see II) In a signature move, Agamben proposes that we must 'think together' the Heideggerian motif of the end of metaphysics, Carl Schmitt's authoritarian lament that liberalism represents 'the depoliticization of human societies' (Agamben, 2004, 76) and the 'Hegelo-Kojevian idea of the end of history'.¹³

What is the result of this unlikely marriage? However remarkable it sounds, everything looks as though – trumping Heidegger – Agamben wants us to interpret today's globalization of 'the perfect senselessness' of 'the society of the spectacle' (Agamben, 1998, 10, 11, 52, 120–121, 187–188) as something like the time immediately 'between' the sixth day and the messianic cosmic *shabbat*¹⁴. 'Let us reflect on the theoretical implications of this post-historical figure of the human' which Kojève encountered in the far East, Agamben for instance intones directly in chapter 3 of *The Open*:

First of all, humanity's survival of its historical drama seems to introduce – between history and its end – a fringe of ultra-history that recalls the messianic reign of ten thousand years that, in both the Jewish and Christian traditions, will be established on earth between the last messianic event and the eternal life ... (Agamben, 2004, 12).

What remains for us, Agamben makes clear, is simply that we reflectively theoretically accept that (ultra-)historical terminus which 'anyone who is not in absolutely bad faith' can reportedly see. This is the 'fact' that after 1914 and the first world war, 'there are no longer historical tasks that can be taken on by, or even ... assigned to, men' (Agamben, 2004, 76). Two possibilities alone are instead open to us in the post-historical (pre-)Shabbat that Agamben, like Francis Fukuyama, takes Kojève to have veridically disclosed. The first ('bad') potentiality is that we continue to technologically turn our backs on the 'disconcealedness' of the animality to which post-history has anyway consigned us. The second ('good') possibility is that:

Man, the shepherd of being, appropriates his own ... animality, which neither remains hidden nor is made an object of mastery, but is *thought* as such, as pure abandonment (Agamben, 2004, 80 (our italics)).

The final chapter of *The Open* ('Outside of Being') can hence take up the cosmological messianism of the 2nd century gnostic thinker, Basilides, and return us to the book's beginning. Reading Basilides 'after' Heidegger, Agamben proposes that in the 'saved night' of the coming messianic time, after we have 'bid farewell to the *logos* and to [our] own history', we might be redeemed in the same paradoxical sense as Basilides describes redemption. The redeemed, Basilides thought, will live blissfully because they will be blissfully ignorant of having been abandoned by God in creaturely reality. (Agamben, 2004, 90) The one thing needful if we are to join their ranks, advises Agamben, is that 'just as Titian's lovers forgive each other for their own lack of mystery', we too cultivate an *ignoscencia* (a-knowledge, also forgiveness). This *ignoscencia* would, in the Heideggerian way, allow us to 'stand serenely with [our] own undisconcealedness'. The result, as *The Open* closes by promising, will be that:

if one day ... the 'face in the sand' that the sciences of man have formed on the shore of our history can finally be erased, what will appear will not be ... a regained 'humanity'. The righteous with animal heads in the miniature in the Ambrosian [with which *The Open* opens] do not represent a new declension of the man-animal relation so much as a figure of the 'great ignorance' which lets ... them be outside of being Perhaps there is still a way in which living beings can sit at the banquet of the righteous without taking an historical task and without setting the anthropological machine in motion ... (Agamben, 2004, 92).

Echoing Scholem, the critical theorist for their part might write: the messianic impulse in contemporary theory has never been driven this far, and scarcely could it have been.

II. *HOMO SACER*, OR THE TRANSCENDENTAL ABANDONMENT OF POLITICAL THEORY

Jacques Derrida qualifies his recourse to a messianicity *without* messianism. Alain Badiou looks to Paul's messianism to illustrate a logic allegedly characteristic of any 'political' subjectivity. By contrast, we have seen in Part I how Giorgio Agamben is far closer to an open recuperation of kabalistic messianism. Yet, I want now to contend that critical theorists should definitively *not* lose our (human) heads, faced by such extraordinary formulations as those which close *The Open*. Thinking of psychoanalysis – one of earlier critical theory's decisive sources – should at least put us on our analytic guard about to a position whose idea of 'redemption' invokes infancy, boredom, the fantasy of 'playing with the law' (Agamben, 2005b, 64), an 'Edenic' sexuality without mystery (Agamben, 2004, 90–92), a 'community' without any discernible symbolic identity nor founding prohibitions, and an 'in-humanity' characterized by what Heidegger precisely calls the 'nowhere without a no' of animals' prediscursive 'captivation' by their 'disinhibitors'.¹⁵ Gershom Scholem, who by contrast with Agamben frankly diagnoses Sabbatai Zevi as a manic depressive (Scholem, 1971, 60), is characteristically more sober. 'The escapist and extravagant

nature of such utopianism', Scholem writes of the kabalistic messianism Agamben rejoins in *The Open*:

... [a utopianism] which undertakes to determine the content of redemption without having experienced it in fact, does of course subject it to the wild indulgence of fantasy ... (Scholem, 1971, 13–14).

