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## The Elephant in the Room: Agamben's 'Bare Life' and Marxist Biopolitics

*"The sensual eye is just like the palm of the hand. The palm has not the means of covering the whole beast."*<sup>1</sup>

– Rumi, The Elephant in the Dark  
The Masnavi; Book Three, Story Five

Rumi's poem is a thirteenth-century re-telling of a much older Indian tale, which has appeared in countless other forms across different times and places. In Rumi, four men visit the exhibition of an elephant, being held in a darkened room. The first, feeling its trunk, declares an elephant to be a creature like a water-spout. The second, reaching the ear, believes the animal to be more like a large fan. Third and fourth differ yet; standing closest to its legs and its back respectively, they find the elephant to be like a pillar, or like a throne. Unlike in many other versions of the story, these men are neither blind nor do they come to blows over their differences – which makes the metaphor a little easier to use, as we compare it to the still-little-explored relationship of Giorgio Agamben and Karl Marx.

What follows here is an attempt to make explicit the materialist foundations of Agamben's central concept of 'biopolitics', both in the historical development of his *oeuvre* from a much more explicit earlier Marxism, and also by implication in his choice of Michel Foucault and Hannah Arendt as the two key poles between which his own theory is constructed. Ultimately, it is our intention to argue that the structural similarities of Agamben's key concept of

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<sup>1</sup> Sourced online ([http://www.khamush.com/tales\\_from\\_masnavi.htm#The%20Elephant](http://www.khamush.com/tales_from_masnavi.htm#The%20Elephant)); tr. A. J. Arberry. Retrieved 30/01/2012.

‘bare life’ and Marxian ‘alienated labour’ are significant enough to indicate that, like the gentlemen in Rumi’s poem, they are in fact sketching distinct aspects of the same phenomenon. To accept this ‘labour thesis’ (and the choosing of this term should not imply that Marx’s account will be privileged in the comparison), allows each theory to supplement the other. In Agamben’s case, his philosophical analysis finds in Marxist *praxis* the workable theory of political action that it noticeably lacks. In the case of Marxist theory, I will contend that Agamben adds both a deeper understanding of the object at the root of this key Marxian category, and a notion of ‘revolution’ freed from its familiar dependency on the concept of a single, defining political act.

Whilst their observations on the fundamental fault-lines that bisect the individual subject, ‘alienated labour’ in the Marxist canon and Agamben’s notion of ‘bare life’ in *Homo Sacer*, are in no way as disparate as the accounts of the four Sufi gentlemen in Rumi’s tale, a full articulation of their positions will require significant work, both to construct and then to properly examine. This essay is, above all, an opening gesture toward that endeavour, which we believe will be a challenging and very productive field of future theoretical study.

The discussion takes place across four sections of argument. Firstly, ‘**Introducing *Homo Sacer***’, takes the opportunity to introduce key elements of Agamben’s work to an audience that may as yet be unfamiliar with his output. We will introduce Agamben’s use of the ancient Hellenic distinction between two forms of life, *zoe* (biological life) and *bios* (civic, political, or community life). We will also outline the crucial category of ‘bare life’, and its role in *Homo Sacer* as the product, object, and result of the operation of sovereign power. We will explore Agamben’s use of Carl Schmitt’s theory of sovereignty, and the concept and logic of ‘the exception’, in his analysis of power structures both ancient and contemporary. We will also lay

out Agamben's use of Michel Foucault and Hannah Arendt as twin bases for his notion of 'biopolitics', and demonstrate that the works of both theorists are suffused with a materialist economic critique that cannot be isolated or extracted in Agamben's distillation of their ideas, but rather must remain at the core of Agamben's concept.

Our second section '**Agamben, Marx, and Modern Biopolitics**' begins by setting out the focal argument of this piece, that Agamben's 'bare life' and Marx's 'alienated labour' share a number of structural and functional similarities that indicate a deeper relationship and, potentially, a common identity between the two phenomena. In addition to this major convergence between the two concepts, the importance of Guy Debord to Agamben's pre-*Homo Sacer* output will further reinforce the argument that, as with Foucault and Arendt, Agamben is building upon the foundations of a clear materialist critique of capitalism, and that the critical import of that perspective must remain throughout the body of theory built upon it. This section concludes with the challenge of Paul Passavant, who argued for a contradiction between the 'early' and 'later' Agamben on the basis of his transition away from a theory of state informed by Debordian Marxism and toward a state-theory built, via Aristotle, as a critique of a far more ancient and pernicious power relation than Marxian socialism seems able to grasp. Agamben in fact refers to the *arcanum imperii*, or 'ancient secrets', of sovereign power when making this latter criticism of the failure of the twentieth-century's Marxist revolutions. Whilst this transition does appear to occur, and whilst Agamben makes his *arcanum imperii* critique of Marxism within *Homo Sacer*, our investigation finds the answer to both challenges in the ancient Greek *polis*.

In '**Agamben, Aristotle, and the Birth of the City**', we follow Agamben's analysis back to the early development of political community and the political subject, to establish how great

a transition Agamben really makes from his earlier explicit Marxism to his *arcanum imperii* account of sovereign power. We will use readings of both Aristotle and Arendt's work on the Athenian *polis* to show that the nature of labour was, in fact, the key problem in the development of community structures and political power in ancient Greece. With the centrality of the problem of labour to the Athenian *polis* established, the continuity between Passavant's alleged 'early' and 'later' Agamben becomes clear, the central concern of both is the problematic relationship of labour to political power, and Passavant's critique is discounted. This argument will also aim to reinforce the relationship between bare life and alienated labour, showing both phenomena to have been present at the locus of sovereign power at both ends of Agamben's sweeping historical survey. Finally, this section will use this conclusion to challenge Agamben's *arcanum imperii* critique of Marxism as a misunderstanding of the role of alienated labour in his own analysis.

With Passavant's challenge overcome, and with the final layers of argument for the identity of bare life and alienated labour made via Aristotle and Arendt, we will end with a discussion of Agamben's way forward, and of the mutual supplementarity of Agamben and Marx as we begin to articulate their theories from the hinge-point of the 'labour thesis'. The final section, **'Potentiality, Power, and Praxis: Re-Reading Agamben's 'New Politics'**, investigates Agamben's theory of political action, and its culmination in what Agamben describes as an 'ontological renegotiation' or a transition to a new form of being, of a political subject freed from the fracture of an isolable bare life held in the grip of sovereign power. Beginning with Walter Benjamin, and Agamben's treatment of Antonio Negri's work on the concept of 'constituent power', we find Agamben once more returning to Aristotle and finding in the latter's treatment of potentiality and actuality (and their opposites) a site at which he believes that the Schmittian

sovereign decision can be evaded. We will see that Agamben's attempt to circumvent the decision, key to both the position of (and resistance to) political power, is embodied in Melville's figure of 'Bartleby the Scrivener', and is roundly derided by both Passavant and William Connelly as a figure of resistance that is futile in the face of the realities of concentrated political and economic power – a critique with which we concur. However, we contend that the 'labour thesis' established earlier allows Agamben's analysis to surmount the obstacle of an immaterial theory of political action by drawing it into an explicit relationship with revolutionary Marxism's emphasis on political contestation and full economic re-foundation. In fact, we will go so far as to argue that it is this Marxian notion of profound economic renewal that may be the only possible precondition for the 'ontological renegotiation' that plays such a central, if elusive, role in *Homo Sacer*'s concluding pages.

