THE POLITICAL ONTOLOGY OF GIORGIO AGAMBEN: BARE LIFE AND THE GOVERNMENTAL MACHINE

A dissertation presented by

GERMAN EDUARDO PRIMERA VILLAMIZAR

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of PhD.
In Political Philosophy

Supervised by

Mark Devenney
Daniel Steuer

UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES
February 2016
Declaration

I declare that the research contained in this thesis, unless otherwise formally indicated within the text, is the original work of the author. The thesis has not been previously submitted to this or any other university for a degree, and does not incorporate any material already submitted for a degree.

_______________________________________________
German Eduardo Primera Villamizar
February 1st 2016
‘My face is my outside: a point of indifference with respect to all of my properties, with respect to what is properly one’s own and what is common, to what is internal and what is external. In the face, I exist with all of my properties (my being brown, tall, pale, proud, emotional...); but this happens without any of these properties essentially identifying me or belonging to me. The face is the threshold of de-propiation and of de-identification of all manners and of all qualities – a threshold in which only the latter become purely communicable. And only where I find a face do I encounter an exteriority and does an outside happen to me.

Be only your face. Go to the threshold. Do not remain the subjects of your properties or faculties, do not stay beneath them: rather, go with them, in them, beyond them.’

Agamben, ‘The Face’ in Means Without End

[To Carole Blomme and the wonderful friends I have made in Brighton]
CONTENTS PAGE

Acknowledgments........................................................................................................................................v
Abstract..................................................................................................................................................vi
Chapter 1 ................................................................................................................................................1
Introduction: The Work of Giorgio Agamben ......................................................................................... 1
Chapter 2 ................................................................................................................................................9
Paradigms, Signatures, and Philosophical Archaeology ................................................................. 9
  Capturing the General Motivation of the Method: On Agamben's Reading of Derrida.................. 10
  The Idea of the Arche: The Moment of Arising .............................................................................. 16
  On Paradigms: Between Singularity and Exemplarity ................................................................. 23
  On Signatures ..................................................................................................................................... 29
  Philosophical Archaeology ............................................................................................................. 38
Chapter 3 .............................................................................................................................................. 41
The Common, the Proper, and the Zone of Indistinction: On the Linguistic-Metaphysical Machine in Agamben's Thought ............................................................ 41
  On the Isolation of the Improper: A Critique of Signification .................................................... 43
  The Common and the Proper: How do Signatures Work? ............................................................ 53
Chapter 4 .............................................................................................................................................. 61
The Paradox of Sovereignty: Bare life and its Paradigms............................................................. 61
  The Paradox of Sovereignty: Between Benjamin and Schmitt .................................................. 62
  Bare Life and its Paradigms: On the Figure of Homo Sacer ....................................................... 74
Chapter 5 .............................................................................................................................................. 86
The Signature of Secularisation: Economic Theology, Government and Bare Life ............... 86
  An Archaeology of Economic Theology: Oikonomia and the Fracture Between God’s Being and His Action .................................................................................................................. 89
  The Providential Machine: On the Collateral Effect as an Act of Government ......................... 97
  An Archaeology of Glory and the Production of Bare Life ....................................................... 101
  The Production of Bare Life and the Governmental Machine .................................................... 105
Chapter 6 ............................................................................................................................................. 112
Neoliberalism, Governmentality, and Sovereignty: The Lessons of The
*Kingdom and the Glory* ......................................................................................................................... 112
  Agamben and Foucault: Two Genealogies of Governmentality .......................... 115
  Neoliberalism: Rearticulating Sovereignty and Governance ......................... 127

Chapter 7 .................................................................................................................................................. 134

Life, Biopolitics, and Inoperativity ................................................................................................. 134
  Foucault’s Notion of Life and the Enigma of Biopolitics .................................. 135
  The Signature of Life and the Biopolitical Machine .......................................... 144
  The Politics of Inoperativity: Use and Destituent Power ............................ 155

Conclusions .............................................................................................................................................. 165

Bibliography ........................................................................................................................................ 170
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Firstly I would like to thank my supervisors Mark Devenney and Daniel Steuer who, throughout my three years of study, have provided an insightful theoretical guidance, support and inspiration. Their commitment to my research was beyond expectations. I would also like to thank my colleagues and friends from the Critical Studies Research Group who have created an intellectually stimulating environment. I have received constructive criticism in the conferences and work-in-progress seminars organised by the CSRG where I presented my work.

Also I must thank Lars Cornelissen, Afxentis Afxentiou and Tim Huzar for the critical and constructive feedback they have given me, as well as for their generous editing and proofreading. I am grateful to Mark Able and Tom Hickey for providing me with a thoughtful critique of some of these chapters. I would also like to express my appreciation for The Centre for Applied Philosophy, Politics and Ethics for organising series of lectures, conferences and reading groups that made my time in Brighton a truly gratifying intellectual experience, thanks Bob Brecher! Finally I have to thank the School of Humanities and the Doctoral College for the Arts and Humanities for their financial support to my PhD.
Abstract

This thesis develops an account of Agamben’s philosophical archaeology through an analysis of the notions of signatures, paradigms and the archē, and through an examination of Agamben’s critique of both Western metaphysics and deconstruction. It claims that Agamben’s philosophical archaeology and his analysis of the differentiating logic of Western metaphysics constitute the necessary framework from which the Homo Sacer project should be examined. In this sense this project rearticulates Agamben’s works on signification, language and ontology with his archaeology of power. Indeed, my thesis reconstructs Agamben’s critique of metaphysics in order to bring together the two parts of the Homo Sacer project through an analysis of the production of bare life: the archaeology of the signature of Sovereignty and the archaeology of governmentality. It argues that throughout the work of Agamben there is no rupture in terms of his treatment of power but rather that there are different emphases that are combined in his analysis of the governmental machine. Finally, this thesis uses the theoretical and methodological frameworks that it develops to address the relation between biopolitics, the governmental machine, Agamben’s account of ontology, and bare life. To conclude, this thesis offers an examination of Agamben’s notion of resistance, that is, the politics of inoperativity through an analysis of the central categories that constitute his attempt at rendering inoperative the signatures of Life and Power: Destituent Power, form-of-life, and Use.

Key Words:
Giorgio Agamben, Political Ontology, Biopolitics, Sovereignty, Governmentality, Bare life
[T]he genuine philosophical element in every work, whether it be a work of art, science or thought, is its capacity to be developed, which Ludwig Feuerbach defined as *Entwicklungsfähigkeit*. It is precisely when one follows such a principle that the difference between what belongs to the author of a work and what is attributable to the interpreter becomes as essential as it is difficult to grasp. I have therefore preferred to take the risk of attributing to the texts of others what began its elaboration with them, rather than run the reverse risk of appropriating thoughts or research paths that do not belong to me. (Agamben, 2009a:8)

In the series of lectures published under the title of *On Time and Being* Heidegger claims that the task of his philosophy has been to trace ‘Being to its own from Appropriation – by way of looking through true time without regard to the relation of Being to beings’ (1972:24). To think Being without beings, for Heidegger, means ‘to think Being without regard to metaphysics’ (1972:24). And yet, Heidegger considers that ‘a regard for metaphysics still prevails even in the intention to overcome metaphysics. Therefore, our task is to cease all overcoming, and leave metaphysics to itself’ (1972:24). The philosophy of Giorgio Agamben, although indebted to Heidegger in decisive ways, intends to prove Heidegger’s strategy wrong: it is a critique of Western metaphysics that aims at its suspension, at rendering inoperative the ‘signatures’ that control the intelligibility of Western politics and culture. In other words, it precisely aims at overcoming metaphysics.

Nevertheless, if leaving metaphysics to itself is not the right strategy for Agamben, neither is the attempt to destabilise it from the inside. Indeed, it is not by reversing the terms of the hierarchy of the phonē/logos, identity/difference, signified/signifier oppositions that the metaphysical machine can be overthrown. For Agamben, phonē and logos, identity and difference, signified and signifier are all part of the
metaphysical machine. Hence, it is rather by suspending the very differentiating structures through which metaphysics operates that we can go beyond metaphysics, whatever this ‘beyond’ might look like. And yet, the philosophical practice that aims at rendering inoperative the differentiating structures of metaphysics should avoid, at all cost, negativity. In *Language and Death* Agamben criticises the metaphysical tradition for being based on negativity. Throughout the history of Western metaphysics, language and death are the essential categories through which the human being has been thought. Thus, as Agamben notes, ‘humans appear as both mortal and speaking’ (1993b:xii). Crucially, for Agamben, ‘both the “faculty” for language and the “faculty” for death, inasmuch as they open for humanity the most proper dwelling place, reveal and disclose this same dwelling place as always already permeated by and founded in negativity’ (1993b:xii).

If Derrida’s powerful critique of metaphysics targets the idea of presence, Agamben contends that the removal of presence – whether that be the removal of the voice, of being, or of the signified – is still trapped in the metaphysical machine in the form of negation. But, what is the underlying structure of metaphysics? How does Agamben propose to render the metaphysical machine inoperative? And, how is it possible to think language and Being beyond the ideas of death and negation? Or, simply put: what is the philosophical method developed by Agamben and what can it tell us about his philosophical system and his political thought?

A reflection on method, writes Agamben in the preface to *The Signature of All Things*, ‘usually follows practical application, rather than preceding it. It is a matter then, of ultimate and penultimate thoughts’ (2009a:7). And yet, for Agamben, ‘in philosophy like in art, no conclusion is possible, you can only abandon your work’ (2013c:1). With the publication of *L’uso dei corpi* (2014a) we now have access to the entirety of the *Homo Sacer* project, which has come to an end, or to paraphrase Agamben, has been abandoned. A new vantage point from which to reread Agamben’s oeuvre is
now accessible. Not only his method but also – and as a consequence of this – his political and philosophical thought can been seen in a clearer light.

The general purpose of this dissertation is to rethink the notions of life and power – two of the central themes in Agamben’s work – through a reconstruction of his philosophical method and the examination of his critique of Western metaphysics. It is commonly asserted, especially within the field of political theory, that there are, as it were, two Agambens. In some debates, Agamben’s early and influential writings on signification, language, and metaphysics are disregarded, ignored or superseded by the wide reception of the first volume of the Homo Sacer project, which, in turn, is frequently read in isolation not only from Agamben’s earlier writings but also from the other seven volumes that constitute the project. Others, such Antonio Negri, read Agamben’s work in its entirety but claim that there is a rupture between the themes and the philosophical method developed by Agamben:

It seems that there are two Agambens. There is the one who lingers in the existential, destining, and terrifying shadows, where he is perpetually forced into a confrontation with the idea of death. And there is another Agamben, who, through the immersion in the work of philology and linguistic analysis, attains the power of being (that is, he rediscovers pieces or elements of being, by manipulating and constructing them). (Negri, 2007:117)

Against Negri’s reading of Agamben, the underlying premise of the thesis is that there is an essential continuity throughout the work of Agamben. More importantly, I argue that it is only by revisiting Agamben’s critique of signification and metaphysics and by examining his reconstruction of the archaeological method that a comprehensive understanding of the notions of life and power can be attained. Even though Agamben claims that ‘every written work can be regarded as the prologue (or rather, the broken cast) of a work never penned’ (1993a:3), and although he frequently states that what remains unsaid and unexplored in his works constitutes the point of departure for what is developed in another, it is also the
case that Agamben has spent little time in making these connections explicit. For this reason, an immanent reading of Agamben’s oeuvre is pertinent: one that critically and retrospectively examines his works, one that reads Agamben against himself and one that does not merely show how certain concepts move and operate through Agamben’s works, but rather one that shows that Agamben’s latest ontologico-political writings are accessible through their origins in his earlier writings on signification and metaphysics only inasmuch as these writings themselves are made accessible by Agamben’s recent works. In other words, an immanent reading of Agamben’s work cannot take the form of a systematic and a gradual reading that trace the chronological development of concepts and themes throughout his entire oeuvre. Rather, it should take the form of an archaeological reading, one that rethinks Agamben’s critique of metaphysics and his philosophical method from the perspective of the Homo Sacer project and that inversely uses his early writings on signification to shed light on the ontological implications of his recent political works. It is only through such an immanent critical reading of Agamben – i.e. by tracing these continuities and establishing connections between Agamben’s writings – that this thesis develops three main arguments:

1. Agamben’s philosophical archaeology aims at rendering inoperative the signatures that control the intelligibility of Western culture. It does so by tracing the archē of discursive formations through the examination of paradigms. Archaeology, for Agamben is the search for the archē, which is not a chronological point or an origin that can be situated in time. Rather it is a force that continues to act in the present, the ‘moment of arising’ of a particular phenomenon. Agamben intends to track these moments through the construction of paradigms, which are examples that by suspending their own singularity, make intelligible a larger political context. These paradigms are distributed, organised and grouped together through time and across discursive formations by large-scale statements, that Agamben calls signatures.
Life, Sovereignty, Power, Glory, and Secularisation\(^1\) are treated by Agamben not as concepts, but as signatures that control the intelligibility of Western politics. Unlike Foucault’s notion of statements, for Agamben, signatures are related to the question of Being. The aim of Chapter 2 is to examine Agamben’s philosophical archaeology in these terms and to present a general account of the way in which the three main elements of archaeology – the paradigm, signatures and the archē – are related. I argue that Agamben’s archaeology could be read as a response to his critique of Derrida first developed in his 1977 *Stanzas* (1993c).

Chapter 3 provides a more nuanced account of the way in which signatures work and control the intelligibility of discursive formations. Here I engage with William Watkin’s analysis of the economy of the common and the proper as the inner logic through which signatures become operative. The common is that which appears as the ground of a phenomenon, the founding and unconditioned element of discursive formations. The proper is what is founded, the conditioned element. Paradoxically, what Agamben shows in his analysis of the signatures that control the operativity of discursive formations, is that it is the proper that founds the common, that is to say, it is the founded element that founds its own founding ground. For Agamben, the common and the proper collapse into a zone of indistinction. Unlike Watkin, I trace this structure back to Agamben’s critique of signification in *Stanzas* in order to locate, within Agamben’s analysis of the improper and of the metaphor, the distinguishing feature of the economy of the common and the proper: the moment of inclusive exclusion.

The aim of this section, then, is to provide an account of philosophical archaeology and of the differentiating logic of Western metaphysics as the necessary framework from which the *Homo Sacer* project should be examined. These chapters not only set

\(^1\) Throughout this dissertation signatures are capitalised so that they can be distinguished from concepts.
the scene for the arguments to come in my dissertation but also, in themselves, provide an analysis of the philosophical system that underpins Agamben’s notions of ontology and politics.

2. The *Homo Sacer* project is an archaeological investigation that aims at making explicit and rendering inoperative the signatures of Life and Power. Life is a signature that Agamben traces through a multiplicity of paradigms, all of which, suspended in their singularity, make intelligible the fact that Life operates through an inclusive exclusion of life from its form, or what Agamben calls bare life. All of the different paradigms that Agamben presents to track this moment of inclusive exclusion – *homo sacer*, the *zoë-bios* distinction, the muselmann, the overcomatose – are examples of this logic and they play only a strategic function: making intelligible the operations of Life through the economy of the common and the proper. As such, bare life does not exist; it has no content of its own. It is rather an index, an indeterminable element, a logic, an economy. Yet, what is crucial in Agamben’s project is that this signature founds and animates the signature of Power in the West. Power operates as a bipolar machine, it articulates the transcendent pole of sovereignty and the immanent pole of administration, kingdom and government, *auctoritas* and *potestas*, political theology and economic theology. This is the structure of what Agamben calls the governmental machine.