Keeping our analytic heads, I want to ask now firstly about the form in which the content of Agamben's messianism is proffered, and in which it has been received. For Agamben presents his thought in the recent texts as meaningfully political, or as pointing towards what he calls 'another', 'coming' or 'new politics'. And, given the timely political subjects that Agamben analyses in *Homo Sacer* and *State of Exception* – which both addressed executive exceptionalism – Agamben has been widely received in the post-Marxian left as a *political* theorist or philosopher. One stylistic peculiarity of these more ostensibly political texts, certainly, is the interruption of Agamben's erudite analyses of the history of ideas with invocations of this 'new politics'. The content of these political invocations is cut from the same messianic cloth as the claims Agamben presents in *The Open*: namely, *desoeuvrement* or worklessness (Agamben, 2000, 141), 'pure mediativity', 'inoperative community, ... the coming people, whatever singularities, or however else they might be called [sic.] ...' (Agamben, 2000, 117–118)

Agamben's claim to speak authoritatively concerning 'the political', on the strength of his readings of philosophical and religious texts, seems principally to be founded on the following *non sequitur*. Versions of this *non sequitur* frame *The Open*, *Means Without Ends*, and *Homo Sacer*:

i. At the beginning of political philosophy, the opening book of Aristotle's *Politics* defines human beings as both political (*zoon politikon*) and speaking animals (*zoon logon echon*). These traits single humans out as living animals who are yet beyond (meta) their physical, animal being (*zoe*). We are animals capable of qualified forms of life: especially the *bios theoretikos* and *bios politikos*.

Given this true exegetical premise, the problem is, Agamben feasts immediately upon the questionable conclusion that:

ii. the most needful, if not the only, 'political' thing left to do (at least in our allegedly 'ultra-historical' *cul de sac*) is accordingly to theoretically question this Aristotelian *framing* of the political realm. Any more mundane disputation within this political realm would by implication fall above or beneath, but in any case 'outside', the scope of political thought. So, for example, *The Open* advises us:

We must learn ... to think of man as what results from the incongruity of these two elements [of man and animal], and investigate ... the practical and political mystery of separation ... It is more urgent to work on these divisions, to ask in what way – within man – has man been separated from non-man ... than it is to take positions on the great issues, on so-called human rights and values ... (Agamben, 2004, 16).

The hidden premise is evidently the ultra-idealistic idea that:

iii. Politics, or at least what is of significance in political life, is determined in advance by the framing ontologico-philosophical categories that would delimit the political realm.

In the most open variants of this position, Agamben strays very close to what could be termed a ‘political Platonism’. By Platonism, we mean here that lineage of Western thought that accords un-tethered priority to *theoria* over *praxis* or else – as in Agamben’s type of case – simply forgets the theoretico-practical difference, by directly collapsing *praxis* into *theoria*. The false conclusion, pleasing only to theoreticians, is that true *theoria* would itself be equated with progressive political action. Does Agamben really sponsor such a Platonism?

To answer, we can consider how in *Means Without Ends*, Agamben invokes the idea of a political ‘form-of-life’ which would lie, as we now know, beyond *all* Law and its founding violence (Agamben, 2000, 3–12). What does this ‘form-of-life’ involve? Disappointingly for the practically oriented critical theorist, Agamben explains that it involves neither action nor considerations of any higher justice. No: it involves ‘thought’:

I call thought the nexus that constitutes the forms of life in an inseparable context as form-of-life ... an *experimentum* that has as its object the potential character of life and of human intelligence. To think does not mean merely to be effected by this or that thing, but rather ... to be affected by one’s own receptiveness and to experience in each and every thing that is thought a pure power of thinking (Agamben, 2000, 9).¹⁶

However unencouraging or simply opaque this reads, Agamben’s recourse to Heidegger in *The Open* (see I) indicates, Agamben’s Platonism *does* need to be situated in its specific modern philosophical heritage. In particular, it cannot escape the reader that the characteristic form of argumentation Agamben proffers us in all his texts is transcendental in the technical sense this term acquired after Kant’s critical philosophy. Whether he is analyzing how words refer to things¹⁷, the distinction between human and animal, or – as in *Homo Sacer* – the relations between law and life, Agamben’s aim is always the disclosure of the condition[s] of possibility of the phenomena or ‘separations’ in question.