The traffic is not all one-way, however. Having argued for Marx in the completion of Agamben's endgame, we will also discuss two ways in which Marx's articulation with Agamben also surmounts shortfalls within the former. We will argue that the recognition of the relationship between bare life and alienated labour gives a fuller account of the true object of Marx's study, an ontological fissure internal to the individual subject that pre-dates any specific mode of economic production, and modulated by its material circumstances in different historical instances, including the phase of industrial capitalism. Our final contention will be that the 'ontological renegotiation' retains the scope and impact of the Marxist 'revolution' but, by virtue of being accessible from an immaterial plane, and materially over a longer period of time, makes a valuable move toward dismantling the Marxian fetish for the revolutionary 'moment' – an event all but fully precluded by a contemporary structure of power typified by the effective co-option or destruction of significantly opposing material forces.

What follows is an argument for two things; the relationship of bare life to alienated labour as possibly one and the same ontological phenomenon, and the mutual benefit of supplementing the Agambenian and Marxian models of political action and revolutionary transcendence. We hope that it leads to both a deeper study of Agamben as a significant theorist for the radical left, and to a wider acknowledgment amongst Agamben scholars, often primarily fixated upon his relation to Aristotle and Heidegger, of the role of Karl Marx as a key influence on the development of Agamben's biopolitics. As Rumi the poet (in some renderings, at least) concludes his tale of the elephant in the dark:

*“If each had a candle, and they went in together, the differences would disappear”*

## **1 – Introducing *Homo Sacer***

Described by Agamben as ‘an obscure figure of archaic Roman law’, *homo sacer*<sup>2</sup>, or the sacred man, functioned in its ancient context as a specific legal status conferred upon those found guilty of certain kinds of crime.<sup>3</sup> The unique attribute of *homo sacer* is that he is banished from the protection of the sovereign legal and political order, to the extent that he may be killed by anybody without his death being classed as homicide – his constant exposure to death only mitigated by the seemingly contradictory proviso that his status prevents his being killed as a sacrifice.<sup>4</sup> In this way, Agamben perceives a figure cast into an indeterminate area between life and death, set at the intersection of human and divine law – a dividing line constantly determined

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<sup>2</sup> When referring to the title of Agamben's work, the term *Homo Sacer* will appear capitalised. In the instances of an uncapitalised reference to *homo sacer*, I will be alluding to the eponymous figure of the 'sacred man'.

<sup>3</sup> G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*; Stanford; Stanford University Press, 1998, p.8., and p.85. (Henceforth, all page references in the footnotes will be from *Homo Sacer* unless otherwise stated, or abbreviated to *HS* when following reference to another work).

<sup>4</sup> p.72.

by the power of the sovereign to decide upon its precise location. Agamben's interest in *homo sacer* is as a compelling metaphor for a series of phenomena that he is attempting to explore, rather than as a purely historical case study in Roman law. The status of *homo sacer* as an exile from political society, captured within the jurisdiction of the sovereign precisely by the act of his exclusion from the constituted legal order, and whose only remaining attribute is the simple fact of his biological existence, is the prime catalyst for Agamben's opening analysis of the phenomenon he refers to as 'bare' life.

The concept of *bare life* forms the cornerstone of Agamben's analysis within *Homo Sacer*. At the outset of the book, Agamben relates the significance of the ancient Greek distinction between two forms of life; *zōē*, the natural, biological life that all human beings share with each other and with the animal kingdom, and *bios*, a qualified, civic, form of life that can only be lived amongst fellow members of a political community.<sup>5</sup> Each form of life finds an appropriate realm in the Greek division between the *oikos*, the household, within which the necessities of natural life are taken care of, and the *polis*, the political realm, within which the foundations and conditions of political life are instituted, discussed, and redefined.<sup>6</sup> Agamben observes the way in which the political realm itself is founded upon the exclusion of *zōē*<sup>7</sup>, indicating the contours of a problematic relationship insofar as natural life simultaneously constitutes the condition of possibility for any kind of civic or political life.<sup>8</sup> This condition is further complicated in the modern age as bare, biological life re-enters the *polis* as an object of political care and intervention, and 'modern democracy presents itself from the beginning as a vindication and liberation of *zōē*, [...] that is constantly trying to transform its bare life into a way

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<sup>5</sup> p.1-2.

<sup>6</sup> p.2.

<sup>7</sup> The grounds for the Hellenistic dismissal of *zōē* as the appropriate location of civic-political rights is discussed in detail in the later section on Aristotle.

<sup>8</sup> *HS*, p.2..

of life and to find, so to speak, the *bios* of *zōē*'.<sup>9</sup>

Early on in *Homo Sacer*, Agamben also makes clear his appropriation of Carl Schmitt's model of sovereignty and the concept of 'the exception'. For Schmitt, '[s]overeign is he who decides on the exception'<sup>10</sup>; the ability to create and impose the boundaries, both spatial and juridical, of an order, and to decide upon what exists within and what is to be cast outside of its borders, remains a crucial component of Agamben's sovereign in *Homo Sacer*. According to Schmitt, 'the exception' is a declared state of emergency in which, for the preservation of a legal order, the order itself is suspended.<sup>11</sup> The sovereign power, which alone has the capacity to decide upon and declare an exception, is then free to act without any potential legal impediment whilst it deals with the threat and restores the normal order.<sup>12</sup> Agamben's interest in the exception is twofold; firstly, with the Schmittian exception itself as an existing and expanding legal-political phenomenon; and secondly, with the underlying logic of the exception; the suspension of existing norms and forms of status by the sovereign power, resulting in the growing indistinction of previously clear thresholds, and the paradoxical nature of the exception as the instrument by which an order applies itself precisely in the process of its own non-application. An example of how the underlying logic of the exception concerns Agamben is his treatment of the progressive blurring of our contemporary concepts of life and death.<sup>13</sup> Agamben notes that recent advances in technology are beginning to bring about cases of people who inhabit an indeterminate zone between life and death, such as the coma patient kept alive on life

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<sup>9</sup> *HS*, p.9.

<sup>10</sup> C. Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Tr. G. Schwab); Cambridge (Mass.); Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1985. p.5.

<sup>11</sup> *Political Theology*, p.7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.12-13. Agamben's appropriation of this schema is to be found in *HS* Ch.1. 'The Paradox of Sovereignty' and p.15-19 in particular.

<sup>13</sup> *HS*, p.162-163.



support.<sup>14</sup> The link to the logic of exception here is twofold; firstly, that a previously clear boundary has dissolved into an ambiguous hinterland; and secondly, that the zone of indistinction thus created demands a sovereign decision on life:

today...life and death are not properly scientific concepts but rather political concepts, which as such acquire political meaning precisely only through a decision<sup>15</sup>

Further, in the case of life and death, the decision is made not by the traditional legal sovereign but increasingly by doctors and scientists, and conditioned by the level of technological advancement itself.<sup>16</sup> Many of Agamben's concepts within *Homo Sacer* share elements of this motif, and the general expansion of paradox, zones of indistinction, and the dissolution or suspension of established orders in Agamben's work is directly related to his historical narrative of the decline of Western politics into emergency rule, and the growth of the permanent state of exception.<sup>17</sup>

The changing relationship between the state and the biological life of its citizens is at the heart of the concept of *biopolitics* itself. In his work *The History of Sexuality Vol. I.*, Michel Foucault observes a distinct change in the nature of human politics, from the Aristotelian animal whose political capacities form a defining *additional* aspect of our existence, to a species of such power and technological ability that our lives, individual and collective, have become dependent upon our politics.<sup>18</sup> Further, in his lecture series published as *Society Must be Defended*, he notes

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<sup>14</sup> p.160-161.