The aim of Chapter 4 is to examine sovereignty – as the first pole of the governmental machine – through an analysis of the paradox of sovereignty, of the state of exception and of the production of bare life. Here, my central argument is that Agamben ontologises sovereignty through the Aristotelian category of potentiality and, at the same time, rejects Schmitt’s decisionism through Benjamin’s notion of undecidability. Moreover, it is claimed that from *State of Exception* Agamben makes clear that his account of Power does not privilege the law and the
juridical apparatus of the state, responding to common criticisms of his analysis of sovereign power.

Chapter 5 focuses on the other pole of the governmental machine, namely governmentality, and proposes that it is the production of bare life that brings together sovereignty and governmentality, the kingdom and the government. In order to do so, I reconstruct Agamben’s archaeology of economic theology as developed in The Kingdom and the Glory, tracing the signature of Secularisation to explain the overwhelming domination of the economy and the operations of the governmental machine. I focus on the paradigm of oikonomia and its implications for the understanding of the articulation between sovereignty and governmentality. I conclude this chapter by relocating Agamben’s account of the production of bare life within the structure of the governmental machine, a task not undertaken by Agamben or his commentators.

Finally, Chapter 6 underscores the relevance of Agamben’s archaeology of Power to the understanding of governance, governmentality, and neoliberalism. The underlying question this chapter answers is: what exactly is brought about by Agamben’s archaeology of economic theology – in terms of our understanding of political power and of the articulation between government and sovereignty – that was not already present in Foucault’s genealogy of governmentality?

As a whole, this part brings together the two parts of the Homo Sacer project through an analysis of the production of bare life: the archaeology of the signature of Sovereignty and the archaeology of governmentality. It argues that throughout the work of Agamben there is no rupture in terms of his treatment of power but rather that there are different emphases that are combined in his analysis of the governmental machine.
3. The notion of life to which Agamben’s biopolitical theory refers is the signature of Life and not the modern notion of life – which is linked to the emergence of the population that characterises the Foucauldian approach to biopolitics. Since the signature of Life determines the inclusive exclusion of life from its form, for Agamben, biopolitics is a power over life, that is, a power that separates and divides life. Hence biopolitics cannot be understood as a power of life. Indeed, for Agamben, the biopolitical machine cannot be deactivated from the inside, that is to say, by opposing life (creative, productive, precarious, vulnerable) to the power that divides it, as this will result in the strengthening of the differentiating structures through which biopolitics operates, and not in its suspension. In others words, biopolitics is, by definition, a power that divides life against itself. What has been called ‘affirmative biopolitics’ makes, from Agamben’s perspective, no sense at all. Chapter 7 presents this account of biopolitics by opposing Foucault’s understanding of life to Agamben’s approach to the signature of Life. This chapter uses the theoretical and methodological frameworks developed throughout the previous chapters to address the relation between biopolitics, the governmental machine, Agamben’s account of ontology, and bare life. I conclude this chapter by examining Agamben’s notion of resistance, that is, the politics of inoperativity through an analysis of the central categories that constitute his attempt at rendering inoperative the signature of Life and Power: Destituent Power, form-of-life, and Use.

Through the development of these three main arguments I aim at underscoring the relevance of Agamben’s work for a critique of contemporary neoliberal politics and, at the same time, at contributing to the current debates on biopolitics, governmentality and sovereignty.
Chapter 2
Paradigms, Signatures, and Philosophical Archaeology

This chapter provides an account of philosophical archaeology as the overall method of Agamben's works. To do so, I focus on the central categories that constitute this method: the notion of the archē, the paradigm, and the signature. I contend that Agamben's philosophical archaeology aims at rendering inoperative the signatures that control the intelligibility of Western culture by tracing the 'moments of arising' of discursive formations through the examination of paradigms. Agamben's archaeology, in this sense, is a form of metaphysical critique that aims at revealing the contingency of the 'signatures' that sanction a common operativity and intelligibility of discursive structures. Any analysis of Agamben's thought that fails to take into account its archaeological character, and to understand what he means by that, remains incomplete, if not mistaken. This argument implies that Agamben has developed a method of his own. There are important differences between Foucault's genealogy and Agamben's philosophical archaeology. Although Agamben uses the terms genealogy and archaeology interchangeably, I will refer to Agamben's method as an archaeology, following Agamben's own reflection on his method in The Signature of All Things (2009).

In the opening section, through a reading of Agamben's critique of Derrida, I will introduce the general purpose of Agamben's archaeology as an attempt to take a 'step-backwards-beyond metaphysics'. Section two will be concerned with the question of ontological anchoring and the 'moment of arising', which is central to Agamben's archaeological project. Finally, I examine the meaning and the function

---

2 Agamben uses interchangeably the terms Genealogy and Archaeology in several of his works. The subtitle of the Kingdom and the Glory (2011) is 'For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government' and yet the last chapter of the book is entitled 'the Archaeology of Glory'. Similarly, the book Opus Dei (2013a) has as a subtitle 'An Archaeology of Duty' while one of its central chapters is called 'A Genealogy of Office'. In Agamben's L'uso dei corpi (2014) one of the central chapters is entitled 'Archaeologia dell’ontologia' [Archaeology of Ontology].

3 This notion comes from Heidegger's Letter on Humanism. Agamben uses it in Stanzas to refer to the possibility of suspending metaphysics and signification. I will return to this notion later in this chapter and in Chapter 3.
of the use of paradigms and signatures to provide a comprehensive account of philosophical archaeology.

Capturing the General Motivation of the Method: On Agamben’s Reading of Derrida

In the last chapter of his 1977 *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* (1993c) Agamben calls into question Derrida’s grammatology and, in doing so, he provides a clear indication of the overall purpose of his philosophical method.\(^4\) Derrida’s critique of the Western tradition of the sign is well known and a full exposition of it is unnecessary here: the Western metaphysical tradition has given a privileged status to the signified, understood as full presence, and hence has subordinated the signifier, conceptualising it as an external trace. The primacy of the signified over the signifier in the Western tradition has its counterpart in the primacy of *phonē* over *gramma* and of the spoken word over the written form. The specific character of Derrida’s grammatological project, writes Agamben, is expressed ‘in the affirmation according to which the originary experience is always already trace and writing, the signified always already in the position of the signifier’ (1993c:155). This affirmation implies that the originary and full presence of the signified is only an illusion created by the metaphysical tradition itself, and embodied in the double structure of the sign.

Furthermore, this critique of the metaphysical tradition entails a negation of any

---

\(^4\) There are readings of Agamben that examine his work as a direct response to Derrida. Simon Morgan Wortham, for instance, writes that ‘the entire momentum of Agamben’s critical re-elaborations of virtually the whole field of post-Enlightenment thought, not to mention his fascinating re-encounters with medieval texts and philosophy, builds ultimately towards a critique of deconstruction’ (2007:90). And the same argument is presented in Attell’s *Agamben: Beyond the Threshold of Deconstruction* (2015). Indeed, in this text Attell examines the extent and the significance of Agamben’s debate with deconstruction claiming that for Agamben, deconstruction is ‘the work against which he must continuously measure his own’ (2015:3). For Attell, *Stanzas* (1977) contains a full critique of deconstruction that he traces back to Agamben’s publication of ‘L’albero del linguaggio’ in 1968. In this chapter, however, I am only claiming that Agamben’s critique of deconstruction provides reading key to understand the intentionality of his method.
idea of origin beyond the signified and the signifier: ‘the origin is the archi-trace, which in the absence of an origin establishes the very possibility of appearance and signification’ (Agamben, 1993c:156). Although Agamben is sympathetic to Derrida’s critique of the Western metaphysical tradition of the sign, he considers grammatology as a metaphysics of the signifier that, ultimately, becomes ‘the reverse face of the metaphysics of the signified and the voice, and not, surely, its transcendence’ (Agamben, 1993c:156). In the last pages of his Stanzas, Agamben presents a general critique of Derrida that reappears in Language and Death and in Infancy and History:

By restoring the originary character of the signifier, the grammatological project effects a salutary critique of the metaphysical inheritance that has crystallized in the notion of sign, but this does not mean that it has really succeeded in accomplishing that ‘step-backward-beyond’ metaphysics – with greater prudence the philosopher on whose thought that critique is based hesitated to declare that step complete or even possible (Agamben, 1993c:156).

In other words, for Agamben, by positing the originary “archi-trace” that undermines the full presence of the signifier in the metaphysical tradition, deconstruction only radicalizes the intrinsic differential logic of the sign and, therefore, remains trapped in the metaphysical structure of differentiation. The reason for this is that metaphysics, for Agamben, is not only the interpretation of the fracture of presence as a duality between sensible and intelligible, appearance and essence, and signifier and signified. It is also ‘that originary experience be always already caught in that fold, be already simple in the etymological sense (sim-plex, ‘once pleated’), that presence be always already caught in signification: this is precisely the origin of Western metaphysics’ (Agamben, 1993c:156). By placing writing in the initial position, deconstruction merely emphasizes this original experience but it does not transcend it. To put it simply, ‘both gramma and phonē in fact belong to the metaphysical project’ (Agamben, 1993c:156).
This is precisely the point that Agamben makes in *The Time That Remains* (2005) when calling into question the notion of the ‘undecidables’ in Derrida. For Agamben, although these concepts confront the primacy of full presence within signification, they do not truly question signification itself. In fact, they ‘presuppose that there is still signification beyond presence and absence, meaning that nonpresence still signifies something, it posits itself as an “archi-trace,” a sort of archiphoneme between presence and absence. In order for deconstruction to function, what must be excluded is not the fact that presence and origin are lacking but that they are purely insignificant’ (Agamben, 2005a:103). In defence of Derrida, it could be claimed that Agamben does not address the notion of reinscription in his critique of grammatology, and hence underestimates the fact that deconstruction’s most distinctive gesture is not the reversal of hierarchy between speech and writing but the ‘reinscription of the reversed term into the discourse under scrutiny’ (Attell, 2015:24). However, even if Agamben has in fact reduced deconstruction to the reversal of the hierarchy of the signified and the signifier, the central point of Agamben’s critique does not lose its argumentative force: the Western metaphysics of presence in signification has its origin in both *gramma* and *phonē* and hence the signifier cannot be used as a means to transcend the metaphysics of presence of the signified.

Derrida would not refute the general implication of this charge, namely that deconstruction does not seek a radical epistemological break with the tradition of signification. Indeed, as Derrida himself has put it: ‘doubtless it is more necessary, from within semiology, to transform concepts, to displace them, to turn them against their presuppositions, to reinscribe them in other chains, and little by little to modify the terrain of our work and thereby produce new configurations; I do not believe in decisive ruptures, in an unequivocal “epistemological break” as it is called

---

5 As Rodolphe Gasché explains, ‘two movements are thus characteristic of deconstruction: a reversal of the traditional hierarchy between conceptual oppositions (expression/indication, presence/sign) and a reinscription of the newly privileged term’ (1994:38)
today’ (Derrida, 1981:24). Nevertheless, Agamben’s point is not only that a radical epistemological break with signification is impossible by merely reversing the terms of the metaphysics of presence – a radical break that Derrida does not seek anyway – but also that even the ‘little by little’ modification of the terrain that deconstruction seeks remains trapped in the metaphysical tradition of the sign. In other words, for Agamben, it is not possible to shake and to deactivate – or to solicit, to use Derrida’s expression – the metaphysical structure of signification from the inside by strategically displacing and reinscribing its terms. William Watkin understands Derrida’s insistence on writing as an attempt to undermine the metaphysics of identity by stressing difference. However, both identity and difference are, for Agamben, concepts that belong to the metaphysical tradition:

For Agamben, the metaphysics of presence (*phonē*) is not undermined in any significant way by the philosophy of trace and writing (*gramma*), and it makes no sense to argue for the precedence of difference, whatever the term “precedence” or “origin” might mean. The archi-trace, that there was always already difference, represented by Derrida as writing, writing as spacing between presentation and representation not writing as material marks, meaning that all structures of self-presence must founder on their dependence on and denial of the trace or the signifier, makes no sense to Agamben, at least not in the way Derrida presents it. For Agamben, the trace was always an acknowledged part of metaphysics, never occluded. The letter therefore is a key element of metaphysics, not a modality of its deconstruction. (Watkin, 2014:111)

What is at stake is not only the impossibility of overcoming the metaphysics of full presence but the very definition of language as a system of signs. For Agamben the celebrated historical closure of the reign of the sign has left the dogma of sign intact, and in this sense, for him ‘contemporary linguistics remains entirely faithful to the Saussurian semiological project’ (Agamben, 1968:112). This is the nucleus of Agamben’s critique of Derrida. Even though Derrida thinks ‘his way to the outer limit of Saussurian semiology’ he ‘remains enclosed within a semiological understanding of language’ (Attell, 2015:2). The intention of presenting this argument, however, is not to take side on this debate, nor is it to closely examine
Agamben or Derrida’s position vis-à-vis Saussure. Rather, the intention is to present, within Agamben’s general critique of Derrida, the groundwork of his philosophical archaeology.

In Agamben’s reading of Derrida two underlying arguments come to the fore. First, for Agamben both phonē and gramma are part of the same metaphysical machine of signification, and therefore the reinscription of gramma at the centre of the economy of the sign does not entail a step-backward-beyond metaphysics. Second, for Agamben, any critique of Saussure’s semiology that retains its definition of language as a system of signs would remain enclosed within its semiological project. Corollary to these two claims is that for Agamben, the core of signification is not the heterogeneity between signified and signifier – voice and writing – but ‘the fold of the presence on which they are established: the logos, which characterizes the human as zoon logon echon (living thing using language), is this fold that gathers and divides all things in the “putting together” of presence. And the human is precisely this fracture of presence, which opens a world and over which language holds itself’ (Agamben, 1993c:156).