We saw in Part I above, for instance, how Agamben contends in *The Open* that the Western distinction between man and animal has been framed by way of ‘deciding’ on an exceptional liminal figure. We now need to qualify that, for Agamben, this ‘decision’ is a transcendental datum. Agamben’s claim is that it made possible the West’s succeeding understandings of how human beings can be speaking and also living animals. In other words, the form of Agamben’s argument in *The Open* replicates that of Agamben’s earlier treatments of the relation between language and being in *Language and Death* – where indexicals and the *voice* are what *make possible* language’s ability to refer – and also of the political realm, wherein Carl Schmitt’s theological conception of the ‘sovereign ... decision on the state of exception’ (cf. Agamben, 2005b, ch.1) is elevated to what trans-historically makes possible:

... the *creation and definition of the very space* in which the juridico-political order can have validity ... the fundamental localization (*ortung*) which ... *makes the validity of the juridical order possible* (Agamben, 1998, 19 (my italics)).

So Agamben's critical descriptive analyses of existing phenomena are avowedly transcendental in their logic and their intent. Our principal concern, by contrast, is with his 'positive' political statements. What of these?, the supporter of Agamben might still rejoin with justice. Do they not have a different argumentative form? And how might this form relate to the extra-political messianism into which he is drawn?

To answer, let us now consider the two chapters (3 and 4) in *Homo Sacer* in which Agamben comes closest to an identifiable, political prescription:

i. chapter 3 of *Homo Sacer* opens by addressing the distinction between constituting and constituted political power. This distinction is central to Schmitt's 1921 *Die Diktator* and his 1928 *Verfassungslehre*. In a way that literally paraphrases Schmitt's reactionary critique of legal positivism and *à la* 'parliamentarianism', Agamben complains that today 'the general tendency' in the liberal West is 'to regulate everything by means of rules'. Against the background of these claims, Agamben turns with praise to Negri's 1992 work, *Constituting Power*. Negri's text, Agamben argues, interrupts today's insipid liberal consensus. Against the grain, *Il Potere Costituente*:

... undertakes to show the irreducibility of constituting power (defined as 'the *praxis* of a constituting act, renewed in freedom, organized in the context of a free *praxis*') to every constituted [already established, legalized] power ... (Agamben, 1998, 43).

Like Benjamin, whose 'Critique of Violence' aims at conceiving a 'pure' violence outside of the horizon of law-preserving or law-constituting violence (cf. Agamben, 2005b, ch. 3), Negri's aim is to conceive of a constituting power 'that cannot lose its [creative or constituting] characteristic in creating'. (at Agamben, 1998, 43) The problem is that Agamben has to confess in *Homo Sacer* that he cannot see that Negri succeeds in this attempt. Negri does not, in Agamben's words:

... find any criterion, in his wide analysis of the historical phenomenon of constituting power, by which to isolate constituting from sovereign power (Agamben, 1998, 43).¹⁸

Why then does Agamben turn to Negri here? The strength of Negri's book, Agamben now qualifies, 'lies elsewhere' than in its analysis of the categories of constituted and constituting political powers. Where does this different significance lie? Here, Agamben says without blinking, 'the problem is ... moved from political philosophy to first philosophy'. (Agamben, 1998, 44) Negri allegedly opens up a theoretical perspective given which constituting power, despite appearances and history, 'ceases to be strictly a political category and necessarily presents itself as a category of ontology'. (Agamben, 1998, 44) In order to weigh Negri's notion of constituting power, Agamben contends, we need to recur to Aristotle – not however to the *Politics* or *Ethics*, but to Book Theta of the *Metaphysics* concerning the categories of potentiality (*dynamis*) and actuality (*energeia*). In this way, Agamben's analysis of constituting power in *Homo Sacer* issues directly into ontology, and finds its messianic pitch there:

Only an entire new conjunction of possibility and reality, contingency and necessity, and the other *pathe tou ontas* will make it possible to cut the knot that binds sovereignty to constituting power (Agamben, 1998, 44).

Book Theta of the *Metaphysics* stands in unlikely opposition to ‘those politicians today who want to reduce all constituting power to constituted power’, for Agamben (44). It does so as it allegedly allows us to glimpse the possibility that *dynamis* can be thought ‘by itself’, without relation to the *energeia* (actuality) we might have assumed it was there to actualize. Just as a tradie will keep his ability to ply his trade if he is retrenched, down-sized or downs tools (cf. Franchi, 2004, 36–37), so Agamben specifies:

... if potentiality is to have its own consistency and not always disappear immediately into actuality, it is necessary that potentiality be able *not* to pass over into actuality, that potentiality constitutively be the potentiality *not to* ... do or be... (Agamben, 1998, 45).

ii. chapter 4 of *Homo Sacer* (‘The Form of Law’) sets out from an analysis of the comportment of Kafka’s ‘man from the country’ in the famous parable of the door of the law. Within the contemporary period wherein Agamben has told us that the state of exception has become the norm, so that *all* today’s laws are allegedly ‘in force without significance’, the enigmatic *passivity* of the man in Kafka’s fable is read by Agamben as an eminent instance of a new, ‘passive politics’. In his assessment, Kafka’s unlikely political hero undertakes ‘nothing other than a complicated and patient strategy to have the door closed in order to interrupt the law’s being in force without significance’ (Agamben, 1998, 55).