<sup>15</sup> p.164.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Agamben's most comprehensive review of the legal/historical phenomenon of emergency rule and its expansion into a Benjaminian generalised state of emergency is his *State of Exception*; Chicago; Chicago University Press, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I.*; London; Allen Lane, 1978. p.143

the way in which the care for the biological life and health of its citizenry has increasingly become the central concern of the state.<sup>19</sup> This aggregation of political power over life, coupled with the increasing state involvement in the care of the collective life of its population, combine to form the traditional Foucauldian concept of 'biopolitics'.

Foucault's theorisation of the emergence of biopolitics also pays a great deal of attention to the role of capitalism in this sea-change of power. Foucault traces the evolution of disciplinary technologies to an effort to harness the full 'productive forces' of individual bodies; he locates the regulatory focus on treating the common, low-level, recurrent diseases ('endemics') in a concern to eliminate ailments which 'sapped the population's strength, shortened the working week, wasted energy, and cost money'; he also demonstrates how both the disciplinary and regulatory systems of the new order could only have been achieved through the growth of 'system[s] of surveillance, hierarchies, inspections, book-keeping and reports'.<sup>20</sup> Foucault's biopolitics is intimately bound up with a study of capitalism, and processes akin to Weber's 'rationalisation', as Agamben briefly acknowledges in the introduction to *Homo Sacer*.<sup>21</sup>

At the same time, Hannah Arendt's account of the historical currents which led, via the imperialisms of the nineteenth century, to totalitarian rule in Germany and the USSR is also intricately bound up with the development of capitalism. From the generation of superfluous and unstable monies in the destruction of the feudal monastic order in Tudor England and superfluous people as casualties of primitive accumulation and the industrial division of labour, to the 'perpetual competition and expansion' mindset that fuelled nineteenth century imperialisms and the bourgeois hijack of the imperial state as insurer against commercial losses

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<sup>19</sup> M. Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*; London; Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 2003. p.242.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.242-244. See also, *History of Sexuality*, p.140-141.

<sup>21</sup> *HS*, p.3.

in the colonies, Arendt distinguishes herself in her nuanced treatment of the interaction of the economic logic of capitalism and the political and social developments that form the core object of her study.<sup>22</sup>

Given that Agamben's stated aim is to create a topography of the biopolitical based upon the twin poles of Foucauldian biopolitics and Arendtian totalitarianism<sup>23</sup>, the presence of a critique of capitalism in each respective work makes the absence of an explicit treatment of capitalist political economy within *Homo Sacer* all the more puzzling. The aim of this essay, therefore, is to establish the points at which Agamben's concept of biopolitics can benefit from a renewed emphasis upon the critique of capitalist economic relations, and the consideration of the question of labour as a central aspect of both Agamben's historical analysis and prescriptions for future action.

## **2 - Agamben, Marx, and Modern Biopolitics**

The question of Agamben's reluctance to open up his theory of modern biopolitics to an explicit analysis of its relationship to the dominant mode of production is deepened by his brief but illuminating treatment of the work of Hans Reiter and other Nazi eugenicists toward the end of the book. At the opening of the chapter 'Politics, or Giving Form to the Life of a People', Agamben documents how many in the National Socialist science establishment began to explicitly account for the biological lives of their citizens in terms of their monetary value to the state.<sup>24</sup> Using concepts such as 'living wealth' and calling for a 'budget to take account of the living value of people', Reiter and others took up 'a logical synthesis of biology and economy' as

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<sup>22</sup> See primarily, H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*; London; George Allen & Unwin, 1967. Ch.5 'The Political Emancipation of the Bourgeoisie' in particular.

<sup>23</sup> *Homo Sacer* (hereafter, *HS*), p.3-4.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, P.144-145.

their objective.<sup>25</sup> However, this explicit economisation and commodification of human life in the thought of the world's 'first radically biopolitical state'<sup>26</sup> is not then explored in any detail by Agamben, despite both its obvious importance to the foundations and application of National Socialist biopolitics, and its distinct resemblance to the logic of Marxian 'primitive accumulation'. The recommendations delivered by Reiter and others within these articles gain a deeper currency when we consider how Agamben himself considers the assumption of powers previously available only to the juridical sovereign by members of the state's medical-scientific establishment as a defining characteristic of the biopolitical age.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, when a rising force of biopolitical authority, in the most extreme example of a biopolitical state, explicitly acknowledges the economic context within which their conception of biological life is to be framed, it would not be unreasonable to assume such a development would lead into a substantial new line of enquiry. Unfortunately, Agamben eschews the opportunity to further explore the relationship of Nazism and biopolitics with their respective economic contexts, a move which would have drawn his analysis of totalitarianism into much tighter step with Foucault's understanding of Nazism as a 'paroxysmal development' of modern biopower.<sup>28</sup>

This particular line of enquiry, tracing the economic contours of Agambenian biopolitics, throws up a striking structural parallel between the notion of 'bare' life in its modern setting and the Marxist conception of alienated labour. It is possible to discern four points of intersection between both theories that may indicate a potentially unobserved connection, and should at least demonstrate the importance of considering labour as a factor in the constitution of *homo sacer*.

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, (Quotations are from Reiter, writing in O. Verschuer (ed.), *Etat et Sante...*, Cited in *Homo Sacer*, p.145.)

<sup>26</sup> *HS*, p.143.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p.122, and p.159. See also, Norris, 'Giorgio Agamben and the Politics of the Living Dead', p.52.

<sup>28</sup> Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, p.259.

Firstly, for Agamben, ‘bare’ life exists within each and every individual<sup>29</sup>, and it is produced, isolated, and held as an object of sovereign power.<sup>30</sup> For Marx, it is the workers’ labour, or rather their abstract and interchangeable labour-power<sup>31</sup>, which becomes virtually a separate entity, a commodity they must sell for an equivalent monetary price<sup>32</sup>, and therefore a part of themselves which, to use Agamben’s description of ‘bare’ life, man ‘separates and opposes [to] himself’<sup>33</sup> in order to survive. Further, Agamben’s identification of ‘bare’ life as a product of the governing sovereign power is echoed in the Marxist position that capitalist production relations themselves are responsible for the production of ‘man as a *commodity*, the *commodity-man*’.<sup>34</sup> In both cases, therefore, we see the phenomenon of a governing framework of power producing an internal division within each and every one of its subjects, before isolating one element resulting from this division and holding it as an object of its continuing control.

The second point of intersection between bare life and alienated labour centres around the effect each has had on the societies built upon their foundations. For Agamben, modern society has predicated itself upon the ‘liberation of *zōē*’, making biological life its leading value.<sup>35</sup> However, the result of this ‘liberation’, in the West at least, has been to reduce the population to the animalistic nihilism of mass consumption and hedonistic excess, a situation of ‘unprecedented ruin’.<sup>36</sup> The decadence Agamben sees at the heart of the modern democratic project also finds an analogy in Marx’s observation that the alienation of man from his own higher capacities, insofar as his labour is expropriated and his product denied him, leads the

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<sup>29</sup> *Homo Sacer*, p.124, and p.140.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6. (production), and p.9.

<sup>31</sup> K. Marx, *Capital: A New Abridgement* (D. McLellan, ed.); Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1999. p.20.

<sup>32</sup> K. Marx, *Grundrisse* (Tr. M Nicolaus); London; Penguin Books, 1993. p.281-282.

<sup>33</sup> *HS*, p.8.