It is clear then that for Agamben the divided character of the sign cannot be thought in isolation from the question of Being. On the contrary, the history of Western metaphysics, for Agamben, has made Being accessible only through language, and inversely, language has been affected by the problem of the finitude of Being. However, as both Agamben and Derrida would hold, the supposedly unmediated access to Being through voice, that is the presentative character of phonē according to which the voice speaks Being as pure presentation, is problematized by the bifurcated nature of signification. In other words, since ‘no pure phonē exists without gramma; every access to Being in Voice instead becomes the inability to access Being, as its only mode of access, language, is not presentative but representative, and so Being in full is always deferred’ (Watkin, 2014:113).
Voice then – with a capital V – refers to this failure of signification to achieve full meaning, the failure of phonē to speak Being in an unmediated manner; it signals, in others words, the failure of the metaphysics of full presence. However, as it has been shown, the difference between Agamben and Derrida in this respect lies in the fact that for Agamben inasmuch as this Voice ‘enjoys the status of a no longer (voice) and of a not-yet (meaning), it necessarily constitutes a negative dimension’ (Agamben, 1993b:35). To put it briefly, the concept of Voice corresponds to the collapse of the full presence of the signified, but it does not constitute a radical break with the ‘fold that gathers and divides all things’. This is precisely the central critique of deconstruction that Agamben develops in Language and Death:

Although we must certainly honor Derrida as the thinker who has identified with the greatest rigor – developing Lévinas’s concept of the trace and Heidegger’s concept of difference – the original status of the gramma and of meaning in our culture, it is also true that he believed he had opened a way to surpassing metaphysics, while in truth he merely brought the fundamental problem of metaphysics to light. For metaphysics is not simply the primacy of the voice over the gramma. If metaphysics is that reflection that places the voice as origin, it is also true that this voice is, from the beginning, conceived as removed, as Voice. To identify the horizon of metaphysics simply in that supremacy of the phonē, and then to believe in one’s power to overcome this horizon through the gramma, is to conceive of metaphysics without its coexistent negativity. Metaphysics is always already grammatology and this is fundamentology in the sense that the gramma (or the Voice) functions as the negative ontological foundation. (Agamben, 1993b:39)

By seeking refuge in gramma, in the Voice, deconstruction can only think language and Being as negation, that is to say, only as a removal of phonē. However, the point for Agamben is not to undermine phonē through mediation and gramma but to move beyond the metaphysics of negation, to think beyond the removal of voice. Agamben’s philosophical archaeology could be read, in a general sense, as an attempt to respond to what he believes to be the failure of grammatology. He rethinks the ‘invisible articulation’ of language and metaphysics beyond the idea of
negation. Its starting point is to conceive both phonē and gramma as complicit in the same metaphysical gesture of signification. Difference, for Agamben, cannot precede repetition as in Derrida, nor could it be the ‘first or last trace’ of which Derrida talks (cf. Derrida, 1981). It is in this light that we need to read the end of Language and Death (1993b) where, in referring to the failure of deconstruction, Agamben presents what I consider to be the task of his philosophical archaeology:

With the definitive death of the Voice, even philosophy – the soliloquy of Oedipus – must come to an end. Thought, which thinks after the end of philosophy, cannot still be the thought of the Voice, of the taking place of language in the Voice; nor can it be the thought of the death of the Voice. Only if the human voice is not simply death, but has never existed, only if language no longer refers to any Voice (and, thus, not even to a gramma, that is, to a removed voice), is it possible for man to experience a language that is not marked by negativity and death. What is a language without Voice, a word that is not grounded in any meaning? This is something that we must still learn to think. (Agamben, 1993b:95)

In other words, Agamben’s philosophical archaeology starts by attacking the Derridean idea of the archi-trace. More importantly, Agamben’s critique of deconstruction implies that his philosophical archaeology is, above all, an attempt to make the step-backwards-beyond metaphysics. In the rest of this chapter, I will examine the way in which this ‘step’ – which is not only a step beyond Derrida, but also beyond Heidegger – is presented in Agamben’s philosophical archaeology.

The Idea of the Arche: The Moment of Arising

In The Signature of All Things (2009a) Agamben revisits the question about ‘ontological anchoring’ from the perspective of philosophical archaeology. The

---

6 As both Foucault and Agamben note, the idea of philosophical archaeology appears in Kant’s jottings in preparation for the essay ‘What real progress has metaphysics made in Germany since the time of Leibniz and Wolff’. In this essay, Kant uses the term ‘philosophical archaeology’ to think the grounds of a philosophical history of philosophy. Although Foucault in The Order of Things does not discuss in depth Kant’s notion of philosophical Archaeology, he acknowledges that Kant ‘used this word in order to designate the history of that which renders necessary a certain form of thought’ (1970:60).
underlying question from which his inquiry departs is: how to understand the notion of the *archē* to which *archē*-ology regresses? As we will see, the rethinking of the notion of *archē* is for Agamben a necessary step towards the construction of an archaeological project that not only aims at revealing the systems of intelligibility and the moments when discursive formations become operative, but ultimately at suspending them. But how can we rethink the notion of the *archē* after ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’ (1984[1972])? And more importantly, what is Agamben’s purpose in retaining this discredited notion against Nietzsche and Foucault?

Genealogy, writes Foucault ‘does not oppose itself to history as the lofty and profound gaze of the philosopher might compare to the molelike perspective of the scholar; on the contrary, it rejects the metahistorical deployment of ideal significations and indefinite teleologies. It opposes itself to the search for “origins”’ (Foucault, 1984:77). Instead of constituting a search of origins (*Ursprung*), the true object of genealogy is descent (*Herkunft*) and emergence, or what Foucault also calls the moment of arising (*Entstehung*). Nietzsche, as Foucault reminds us, challenges the pursuit of the origin because what we find at the historical beginning is never the ‘inviolable identity of their origins’. Indeed, the quest for the location of *U sprung* in history, as Foucault writes, is nothing but:

> an attempt to capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities; because this search assumes the existence of immobile forms that precede the external world of accident and succession. This search is directed to “that which was already there,” the image of a primordial truth fully adequate to its nature, and it necessitates the removal of every mask to ultimately disclose an original identity (Foucault, 1984:78).

Agamben, who revisits ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’ in the last chapter of *The Signature of All Things* (2009a), notes that when Foucault writes that genealogy
needs history to ‘dispel the chimeras of the origin’ the verb to dispel – conjurer, in French – encompasses two different and opposing meanings: to evoke and to expel. Or perhaps, writes Agamben, ‘these two meanings are not opposites, for dispelling something – a specter, a demon, a danger – first requires conjuring it. The fact is that the alliance between the genealogist and the historian finds its meaning precisely in this “evocation-expulsion”’ (Agamben, 2009a:84). As Agamben notes, for Foucault this very same operation of evocation-expulsion should also be implemented by genealogy in respect of the subject: ‘it is necessary to get rid of the subject itself by getting rid of the constituting subject, that is, to arrive at an analysis that would account for the constitution of the subject in the historical plot. This is what I will call genealogy: to account for the constitution of knowledge, discourses, spheres of objects, etc. without having to refer to the subject’ (Foucault, 1994:147). In other words, to truly get rid of the subject, genealogy has to account for the constitution of the subject within the historical narrative.

The point Agamben is trying to make is that in order to dispel the problem of the subject and the quest for an origin, genealogy must first evoke them. Once the subject and the notion of origin have been eliminated, what takes their place is the tracing back to a ‘moment of constitution’ of knowledge and discourses. This constitution, however, takes place in the non-place of origin. Crucially, Agamben asks: ‘where then are “descent” (Herkunft) and “the moment of arising” or “emergence” (Entstehung) located, if they are not and can never be in the position of the origin?’ (Agamben, 2009:84). Unlike Foucault, Agamben retains the notion of archē, not as a chronological datum, but as the moment when the solidarity between historical inquiry and genealogy finds its maximum expression. The archē is nothing other than the moment when the historical gaze reveals the ‘origin’ of a discursive formation allowing for the dispelling of the myth of the origin itself. Generally put then, the archē reveals the ‘deep-seated structures of Western thought as
problematic, profoundly contingent and so surmountable’ (Watkin, 2014:29). It is worth quoting Agamben at length here:

From the perspective of the philosophical archaeology proposed here, the question regarding ontological anchoring must be completely revised. The archē toward which archaeology regresses is not to be understood in any way as a given locatable in a chronology (even with as large a frame as prehistory); instead, it is an operative force within history .... [T]he archē is not a given or a substance, but a field of bipolar historical currents stretched between anthropogenesis and history, between the moment of arising and becoming, between an archi-past and the present .... [T]he archē alone is able to guarantee the intelligibility of historical phenomena, “saving” them archaeologically in a future anterior in the understanding not of an unverifiable origin but of its finite and untotalizable history. (2009a:110)

The fact that Agamben renders Foucault’s notion of the ‘moment of arising’? pivotal in his philosophical archaeology through a re-introduction of the archē signals a major shift in the methodological itinerary of both philosophers. Yet, as Agamben tirelessly repeats, the archē is not a chronologically localizable point that as a foundational moment determines the present, becoming its inner grounding force. Rather it is the vantage point at which genealogy and the historical document revealed their alliance. In order to emphasize the archaeological task of evocation-conjuration, that is, the attraction – expulsion moment, Agamben presents, through a reading of Melandri, an analogy between the character of archaeology and that of Freudian repression.8 In both cases, writes Agamben, ‘it is a question of gaining

---

7 In Agamben, the moment of arising is arguably another name for the archē. Foucault only uses this concept to refer to the notion of emergence in Nietzsche (Entstehung). In Agamben, the moment of arising is ‘objective and subjective at the same time and is indeed situated on a threshold of undecidability between object and subject’ (Agamben, 2009a:89). In others words, while in Foucault this notion refers primarily to the emergence of a discursive formation, in Agamben emergence is at the same time the emergence of the knowing subject itself, that is, it is situated in a zone of indistinction between origin, or historical data and genealogy.

8 In particular, Agamben refers to La linea e il circolo (2004) where Melandri, following Ricoeur, connects the Freudian concept of regression to archaeology. For archaeology, writes Melandri, ‘the concept of regression is essential. Furthermore, the regressive operation is the exact reciprocal of rationalization. Rationalization and regression are inverse operations, just like the differential and the integral’ (2004:67). Moreover, the analogical character of archaeology and repression lies in the fact that, as Cathy Caruth has pointed out, ‘the historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all’ (1996:17).
access to a past that has not been lived through, and therefore that technically cannot be defined as “past,” but that somehow has remained present’ (Agamben, 2009:102).

In other words, for both psychoanalysis and archaeology, there is a part of non-lived experience in the constitution of the present. The analogy then, becomes clear in that the factuality of the archē – namely, its taking place as a lived experience – is irrelevant for both archaeology and Freudian psychoanalysis.9 In the case of genealogy, access to the past that has been repressed by tradition, that is, to a past that has been covered over, is possible first of all, through the patient work that focuses on the moment of arising. In the Freudian scheme, a similar operation takes place whereby a non-lived experience is experienced as lived by means of neurotic symptoms, which are used to go back to the originary event. In both cases, then, the first purpose is to reach the fault line when lived and non-lived experience, memory and forgetting both ‘communicate with and separate from each other’ (Agamben, 2009a:102).

Nevertheless, rather than defining an inner solidarity between archaeology and psychoanalysis, Agamben uses the analogy between Freudian repression and archaeology in order to further clarify his concept of the archē. In this particular context, what is at stake here is not the question of how subtle Agamben’s reading of Freud is, but what Agamben’s reading of Freud tells us about his archaeological method. The reference to repression, then, serves to explain that the past to which archaeology intends to gain access is a non-lived past or a not-yet-lived-past that partly constitutes the present and that is revealed in the ‘moment of arising’. Yet,

---

9 Although Agamben did not fully elaborate on this claim in The Signature of All Things (2009), the implicit reference is to Freud’s study of the ‘Wolfman case’. As Watkin has pointed out, for Freud the fact of the ‘actual existence of a primal scene is irrelevant as long as the patient believes this factuality in such a way as a cure is produced. To a degree, the same is true for the genealogist who works in the opposite direction to the symptom producing antisymptomology. They also care nothing for the veracity of the archē – there is no such veracity except as an assumed element of the discursive formation that allows statements that require archē to come into existence(2014:31).
unlike the psychoanalytical therapy, or at least, unlike Agamben’s understanding of it - the point of archaeology is not regress to a repressed element in order to bring it back to consciousness but, but on the contrary:

[I]t is a matter of conjuring up its phantasm, through meticulous genealogical inquiry, in order to work on it, deconstruct it, and detail it to the point where it gradually erodes, losing its originary status. In other words, archaeological regression is elusive: it does not seek, as in Freud, to restore a previous stage, but to decompose, displace, and ultimately bypass it in order to go back not to its content but to the modalities, circumstances, and moments in which the split, by means of repression, constituted it as origin. (Agamben, 2009a:102-103)

In this particular sense, the archē to which archaeology regresses impresses on archaeology a particular temporal structure. It is not a past in a linear historical sense, nor is it a chronological datum or a lived experience. Rather, it is a moment of arising that will take place in the future. It is a form of past, in the future: a future anterior. It is, as Agamben has put it, ‘the past that will have been when the archaeologist’s gesture (or the power of the imaginary) has cleared away the ghosts of the unconscious and the tight-knit fabric of tradition which blocks access to history’ (2009a:107). Access to this moment of arising can only be obtained by ‘returning back to the point where it was covered over and neutralized by tradition’ (Agamben, 2009a:105). At this point, a preliminary definition of philosophical archaeology in Agamben can be presented:

[W]e may call “archaeology” that practice which in any historical investigation has to do not with origins but with the moment of a phenomenon’s arising and must therefore engage anew the sources and tradition. It cannot confront tradition without deconstructing the paradigms, techniques, and practices through which tradition regulates the forms of transmission, conditions access to sources, and in the final analysis determines the very status of the knowing subject. (Agamben, 2009a:89)

In ‘Bare Life or Social Indeterminacy?’ (2007) Ernesto Laclau proposes two common
arguments against Agamben's archaeology.\textsuperscript{10} He argues that Agamben 'jumps too quickly from having established the genealogy of a term, a concept or an institution, to determine its actual working in a contemporary context, that in some sense the origin has a secret determining priority over what follows from it' (2007:11). Second, Agamben's method is 'not sensitive enough to structural diversity and, in the end, it risks ending in sheer theology' (2007:12). However, the preliminary definition of Agamben's archaeology at which we have arrived suggests that Laclau misreads the general purpose of philosophical archaeology. First, as we have seen, archaeology does not 'jump' from establishing the genealogy of a term to determine its actual operation in the present. Rather, archaeology engages with and deconstructs the sources and traditions that covered over the moment of a phenomenon's arising, a moment that, as we have explained, cannot be confused with a historical origin. Second, Agamben's philosophical archaeology values the legitimacy of tracing historical materialities but at the same time it operates with the logic of genealogy. In other words, archaeology functions with the structure of evocation-expulsion, and hence it articulates both historical data and genealogy. The point then is not search for the origin of a political phenomenon (e.g. the figure of \textit{homo sacer}) to then impose it on the analysis of the present. Rather, the point of archaeology is to confront tradition through a careful deconstruction of the paradigms and practices through which tradition regulates the forms of transmission of discursive formations.

Finally, archaeology cannot be a 'sheer theology' because the past that it reaches is not properly a past but a moment of arising, a \textit{future anterior} and hence, archaeology has nothing to do with 'remembrance'. Agamben clearly distances his archaeological method from theology when he refers to Benjamin, for whom 'in remembrance we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as

\textsuperscript{10} It is worth mentioning that Laclau’s article was published before \textit{The Signature of All Things} (2009a) and that it only refers to Agamben’s first volume of the \textit{Homo Sacer} series.
fundamentally atheological’ (Benjamin, 1982:471) because memory, writes Agamben ‘modifies the past, transforming the unrealized into realized and the realized into the unrealized. If memory does constitute the force that gives possibility back to what has been (and nevertheless confirms the past), forgetting is what incessantly removes it (and yet somehow guards its presence)’ (Agamben, 2009a:106). The point of archaeology is to ‘gain access to the present for the first time, beyond memory and forgetting or, rather, at the threshold of their indifference’ (Agamben, 2009a:106).

To recapitulate then, through Agamben’s critique of Derrida in Stanzas (1993c) we have presented the overall intention that underlines Agamben’s method. His purpose is to suspend the metaphysical structure of differentiation (signified/signifier) and to go beyond negativity. I have also argued that Agamben’s archaeology retains the notion of the archē as a ‘moment of arising’, which cannot be confused with a chronological point. In a first instance, archaeology is the practice that has to do with the evocation-expulsion of the moment of arising of a particular phenomenon, through a confrontation with tradition. I now turn to the two central analytical tools that constitute Agamben’s method, the notions of the paradigm and the signature.