In what would this passive and patient politics consist? Again it is difficult to say. For in answering, Agamben almost instantly reconfigures his analysis of the man at the door around an ontological inquiry (firstly) into the meaning of Jean-Luc Nancy’s notion of ‘abandonment’ which in its turn issues (secondly) into the ruminations of the later Heidegger. *The State of Exception* controversially asserts that Benjamin’s ‘pure violence’ – the ‘extreme ‘thing’ of politics’ – is the ‘counterpart’ to Heidegger’s Being (Agamben, 2005b, 59–60). In similar ontological clip, chapter 4 of *Homo Sacer* remarkably announces the ‘political’ importance of rethinking the relation of Law to life through Heidegger’s thought of ontological difference. According to later Heidegger, readers will recall, *Sein* is not an entity. This is because it is the condition for the possibility of any such entities intelligibly appearing to us. In giving *seindes* over to presence, Being ‘itself’ as it were withdraws, *abandons* or *dissimilates* itself behind what it makes possible. If this much is well and good, less immediately clear is what any of this could have to do with the enigmatic *praxis* of Kafka’s man from the country. Agamben is once again clear. The bridge that would span the apparent gulf between fundamental ontology and a reflection on the (non-)relation of subjects to sovereignty and law is, he argues, to be located directly on the side of ontology:

If Being in this sense is nothing other than Being *in the ban* of being, *then* [sic.] the ontological structure of sovereignty ... fully reveals its paradox... it is necessary to remain open to the idea that the relation of abandonment is not a relation ... [what is required is] nothing less than an attempt to think the politico-social *factum* no longer in the form of a relation ... (Agamben, 1998, 60).

Once again, that is, politics is abandoned in a philosophical analysis whose logics explicitly point away from the political realm to a reflection on the transcendental conditions for any such realm.

III. OVERCOMING HEIDEGGERIANISM: OR INTERRUPTING THE ONTOLOGICO-MESSIANIC MACHINE

The point of our critique of Agamben, like any philosophical critique, is first of all to contest the prejudice that what Agamben says is true by virtue of the fact that it is he who has said it, and to question whether Agamben instead has discernibly said it because it is true and capable of being defended by way of convincing justificatory *logoi* (cf. Plato, *Euth.*, 10c ff.). In one sense, then, our critique is a very strong one indeed. For, as per II, what seems to us to be ‘worthy of thought’ if we are to ‘interrupt’ what might be termed the contemporary ‘ontologico-messianic’ machine as Agamben refigures it, is the very *type* of claim Agamben proffers us concerning the political phenomena (law, sovereignty, power ...) he addresses in *Homo Sacer* and elsewhere, and which under-girds the messianism of *The Open*, *Coming Community* and *Time That Remains*. Can Agamben, or anyone else, hope to say anything meaningful at all about what occurs *within* the political realm, or about the generic difference of political *praxis* from art, philosophy, economics or *prophecy*, given *the very logic – which as we saw is always post-Heideggerian or transcendental-ontological* – of his analyses?

Certainly, we have seen in I and II that if we are to judge the tree of Agamben’s political knowledge by the fruits it would provide us, these fruits seem to fall ‘outside’ the *polis*, if not outside of *Being* as we know it (Agamben, 2004, 89–92). If, by reading Agamben, we were – for instance – to take up the ‘urgent’ tasks of thinking our animality as the undisconcealedness at the heart of our *dasein*, or of reconsidering the ‘socio-political factum’ as a non-relation, what would the political result of these apparently *theoretical* operations be? Would one, a few, many, or all have to ascend to this messianic ‘experience’ of ‘thought’ for the messianic time to arrive? Is this a version of the messianism of *Psalms* 95 that if all the nation of Israel were to simultaneously repent the messiah will come? (cf. Scholem, 1971, 11). Or would even this ‘action’ be, falsely, to ‘press for the end’, so that an Agambenian *gelassenheit* is the most we might do to prepare the place where the *parousia* or rapture might come, like a thief in the night? Would the arrival of the messianic time necessarily involve a change in public – perhaps educational? – institutions and policies, and could its inspiration be used to frame *praxis* in *any* determinate way?¹⁹ Finally, if the coming community would live beyond law, ‘ordered exclusively for the full enjoyment of worldly life’ could we in any way be sure it would not quickly degenerate into, for example, the unhappy chaos Plato for example reports in the *7th Letter* as the result of the Sicilians’ anomic pursuit of the ‘happy life’?