<sup>34</sup> K. Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Tr. M. Milligan); New York; Prometheus Books, 1988. p.86. (Italics in original)

<sup>35</sup> *HS*, p.9-10.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

worker to find freedom only in the most base of human activities:

As a result [of the alienation of labour], therefore, man (the worker) no longer feels himself to be freely active in any but his animal functions – eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and in dressing up, etc.; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal.<sup>37</sup>

Therefore, beyond the production and capture of an integral part of every man, we also see the governing powers in Agamben and Marx, the nexus of sovereign power and the capitalist mode of production respectively, set man's political development on a trajectory which results in the bestialisation of man and the valorisation of his most animal traits.

The third structural convergence that takes place between these two phenomena centres upon the way in which both bare life and alienated labour enter into a dialectical relation with the powers that produce them, and become the central threat to their respective systems. To begin this comparison with Marx, whose position is most famously distilled into *Capital's* Chapter 32; the logic of capitalism leads to a centralisation of economic resources in the hands of a dwindling number of bourgeoisie, the corollary of which is the ever-increasing socialisation of labour, which produces an organised, unified proletariat, whose expropriation of the capitalist expropriators socialises both property and production, allowing for the end of the coerced alienation of man from his own labour.<sup>38</sup> For Agamben, the product of sovereign power, bare life, is also the bacillus responsible for infecting and fatally undermining the birth-nation link,

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<sup>37</sup> *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts...*, p.74.

<sup>38</sup> *Capital*, p.378-380.

which had previously functioned as a locus of sovereign power.<sup>39</sup>

### **Excursus: The ‘Birth-Nation Link’**

The birth-nation link is the mechanism by which the bare lives of citizens are ‘inscribed’, or taken into, the state order. Agamben explains that the need for such an inscription did not exist in the classical world, when our biological existence was excluded, as animalistic *zōē*, from the political realm; nor was the relation of bare life to the political community a problem in the mediaeval world, in which our biological life belonged, as with the bare life of all other animals, to God. However, when the French Revolution removed from authority a divinely-appointed sovereign monarch and declared the people themselves to be sovereign, the dissemination of sovereign power into each and every individual ‘irrevocably united’ the principles of nativity and sovereignty, creating the paradoxical figure of the ‘sovereign subject’ and necessitating a new understanding of the relationship that existed between the individual and the state order. In short, with the fact of simple birth came the conferral of rights, and the bare life of individuals was written into the new nation-state order inaugurated by the French revolution; birth was the condition of citizenship within the nation, the bare life of man was transformed into the *bios*-life of the citizen, and the gap that exists between the simple fact of birth and the complex nature of citizenship was obscured by a doctrine of civic rights predicated on the immediacy of this passage.

Subsequently, the birth-nation link succeeded in regulating the relationship between life and the political-juridical order for over a century, until the European nation-state system was presented with the limit case, or ultimate exception to the rule, in the arrival of the refugee as a mass phenomenon in inter-war European politics. Whilst the birth-nation link is predicated on

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<sup>39</sup> HS, p.131-133.

the notion that there is no gap between the fact of birth and the enjoyment of citizenship, the refugee demonstrates precisely the opposite, that man may indeed be born without immediately becoming a citizen, allowing ‘bare life...to appear for an instant in [the political] domain’. In forcing open the implicit gap between birth and nation, the bare life of the refugee presented the state order itself with an exception, a life inside the borders of the state yet not inscribed into the order of the state. The reaction of the sovereign order to this development, according to Agamben, is the creation of an exceptional space within the nation, areas within its territory yet in relation to which the normal legal code is suspended, in order to contain the exceptional form-of-life of the refugee, non-citizen, or any other of the state's declared unwanted outsiders, namely the *concentration camp*<sup>40</sup>.

Bare life is, therefore, an ‘exception’ which sovereign power attempts to contain, yet every attempt to contain and eradicate the problem only reproduces it anew and leads us still further into universalised emergency.<sup>41</sup> In both examples, then, we see a common thread in the process whereby the unfolding logic of the dominant power leads to its creation of an entity which subsequently destabilises the very order that called it into being.

The final point at which Agamben's bare life and Marx's alienated labour show signs of a distinct structural similarity is in terms of the eschatological prescriptions each author extrapolates from their respective conditions. For Agamben, his prescription for emancipation from sovereign power centres upon the creation of a ‘*bios* that is only its own *zōē*’<sup>42</sup>, a life in which it is impossible to isolate anything corresponding to a ‘bare’ life, in order to prevent the formation of any sovereign power, which holds bare life hostage to its constant decision. This

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<sup>40</sup> See *Homo Sacer*, p.127-131 (birth-nation link), and p.166-176 (concentration camps).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p.174-176.

<sup>42</sup> *HS*, p.188.



new ‘form-of-life’, an inseparable unity of a life previously subjected to internal fracture, is an image again reminiscent of the Marxian endpoint of the abolition of alienated labour. The final expropriation of the capitalists’ property and means of production allows man to re-connect with his *species-being* as free producers, working toward his own, and his society’s, full development through ‘free, conscious activity’, and the non-alienated production that forms ‘his active species life’.<sup>43</sup> The important convergence here is that, in both theories, the key to success is a form of unity which does not permit the introduction of caesurae, and the isolation, alienation, or colonisation of any part of an individual’s life in the interests of a hostile system of power.

These four convergences between the Agambenian notion of bare life and the Marxian notion of alienated labour are certainly not designed to reduce one to the other, or even at this point to posit any strict equivalence. However, the fact that such similarities exist undoubtedly increases the necessity of a deeper consideration of the relation of labour to the problem of bare life in Agamben’s biopolitics. In fact, the only theoretical step necessary to positing a more substantial relationship here would be to argue that the two powers responsible for the production of these phenomena are convergent, or coextensive, an argument which has already been taken up by Agamben himself in the early 1990s.

Whilst positing a structural proximity between Agambenian ‘bare’ life and Marxian alienated labour remains a speculative gesture towards a modified understanding of the condition of the *homines sacri* of the Western world, the proximity of early Agamben to the continental legacy of Marx is much clearer cut. In the essay ‘Notes on Politics’, Agamben notes an ongoing transition in the post-Cold War world typified by the expansion of the ‘integrated spectacle’ as the dominant condition of government(s).<sup>44</sup> Agamben takes the term ‘integrated spectacle’

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<sup>43</sup> *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, p.76-77.

<sup>44</sup> G. Agamben, ‘Notes on Politics’, in, G. Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics* (Tr. V. Binetti and C.

directly from Guy Debord's 1988 work *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*.<sup>45</sup> The *Comments* revisit and reassess aspects of Debord's seminal *Society of the Spectacle*, published two decades previously. The eponymous 'spectacle' is described by Debord as the 'result and the goal of the dominant mode of production'<sup>46</sup>; it stands for the totality of economic and social relations in a society in which the apogee of commodity fetishism, the ultimate eclipse of all use-values by abstract exchange-value<sup>47</sup>, has not only colonised social life, but has rendered humanity incapable of seeing anything beyond the commodity itself and the unreal world of images and representation generated around it.<sup>48</sup> People are reduced to the role of alienated spectators, incessantly exposed to 'the ruling order's non-stop discourse about itself, its never-ending monologue of self-praise' which is transmitted across a media newly concentrated into the hands of a ruling elite, and working to sustain and strengthen the grip of the commodity economy as a whole.<sup>49</sup>

In the 1967 work, Debord makes the distinction between two forms of contemporary spectacle, the *concentrated* and the *diffuse*. The relative lack of commodities in countries of the Second and Third World leads to a concentration of production and consumption in the domestic bureaucratic elites, the enforcement of the system by permanent police-state terror, and a fixation on a dictatorial leader as the 'master of everyone else's nonconsumption'.<sup>50</sup> In the affluent West, meanwhile, the material abundance of commodities leads to an order in which individual commodities vie with each other for consumption within the 'unified spectacle' of a society of

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Casarino); Minneapolis; University of Minnesota Press, 2000. p.109.