On Paradigms: Between Singularity and Exemplarity

[T]he archē [my investigations] reach ... is not an origin presupposed in time. Rather, locating itself at the crossing of diachrony and synchrony, it makes the inquirer’s present intelligible as much as the past of his or her object ... If one asks whether the paradigmatic character lies in things themselves or in the mind of the inquirer, my response must be that the question itself makes no sense. The intelligibility in question in the paradigm has an ontological character. It refers not to the cognitive relation between subject and object but to being. (Agamben, 2009a:32)
The use of paradigms is one of the most distinctive gestures of Agamben’s philosophical archaeology. Figures such as the Muselmann, the concentration camp, the Trinitarian oikonomia, and homo sacer represent actual historical phenomena but are nonetheless treated by Agamben ‘as paradigms whose role [is] to constitute and make intelligible a broader historical-problematic context’ (Agamben, 2009a:9). Although Foucault did not clearly define the notion of the paradigm, this concept is also central to his method\(^{11}\): the care of the self, the Panopticon, the confession, are all ‘singular historical phenomena that Foucault treats as paradigms, and this is what constitutes his specific intervention into the field of historiography’ (Agamben, 2009a:17).

Agamben’s essay on paradigms in *The Signature of All Things* (2009a) begins by contrasting Kuhn’s notion of scientific paradigms with Foucault’s use of this term. Kuhn, writes Agamben, used the notion of paradigm in two particular senses. The first one refers to ‘the common possessions of the members of a certain scientific community, namely, the set of techniques, models, and values to which the group members more or less consciously adhere’ (Agamben, 2009a:11). The second – which is closer to Agamben’s own use of the term and which Kuhn himself considers to be more novel – defines ‘a single element within the set, such as Isaac Newton’s *Principia* or Ptolemy’s *Almagest*, that serves as a common example and thus replaces explicit rules and permits the formulation of a specific and coherent tradition of inquiry’ (Agamben, 2009a:11). Crucially, for Kuhn, normal science is not determined and governed by a precise set of rules, but rather paradigms are the condition of possibility of what is defined as normal science, they determine what a scientific problem is for a community and what is not, and more importantly, they define the

---

\(^{11}\) As Agamben suggests, Foucault uses the term paradigm frequently but he did not provide a clear definition for it. In one of the lectures at the *Société Française de Philosophie*, Foucault says that paradigms ‘are all procedures and all effects of knowledge which are acceptable at a given point in time and in a specific domain’ (1991:16). This definition, however, is closer to Kuhn’s definition of scientific paradigms than to Foucault’s own use of paradigmatic figures.
rules. After Kuhn, therefore, the concept of the paradigm is linked to the notion of the example:

A paradigm is simply an example, a single case that by its repeatability acquires the capacity to model tacitly the behavior and research practices of scientists. The empire of the rule, understood as the canon of scientificity, is thus replaced by that of the paradigm; the universal logic of the law is replaced by the specific and singular logic of the example. And when an old paradigm is replaced by a new paradigm that is no longer compatible with the previous one, what Kuhn calls a scientific revolution occurs. (Agamben, 2009a:11-12)

The fact that Kuhn is not primarily concerned with the general rules that determine the cannon of scientificity and constitution of normal science but rather with the paradigms that guide the scientists’ behaviour, replacing the rule with the example, finds clear resonances in Foucault’s work. Indeed, for Agamben, Foucault’s abandonment of the problem of universal categories such as the law in order to focus on concrete mechanisms and technologies of power is analogical to Kuhn’s account of paradigms. Moreover, ‘just as Kuhn separated normal science from the system of rules that define it, Foucault frequently distinguished “normalization”, which characterizes disciplinary power, from the juridical system of legal procedures’ (Agamben, 2009a:12). However, the proximity between Kuhn and Foucault with regards to the notion of the paradigm is only apparent. A closer reading of Foucault would show that the notion of ‘discursive regime’ and his particular use of paradigms differs from Kuhn’s account of scientific paradigms. Both share, in principle, the idea that the paradigm responds to the logic of the example. Indeed, when answering a question on discontinuity in the interview

---

12 Agamben will hold to this view. Indeed, in his own account, a paradigm implies the rejection of the model of logical inference based on the general-particular dichotomy. The rule, if it is possible to conceive something like a rule under the perspective of the paradigm ‘is not a generality preexisting the singular cases and applicable to them, nor is it something resulting from the exhaustive enumeration of specific cases. Instead, it is the exhibition alone of the paradigmatic case that constitutes a rule, which as such can be applied or stated’ (Agamben, 2009: 21).
'Truth and Power', Foucault claims that discursive regimes are in fact the opposite of Kuhn's notion of paradigms:

Thus, it is not a change of content (refutation of old errors, recovery of old truths), nor is it a change of theoretical form (renewal of a paradigm, modification of systematic ensembles). It is a question of what governs statements, and the way in which they govern each other so as to constitute a set of propositions that are scientifically acceptable and, hence, capable of being verified or falsified by scientific procedures. In short, there is a problem of the regime, the politics of scientific statements. At this level, it’s not so much a matter of knowing what external power imposes itself on science as to what effects of power circulate among scientific statements, what constitutes, as it were, their internal regime of power, and how and why at certain moments that regime undergoes a global modification (Foucault, 2000:114).

The difference between Foucault’s notion of discursive regimes and Kuhn’s conception of the paradigm is crucial for Agamben’s re-articulation of the concept of the paradigm as methodological tool.13 Indeed, for Foucault, what is important is the shift from epistemology to politics. He focuses on the way in which paradigms enter into the realm of discursive formations, that is in the politics of statements. In short, for Foucault it is a matter of grasping the way in which statements govern each other and constitute ensembles through internal regimes of power rather than indicating a change of theoretical forms that signals a scientific revolution (cf. Agamben, 2009a:14). As Agamben reminds us then, in Foucault, what is crucial is not so much the question of what exists as knowledge – a question directly addressed by Kuhn’s notion of the paradigm – but rather the question of why and how knowledge exists in the first place.14

---

13 Likewise, unlike Kuhn’s notion of the paradigm, Foucault’s definition of the episteme in the Archaeology of Knowledge does not refer to ‘what is knowable in a given period, but what is implicit in the fact that a given discourse or epistemological figure exists at all’ (Agamben, 2009:15).

14 For this reason, William Watkin claims that Agamben is drawing our attention to an ‘ontology of epistemology’ (Watkin, 2014:8)
In order to illustrate how Foucault uses the notion of paradigm then, Agamben refers to Foucault’s description of the Panopticon in *Discipline and Punish*. As is well known, the Panopticon refers to Bentham’s actual architectural prison design but, for Foucault, it can also serve as a ‘generalizable model of functioning’ which in turn represents the principle of a panoptic modality of power. That is to say, it is a ‘figure of political technology that must be detached from any specific use’ representing ‘the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form’ (Foucault, 1977:205). In short, the Panopticon functions as a paradigm: ‘it is a singular object that, standing equally for all others of the same class, defines the intelligibility of the group of which it is a part and which, at the same time, it constitutes’ (Agamben, 2009a:17). In this particular sense, the Panopticon does not function with the logic of the metaphor, that is to say, it is not a metaphorical transfer of meaning, an extension of a signifier imposed on other phenomena. Rather it operates in terms of the analogical logic of the example: ‘the paradigm is a singular case that is isolated from its context only insofar as, by exhibiting its own singularity, it makes intelligible a new ensemble, whose homogeneity it itself constitutes’ (Agamben, 2009a:18). As is clear then, and Agamben emphasizes this point, the paradigm suspends, as it were, its normal use, not in order to be imposed or transferred into another context, but to present the canon of its own use.

This deactivation of the normal use of the paradigm, that is, the suspension of its singularity, is the most persistent characteristic of Agamben’s use of paradigmatic cases. The figure of *homo sacer*, for instance, is a concrete historical phenomenon that is nonetheless isolated from its context only insofar as, by exhibiting its own

---

15 Foucault describes extensively the concrete architectural organization of Bentham’s Panopticon in *Discipline and Punish*. ‘We know the principle on which it was based: at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres’ (Foucault, 1977:200).
singularity – he who might be killed but not sacrificed according to the Roman Law and in a concrete historical period – makes intelligible a broader problematic.

Another characteristic of a paradigm has to do with its epistemological status. Radicalising Aristotle’s definition of paradigms in *Prior Analytics*, Agamben argues that the paradigm does not function with the deductive logic that proceeds from the universal to the particular nor does it operate in an inductive fashion, from the particular to the universal. Rather, the paradigm moves from the particular to the particular and, in this sense, it questions the Western dichotomous principle which always opposes the universal to the particular. Finally, Agamben suggests that the paradigm operates through analogy. Here, he heavily relies on Melandri’s notion of the *analogon*, that is, on the third term that is neither A nor B but that ‘intervenes in the dichotomies of logic (particular/universal; form/content; lawfulness/exemplarity; and so on) not to take them up into a higher synthesis but to transform them into a force field traversed by polar tensions, where (as in an electro-magnetic field) their substantial identities evaporate’ (Agamben, 2009a:20).

Needless to say, this third analogical term is not a higher synthesis of A and B since analogy does not operate as a dialectical process. Rather, the analogical term, the paradigm, is ‘attested here above all through disidentification and neutralization of the first two, which now become indiscernible. The third is this indiscernibility, and if one tries to grasp it by means of bivalent caesura, one necessarily runs up against an undecidable’ (Agamben, 2009a:20). In this sense, the paradigm neutralizes the dichotomy between the universal and the particular, moving from singularity to singularity and, without ‘ever leaving singularity, transforms every singular case into an exemplar of a general rule that can never be stated a priori’ (Agamben, 2009a:20).

---

16 Aristotle distinguishes the operation of the paradigm from the logics of induction and deduction. The paradigm, as Agamben quotes from Aristotle, ‘does not function as a part with respect to the whole [hōs meros pros holon], nor as a whole with respect to the part [hōs holon pros meros], but as a part with respect to the part [hōs meros pros meros], if both are under the same but one is better known than the other one’ (Agamben, 2009:19).
With this in mind, we can now recall the central features of a paradigm as summarized by Agamben at the end of the first essay of *The Signature of All Things*:

1. A paradigm is a form of knowledge that is neither inductive nor deductive but analogical. It moves from singularity to singularity.
2. By neutralizing the dichotomy between the general and the particular, it replaces a dichotomous logic with a bipolar analogical model.
3. The paradigmatic case becomes such by suspending and, at the same time, exposing its belonging to the group, so that it is never possible to separate its exemplarity from its singularity.
4. The paradigmatic group is never presupposed by the paradigms; rather, it is immanent in them.
5. In the paradigm, there is no origin or archē; every phenomenon is the origin, every image archaic.
6. The historicity of the paradigm lies neither in diachrony nor in synchrony but in a crossing of the two. (Agamben, 2009a:31)

In other words, by suspending its regular use and yet being able to make intelligible the paradigmatic group, the paradigm creates a zone of indistinction between the general (identity) and the particular (difference). The paradigm is then suspended from the paradigmatic group whilst still belonging to it. It is placed in between singularity and exemplarity. Paradigms then, are not simply historical examples, but rather the means by which large scale discursive formations are mapped. They are not the ‘origin’ of historical phenomena but that which makes intelligible their moment of arising.

**On Signatures**

For Agamben, concepts entail signatures, ‘without which they remain inert and unproductive’ (Agamben, 2009a:76). What may appear to be a concept could in fact be a signature and vice versa. A signature then is not a concept but rather a process of transference whereby a concept or discourse is transposed from one domain to another ‘through a series of shifts, substitutions and displacements’ (Fuggle,
As Agamben has put it in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, a signature is ‘something that in a sign or concept marks and exceeds such a sign or concept referring it back to a determinate interpretation’ (2011:4). However, signatures are more than this displacement and excess of signs. Indeed, if a paradigm is defined as a ‘singular object that, standing equally for all others of the same class, defines the intelligibility of the group of which it is a part and which, at the same time, it constitutes’ (Agamben, 2009a:17), it could be said that signatures describe the mode of the distribution of paradigms through time and across discourses (Watkin, 2014:4). They are concerned with the exposition of intelligibility, or what Agamben calls *operativity* in his recent works (cf. 2011, 2012, 2015). Secularization, life, sovereignty, these are all central notions in the *Homo Sacer* project that are nonetheless treated in Agamben’s work as signatures. Hence, an understanding of the way in which signatures function and the place they have within Agamben’s philosophical archaeology is imperative for any critical reading of Agamben’s oeuvre.

Although Foucault’s notion of statement is at the core of Agamben’s theory of signatures, the starting point for Agamben’s appropriation of this term is Paracelsus’ treatise on signatures and Jakob Böhme’s *De Signatura rerum* (2003). The central idea of Paracelsus *On the Nature of Things* is that ‘nothing is without a sign since nature does not release anything in which it has not marked what is to be found within that thing’ (Paracelsus in Agamben, 2009a:33). As Agamben puts it, for Paracelsus ‘all things bear a sign that manifest and reveal their invisible qualities’ (Agamben, 2009a:33). All things then, become known because they carry a *signatum* and it is in this sense that for Paracelsus the theory of signatures is the ‘science by which everything that is hidden is found’ (Paracelsus in Agamben, 2009a:34).

Crucially, for Agamben, Paracelsus conceived this ‘science’ as a consequence of sin. Indeed, Adam and everything that surrounded him in Eden was unmarked, and
could have remained unmarked had he not fallen into nature, ‘which leaves nothing unmarked’ (Agamben, 2009a:33). The fall of man then coincides with the emergence of the signatum and, therefore, with the emergence of the ‘signatory art’, that is, with the emergence of the originary signature: language. Language is the means by which Adam, as the first signator, imposes on all things their genuine names (cf. Agamben, 2009:35). As noted by Watkin, we find in Paracelsus that there is a ‘signatory art of which the originary structure is Adamic language as the true names of all things. These true names are what Agamben calls oaths, not acts of denotation but rather speech acts of facticity wherein each name gives the true nature or being of the animal’ (Watkin, 2014:19). The signature then is composed of two elements: the signator and the signatum. Although the signator operates as the condition for the signature to exist in the first place, it is crucial that for Paracelsus the signator is retroactively affected by the signature:

Signatures, which according to the theory of signs should appear as signifiers, always already slide into the position of the signified, so that signum and signatum exchange roles and seem to enter into a zone of undecidability. This sliding movement can be observed in a passage from Paragranum, where Paracelsus establishes the identity between a metal – iron – and a planet (Mars), which should be its signator. Paracelsus writes, “What is ferrum? Nothing other than Mars. What is Mars? Nothing other than ferrum. This means that both are ferrum and Mars ... He who knows Mars knows ferrum and he who knows ferrum knows what Mars is” (Agamben, 2009a:37).