Now: the bemused *silence* with which any Agambenian thought *must* meet such political considerations, I would say, is of the essence here. For the legitimate *defense* one could indeed make for Agamben at this point – *viz.* that such concerns are simply beneath the concern of philosophy as Agamben practices it – *is exactly the point*. As Agamben’s own arch-Platonic disdain towards today’s ‘mass democracy’ can be read as indicating, the political realm *is not* philosophic or scientific in anything like the ancient or modern senses of *episteme*. Grounded, as the *Nichomachean Ethics* VI argues, in phronetic deliberations concerning that sphere of

things that can be transformed by coordinated human *praxis*, the political realm is, on one side, a much simpler and more public thing than the mathematical or ontological forms of inquiry beloved of philosophers. Equally, however, *because* its issues are always changing, involve a plurality of subjects, and hence can never be exhaustively ‘thought’ *a priori*, the political realm is also *irreducibly more complex* than what philosophers, including Agamben, typically deem ‘worthy of thought’. Western political philosophy as we know it, we should recall, originated in Socrates’ critique of his own earlier purely ontological inquiries. The Xenophontic Socrates compares the pre-Socratic *physikoi* to madmen, noting in almost proto-Kantian terms that, without much hope of resolution:

... some of them believe that being is only one and others believe that there are infinitely many beings: some believe that all things are always in motion and others believe that nothing is always in motion; some believe that all things come into being and perish, others believe that nothing ever comes into being or perishes (Xenophon, *Mem.*, I.1.11–13).

The point here is not to construct an argument by drawing on the *auctoritas* granted by recourse to ancient texts. The point is to contest whether any such comparable ‘pre-Socratic’ oppositions as that between potentiality versus actuality, relation versus non-relation, or beings versus Being which Agamben tells us we must rethink as a political task²⁰ can inform *political* theory and *praxis* at all, short of their being supplemented by wholly other, and more generically political, considerations.

This is not to deny that critical political theory remains a theoretical endeavor. As such, it is something which, if it is to have any specific force or significance, must lay claim to truths political subjects might not have been able to discover or ‘ascend to’ in their everyday lives. As we saw in II, the issue is that the very *type* of truth Agamben’s analyses lay claim to showing us are *the structuring conditions for the possibility of the phenomena we encounter in political life*. Now: compared to the *eidei* Plato claimed philosophers’ ‘rough ascent’ could access, or the *teloï* Aristotle claimed inhered in *ta physika* and *ta pragmata*, the issue is that *no transcendental analysis as such* can say anything either about the *actuality* of the thing(s) or event(s) whose conditions of *possibility* it uncovers, nor about their *desirability* as *teloï* for ethico-political action(s). Notably, something like this very distinction was indeed at the very heart of Socrates’ critique of the *physikoi* in *Phaedo*, where he describes his turn towards political matters. ‘It may be said ... that without bones and muscles and the other parts of the body I cannot execute my purposes’, Socrates concedes to Anaxagoras:

But to say that I do as I do *because* of them, and that this is the way in which mind acts, and not from the choice of the best, is a very careless and idle mode of speaking. I wonder that they cannot distinguish the cause from the condition, which the many, feeling about in the dark, are always mistaking and misnaming ...’ (Plato, *Pha.*, 99a-b: italics mine).

As Žižek would pronounce it: faced by the political *aporia* of contemporary critical messianism, perhaps the time has come to cease trying to think ‘the political’ by way of forms of analysis generic to ontology or *prima philosophia*, but – after Hannah Arendt and others – to re-situate

philosophical reflection itself as a *bios* undertaken within the *polis*. One fruit of this reflective move would be to reconsider what might be termed the ‘theoretical politics’ of the form of transcendental analysis inaugurated by Kant in the time of Newtonian physics, and carried forward today by Agamben and others. Kant’s inauguration of the method of transcendental inquiry certainly secured a continuing place and dignity for philosophy in the age of modern science, since this science truly *cannot* explain its own conditions of possibility on its own terms. Nevertheless, one cost of securing this domain of the ‘synthetic *a priori*’ is that Kantian philosophy, by doing this, also ‘abandoned’ the capacity to judge philosophically concerning the political realm, since this realm can only show up for it as one part of the ‘empirical’ world which it is the work of transcendental analysis to trace back to its conditions of possibility. There is, as Husserl would have said it, simply a veritable ‘abyss’ that separates what transcendental philosophy can disclose and political judgment. Recall, for instance, that one of the most deeply convincing features of Heidegger’s disclosure of the *existentialia* structuring human ‘dasein’ in *Being and Time* is exactly that these structures – as Agamben’s emphasis that ‘potentiality constitutively is the potentiality *not to be*’ (Agamben, 1998, 45) would only hypostasize or mystify – make possible all of the possible *existentielle* behaviors of individuals, up to and including what Heidegger calls ‘deficient’ modes – so that (eg) even being alone *remains* a mode of *mitsein* (being-with-others) (Heidegger, 1962, #26).