<sup>45</sup> G. Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (tr. M. Imrie); London; Verso, 1988.

<sup>46</sup> G. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (tr. K. Knab); London; Rebel Press, 2004. p.8

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p.21.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, P.13.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p.31-32.

‘total commodity production’, the apex of modern capitalism.<sup>51</sup> Debord’s major innovation in his later *Comments* was to diagnose the development of a third form, the *integrated spectacle*, which combines elements of each, predicated upon the general historical victory of the *diffuse*<sup>52</sup>, though each form had noticeably evolved:

As regards concentration, the controlling centre has now become occult: never to be occupied by a known leader, or clear ideology. And on the diffuse side, the spectacle has never before put its mark to such a degree on almost the full range of socially produced behaviour and objects<sup>53</sup>

It would be impossible for Agamben to appropriate the Debordian notion of the ‘integrated spectacle’ as an element of his political analysis without taking on the myriad Marxist presuppositions with which it is suffused, and Agamben attempts no such thing. In an essay on Debord’s 1988 work, he describes the author’s output as ‘the clearest and most severe analysis of the miseries and slavery that by now has extended its dominion over the whole planet’<sup>54</sup>, asserts the centrality of the commodity fetish in the work of Marx, and criticises Louis Althusser’s position that the opening of *Capital* should be disregarded because it reflects the contagion of ‘scientific Marxism’ with residual traces of Hegelian philosophy.<sup>55</sup> Later in the same collection of essays, Agamben argues that the collapse of communism around the globe has hastened the expansion of the ‘integrated spectacle’ as the dominant, and universalising, trajectory of

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p.32.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9.

<sup>54</sup> Agamben, ‘Marginal Notes on *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*’, in *Means Without End...*, p.73.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p.74-76.

contemporary power.<sup>56</sup> Regardless of their prior political structures, Agamben sees the whole gamut of state forms across the globe succumbing to the imperatives of ‘spectacular capitalism’ and undergoing radical change.<sup>57</sup> This transformation, equivalent to the upheaval in antediluvian social and political structures during the first industrial revolution, has so transformed the traditional categories of political theory (sovereignty, people, democracy, etc.), that they have become unusable without radical re-conception.<sup>58</sup> Echoing Debord’s analysis of a ‘spectacular’ reality that has divorced itself from its material bases in society and colonised every manner of institution, cultural tradition, and mode of communication, whilst maintaining the façade of their former appearance as a mask, Agamben describes contemporary politics as a ‘devastating experiment that disarticulates and empties institutions and beliefs, ideologies and religions, identities and communities all throughout the world’.<sup>59</sup> It is clear that, in the early Agamben, Debord’s analysis, and its Marxist underpinnings, were central to his understanding of contemporary political phenomena, and for theorising potential courses of action. The shift between the Agamben of *Means Without End* to the Agamben of *Homo Sacer*, excoriating Marxist political theory for its failure to recognise the essential structure of sovereign power and thereby working unknowingly to perpetuate it<sup>60</sup>, appears to be a dramatic departure.

The apparent divergence between Agamben’s works is a central point in Paul Passavant’s essay *The Contradictory States of Giorgio Agamben*.<sup>61</sup> Passavant’s critique is twofold; firstly, he argues that Agamben employs two contradictory theories of state in his earlier and later works, and secondly, that Agamben’s prescriptions for resistance and radical political action are

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<sup>56</sup> ‘Notes on Politics’, p.109.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p.109-110.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p.110.

<sup>60</sup> *HS*, p.12.

<sup>61</sup> P. Passavant, ‘The Contradictory State of Giorgio Agamben’, in, *Political Theory*, Vol. 35., No. 2. (April 2007); pp.147-174.

rendered inoperable by the transition from his earlier state theory to his later formulation. According to Passavant, Agamben's use of Debord and Marx in tracing the deepening integration of state and economy, and his assertion of exchange value's attainment of 'absolute and irresponsible sovereignty over life in its entirety'<sup>62</sup>, demonstrate the *determining* power of the economy over the state in Agamben's earlier works. Passavant goes so far as to declare that, in Agamben's early theory of the state, it is the economy which is ultimately sovereign.<sup>63</sup> In fact, the state itself is being eroded and weakened by the expansion of the spectacle, which is forcing an unprecedented uniformity of experience around the world.<sup>64</sup> Passavant therefore detects an about-turn in Agamben's state theory when examining his later works, such as *Homo Sacer* and *State of Exception*, in which Agamben accords the state not only supremacy over the economy, but also the power to define and to produce discrete forms of life itself.<sup>65</sup> Here, the state figures as the *determining* actor, and Agamben criticises the economic fixation of modern Marxist and anarchist thought for their all too hasty marginalisation of the '*arcanum imperii*', the ancient secrets of sovereign power and the entity of the state, both of which pre-date capitalist relations of production by millennia.<sup>66</sup>

Whilst correctly identifying a change of emphasis, however, Passavant's charge overlooks an important piece of this particular puzzle, as does Agamben in constructing his '*arcanum imperii*' critique of Marxism. At the heart of both Agamben's concept of the state, and his theory of biopolitics, rests the Aristotelian distinction between two forms of life, *zōē* and *bios*, and the exclusion of 'bare' life from the political realm at the foundation of the *polis*. In order to fully explore Passavant's challenge, and the foundations on which Agamben builds his *arcanum*

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<sup>62</sup> Agamben, 'Marginal Notes on...', cited in, Passavant, p.150.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p.151.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p.153.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, also; *HS*, p. 12.

*imperii* argument, it is necessary to transport our own analysis back to the Classical Age.

### 3 - Agamben, Aristotle, and the Birth of the City

According to Agamben, ‘bare’ life is excluded from the *polis*, and yet, as both the condition of possibility of the *polis* and as the ‘life [that] had to transform itself into good life’ through politics, remains implicated at its centre.<sup>67</sup> The grounds upon which biological life was excluded from the public realm in ancient Athenian democracy is therefore of great importance to our understanding of the link between sovereign power and ‘bare’ life at its inception. In *The Human Condition*, the work cited by Agamben in his discussion of the foundations of his biopolitics<sup>68</sup>, Hannah Arendt argues that, for Plato and Aristotle, any form of life shared in common with other animals ‘could not be fundamentally human’.<sup>69</sup> This point of analysis is echoed by Agamben in the essay ‘Form-of-Life’, where he argues for the Greek distinction between:

...*zōē*, which expressed the fact of living common to all living beings (animals, humans, or gods), and *bios*, which signified the form or manner of living peculiar to a single individual or group.<sup>70</sup>

Yet neither Arendt nor Aristotle exclude ‘bare’ life from the political arena solely on the basis of its animalistic simplicity or its commonality with other species, and Agamben is only partially correct when he attributes to Arendt the argument that the ‘primacy of natural life over political

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<sup>67</sup> *Homo Sacer*, p.7.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3-4.

<sup>69</sup> H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p.24.

<sup>70</sup> Agamben, ‘Form-of-Life’, in *Means Without End*, p.3.

action' is responsible for the political decline of modernity.<sup>71</sup> In fact, Arendt's account of both the original confinement of *zōē* to the *oikos*, and the proto-biopolitics of *The Human Condition*, become clearer when we remember that, for Arendt, 'bare' or 'natural' life is also inherently tied to that most problematic of human activities, *labour*.