The division between Signator and Signatum is therefore suspended. Moreover, Agamben shows that in Paracelsus, signatures move from one domain to another. The signature stamped on coins, the signature of an artist in a painting and even the seal impressed on a letter,¹⁷ are examples provided by Agamben to show that a

---

¹⁷ In all these cases, Agamben shows that the signature changes our relation to the object, inscribing it into a complex network of social relations. In the example of the coin, for instance, Agamben states that the signature stamped on it to determine its value adds no ‘real proprieties to it at all, just as the signature, without altering in any way the materiality of Titian’s painting inscribes it in the complex network of relations of “authority”, here it transforms a piece of metal into a coin, producing it as money’ (Agamben, 2009:40).
signature does not merely express a ‘semiotic relation between signans and a signatum; rather it is what – persisting in this relation without coinciding with it – displaces and moves it into another domain, thus positioning it in a new network of pragmatic and hermeneutic relations’ (Agamben, 2009a:40). In this sense, the yellow patch on a Jew’s coat, the collared mark of the bailiff or of the courier are not merely neutral signifiers: ‘by shifting this relation into a pragmatic and political sphere, they express instead how one must comport oneself before Jews, bailiffs, or couriers (as well as the behavior expected from them)’ (Agamben, 2009a:41). From Paracelsus Agamben retains the emergence of a zone of undecidability into which both the signum and the signatum enter. Another thing that he takes from his reading of Paracelsus is that the signature is not in the position of the signifier but that it always slides into the position of the signified, or to put it on a different level, that through the act of signing the signator is affected and redefined retroactively by the signature.

With Böhme, the theory of signatures is taken further. Böhme shows that the concept of the sign is unable to capture the ‘sliding’ character of the signature. Crucially for Agamben, in Böhme, the signature is ‘no longer understood simply as what manifests the occult virtue of things by establishing a relation between domains. Instead, it is the decisive operator of all knowledge, that which makes a world, mute and without reason in itself, intelligible’ (Agamben, 2009:41). In other words, the signature does not coincide with the sign, but rather it is what makes the sign intelligible.

In The Order of Things, Foucault situates, along the same lines, the theory of signatures within the Renaissance episteme of the sixteenth century through a reading of Paracelsus, where resemblance and similitude play a crucial role. For Foucault, in a world where resemblance, analogy and correspondence are decisive, identifying signatures becomes an essential requirement for the signs to become
The world is covered with signs that must be deciphered, and those signs, which reveal resemblances and affinities, are themselves no more than forms of similitude. To know, therefore must be to interpret: to find a way from the visible mark to that which is been said by it and which, without that mark, would lie like unspoken speech, dormant with things' (Foucault, 1970:28). This is why, for Foucault, ‘there are no resemblances without signatures’ (1970:26). Foucault expresses the relation between resemblances and signatures in a paradoxical form: ‘every resemblance receives a signature; but this signature is no more than an intermediate form of the same resemblance’ (1970:28). To be clear, for Foucault, during the sixteenth century, the nature of all things and the way in which they coexist and are linked together is determined by their resemblance. Furthermore, resemblances are intelligible in a network of signs that ‘crosses the world from one end to the other’ (Foucault, 1970:29). While in the Renaissance episteme the character of the signature emphasized the similarity between sign and signified, modern science ‘is more interested in its relation to other signs. But, in each case the type of episteme depends on that of the signature’ (Bussolini, 2010:137).

Therefore, what we have from the Renaissance episteme of the sixteenth century is a superimposed relation between semiology and hermeneutics. This relation is crucial for Agamben’s interpretation of signatures. Indeed, as Agamben points out, Foucault distinguishes between ‘semiology – the set of knowledges that allow us to recognize what is a sign and what is not – from hermeneutics, which consists of the sets of knowledges that allow us to discover the meaning of signs, to “make the signs

---

18 In the Order of Things Foucault refers to the notion of signatures in terms of the system of resemblances that dominated the episteme of the sixteenth century: ‘but what are these signs? How, amid all the aspects of the world and so many interlacing forms, does one recognize that one is faced at any given moment with a character that should give one pause because it indicates a secret and essential resemblance? What form constitutes a sign and endows it with its particular value as a sign? – Resemblance does. It signifies exactly in so far as it resembles what it is indicating (that is, a similitude) … But what it indicates is not the homology; for its distinct existence as a signature would then be indistinguishable from the face of which it is the sign; it is another resemblance, an adjacent similitude, one of another type which enables us to recognize the first, and which is revealed in its turn by a third’ (Foucault, 1970:29)
speak” (Agamben, 2009a:58). The point Agamben is trying to make here is that ‘semiology and hermeneutics do not perfectly coincide by means of resemblance; between them there remains a gap, where knowledge is produced’ (Agamben, 2009a:59). If the semiology of signatures and the hermeneutics of resemblance were to coincide, everything would be immediately knowable (cf. Foucault 1972). Signatures, for Agamben, find their locus precisely in the gap, in the disconnection between hermeneutics and semiology. Enzo Melandri’s reading of The Order of Things also emphasizes the connection between this gap and the notion of signatures. A signature, he writes, is ‘a sign within a sign; it is the index that in the context of a given semiology univocally makes reference to a given interpretation. A signature adheres to the sign in the sense that it indicates by means of the sign’s making, the code with which it has to be deciphered’ (Melandri, 1967:147).

Inevitably at this point, the notion of statements that Foucault develops in the Archaeology of Knowledge comes to the fore. Like signatures, statements are not reducible to the semantic, nor are they situated in the sphere of the semiotic: ‘the statement is neither a syntagma, nor a rule of construction, nor a canonic form of succession and permutation; it is that which enables such groups of signs to exist, and enables these rules or forms to become manifest’ (Foucault, 1972:88). The statement, for Foucault, is not a sign or a particular arrangement of grammatical rules and relations. Rather, it operates in signs at the level of their existence, it is not a unit but ‘a function that cuts across a domain of structures and possible unities, and which reveals them, with concrete contents, in time and space’ (Foucault, 1972:86). As is the case with signatures the statement does not coincide with the signifier or with the signified, but it is rather that which refers to ‘the very fact that they are given, and the way in which they are given’ (Foucault, 1972:111). For all these reasons, in a decisive passage of Agamben’s essay on the theory of signatures (2009), the notion of the statement is linked to that of the signature, establishing a connection between The Order of Things and The Archaeology of Knowledge and
further clarifying the concept of the signature itself:

The whole argument acquires clarity if we hypothesize that the statements in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* take the place that in *The Order of Things* belonged to signatures. Statements, then, are situated on the threshold between semiology and hermeneutics where signatures take place. Neither semiotic nor semantic, not yet discourse and no longer mere sign, statements, like signatures, do not institute semiotic relations or create new meanings; instead, they mark and “characterize” signs at the level of their existence, thus actualizing and displacing their efficacy. These are the signatures that signs receive from the sheer fact of existing and being used – namely, the indelible character that, in marking them as signifying something, orients and determines their interpretation and efficacy in a certain context. Like signatures on coins, like the figures of the constellations and the decans in the sky of astrology, like the eye-shaped spots on the corolla of the *Eaphrasia* or the character that baptism imprints on the soul of the baptized, they have always already pragmatically decided the destiny and life of signs that neither semiology nor hermeneutics is able to exhaust. (Agamben, 2009a:64)

What both the statement and the signature reveal is that there are no unmarked signs. Instead, signs ‘signify’ because they carry a signature that ‘predetermines their interpretation and distributes their use and efficacy according to rules, practices and precepts that it is our task to recognize’ (Agamben, 2009a:64). Hence, for Agamben, archaeology is a science of signatures. Nevertheless, the proximity between statements and signatures is as important for us as is the distance between them. Indeed, Agamben’s account of signatures, unlike Foucault’s notion of the statement, is intrinsically linked to the question of being. To put it differently, Agamben’s archaeology of signatures is an ontology of epistemology: ‘Signatures (like statements with respect to language) are then that which marks things at the

---

19 As pointed out by Bussolini, Agamben notes ‘other attempts to link the doctrine of the signature to ontology, such as in Herbert of Cherbury, and prominent strands of theology in several religions. He also points out the dispersion and influence of the concept of the signature, explicitly or implicitly, in locations as diverse as the Morelli method, the techniques of Sherlock Holmes, the methods of Freud, and the notions of Galton and Bertillon. All of them in one way or another focused on a signature that exceeded the semiotic frame in order to make sense of a determinate phenomenon’ (Bussolini, 2010:138).
level of their pure existence’ (Agamben, 2009a:66). As Watkin puts it, ‘signatures stand in relation to being in the same manner that statements stand in relation to language’ (2014:21). However, it is crucial to emphasize that for Agamben – who follows Kant on this principle – existence is not a real predicate, and in this sense, being is not a concept but a signature. Hence, for Agamben ‘ontology is not a determinate knowledge but the archaeology of every knowledge, which explores the signatures that pertain to beings by virtue of the very fact of existing, thus predisposing them to the interpretation of specific knowledges’ (Agamben, 2009a:66).

At this point we can return to Agamben’s critique of deconstruction. In The Kingdom and the Glory Agamben states that deconstruction is a science of signatures (2011:4). Yet, the primacy of the signature over the sign has an entirely different character in Derrida. If we accept Agamben’s reading of Derrida according to which deconstruction is a way of thinking about signatures ‘as pure writing beyond every concept, which does guarantees the inexhaustibly – indefinite deferral – of signification’ (Agamben, 2009a:78) then, it follows that signatures are posited as a supplement with regards to every presence. Indeed, the notions of the archi-trace, the undecidables and the ‘origininary supplement’ in Derrida demonstrate that for deconstruction the signature exceeds every meaning ‘in a ceaseless différance and erases its own trace in a pure auto-signification’ (Agamben, 2009a:79). As noted at the beginning of this chapter, for Agamben, this implies that deconstruction merely reverses the hierarchy of the signified over the signifier but does not entail a critique of the metaphysical structures of differentiation. In other words, deconstruction leads to the appreciation of difference as self-referentiality leaving untouched the implications of the differentiating structures for the question of being: ‘a signature auto-signification never grasps itself, nor does it let its own insignificance be; rather, it is displaced and deferred in its own gesture. The trace is then a signature suspended and referred toward itself, a kenosis that never knows
its own *plerōma* (Agamben, 2009a:79). Foucault – like Derrida and Agamben for that matter – accepts that there is an excess of the signature over signification. However, unlike Derrida, the fact that there is never a sign that does not carry a signature does not imply, for Foucault, that the signature can be totally separated from the sign and moved to an originary position, not even as a supplement (cf. Agamben, 2009a:79). Agamben’s science of signatures is in this sense closer to Foucault’s archaeology than it is to Derrida’s deconstruction. Yet, the strategy of Agamben’s philosophical archaeology is different from that of Foucault. Indeed, Agamben conceives archaeology as a practice that without ‘dwelling in pure signatures or simply inquiring into their vital relations with signs and events of discourses reaches back beyond the split between signature and sign’ (2009a:80).

To be precise, for Agamben both Derrida’s deconstruction and Foucault’s archaeology start with the signature and its excess over meaning. While deconstruction ‘dwells’ in the signature moving it to an originary position, Foucault’s archaeology limits itself to the investigation of their regularities, relationality and operations in discursive formations. Agamben’s science of signatures intends to reach back beyond the split between the semiotic and the semantic. Moreover, while Foucault’s notion of the statement is limited to the sphere of the linguistic, Agamben, in a Heiddegerian fashion, relates the notion of signatures to the question of being: ‘*On haplōs,* “pure being” is the archi-signator that imprints its transcendental marks on existent entities’ (Agamben, 2009:66). This is precisely what Agamben’s archaeology intends to suspend, that is, to render inoperative. However, the function of signatures and the way in which this suspension takes place in Agamben’s archaeology cannot be understood in isolation from the operation of paradigms and the moment of arising – *archē*. With the analysis of these three elements in mind – *archē*, paradigms and signatures – we can now grasp Agamben’s philosophical archaeology in its totality.
Philosophical Archaeology

In the first volume of the *Homo Sacer* series Agamben refers back to his critique of deconstruction, in this case Derrida’s reading of Kafka:

The prestige of deconstruction in our time lies precisely in its having conceived of the entire text of tradition as being in force without significance, a being in force whose strength lies essentially in its undecidability and having shown that such a being in force is, like the door of the Law in Kafka’s parable, absolutely impassable. But it is precisely concerning the sense of being in force ... that our position distinguishes itself from that of deconstruction. (Agamben, 1998: 54)

Unlike Derrida, Agamben thinks that a radical break with tradition is possible. Just as the man from the country stands in front of the door of law, for Agamben, our age stands in front of language (1998:54). By placing *gramma* at the center of the differentiating structure of signification, deconstruction condemns thinking to ‘infinite negotiations with the doorkeeper or, even worse, ...it might end by itself assuming the role of the doorkeeper who, without really blocking the entry, shelters the Nothing onto which the door opens’ (Agamben, 1998:54). This is why, as Agamben suggests in *Potentialities*, deconstruction is ‘petrified or paralyzed messianism’ (1999:171). Contrary to a common critique of Agamben whereby his philosophy and politics are presented as another form of messianism (cf. Badiou 2009, Laclau 2007), the philosophical archaeology developed by Agamben seeks to suspend the differentiating structures of metaphysics (signified-signifier) by locating the ‘moments of arising’, and rethinking ‘altogether the idea of the ontological anchorage to see existence as a field of essentially historical tensions’ (Agamben, 2009a:111).

Agamben’s philosophical archaeology aims at suspending and rendering inoperative the signatures that control the intelligibility of Western culture. The moment of arising – the *archê* – represents the moment when paradigms become ‘operative’.
Paradigms, then do not explain modernity ‘by tracing it back to something like a cause or historical origin’ (Agamben, 2009a:31). On the contrary, the use of paradigms makes ‘intelligible a series of phenomena whose kinship had eluded or could elude the historian’s gaze’ (Agamben, 2009a:31). The function of signatures explains the way in which heterogeneous paradigms co-belong, the way in which they communicate with each other and form and control discursive formations. The signature of Life, for instance, marks the intelligibility of what it allows to be said about ‘life’ through a logic of ‘inclusive-exclusion’. The figure of homo sacer, the Muselmann and even the zoë-bios distinction are paradigms that make intelligible the signatorial operations of Life. Unlike Foucault, Agamben ‘believes that in revealing the moment of arising, identifying its paradigms and tracing its signatory transmissions, one is able to close the book on an element of Western thought. This is because each of these three elements depends on a logic of conditioning conditions which create their own condition as origin, as part of the modality of their distributive mode of “being conditioned”’ (Watkin, 2014:45).