If we nevertheless do try, with Agamben and others, to ‘think’ an ethics or a politics on the basis of transcendental argumentation alone, only a *very* limited horizon of potentialities – logically – remain available to us. On the one hand, like the young Heidegger, one can try to derive what Hegel already critiqued as a formalistic ethics of ‘conscience’. For variants of this position, what is decisive will not be *what* a subject empirically does, but her/his reflective comportment *towards* this action. What matters, in Heidegger’s precise terminology, is whether the individual or collective in question ‘owns up’ to what is their ‘ownmost’ (*eigentlich*): namely their own ultimately groundless responsibility for the projects they ek-statically choose. Alternately – and here we rejoin Agamben, and his post-kabalisic messianism – since a transcendental analytic uncovers the conditions for the possibility of the *entire horizon of possibilities delimiting the subjects’ experience*, it is open to us to conceive an ‘ethics’ which would single out *only* those actions or interventions from somewhere ‘wholly other’ which would engender ‘an entire new conjunction of possibility and reality’, as Agamben puts it very precisely in *Homo Sacer*. (Agamben 1998, 44; cf. (eg) Žižek, 1992: ch.2; Žižek, 2002, ch. 5).²¹

As with Kant’s inauguration of transcendental logic in *The Critique of Reason*, this is not to say that there are not certain ‘political’ gains that accrue to the theorist who takes this ontologico-messianic turn today. In ‘Towards an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism’, Scholem at times echoes the Hegelian and Nietzschean critiques of religious other-worldliness. Scholem notes that, historically, utopian and ontological variants of the messianic idea like to that which Agamben propounds typically emerge in times of crisis, like the destruction of the second temple, or the 1492 Spanish expulsion. There is an historically verifiable correlation between the attraction of this type of thought, Scholem contends, and the loss of a sense of stable historical or political reality (cf. Scholem 1971, 35):

The stronger the loss of historical reality in Judaism during the turmoil surrounding the destruction of the second temple and of the ancient world, the more

intensive became consciousness of the cryptic character and mystery of the Messianic message ... Jewish messianism is in its origins and by its nature – this cannot be sufficiently emphasized – a theory of catastrophe ... (Scholem, 1971, 7).

Similarly, in the wake of the discrediting of political Marxism, the global ascendancy of neoliberalism, and the concomitant loss of any historical addressee for critical theory, the gains of post-Marxian thinkers regressing to messianism of the Agambenian type ‘... which in times of darkness ... counterpoises the fulfilled image of wholeness to the piecemeal, wretched reality ...’ (Scholem, 1971, 14) are evident. The political question I would ask to close is whether this ‘gain’ is worth the costs with which it comes encumbered. The post-Marxian left’s embrace of Agamben’s messianism, I have contended, is more comparable to one of Freud’s famous analogues to illustrate the type of paltry ‘gain’ neurotics glean from their illness, and which informs their resistance to analysis – the man who is grateful for his disabilities because of the pension he will now receive, overlooking in this way that from now on, he will also be unable to *walk*

Agamben, for his part, frankly confirms Scholem’s type of diagnosis in a remarkable and affecting passage, written in the first person, towards the close of *Means Without Ends*: His thought, Agamben confesses ‘ – why not admit it?’ – arises out of his sense of ‘absolute impotence, bumping against solitude and speechlessness, over and over again precisely there where we were expecting company and words’ (Agamben, 2000, 139) Nevertheless, Agamben confides:

I would not feel up to forgoing this indistinction of public and private, of biological body and body politic, of *zoe* and *bios*, for any reason whatsoever. It is here I must find my space once again – here or nowhere else. Only a politics that starts from such an awareness can interest me (Agamben, 2000, 139).