Arendt sees in the Marxist concept of labour a conflation of two distinct phenomena, which she labels 'labour' and 'work'. 'Labour' spans all activities based upon the material reproduction of biological life, physical subsistence, and is, as such, determined by base necessity. Labour itself is also an isolating activity, even in groups working on the same task, because the satisfaction of a body's physical needs keeps the individual 'imprisoned' within the horizons of their own bodily existence and its unique 'metabolism with nature'. The blind subjection of man to the realm of necessity involved in labouring is the germ of the corruption Arendt alleges exists in Marx's own construction. Further, the products of labour are designed for the purposes of rapid consumption, and make no lasting alteration or addition to the human world. The fact that 'labour' spans those activities which are biologically determined, atomistic, and geared toward short-term consumption, leads Arendt to distinguish 'labour' from the superior concept of 'work', which Arendt describes as the crafting of durable objects designed to add an element of stability to the artificial human world<sup>72</sup>.

In her chapter on 'The *Polis* and the Household', Arendt makes clear that it is labour, and not the simple fact of natural life, that forms the basis for the exclusion of *zōē* from the *polis*:

No *activity* that served only the purpose of making a living, of sustaining only the

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<sup>71</sup> HS, p.4.

<sup>72</sup> See, for example, *The Human Condition*, p.115 and p.137, and Canovan's *Hannah Arendt...*, p.97.

life process, was permitted to enter the political realm<sup>73</sup>

Labour, the activity of ‘making a living’, is confined to the *oikos* as a result of its coercive and unequal nature; labour is dictated by blind, biological necessity<sup>74</sup>, is typified by the relentless repetition of futile tasks<sup>75</sup>, prevents individuals from engaging in meaningful, and uniquely human, activities<sup>76</sup>, and is geared only toward the destructive consumption of matter.<sup>77</sup> Those who laboured under their master’s command in the household had to be excluded from the public realm, lest the necessary iniquities of labour infect and undermine the essential condition of equality which forms the *sine qua non* of authentic political community.<sup>78</sup> Arendt’s critique of modernity is precisely that, having escaped its banishment to the household and invaded the public sphere, the principle characteristics of labour - inequality, necessity, and the futile ‘eternal recurrence’<sup>79</sup> of ‘making a living’ - have colonised the political realm and destroyed the traditional foundations of the *polis*, the condition of free and equal citizens speaking and acting ‘amongst one’s peers’ in the public realm.<sup>80</sup> Arendt’s reading of the ancient banishment of ‘bare’ life from the political centre is, at its heart, a question of the problematic nature of labour, and Agamben’s rendering of her critique in his narrative of the origins of biopolitics, would be more complete if this were taken into account.

Taking a distinctly Agambenian tack, and returning to Aristotle himself, it is also possible to discern the elementary importance of the question of labour at the foundation of the Athenian *polis*. In the introduction to *Homo Sacer*, Agamben uses Aristotle’s *The Politics* to counterpose

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<sup>73</sup> *The Human Condition*, p.37. (My italics)

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p.83-84.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p.98.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p.84.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p.100.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p.32.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p.46.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p.41.



natural *zōē* and the politically qualified *bios* that takes inherent priority.<sup>81</sup> In addition to the theoretical exclusions of ‘bare’ life found by Agamben and Arendt, the Athenian *polis* was famously marked by the physical exclusions of women, children, foreigners, and slaves. Each of these exclusions is described by Aristotle in *The Politics*; women, children and slaves find themselves excluded on the grounds of their nonexistent, or merely inadequate, capacity for rational deliberation<sup>82</sup>, whilst the foreign-born fall afoul of the ‘practical’ requirement of citizen descent on both sides of any individual’s ancestry.<sup>83</sup> In attempting to sketch further the problematic nature of labour, discerned by Arendt, the case of the slave’s exclusion from the *polis* proves doubly instructive. Firstly, early on in *The Politics*, Aristotle founds his distinction between master and slave, ruler and ruled, on the material, and arguably *biopolitical*, criterion of the latter’s physical capacity for labour:

For the element that can use its intelligence to look ahead is by nature ruler and by nature master, whilst that which has the bodily strength to do the actual work is by nature a slave, one of those ruled.<sup>84</sup>

It is true that, in Aristotle’s argument, slavery is not linked to the process of economic production *per se*<sup>85</sup>, its purpose is rather to ‘minister to action’ and facilitate the good life of his master.<sup>86</sup> However, in his chapter introduction to ‘The Slave as a Tool’, Trevor Saunders challenges Aristotle’s ‘bias in favour of a “gentlemanly life”’ and presents the historical counterfactual that

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<sup>81</sup> *HS*, p.2.

<sup>82</sup> Aristotle, *The Politics* (Tr. T. A Sinclair, revised by T. J. Saunders); London; Penguin Classics, 1992. Book 1, Ch.13; p.95.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, Book 3, Ch. 2; p.171-172.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, Book 1, Ch. 2; p.57.

<sup>85</sup> Arendt also advances this line of argument in *The Human Condition*, p.84.

<sup>86</sup> *The Politics*, Book 1, Ch. 4; p.65.

slaves were, in fact, a central element of economic production ‘in factories and mines and on farms’.<sup>87</sup> Therefore, it is possible to recognise the presence of labour, or rather physical labour-power, as a defining characteristic of the excluded slave whilst, at the same time, locating the slave within the system of economic production that forms the material condition of possibility of the *polis* itself.

The second echo of labour’s difficult relationship to the political realm is found in the chapter ‘Ought Workers to be Citizens?’, in which Aristotle dismisses the argument that those engaged in labour could be included in the *polis* as citizens, instead insisting that the nature of their work would not leave them with the time necessary to properly fulfil their civic obligations:

But the best state will not make the mechanic a citizen. But even if he is to be a citizen, then at any rate what we have called the virtue of a citizen cannot be ascribed to everyone, nor yet to free men alone, but *simply to those who are in fact relieved of necessary tasks*.<sup>88</sup>

Whilst Aristotle makes his point with reference to free time, it should be clear that such free time is necessarily bought by the expropriation of the labour of others. Aristotle’s position that it is ‘impossible, while living the life of a mechanic or hireling, to occupy oneself as virtue demands’<sup>89</sup> is a corollary of the fact that the citizens of the Athenian *polis* enjoyed the freedom to occupy themselves ‘as virtue demands’ precisely insofar as they enjoyed the fruits of their mechanics’ labour, of their slaves’ ‘minister[ing] to action’ in the name of their master’s comfort.

In the same way in which bare *zōē* forms the condition of possibility of man’s *bios* and

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p.64.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, Book 3, Ch. 5.; p.184. (My italics)

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

yet remains excluded from it, the expropriated labour of the slave provides the material condition of possibility of the *polis* itself, in terms of quarried marble and paved roads amongst other things, and of the citizens within, of the food they eat, the clothes they wear and the houses in which they live, yet goes on to form the very criterion by which the participation of the worker in the *polis* itself is disallowed. This compelling structural parallel is no coincidence. The management of the problem of labour, and the management of the expropriation of labour, have always been central concerns to the foundation and constitution of the *polis*. The aim of this argument is not to reduce the nature of Athenian citizenship to a crude economic foundation but rather, in the spirit of this entire piece, to suggest that recognising the significance of the problem of labour to the foundation of the *polis* deepens our understanding of the issue, and opens up an alternative answer to Agamben's *arcanum imperii* argument by identifying the problematic nature of labour as a key component of the 'ancient secrets' of sovereign power that Agamben is concerned with.