Although the notion of ‘machine’ is never defined in Agamben’s works, it could be claimed that the network that is established between these three elements – the moment of arising, paradigms and signatures – is what Agamben calls a ‘machine’. Indeed, following Foucault’s notion of apparatus, the notion of the machine in Agamben indicates ‘a set of practices, bodies of knowledge, measures, and institutions that aim to manage, govern, control, and orient the behaviors, gestures, and thoughts of human beings’ (Agamben, 2009b:12). In others words, a machine is the ensemble of paradigms and signatures that control the operativity of the West. Agamben’s archaeology is an attempt at rendering those machines inoperative by revealing and suspending their moments of arising, in order to restore to common use what has been captured in them. Yet, these machines – anthropological, theological, governmental – operate within a larger structure, that is, within a ‘signature of all things’: the signature of metaphysics. Chapter 3 deals with this
underlying signature – the common and the proper – and explains the way in which signatures work, while Chapter 7 will provide an account of the way in which Agamben proposes to suspend them through the politics of inoperativity.
Chapter 3

The Common, the Proper, and the Zone of Indistinction: On the Linguistic-Metaphysical Machine in Agamben’s Thought

I argued in the previous chapter that Agamben’s archaeological project aims at rendering inoperative the signatures that control the intelligibility of Western politics and culture by tracing the archē of discursive formations through the use of paradigms. Although concrete examples of how this method is carried out in the Homo Sacer project have not yet been provided – this is the aim of the following chapters – I contend that archaeology, for Agamben, is a form of metaphysical critique that aims to go beyond negation. We have defined the tools of Agamben’s archaeology, namely the archē, paradigms, and signatures and an initial indication of the way in which they are related to one another has been provided. Little has been said, however, about the way in which signatures work. In others words, the question that has not yet been asked is: how do signatures control the intelligibility of discursive formations, how do they produce materialities, how do they allow for things to occur politically? This question, as we will see, is another way of asking about the character of the metaphysical structuring of the West.20

In this chapter I will provide an account of the economy that renders the operation of signatures possible. Indeed, the multiplicity of paradigms that Agamben provides in his archaeological investigations are organised beneath large-scale and overarching notions, which Agamben calls signatures. Some examples of the central signatures in Agamben’s projects are Secularisation, Life, Power, and Sovereignty,

20 In Agamben’s works the ‘West’ is not defined. It could be said, however, that the West functions in his works as a signature and not as a concept. It is not a geographically fixed unity nor is it a political structure. Rather it is a signature that allows for certain things to be said, a signature that controls the intelligibility of particular acts of exclusion and that reorganises discursive formations. It is possible to trace the operations of this signature through the exposition of different paradigms, such as Christianity, Greek philosophy, metaphysics, and linguistics, all of which are examined in Agamben’s work.
developed in the chapters to follow. These signatures are operative because of a particular economy made up of two different elements. On the one hand, an element which appears to found the phenomenon and on the other 'a series of subsequent elements which appear to actualize this founding element or simply which are allowed to occur because of a held-in-common foundation' (Watkin, 2014:xi). Agamben calls the unconditioned, founding element “the common”, and the conditioned, founded element “the proper”. Paradoxically, what Agamben shows repeatedly in his works, is that it is the proper which founds the common, that is to say, it is the founded element that founds its own founding ground. Ultimately, both the common and the proper collapse into a zone of indistinction in which it is no longer possible to distinguish them. This structure is consistently revealed in Agamben’s archaeological investigations to the extent that, as I will claim, it constitutes the signature of the metaphysical tradition. The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to make this structure intelligible as a precondition for a comprehensive analysis of the notions of bare life, sovereignty and secularisation presented in the following chapters.

My original contribution to the comprehension of this schema – common-proper-indistinction – that explains the way in which signatures work, resides in how I trace this structure to Agamben’s early writings on signification. I argue that Agamben’s critique of the Western tradition of the sign – viz. the separation between the signifier and the signified, the proper and the improper that can be traced back to Stanzas (1993c) – allows us to grasp the internal logic that underpins the economy of the common and the proper. By tracing this economy of the common and the proper back to Agamben’s early writings, I introduce the relation between metaphysics, signification and ontology, which is crucial in Agamben’s work.

---

21 William Watkin developed this argument extensively in Agamben and Indifference (2014) focusing on the moment of indistinction between the common and the proper and the political possibilities of the suspension of this dialectic. In this chapter, while accepting his basic premises, I will try to make more explicit the connection between Agamben’s reading of the ‘linguistic metaphysical machine’ and the oikonomia of the common and the proper.
Moreover, by referring the structure of the common and the proper back to Agamben’s critique of signification I aim at locating the moment of inclusive-exclusion that guides the economy of the common and proper. This chapter provides the theoretical terrain on which the discussion of Agamben’s attempted political escape from this metaphysical structure takes place. It is against this metaphysical machine that we should test Agamben’s political project of resistance and the notions of inoperativity, suspension, form-of-life, eternal life, the coming community and ‘new ontology of potentiality’, all of which are discussed in the following chapters.

**On the Isolation of the Improper: A Critique of Signification**

Agamben finds in the history of Western metaphysics an act of forgetting.\(^{22}\) Indeed, in his discussion of Plato, Agamben suggests that criticism ‘is barred by the forgetting of a scission stemming from the origin of our culture that is usually accepted as the most natural thing – that goes, so to speak, without saying – but in fact is the only thing truly worth interrogating. The scission in question is that between poetry and philosophy, between the word of poetry and the word of thought’ (Agamben, 1993c:xvii). In *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* (1993c[1977]) Agamben reconstructs the epistemological foundation of the West through this scission that underpins European culture. Although he suggests that in the Platonic critique of poetry, this split is already presented as an ancient enmity,  

\(^{22}\) In a similar fashion, the history of Western philosophy is, for Heidegger, the history of a monumental ‘forgetting’. The central question of Greek philosophy, the question concerning the ‘ontological difference’ – that is, the difference between beings and Being –, has been occluded and marginalised. Heidegger’s project of destruction of tradition and of the history of ontology is an attempt to escape from this forgetting, that is to say, an attempt “to think Being without regard to metaphysics. Yet a regard for metaphysics still prevails even in the intention to overcome metaphysics. Therefore, our task is to cease all overcoming and leave metaphysics to itself” (Heidegger, 1972:24). What is at stake is the ontological difference between actual being-in-the-world, or what Heidegger calls *Dasein* and Being in the capitalised form. Like Heidegger, Derrida also sees the history of metaphysics as act of forgetting, but, as is well known, for Derrida even Heidegger’s destruction of tradition is committed to this very same act of forgetting. *Logocentrism*, the privilege of speech over writing, the subordination of the signifier over the ineffable presence of the signified, is the name of this forgetting in Derrida.
he argues that it is only in modernity that this scission acquires a hegemonic character in which ‘the word is construed to mean that poetry possesses its object without knowing it while philosophy knows its object without possessing it’ (1993c:xvii). Poetry, from the perspective of this scission, enjoys and represents its object of knowledge in an improper, yet beautiful, manner while philosophy does not enjoy its object of knowledge but merely tries to understand it:

The split between poetry and philosophy testifies to the impossibility, for Western culture, of fully possessing the object of knowledge (for the problem of knowledge is a problem of possession, and every problem of possession is a problem of enjoyment, that is, of language). In our culture, knowledge (according to antinomy that Aby Warburg diagnosed as the "schizophrenia" of Western culture) is divided between inspired-ecstatic and rational-conscious poles, neither ever succeeding in wholly reducing the other. Insofar as philosophy and poetry have passively accepted this division, philosophy has failed to elaborate a proper language, as if there could be a royal road to truth that would avoid the problem of its representation, and poetry has developed neither a method nor self-consciousness. What is thus overlooked is the fact that every authentic poetic project is directed toward knowledge, just as every authentic act of philosophy is always directed toward joy. (Agamben, 1993c:xx)

In the same manner that the operative distinction between *Dasein* and Being has been accepted and normalised according to Heidegger, for Agamben the ‘forgetting of the strangeness and importance of a division held to separate philosophy and poetry has become so ingrained in our culture that it too has become to seem natural’ (De la Durantaye, 2009:58). Poetry has access to a direct experience of language but is unable to ‘test’ and to rationalise language, while philosophy cannot experience language directly, it does not ‘enjoy’ its object but can only try to understand it. Both philosophy and poetry, Watkin suggests, ‘are victims of the cruel scission at the heart of human language and neither, alone, holds the key to language’s capacious inner chamber’ (2010:15). But, is a reconciliation possible between ‘systematic study, which knows the truth but cannot enjoy it, and taste, which enjoys beauty without being able to rationally account for it?’ (Agamben,
Agamben captures this complex relation through the notion of *Stanza*, which indicates the ubiquity of this relation across Western culture and gives a first indication of the role of poetry in Agamben’s critique of metaphysics. Stanza is a battleground for two opposing forces: the poetic word, presented as pure pleasure, as *phonē* and the philosophical word, presented as pure knowing, as *logos*. Yet, as we have seen in the previous chapter, Agamben’s project aims at problematising the understanding of language as scission. Crucially, in Plato’s banning of poetry, Agamben finds the same metaphysical dividing gestures as the history of signification has imposed on the structure of the sign. In the structure $S/s$, the signifier, represented with a lowercase “$s$”, is located below the signified, which is represented with the capitalised “$S$”; and a bar separates the two. In modern semiology:

The forgetting of the original fracture of presence is manifested precisely in what ought to betray it, that is, the bar (/) of the graphic $S/s$. That the meaning of this bar or barrier is constantly left in the shadow, thus hiding the abyss opened between signifier and signified, constitutes the foundation of that primordial positing of the signified and the signifier as two orders distinguished and separated by a barrier resisting signification, a position that has governed Western reflection of the sign from the outset, like a hidden overlord. (Agamben 1993c:137)

This is why, for Agamben, from the point of view of signification, ‘metaphysics is nothing but the forgetting of the originary difference between signifier and signified’ (Agamben, 1993c:137). The bar that separates *logos* and *phonē* is the very same bar that divides poetry from philosophy and yet gathers them together in the same apotropaic structure. Agamben traces the implications of this act of forgetting for

---

23 These lines correspond to Agamben’s entry on “gusto” [taste] for an Italian Encyclopedia.

24 The notion of “*stanza*” has a double meaning. As De la Durantaye suggests, in both Italian and English, stanzas are divisions of verse. In Italian, however, *stanza* is also a ‘room’. Agamben plays with these two meanings indicating, then, not only poetry and its divisions, but also the space in which scissions take place.

25 For Agamben, with Saussure’s formula ‘linguistic unity is double,’ the accent ‘has been placed now on the pole of the signifier, now on that of the signified, without ever putting into question the paradox, insuperable for Saussure, that had testified on behalf of his own formulation’ (Agamben, 1993c:137).
modern semiotics and aims at answering the question ‘why is presence deferred and fragmented such that something like signification even becomes possible?’ (Agamben, 1993c:137). The history of Western thought from Aristotle to Heidegger, is marked by a split within language whereby an ineffable element, namely the bar separating the signifier and the signified, appears to escape human discourse but nonetheless becomes a condition for it. For Agamben, although this identification of the ‘unspeakable’ appears as necessary, it is nevertheless a metaphysical imposition, rather than a linguistic one and it is totally contingent.

Here, I would like to focus on one of the registers through which the separation between the semiotic and the semantic has been introduced in the West. Agamben reconstructs a genealogy of this problem, which is ultimately the problem of representation. He does so by locating a shift in Western culture with regards to its treatment of the ‘improper’, which is at the core of the split between poetry and philosophy. Agamben describes the ‘epoch of the emblem’ as the time when the incongruous dominated the sphere of representation – between the first half of the 16th and the second half of the 17th century. During this period and with regards to the divine, negations were believed to be truer and more congruous than affirmations. Incongruence and displacement ‘became the vehicle of a superior knowledge, one in which the metaphysical difference between corporeal and incorporeal, matter and form, signifier and signified, both tended toward the maximum divergence and, at the same time, came together’ (Agamben, 1993c:142). The metaphor, as the dispositif of ‘signifying by improper terms’ operated by dissociating the signifier from its own signified. Similarly, according to Agamben, the caricature26 emerged as a displacement of the human figure from its signified, becoming the counterpart of the emblem and appearing ‘more similar to the person than the person itself’ (1993c:143). The emblem became a central figure in this

26 Caricature for Agamben, is ‘in the human sphere, what the emblem is in the sphere of objects’ (Agamben, 1993c:143).
model of signification founded on the incongruence and the displacement of essence from its appearance. ‘For the allegorical project of the baroque’, writes Agamben, ‘this mortification of the proper form is a token of redemption that will be rescued on the Last Day, but whose cipher is already implicit in the act of creation’ (1993c:142-143).

However, the centrality of the emblematic form in Western culture was called into question by the modern attitude of mastering the ‘proper’ form. With the decline of baroque allegoresis and with the emergence of psychoanalysis, the improper was identified with the uncanny (cf. Agamben, 1993c:145). From this point, the symbolic and the improper coincide with the unconscious and are displaced to the margins. Crucially, for Agamben, the Oedipal scheme27 of the proper and the improper becomes inadequate to grasp the structure of the metaphor. Indeed, the isolation of the improper operates through an a posteriori interpretation that ‘makes us discern a substitution where there is nothing but a displacement and a difference within a single signifying act. Only in a metaphor already crystallized by usage (which is therefore no longer a metaphor at all) is it possible to distinguish a proper and an improper signified: in an originary metaphor it would be useless to look for something like a proper term’ (Agamben, 1993c:148).

What Agamben calls into question then, is the presupposition in the Western metaphysical conception of signification of the existence of one term that is supposed to be replaced by another through a metaphorical transfer: the proper and

27 In a crucial chapter of Stanzas, Agamben uses the encounter of Oedipus and the Sphinx as a way of discussing the theory of signification. For Agamben, both the Sphinx and Oedipus are complicit in the abyss between signifier and signified. The Sphinx in the sense that she hides meaning, and Oedipus because he ‘reveals’ it. The ‘sin’ of Oedipus for Agamben is not incest, but ‘hubris toward the power of the symbolic in general … which he has misperceived by interpreting its apotropaic intention as the relation of an oblique signifier and a hidden signified’ (Agamben, 1993:138). As William Watkin suggests, Oedipus, and Western thought since then, ‘has valorized the very quality of interpretation over the fact of the enigma as such. Presupposing the enigma as a sign that needs to be made to signify, a philosophy dependent on an idea of language has totally missed the glaring fact that the power of the enigma lies elsewhere in the presence of the semiotic within the enigma of the sign’ (2010:177).
the improper. In other words, it is the reaffirmation of the improper in the epoch of the emblem and its exclusion in the epoch of the proper, which founds the realm of the proper itself. Crucially, as Agamben has put it,

The displacement of metaphor is not, in fact, between the proper and the improper, but within the metaphysical structuring of signification itself. Its space is determined by a reciprocal exclusion of the signifier and the signified, and in this space emerges the original difference on which every signification is founded (1993c:150).

The scission between poetry and philosophy, which acquires its most radical form in modernity, is partially a consequence of the failure of Western culture in coming to terms with and rejecting altogether the opposition between proper and improper. Crucially, for Agamben, it is the exclusive inclusion of the improper that founds the realm of the proper. For Agamben, this opposition takes place within signification but yet goes beyond it, since what is at the stake in the isolation of the improper is the question of appearance, and hence a problem of ontology. Put differently, for Agamben the differentiating structure of signification is directly linked to the question of Being. Needless to say, Being, for Agamben, does not have universal meaning nor does it have a concrete empirical object that stands for it. Rather, it is a signature by which a specific being becomes operative, or is said to come into existence in a particular time. In this sense, ontology is not ‘a determinate knowledge but the archaeology of every knowledge, which explores the signatures that pertain to beings by virtue of the very fact of existing, thus predisposing them to the interpretation of different knowledges’ (Agamben, 2009a:66).