If today’s left is to walk again, let alone robustly confront the rising tide of reaction, and the environmental crises and humanitarian consequences which will surely shape much of the next century, the one messianic statement with which we might greet such a confession is surely this: *let the dead bury the dead*.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Alain Badiou, the author acknowledges, is a more complex case than Derrida, Heidegger, or Agamben. Nevertheless, Badiou does emphasise that no existing laws can allow us to predict or anticipate a truth event. At most, they provide torsional evental sites in existing situations. In this way, his break with the Marxian heritage of immanent critique is clearly marked, or any thought that would seek to build revolution or reform on the basis of a rational analytic of the existing situation (as I have argued in Sharpe 2008). This emphasis on the unpredictability or indiscernability of the coming of the sacred time or messianic leader-figure or movement is one key feature of any messianism, although some readers may dispute whether it is sufficient for labelling Badiou a messianist. A second feature is Badiou's emphasis on the need for a totally new dispensation in the light of the occurrence of a new truth event, which is coupled with a dour assessment of the political lives and ethical worth of human beings outside of the sway of fidelity to an event ('animals of the city'). Finally, the other feature to emphasise is the paradoxical irrationalism of Badiou's position, which calls for a decision in favour of an Event (first of all, an ontological decision to assert *that* it has occurred), and then for unflinching fidelity to it. Such unflinching fidelity to the messiah, one which would in principle allow for the suspension of the ordinary rules of ethical and political life, is also another feature of at least some messianic positions. The need for these qualifications is something for which I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer of this essay for *BCT*.
- 2 Modernists, like utopian messianists, paradigmatically look to the *future* as promising the 'better times' that, for them, will justify the course of history, and modern institutions. Modernisms paradigmatically set their back against the time consciousness of preceding societies, for which the present was lived either as one moment in an eternal mythic recurrence, or – as paradigmatically in the Edenic or Platonic stories – in the shadow cast by lost primordial plenty.
- 3 See note 1.
- 4 Will the existing Law be merely fulfilled or completed after the messiah comes, the question hence arises, such that some elements of Law which can currently not be realized might at that time become capable of fulfillment? (Scholem, 1971, 14) But, then, if the messianic age will by wholly different from the present period, will not the 'yoke of the Torah' simply become a heavy or redundant burden in the messianic time? Or will the messiah himself bring a new torah, or perhaps new reasons for abiding by the existing torah 'which only the messiah will be able to explain' (Scholem, 1971, 20)? *etc.*
- 5 Sometimes it is impossible not to wonder whether it is precisely the veneer of profundity that some readers will get from the very fact that Agamben references such obscure figures is a large part of his contemporary attraction, in abstraction from their religious and socio-political contexts. However that is, Agamben's book on Saint Paul begins by stating his intention to retrieve Paul as a distinctly *messianic* thinker from beneath the age-long sedimentations of orthodox Christianity (Agamben, 2005a, 1). 'What does it mean to live in the Messiah, and what is the messianic life? What is the structure of messianic time? These questions, ... Paul's questions, must in turn be ours', Agamben advises us at the close of the 'first day' of *The Time That Remains* (Agamben, 2005a, 18 (see anon)).
- 6 These propositions are adduced by Agamben as testimony to what he terms the inherent 'paradoxes of messianism' as that lineage of religious ideas 'in which religion confronts the problem of the law, in which religion and the law come to a decisive day of reckoning'.
- 7 *viz.* which some kabalists argue is the only vocable uttered by God to Moses on Sinai, making it the founding letter.
- 8 According to the Talmudic *Avodah Zorah* which stands as an epitaph to the chapter and hence the book (Agamben, 2004, 1)

9 To stress the same point: two of *The Open's* next chapters consider the acephalous gnostic god 'topped with two animal heads' which captivated the Bataille of 1930 (ch. 2) and the *unheimlich* 'physiology' of the saved in the Christian afterlife. (ch. 4)

10 The evocation of the kabalistic *Ra'ya Mekemna* -type messianism in Agamben's final chapters could hardly then be more direct. In *Means Without Ends*, indeed, Agamben lays bare without much hesitation his allegiance to this kabalistic lineage of interpretation of the messianic promise. 'In the Jewish as much as in the Christian and Shiite contexts', Agamben contends, eliding the dualities Scholem stresses in the history of messianism:

The messianic event marks first of all a crisis and a radical transformation of the properly legal order of religious tradition. The old law (the Torah of Creation [sic.]) that had been valid up to that moment now ceases to be valid; but obviously [sic.], it is not a question of substituting for it a new law that would include commandments and prohibitions that would be different from and yet structurally homogenous with the previous ones ... (ME, 135)

11 NB: The protocols of esoteric writing demand that the central chapters or sections of a work, or their foot- or endnotes, should couch the author's deepest insights, being farthest from the eyes of careless readers. That Agamben knows of esotericism is clear. Esotericism is central to the Gnostic or kabalistic Judaism which Agamben draws on in *The Open*. Leo Strauss, famed for his rediscovery of the 'forgotten art of writing', is cited as an authority in *Homo Sacer*. In this context, for instance, it is unlikely that Agamben's decision to divide *The Open* into the same number of chapters (20) as there are books in Basilides' gospels (see chapter 20) is entirely haphazard. If Agamben is to be read as the authors he is reading wanted to be read, what would be indicated is Agamben's identification with this Gnostic author, an identification which the content of the text confirms. See Leo Strauss, 1962, ch. 1.

12 The last chapter before Agamben gives the six 'provisional results of our reading of Western philosophy's anthropological machine in the form of theses'. (*The Open*, 79)

13 A motif (informs Agamben) whose overt messianic overtones should not surprise us in Kojève, 'a thinker who had devoted his first work to the philosophy of Solov'yev, itself imbued with messianic and eschatological themes' (Agamben, 2004, 12).

14 Which mystical readers did not fail to read into the strange circumstance that on the seventh day God still *had to complete his work* before he could rest well pleased.

15 And one could go on, to note the strictly perverse nature of Agamben's promise that one day humans will play with the law like children play, in *State of Exception*.