By arguing for the centrality of the problem of labour to the original constitution of the Athenian *polis*, we achieve more than a simple vindication of a materialist historical analysis. One further consequence is that Agamben's references to the *arcanum imperii* of sovereign power become more complicated. In order to grasp the full nature and implications of this challenge, it is essential to understand the two main functions Agamben's *arcanum imperii* motif appears designed to fulfil. Firstly, it works to distance Agamben from what he sees as the fatal misdirection at the heart of Marxist and anarchist critiques of power, and their revolutionary strategies. By locating the nexus of sovereign power deep within the metaphysical conditions of Western politics, Agamben can argue for a division which precedes the conflict of opposing social classes and, by virtue of his more accurate analysis, avoids the associated theory of the

state which Agamben describes as the ‘reef on which the revolutions of our century have been shipwrecked.’<sup>90</sup> Secondly, Agamben’s argument also allows him to open up a deep chronology, locating the headwaters of modern biopolitics within the ontological conditions of pre-historic humanity. This retrospective location forms the basis upon which Agamben makes the transition, as discussed by Passavant, from his earlier economic determinism to a position in which the sovereign state gains a determining power over all within its boundaries. However, our previous excursus into the problem of labour at the foundation of the *polis* indicates that, *pace* both Passavant *and* Agamben, the distinction between each period of the latter’s work may have been overstated.

To the extent to which Agamben’s *arcanum imperii* locates a determining cleavage in the *zōē/bios* distinction, he does find a division both more basic and, given that its fault line runs through each individual human being, a more pernicious division than Marx’s class distinction or Schmitt’s friend-enemy divide. However, the alienation of man from his own labour, the *sine qua non* of the worker and therefore the basis of the class division of which Agamben speaks, is equally fundamental and pernicious. When Agamben argues for the biopolitical fracture preceding any class divide, he neglects not only the fact that the alienation of labour does so too, but also the fact that, if we are to follow Aristotle and Arendt, as he does in order to fully construct his own analysis, then we are compelled to posit the connection of labour to ‘bare’ life, to which it is inseparably attached and, as a result, equally inadmissible to the *polis*. Whilst Agamben’s chronology allows him to criticise Marxist analysis for casting aside the ancient secrets of the state too easily in relation to modern economic developments, he fails to mention that both theories share a common premise in the form of the problematic relationship of labour to the concepts of freedom and political community.

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<sup>90</sup> HS, p.12.

Finally, in order to maintain the full autonomy of an ancient sovereign power when faced with the modern mode of economic production, Agamben would have to provide a distinctive account of the ability of established power structures to resist encroachment, assimilation, or usurpation by others. Yet this very process forms a central component of his earlier theory of the state, whose institutions are 'emptied' and colonised by the growing power of spectacular capitalism. Further, similar motifs can be found within the work of each of Agamben's theoretical inspirations; in Foucault's theory of biopower's encroachment onto the territory of sovereignty<sup>91</sup>; in Arendt's theorisation of the penetration of 'the social' into the pre-existing public realm<sup>92</sup>; in Debord's notion of the 'spectacle' as a system that disguises the fact that it has 'only just arrived'<sup>93</sup>; and not least in Agamben's own later theory of the growing assumption of sovereign power by the scientific-medical establishment. In short, there are substantial impediments to Agamben's deployment of the *arcanum imperii* argument as a critique of Marxism, not least that the ancient secret of sovereignty itself appears to reflect the centrality of labour and relations of production to the original constitution of political order. These impediments also form grounds for positing a deeper continuity between the early and later projects of Agamben, the difference in tone and emphasis disguising a consistent occupation with the same object of study. It now remains for us to draw the implications of the re-integration of the Marxian analyses of the problem of labour for Agamben's understanding of possible political action.

#### **4 - Potentiality, Power, and *Praxis*: Re-reading Agamben's 'New Politics'**

Agamben's discussion of political action in *Homo Sacer* begins with an engagement with

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<sup>91</sup> Foucault, *Society...*, p.241.

<sup>92</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p.46-47.

<sup>93</sup> Debord, *Comments...*, p.10.

the notion of ‘constituting power’, the primary, anomic force which creates a legal-political order – as distinct from the ‘constituted power’ which, in Benjaminian parlance, struggles to preserve it.<sup>94</sup> It is from Antonio Negri’s notion of constituting power as an ontological, rather than political, phenomenon that Agamben takes his cue to return to ‘first philosophy’:

The strength of Negri’s book [*Il Potere Costituente*] lies...in the final perspective it opens insofar as it shows how constituting power, when conceived in all its radicality ceases to be a strictly political concept and necessarily presents itself as a category of ontology...[this] unresolved dialectic between constituting power and constituted power opens the way for a new articulation of the relation between potentiality and actuality<sup>95</sup>

As long as potentiality and actuality maintain themselves in any form of relation, that is, share any relational boundary, it will be impossible to escape from a sovereign power predicated upon the imposition of and decision upon these borders<sup>96</sup>. Following this philosophical track, Agamben returns to Aristotle’s treatment of the relationship of potentiality and actuality to find a formula for escape. Following Aristotle, Agamben acknowledges potentiality as both a force *to be* and simultaneously a force *not to be*, and challenges the pre-existing ontological priority of the actual over the potential which has formed the foundation of Western metaphysics.<sup>97</sup> In doing so, Agamben is seeking to disrupt the conceptual boundaries between the material and the (im)potential, in such a way as to posit each as completely separate, and thus abolish the

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<sup>94</sup> *HS*, p.39-41.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p.43-44.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p.45-46.

relational border which necessarily calls forth a sovereign decision upon its content.<sup>98</sup> Agamben finds a model for the resulting concept of political action in the form of Herbert Melville's eponymous 'Bartleby', whose ultimate passivity and resistance to the sovereign decision, embodied in his repeated mantra of 'I would prefer not to' in answer to every demand made of him, retains the full power of his potentiality precisely in his suspension of deciding upon or enacting any possible application of it.<sup>99</sup> Taken alongside his call for a new human ontology, Agamben's use of Bartleby and his radical refusal to perpetuate the sovereign decision, presents us with a distinctively philosophical model of resistance. However, whilst undoubtedly a seamless piece of thought, we must question whether Agamben's notion of the emancipatory potential of first philosophy risks condemning his innovative biopolitical analysis to an insurmountable practical impotence.

In his wide-ranging pluralist critique of Agamben, William Connolly argues that the former's theories only serve to create a 'historical impasse', and that, devoid of any concrete proposal to overcome the logic of sovereignty, Agamben leaves the reader trapped in 'a paradox that [Agamben] cannot imagine how to transcend'.<sup>100</sup> Connolly also notes the way in which Agamben's theoretical elegance is bought at the expense of a much messier, material reality.<sup>101</sup> Agamben's deployment of Bartleby as an instructive case is also swiftly disassembled upon its application to the realities of sovereign power by Paul Passavant, who notes the simplicity with which Agamben's sovereign can 'decid[e] to kill or otherwise incapacitate the recalcitrant Bartleby'.<sup>102</sup> Whilst acknowledging the potential effectiveness of the Bartleby model in a

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<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p.47.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p.48.

<sup>100</sup> W. Connolly, 'The Complexity of Sovereignty', in, J. Edkins, V. Pin-Fat and M. Shapiro (eds.), *Sacred Lives: Power in Global Politics*; New York; Routledge, 2004. p.26-27.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p.29-30.

<sup>102</sup> Passavant, *The Contradictory State...*, p.159.