It is with this in mind that Agamben’s Means without End (2000) should be read. Here Agamben presents another account of the relation between the proper and the improper, this time with regard to the notion of appearance. For human beings, writes Agamben, everything is divided between proper and improper. We are condemned to be and to have only one face. The face is for Agamben a revelation by
language, a terrain in which the isolation of the improper transcends signification to contaminate ethics and politics. Indeed, for Agamben, all living beings are in the open; they manifest themselves in appearance. Humans and only humans, however, try to take possession of their own appearance through language; they want to take possession of this opening by conquering appearance, which becomes the location of truth (Agamben, 2000:91). This is why, for Agamben, there is a face ‘whenever something reaches a level of exposition and tries to grasp its own being exposed, whenever a being that appears sinks in that appearance and has to find a way out of it’ (2000:92). Animals are in the open but do not take possession of their exposition. They do not have a face nor do they have language. Humans on the contrary, according to Agamben, transform the open into a world by separating things from images, making of the open a political struggle whose object is truth. Humans want to take possession of their exposition, of their own appearance. This struggle, writes Agamben, ‘goes by the name of History’ (2000:93).

The face is the first terrain of this battle, and because it is the location of ‘truth’ it becomes the space of the improper and of impropriety. Truth itself cannot be possessed, nor does it have ‘any object other than appearance and the improper: it is simply their comprehension, their exposition’ (2000:97). In short, in the same fashion that within the sphere of signification there is no such thing as a proper term that the metaphor is supposed to replace, there is not a proper form behind appearance. Human beings are nothing but this displacement, this dissimulation

---

28 The face, writes Agamben, ‘is at once the irreparable being-exposed of humans and the very opening in which they hide and stay hidden. The face is the only location of community, the only possible city. And that is because that which in single individuals opens up the political is the tragicomedy of truth, in which they always already fall and out of which they have to find a way’ (Agamben, 2000:91).

29 The dialectics of the proper and the improper is not a reproduction of the duality bios and zoē. The proper form is not qualified life. What Agamben shows in his account of the human face is that the proper is an illusion created by the will to take possession of appearance. Timothy Campbell’s reading of this passage suggests otherwise; for him ‘Agamben indicates by zoē the improper form of living that characterizes industrialized democracies, whereas bios is situated in those totalitarian or fundamentalist states whose task is to exclude the improper from the mode of living that is proper to the state’ (2011:33). Campbell’s reading of the improper in Agamben relies on a particular account of Heidegger’s use of the proper/improper scheme that overemphasises the role of technology and is unable to grasp Agamben’s critique of the metaphysical opposition between the
and, as Agamben has put it, this disquietude within the appearance: ‘the human face reproduces the duality that constitutes it within its own structure, that is, the duality of proper and improper’ (Agamben, 2000:98). This is the reason why every appearance becomes improper, and we are confronted with the impossible task of taking possession of truth as our own proper truth. For Agamben, the totalitarian politics of the modern, is precisely the will to total self-possession:

[H]ere either the improper extends its own rule everywhere, thanks to an unrestrainable will to falsification and consumption (as happens in advanced industrialized democracies), or the proper demands the exclusion of any impropriety (as happens in the so-called totalitarian states). In both these grotesque counterfeits of the face, the only truly human possibility is lost: that is, the possibility of taking possession of impropriety as such, of exposing in the face simply your own proper impropriety, of walking in the shadow of its light. (2000:97-98, emphasis in original)

As is clear in this passage, Agamben is not committed to a politics of the improper, since this would be repeating Derrida’s inversion of the hierarchy of the signified and the signifier. Returning the improper to the privileged position it had during the epoch of the emblem leaves untouched the dividing structure of metaphysics that allows for both signification and appearance to become possible. Moreover, as Agamben puts it, ‘the principle according to which the sole content of the proper is the improper is exactly verified by its inversion, which has it that the sole content of the improper is the proper’ (Agamben, 1999:76). For this reason, Agamben calls into question Heidegger’s idea of authenticity. Indeed, in Remnants of Auschwitz (1999) Agamben argues against the Heideggerian distinction between proper and improper. Indeed, Timothy Campbell’s Improper Life (2011) establishes a relation between technology and thanatopolitical thought by focusing on Heidegger’s distinction between improper and proper writing. By extracting only Heidegger’s distinction between handwriting and typewriting from Parmenides (2000) Campbell ends up with a limited account of the proper and the improper in Heidegger’s thought that he then imposes on his reading of Agamben. For Heidegger, ‘in handwriting the relation of Being [des Seins] to man, namely the word, is inscribed [eingezeichnet] in beings themselves’ (Heidegger, 2000:85). Typewriting, on the contrary, concerns an improper action of the hand that makes everyone look the same. What Campbell does, is translating handwriting and typewriting into proper and improper and then, in his reading of Agamben, into bios and zoë.
improper,\textsuperscript{30} presented by Heidegger in terms of the appropriation of the experience of death. In the concentration camps, as De la Durantaye states, ‘death experienced as one’s own is impossible because of the very omnipresence of death’ (2009:268). Indeed, for Agamben, the appropriation of the experience of death that guides Heidegger’s account of the proper becomes impossible in the camps:

The reason for which Auschwitz is excluded from the experience of death – of the sort that Heidegger envisions – is that it calls into question the very possibility of authentic decision and thus threatens the very ground of Heidegger’s ethics. In the camp, every distinction between proper and improper, between possible and impossible radically disappears (Agamben, 1999:75-76).

In this sense, Heidegger’s call for the appropriation of the improper that makes existence possible within his ontological perspective becomes irrelevant. The 	extit{Muselmann}, as the most radical paradigmatic figure of bare life, renders any distinction of a proper form based on a primordial experience inoperative. As De la Durantaye pointedly observes, ‘the Heideggerian dialectic that Agamben sees put into question by death in Auschwitz is not about correctness – about what would be proper in the English sense of the term – but about what, if anything, is proper to the state of the 	extit{Muselmann}, this bare life stripped of all traditional ethical attributes’ (2009:267-268). In the camp then, not only the content of the improper becomes the proper but ultimately any distinction between proper and improper in terms of the experience of death disappears.

Taking possession of impropriety is then what is lost in every register of the proper/improper scheme, not in the sense of a failure of mastering the improper

\textsuperscript{30} It is beyond the scope of this chapter to develop a critical reading of Heidegger’s account of the proper and the improper. Generally put, the notions of the proper and the improper in Heidegger pivot on his account of the distinction between authentic and inauthentic existence that is put forth in  	extit{Being and Time}. What is crucial here is that Agamben’s notion of the improper has nothing to do with the concept of the inauthentic. For Heidegger, the experience of death as one’s own is intimately linked to the notion of the proper. For Agamben, on the contrary, the proper has no content of its own and is not determined by experience, rather it is created by the exclusion of the improper.
but because for Agamben, both the proper and the improper are complicit in the same metaphysical machine of differentiation. From signification, where the improper is pushed to the margins, to the human face where appearance becomes the improper, Agamben’s critique of signification underlines a structure: the isolation of the improper as what gives form to ‘propriety’ in all the different registers in which the dialects of the improper and the proper comes to the fore as an object of critique. For Agamben there is no such thing as a ‘proper form’ in either signification or behind the human face. Through the isolation of the improper the proper is founded but then this dialectic ultimately collapses in a zone of indistinction. Maintaining this false division, which is ultimately a division between a being that speaks but does not know and a being that knows but does not speak – but also between signifier and signified, between poetry and philosophy, between proper and improper – is a metaphysical imposition.

Agamben’s critique of metaphysics, in this sense, is neither on the side of Heidegger’s critique of the obfuscation of an authentic Being by tradition nor on the side of Derrida’s privileging of speech. Rather, for Agamben, language, which is the experience of experience itself, cannot be approached from the outside of language. Yet, as Watkin claims ‘nor it can be experienced entirely from the inside as in some imagined, primordial being for whom the division between phone [sic] and logos has not yet come about’ (2010:11). Human language is bifurcated and hence human beings are defined as ‘neither Homo sapiens nor Homo loquens, but Homo sapiens loquendi’ (2010:8). Crucially, writes Agamben, ‘in the reflection on language, which has always been par excellence the plane on which the experience of the original fracture is represented, this interpretation is crystalized in the notion of the sign as the expressive unity of the signifier and signified’ (Agamben, 1993c:136). The sign in this sense both masks the primary scission of language through a notion of unity and yet contains within its structure a bar that represents the scission.
The *oikonomia* of the proper and the improper within the Western tradition of signification from which Agamben develops a critical reading of both politics and ethics, responds to a particular dialectic based on the inclusive exclusion of one element – the improper – that in turn founds the illusion of a proper form. As has been shown, Agamben argues that this structure ultimately collapses into a zone of indistinction in which it is impossible to distinguish between the proper and the improper. Moreover, the proper element is founded through the exclusion of the improper. What we have here is the basic economy of a larger metaphysical structure that is at work, for Agamben, in the operation of signatures. Indeed, this economy explains the way in which the intelligibility of discursive formations is controlled by signatures. In what follows, I outline a comprehensive account of this economy.

**The Common and the Proper: How do Signatures Work?**

The central argument of this chapter is that in Agamben’s critique of signification we can find the underlying structure that both organises and produces every conceptual discursive formation in the West, including the originary doubleness of the metaphysical conception of signification itself. As William Watkin has carefully demonstrated in *Agamben and Indifference* (2014), for Agamben all the central concepts of Western culture are formed by a limited set of contingent philosophical structures that are nonetheless presented as necessary. Indeed, Agamben sees the basic structure of the metaphysical tradition to be the presentation of a concept through a primary scission between two heterogeneous and asymmetric elements. One element always occupies the position of the common or unconditioned power, the other that of the proper of the supposed singularity of the conditioned fact. The common operates in this model as the foundation, while the proper is what is founded, hence the supposed heterogeneity and asymmetry between the two. (Watkin, 2014:6)
The common, Watkin points out, founds the realm of the proper, which in turn creates the need for the fiction of the ‘unconditioned’ foundation, and therefore both the common and the proper are part of the same metaphysical machine of production of differential oppositions that ‘lie at the root of every major Western concept-signature or discursive structure’" (2014:xiii).

Although this is another way of decoding the same dialectic between the proper and the improper as the basis of Agamben’s critique of Western metaphysics, by focusing on the common and the proper, rather than on the proper and the improper, Watkin deciphers a more general framework underlying Agamben’s critique of Western metaphysics. The economy of the common and the proper scheme shows how the differential oppositions, which for Agamben form every major signature in the West, are constituted. The exclusion of the improper in signification is but one instance of this. Introducing the notion of the common, Watkin goes one step beyond the isolation of the improper to examine more closely the foundational moment of the proper itself. The advantage of this approach is that it allows us to locate Agamben’s thought within a philosophical tradition that includes Nietzsche, Heidegger, Deleuze, and Derrida, while retaining his distinctive critique of both identity and difference. However, Watkin’s account of the structure of the common and the proper is unable to grasp that it is precisely by a relation of inclusive exclusion that the common and the proper reciprocally found each other.

The economy of the improper and the proper that we have presented in the first part of this chapter in relation to signification, is indicative of a larger metaphysical structure that pertains to the functioning of signatures, namely the structure of the common and the proper. However, by tracing the structure of the common and the

---

31 At the root of the totality of Agamben’s philosophical system is that ‘even the very basis of thinking, the opposition between identity and difference, the very terms ‘identity’ and ‘difference’, even the idea of an economy between them, are historically contingent’ (Watkin, 2014:7)
proper back to Agamben’s critique of signification we are able to capture inclusive exclusion that marks the relation between the common and the proper, missing in Watkin’s reading.

Thanos Zartaloudis’ (2010) analysis of the relation between philosophy and Law in Agamben’s thought also provides an insightful example of the economy of the common and the proper in terms of the operations of power in the West. He calls the moments of arising of the dialectic between the common and the proper – terms that he does not use himself – “foundational mythologemes”, which are the self-referential structures constructed through the differential opposition of a founding fiction and a proper form:

The historical, political and theoretical celebration of such mythologemes and their continued transmission is highly problematic since it misleads thought from considering the fact that it is the founded power or concepts that project the so-called founding referent (as their metaphysical – transcendental principle). In other words it is the act of founding (search for the origin or essence of authority and power, and the need to render them stable, infallible and ordered), which presupposes not only the particular form of the founded power, but also the source of its justification as if from an outside, higher realm that is to be rendered sacred, concealed, absolute and allegedly just and more powerful. Whether it is sovereignty (in despotic understandings of power) or the People (for instance, in democratic understandings of power) that are claimed as the originary foundation of power, it is instead the act of their specific manner of presupposition by what they allegedly found and justify (government-administration-police) that projects their imaginary transcendence, absolution and perfection. (Zartaloudis, 2010: 185).

In this sense, Western political concepts – and in fact all abstract concepts – are only quasi-transcendental (cf. Watkin, 2014:xiii). The common, this foundational power described by Zartaloudis, creates the proper – the founded power – only to legitimise its own existence, to produce the need for its fictional transcendence so that in reality, it is the proper what founds the common, or to put it in a paradoxical form, it is the founded element which founds its founding ground. Needless to say, it
is not only the case that the founded element – the proper – actualises the founding fiction constantly but also that the proper is ‘allowed to occur because of a held-in-common foundation’ (Zartaloudis, 2010:xii).

For Agamben, the common and the proper are part of the same metaphysical machine that, as a general framework of his critique of the West, sustains and makes intelligible the other machines that have produced and continue to produce our current predicament: the anthropological machine (human/animal), the governmental machine (kingdom/government), the biopolitical machine (bare life/qualified life) and the theological machine (divine/secularised). At the core of the metaphysical machinery of the West there is the split within signification between the proper and the improper – and between the signified and the signifier, between philosophy and poetry –, which provides the basic structure and the internal logic of all discursive formations. This linguistic-metaphysical structure that we have traced back to Agamben’s critique of the sign constitutes the signature of metaphysics and the way in which signatures control the intelligibility of discursive formations.

The dialectic between the common and the proper represents, for Watkin, another way of citing what Agamben calls the ‘battle of giants concerning being’ (Agamben, 2005a:59) that has determined the history of Western metaphysics and which ultimately refers to the struggle between the one – the common – and the many – the proper (Watkin, 2014:xii). When read in this light, the common/proper scheme

---

32 Relevant to this discussion is Agamben’s reading of Wittgenstein in The Highest Poverty (2013b). Indeed, when discussing the monk’s form-of-life that coincides with the ecclesiastic rule, Agamben examines the role of constitutive norms, that is norms that do not prescribe or regulate a preexisting act or state of things but bring them into being. Agamben refers to Wittgenstein’s example of chess pieces to illustrate this. These pieces, ‘do not exist before the game, but are constituted by the rules of the game’ (2013b:71). As Agamben notices, ‘the execution of a rule of this type, which does not limit itself to prescribing to an agent a certain conduct but produces this conduct, becomes extremely problematic [...]. A form of life would thus be the collection of constitutive rules that define it. But can one say in this sense that the monk, like the pawn in chess, is defined by the sum of the prescriptions according to which he lives? Could one not rather say with greater truth exactly the opposite, that it is the monk’s form of life that creates his rules? Perhaps both theses are true, on the condition that we specify that rules and life enter here into a zone of indifference’ (2013b:71).
provides not only grounds to grasp a larger philosophical debate on the notions of
identity and difference, but also the key to locating Agamben’s philosophical system
beyond the philosophers of difference.\textsuperscript{33} Indeed, for Agamben it is not just the case
that identity is undermined by a valorisation of difference, but also that difference
itself participates in the metaphysical machine as an historically contingent
element.\textsuperscript{34}

It comes as no surprise that in the same fashion that for Agamben in an originary
metaphor it is not possible to distinguish between the improper and the proper, in
the metaphysical machine both the common and the proper collapse into a zone of
indistinction. This is explicit in all of the discursive formations that constitute our
notion of the West: the grey area between the human and the animal produced by
the anthropological machine, the threshold between fact and Law, the zone of
indistinction between bare life and sovereign power, the complete coincidence of
rule and form-of-life in the monastic orders, and the status of the \textit{Muselmann} in
between life and death. Regardless of the different ways in which this grey area
appears in Agamben’s works, the structure is always the same: the difference
between the common element and the proper radically disappears, to the extent
that it is no longer possible to distinguish them. In terms of the \textit{Homo Sacer} project,
for instance, the moment of indistinction between the common and the proper
reaches its highest expression through a consideration of the state of exception as a

\textsuperscript{33} Specifically, Agamben’s critique of the common and the proper could not be understood as a valorisation of
difference, as could be the case of Derrida. It goes without saying, though, that Agamben’s archaeological project
overlaps with deconstruction on multiple occasions as we have seen in the previous chapter.