16 If this sounds to the uninitiated like an idiosyncratic amalgam of late Heidegger with Aristotle's notion of the *entelecheia* (thought thinking itself) proper only to the gods and/or philosophers in *Nichomachean Ethics* X, Agamben's citation of Dante as signaling a break with the elitism of classical *philosophia* only enforces this sense:

It is clear that man's basic capacity is to have a potentiality or power for being intellectual ... [t]he proper work of mankind taken as a whole is to exercise continually for intellectual growth, first, in theoretical manners, and secondarily, as an extension of theory, in practice ... (Agamben, 2000, 11 (my italics)).

The concrete political implications of this are unclear, particularly how 'mankind taken as a whole' is to be read: democratically, as implying the need to widen intellectual education to the many, or aristocratically, as implying that the many's non-intellectual labour can be justified Platonically, because of the leisure it allows the few to develop the intellectual resources of the species 'taken as a whole'.

17 In *Language of Death*, Agamben in fact aligns his reading of linguistic indexicals with the 'transcendentals' of medieval thought (Agamben, 1991).

18 We note: just as chapter 4 of *State of Exception* sees Agamben confessing that Schmitt's political theology and Benjamin's messianism are much 'more tightly woven into each other' than we might first suppose given their arrantly opposite situation on the political spectrum. (Agamben, 2005b, 60) It is not the task of this essay to examine this provocative but controversial claim.

19 Or again consider in this vein Agamben's notion of 'passive politics' which as we have seen is as close as Agamben comes to this type of political reflection. As Franchi has examined in detail, and as we considered in II, Agamben like the later Levinas or Derrida proposes an ethico-political notion of 'passivity', in line with his revamped post-Aristotelian conception of potentiality, and in order to 'throw a wrench' in the West's biopolitical-anthropological 'machine'. (Franchi, 2004, 30-31) Having examined in detail how Agamben's notion of 'passivity' developed out of his appropriation of the notion of *desouevrement* from Kojève's later writings (Franchi 2004, 32-23), Franchi nevertheless notes that the political prospects of such a thought of 'passivity' are at best equivocal (Franchi, 2004, 38, 38-39). It is not just that politics has been aligned since Aristotle with a type of *praxis* involving speech (*lexis*), as Agamben notes at the beginning of *Homo Sacer* (cf. Franchi, 2004, 34, 37), and that passivity has been aligned with the necessity and the *oikos* whose centrality to modern politics Agamben, like Schmitt or Arendt, laments. It is after all possible that the philosophical tradition or this evaluation is importantly contestable. As we have stressed, Agamben comes out of the Heideggerian heritage that argues precisely this. If we read Agamben alongside the Italian Marxists of the workerist school, Franchi notes, it is at least possible to align Agamben's 'passive politics' with the strategic valorization of passive resistance to the work process in later capitalist societies advocated by Tronti, Virno, and others (Franchi, 2004, 38). My point is this: if 'passivity' thus *can* in some conjunctures be politically efficacious, what decides whether this is the case is a complex of historical and contextual matters which demand a quite different form of analysis and reflection than one governed by the categories of a fundamental ontology, however ancient or (post-)modern. Facing the bio-political legal and political changes that the war on terror has legitimated, for example, it is questionable whether citizens' passivity is any better than vocal public advocacy and the active attempt to bring together an oppositional solidarity. Again, facing an occupation not by the Brits but by the national socialists, it is surely in question whether Gandhi's 'passive politics' could have done anything more politically redemptive than hastened the slaughter. Then there is the question, if it is a question of advocating a general strike, whether a strike is an instance of passivity (it stops work) or activity, as when people talk of taking 'strike action': which involves picketing, rallying, advocacy, public speaking, and other political actions.

20 But in today's theoretical conjuncture, we could add: active versus reactive (Deleuze, with and without Guattari), identity versus difference (Derrida, the young Deleuze, the later Heidegger, with qualifiers), being versus event (Badiou), passivity versus activity (Levinas, Agamben, later Derrida), or action versus Act (Žižek). One register of the primarily pre-political character of these categories is that it is perfectly possible to give any of them indifferently 'progressive' or 'reactionary' meanings; the political Right is in no way debarred from thinking that (eg) '911' is an event, the Nazis' *did* hijack Nietzsche's 'affirmative' vitalism for their politics, and Žižek (like Badiou) has great difficulty explaining why the National Socialist *Gleichschaltung* was not an Act, changing the most basic parameters of German public life for 12 years, etc.

21 In 'activist' configurations, such as Žižek's, one will hence valorize a radical Act which would create the conditions which, retrospectively, could be seen to justify it. Agamben, like Derrida (and Badiou at least when he emphasizes that the Event cannot be 'pushed for' but only embraced *post facto*) is closer to belonging, as we have seen, to what could be called the 'passivist' stream, for which the transformative Act must come from 'outside being'. The action for Badiou comes after the Event, in light of militants' decision that there has been an Event, and declaration that this is so.

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