Foucauldian system of dispersive/‘decentred’ power structures, Passavant correctly notes the incongruity between Agamben’s description of the architecture of contemporary sovereign power and his plainly inadequate model for political action.<sup>103</sup>

One way to account for the difficulties encountered by Agamben in his search for a means of resistance to power is to examine the necessity of its philosophical base. When faced with the abject existence of the bare life he describes, Agamben is forced to trace the roots of his phenomenon back into an ancient metaphysical riddle. Yet the aim of this essay has been to describe precisely the way in which Agambenian bare life is not so ‘bare’ at all, it is actually inextricably linked with the capacity and materiality of *labour*, and, if we accept the (re)integration of labour into the concept of bare life, it becomes possible to discern a potential form of political action commensurable with the concept of *praxis*. This very transition echoes in microcosm the transformation of abstract philosophy into concrete social theory which formed the goal of Marx’s re-orientation of the Hegelian dialectic.<sup>104</sup> In the spirit of Marx’s eighth ‘thesis on Feuerbach’, that the ‘mysteries which mislead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice’<sup>105</sup>, we are seeking to contend that Agamben’s ontologisation of the condition of bare life results from his failure to grasp its inherent connection to the social problem of labour. That, as opposed to a philosophical mystification, which necessarily follows its own momentum and delivers him over to an equally mystified theoretical solution, Agamben’s analysis could benefit from the recognition that bare life is tied to a material, socio-economic phenomenon and, as such, can also be followed to a material solution.

In fact, it is possible to conceive of a material and economic contestation, and

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<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p.159-160.

<sup>104</sup> The best analysis of this transition, and its crucial components, that I have yet come across is Marcuse’s in, H. Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.); London; Routledge, 2000., p.258-262.

<sup>105</sup> K. Marx, ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, in, *Marx/Engels Selected Works in One Volume*; Moscow; Progress Publishers, 1968. p.30.



revolutionary transformation in our current relations of production, as the necessary prerequisite to Agamben's philosophical revolution. One need not be a Marxian materialist to acknowledge that the organisation of the economy forms the primary determinant of the individual's everyday life, of his relationship with his own labour, the product of his labour, and his relationships with others. Further, one need not be a brutal cynic to imagine that, of the seven billion souls inhabiting the earth, only a small proportion may be able to conceive of a state of ontological non-relationality as the precondition for an escape from sovereign power. However, if this 'labour thesis' linking bare life to alienated and expropriated labour were to be accepted, then it is also possible to accept the corollary that a change in the conditions of labour can also equal a change in the conditions of life, both bare and qualified. Ultimately, the reorganisation of the economy must itself constitute a reorganisation of social relations, given the fundamental symbiosis of economic and social life under conditions of advanced industrial capitalism. The ordering and re-ordering of production and distribution networks being one aspect of the societal whole that is open to intervention through collective human agency, we conclude with the thought that radical social change along these lines is not only continually possible, but also that the subsequent reorganisation of the ways in which we interact with each other and with our own nature, with our own *being* and the being of others, would constitute nothing less than the very ontological transvaluation Agamben is striving towards.

Finally, we are also convinced of the advantages that theorists within the Marxist tradition will be able to gain through a deeper engagement with Agamben's biopolitics. Two immediate points of interest present themselves for discussion; 'bare life' as an originary point of fracture within the subject, and the 'ontological renegotiation' as a concept that gestures beyond

the twentieth-century fixation on the revolutionary 'event' towards a subtler and more sustainable understanding of revolution.

A key part of *Homo Sacer's* impact upon its audience stems from Agamben's consideration of distinctly modern phenomena (concentration camps, mass denationalisation, states of exception, etc.) and their development, or rather the development of the logics that condition their historical appearance, to some of the earliest problems and paradoxes that accompanied the birth of man as the 'political animal' in our distant past. Accepting the idea of a structural identity between bare life and alienated labour has a valuable implication for Marxist political theory; it elevates the key object of its study beyond its existence as a contingent by-product of a specific economic formation and returns it to Marx's earlier focus on the much more fundamental category of man's 'species-being'. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, Marx not only contends that '[l]abour is life'<sup>106</sup>, but also that changing man's relation to the product of his labour will ultimately change the nature of his constructed reality to the point that '[man] sees his own reflection in a world which he has constructed'<sup>107</sup>. Again, the almost perfect dovetail with Agamben's notion of an 'ontological renegotiation' is too compelling to ignore.

The final point that we would like to suggest as a useful Agambenian supplement to Marxian theory is in the use of the 'ontological renegotiation' to indicate a potential for a reconceived notion of 'revolution'. Agamben criticises twentieth-century revolutions for failing to comprehend that states of emergency/exception, and the sovereign decision that such states necessarily entail, only repeat the power-structures against which they have struggled<sup>108</sup>. Whilst there is no room here for the greater discussion of the fetish that exists within the Marxist tradition for a romanticised revolutionary 'moment' it is hard not to concur that every

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<sup>106</sup> in, T.B. Bottomore (ed.), *Karl Marx: Early Writings*; New York; McGraw-Hill, 1964. p.83.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p.128.

<sup>108</sup> *HS*, p.12.

historically-actualised ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ has resulted in massive human tragedy and degenerated into fairly effective counter-revolutionary states, after radical early periods. We believe more consideration should be paid to the possibility that it is our faith in single, pivotal, revolutionary ‘moments’ that contains the seed of post-revolutionary disappointment and reaction that has become the bitter staple of state-level revolutionary experiments conducted in Marx’s name. By moving the terrain of revolution away from the capture (or formation) of state power, toward a transcendence and re-foundation of human *being*, Agamben reminds us of the possibility that the revolution may be a product of the New Man; rather than *vice versa*, which was the position of the dominant strains of the last century’s revolutionary thought. In the absence of any obvious collective agent of change, and with the vast concentration of economic and political power in contemporary Western societies, it should also be a relief to find an avenue of revolutionary change that has not already been materially precluded for decades.

Identifying the precise structure and mechanics of the kind of radical socio-economic shift that could create the Agambenian ontological renegotiation must, as yet, remain an object (and objective) of further research. It seems clear that a sequence of changes to the nature of production and the nature of our social relations (and relation to our own production), in the form of increased co-operative ownership of enterprise, a new public understanding of ‘the common’ and the appropriation of resources to it, the progressive redefinition of ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres to end the arbitrary separation of economic life from the realm of collective political action, and myriad similar reforms, could have the potential to cumulatively re-define the lived experience of human *being*. It is our contention that these economic changes are, in our current circumstances, the closest route we can find to the end-points of both Marx and Agamben – the final abolition of the ancient and pernicious intra-subjective fracture that both have made a prime

object of their studies.

The aim of this piece was to provide a reading of key elements of Agamben's *Homo Sacer* that brings out the proximity and utility of Agamben to theorists of the radical left. Insofar as it has explored the materialist foundations of the theorists upon whom Agamben explicitly based his biopolitical project, identified the ground upon which an articulation of bare life and alienated labour can be made, demonstrated the centrality of labour and relations of economic production to the constitution of even the most ancient systems of political power, and gestured towards the kind of revolutionary social change that forms the implicit presupposition of Agamben's ultimately metaphysical eschatology, we hope to have helped further open the way for other, even conflicting, attempts to bring Agamben (back) into an explicit relation with revolutionary social theory. We have also made a reciprocal case for Agambenian concepts to supplement Marxist theory in areas where we feel Agamben's work enhances the latter. The Agamben-Marx relationship is one that we feel remains under-explored by scholars of both, and will yield substantial material for both theory and *praxis* for years to come.