\textsuperscript{34} Agamben, as Watkin points out, does not participate in the philosophical tradition that problematises
philosophical structures of consistent identities through a celebration of difference. Rather, Agamben makes the
basic presupposition of this tradition indifferent or indistinct because ‘he insists that difference is as much
implicated in the system of metaphysics as that of identity, or the proper is as much part of the metaphysical
machine as the common. If, he argues, like his predecessors, that identity structures are historically contingent,
not locally necessary, then so too are differentiating structures, which can then further be said to be complicit in
metaphysics, not a means to overcoming it. Rather than undermining identity with difference, therefore,
Agamben shows that identity and difference themselves are not necessary terms in the development of
ontology, say, but historical contingencies that in fact form one single entity within our tradition, what one might
call identity-difference metaphysics since the Greeks, and based on this observations one can suspend their
history of opposition by rendering them indifferent to each other’ (Watkin, 2014:xiv)
political paradigm: ‘the decisive fact is that, together with the process by which exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life – which is originally situated at the margins of the political order – gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, bios and zoe, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction’ (Agamben, 1998:9).

With the publication of L’uso dei corpi (2014a) the Homo Sacer project has come to an end.35 The schema common-proper-indifference as well as the function of paradigms and signatures provides the internal logic that organises the project, bridging the different volumes of a series that were never supposed to be read in isolation. As a whole, the Homo Sacer project is an attempt to decipher the political meaning of pure Being as a precondition to ‘master the bare life that expresses our subjection to political power’ (Agamben, 1998:182). But inversely, it aims at understanding the theoretical implications of the isolation of bare life in order to solve the enigma of ontology. Neither of these tasks is effectively accomplished if the constitutive processes of metaphysics and politics are not located within the economy of the common and the proper, that is to say, within the linguistic-metaphysical machine that lies at the core of Agamben’s philosophy.

Indeed, if we bring the conclusions of these two chapters together, it could be said that the Homo Sacer project is an archaeological research that unveils and intends to render inoperative the transmission of signatures – Life, Sovereignty, Power, Secularization – across discursive formations through the examination of oppositional philosophical structures – the common and the proper – that are made intelligible through the use of paradigms. Archaeology, in this sense, renders inoperative the conditioning logic of the common and the proper through the

mapping of their signatory operations. These operations are traced through the paradigms that make intelligible the moments of arising of the dialectic of the common and the proper.

Regardless of the particularities of the archaeological investigations that Agamben has carried out (1998, 2009a, 2011), a pattern emerges in his work: after locating both the common and the proper, Agamben examines the moments of indistinction, the zones of indifference in which both the common and the proper become indistinguishable. He then identifies the emptiness that lies at the core of the metaphysical machine in order to call for a politics freed from the economy of the common and the proper. This is how this call is presented in The Open: Man and Animal (2004):

To render inoperative the machine that governs our conception of man will therefore mean no longer to seek new – more effective or authentic – articulations, but rather to show that the central emptiness, the hiatus that – within man – separates man and animal, and to risk ourselves in this emptiness: the suspension of suspension. (Agamben, 2004:92)

Likewise, in The Kingdom and the Glory, Agamben claims that it is the empty throne of sovereign power what we need to profane in order to conceive what he calls ‘eternal life’ (2011:xiii). To think the Being of abandonment beyond every idea of law, as the task Agamben imposes on our time in Homo Sacer, implies precisely moving out of the emptiness of every form of law. The question that arises is therefore: what entails thinking outside this metaphysical machine – which has been traced back to Agamben’s critique of the sign? Agamben has partially answered this question in terms of what he calls form-of-life and the politics of inoperativity.36 For Watkin,

---

36 These notions are developed in Agamben’s The Highest Poverty (2013b) and L’uso dei corpi (2014a). A critical reading of them will be provided in the final chapter of this thesis.
a new politics comes about by, first of all, suspending the signatory transmissibility of Life. This signature is not a set of meanings but a mode of organization and sanction. Its logic of included exclusion is what is transmitted, and that is all Life is. Every political theory thus far has depended on the transmission of this mode to make intelligible its claims, by which we mean to makes its claims possible though sanction, and operative through the context of their intelligibility. The only politics that can claim to be new is one that, directly facing up to the signature of all politics, refuses the sanction and operativity offered by Life as signatory included exclusion. (2014:190)

However, the initial presupposition – or last identification – remains untouched, namely, the existence of a signature of all signatures: pure being as the archi-signator that ‘imprints its transcendental marks on existential entities’ (Agamben, 2009:xx). Agamben’s structure of the common and the proper functions as the hidden matrix upon which the very notion of thinking is established; this is what ultimately needs to be suspended and rendered inoperative, by taking the step-backwards-beyond metaphysics, a step which deconstruction renounces. Whether or not Agamben’s philosophical archaeology is capable of suspending the signature of all signatures is a question that I will answer in the last chapter of this thesis through an examination of the politics of inoperativity. What is clear at this point, however, is that a critical reading of Agamben’s thought cannot ignore the archaeological aims of his investigations. By presenting an overall description of Agamben’s method and venturing an account of the way in which his early writings on signification explain the operation of the signatures that control the intelligibility of the West, I am attempting to shed light on the entire Homo Sacer project.
Chapter 4

The Paradox of Sovereignty: Bare life and its Paradigms

In the preface of *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Agamben claims that the *Homo Sacer* project is an archaeology of power in the West (2011:xii). With full access to the eight volumes that compose the entire project and to the overall method, we can say that this archaeology is primarily concerned with the signature of Life, with the signature of Power, with their relation and with the way in which these signatures can be rendered inoperative. What is at stake in the treatment of power throughout the project is the double structure of the governmental machine, that is, the articulation of sovereignty and governmentality, auctoritas and potestas, kingdom and government, political theology and economic theology. With regard to life, Agamben’s archaeology focuses on the inclusive exclusion of bare life that founds and animates the political in the West.

*Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), originally published in 1995, is the first volume of the project and, as is well known, focuses on the inclusive exclusion of bare life in relation to the first pole of the governmental machine, namely, sovereign power. Reading this volume in isolation has resulted in a failure to grasp both the double structure of the governmental machine – viz. sovereignty and government – and the way in which this articulation, through the economy of the common and the proper, explains the operativity of the signature of Power in the West. On the premise that sovereignty is only one of the axes of the governmental machine, this chapter examines Agamben’s initial approach to the question of sovereign power and introduces the notion of bare life. In particular, I focus on Agamben’s analysis of the paradox of sovereignty and on the way in which
this paradox captures the dialectic between constituting and constituted power.\footnote{Chapter 6 provides a comprehensive account of sovereignty and of its articulation with governmentality and Chapter 7 deals with the relation between sovereignty and biopolitics.} My central argument here is that Agamben moves away from Schmitt’s decisionism in his account of the paradox of sovereignty and that he embraces Benjamin’s view of the state of exception as a space of undecidability. Unlike Benjamin, however, Agamben ontologises sovereignty through the introduction of the Aristotelian category of impotentiality in his analysis of sovereign power, resulting in a dramatisation of the paradox of sovereignty. Yet, Agamben’s reading of Benjamin provides an antidote to this problem, anticipating some of the conclusions that Agamben reaches in his later works. Indeed, Benjamin’s notion of divine violence constitutes a starting point for the construction of a form of politics that aims at rendering inoperative the sovereign machine, as developed by Agamben in his \textit{L’uso dei corpi} (2014a). Moreover, Benjamin’s insistence that the state of exception opens a gap between power and its exercise provides a hint of the way in which power is presented as an articulation between sovereignty and government in \textit{The Kingdom and the Glory}, to which I turn in the next chapter. With regards to the notion of bare life, my aim here is to provide an analysis of the central paradigms through which Agamben connects this notion to sovereign power. I further aim to respond to different criticisms that this notion has raised.

**The Paradox of Sovereignty: Between Benjamin and Schmitt**

Following Schmitt, Agamben claims that sovereign power is undoubtedly situated within and above the law (cf. 1998:15), echoing different thinkers from a wide range of intellectual traditions including Rousseau, Derrida, Deleuze, and Kafka, all of whom affirm that there is a fundamental paradox at the core of sovereignty (cf. Connolly 2007:24). This paradox consists in the fact that the sovereign is both outside and inside the juridical order (cf. Agamben 1998:15). Unlike Rousseau, who,
in *On the Social Contract*, analyses the paradox of sovereignty\(^\text{38}\) to negotiate its terms and resolve it through the figure of the wise legislator,\(^\text{39}\) Agamben’s reading of sovereignty discloses deeper paradoxes that can only be resolved by rejecting or transcending its logic altogether, that is, by suspending its signatorial operations.

For Agamben, this paradox lies in the fact that the sovereign, having the legal power to decide if the juridical order is to be suspended, legally places himself outside the law. The limits of the juridical order are subjected to the structure of this paradox, whose topology corresponds to the structure of the exception (cf. Agamben, 1998:15). In a well-known passage from *Political Theology*, quoted by Agamben in *Homo Sacer*, Schmitt writes:

> The exception appears in its absolute form when it is a question of creating a situation in which juridical rules can be valid ... There is no rule applicable to chaos ... [and therefore, GA] a regular situation must be created and the sovereign is he who definitely decides if this situation is actually effective ... [H]e has the monopoly over the final decision. (Schmitt in Agamben, 1998:16)

The exception – which for Agamben becomes more important than the regular situation – is explained by the fact that a final authority is required to suspend the validity of the positive law, to define ‘the normal case as the realm of its own validity’ (1998:16). This final authority is insufficiently informed by any law that precedes it. Indeed, for Schmitt, ‘authority proves itself not to need law to create

\(^{38}\)For Rousseau the paradox of sovereignty resides in the fact that ‘in order for an emerging people to appreciate the healthy maxims of politics and follow the fundamental rules of statecraft, the effect would have to become the cause: the social spirit which should be the result of the institution, would have to preside over the founding of the institution itself; and men would have to be prior to the laws what they ought to become by means of laws’ (2004:27).

\(^{39}\)Here it is worth quoting Rousseau’s comments on the figure of the legislator in full: ‘he who dares to undertake the making of a people’s institutions ought to feel himself capable, so to speak, of changing human nature, of transforming each individual, who is by himself a complete and solitary whole, into part of a greater whole from which he in a manner receives his life and being; of altering man’s constitution for the purpose of strengthening it; and of substituting a partial and moral existence for the physical and independent existence nature has conferred on us all. He must, in a word, take away from man his own resources and give him instead new ones alien to him, and incapable of being made use of without the help of other men’ (2004:25).
law' (2005:19). The character of the exception is defined by Agamben as an exclusion, which preserves a relation with the general rule as a form of the rule’s suspension. In this sense, the rule applies in no longer applying and, therefore, the state of exception, far from being the lawless situation that precedes the order, is the scenario that results from its suspension (cf. Agamben 1998). It is in this light that we must read Carl Schmitt’s statement that ‘sovereignty presents itself in the form of a decision on the exception’ (Schmitt in Agamben, 1998:26).

The complexity of the inclusion described by Agamben exceeds not only Deleuze and Guattari’s affirmation of the capacity of sovereignty to rule only over what it is capable of interiorizing (cf. Agamben, 1998:45) but also Blanchot’s claim that there is an attempt of society to confine the outside and constitute it in an ‘interiority of expectation or of exception’ (1993:272). Agamben goes further to suggest that the exception that defines the structure of sovereignty is even more complex: ‘what is outside is included not simply by means of an interdiction or an interment, but rather by means of the suspension of the juridical order’s validity’ (1998:18).

---

40 In “Society Must Be Defended” Foucault claims that the theory of sovereignty is incapable of grasping the multiplicity of mechanisms of domination found in modern societies. Through the notion of sovereignty, he argues, the multiplicity of techniques and mechanisms of power are referred back to a ‘fundamental and foundational unity’. Rather, he thinks that these mechanisms should be examined in terms of the ‘real relations of domination, and to allow them to assert themselves in their multiplicity, their differences, their specificity, or their reversibility’ (Foucault, 2003:45). In a more radical vein, Antonio Negri locates a crisis of the concept of sovereignty, discussing the necessity to ‘escape the fetish of sovereignty as the concept of government in modernity’ (2010:209). After locating different perspectives within postmodern thought that sustain this crisis (from the biopolitical transformation of the concept of sovereignty to its modification in the light of international law), Negri asks: ‘If, in the current post-modern climate, the principle of sovereignty is dissolving, could it however be rebuilt – stripped of every spurious characteristic – abstracted into an unambiguous definition of “exceptionality”? ... This is what some legal-philosophical positions rather ambiguously – and very abstractly – propose, sometimes claiming that the strength of the exception restores the entire process of the production of law under the auspices of sovereignty, at others recognizing in the emergence of the ‘exception’ a new figure of sovereign command ... But it is a process so abstract (and teleological or – as Kant put it – ‘terroristic’, that is, armed with a radical ethical pessimism, based on a metaphysics of transcendence) as to become instrumental in too many theoretical positions and indifferent to too many ideological standpoints. When a key opens too many doors it can only be a lock-pick’ (2010:207-208). Agamben’s critique of sovereignty represents precisely a threshold in the totalisation of sovereignty through a re-composition of its abandonment in the category of the exception.
In this particular sense, the situation created in the exception cannot be defined either as a situation of fact or as a situation of right, but rather as a threshold of indistinction between the two. This zone of indistinction is produced, according to Agamben, by the inclusion of chaos in the juridical order, since in order to refer to something, a rule must both presuppose and yet still establish a relation with what is outside the relation. Once this presuppositional character of law is fully established and the sovereign power is located in the very indistinction between outside and inside, the state of exception and the state of nature become the two sides of the very same topological process in which, according to Agamben, as in a Möbius strip, ‘what was presupposed as external – the state of nature – now reappears in the inside – the state of exception’ (1998:37). For this reason, the state of exception is not simply a spatiotemporal suspension of the juridical order but rather a ‘complex topological figure in which not only the exception and the rule but also the state of nature and law, outside and inside, pass through one another’ (Agamben, 1998:37).

It is in this way that Agamben digs into the paradox of sovereignty to reveal its originary structure, which, he believes, is fully exposed in the problem posed to political and legal theory by constituting power – that is, for Benjamin the violence that posits the law – in its relation to constituted power41 – that is, the power that preserves the law. Here, two possibilities emerge: either constituting power is dismissed and reduced to the power of revision foreseen in constitutional terms,42 or constituting power is maintained in its capacity to transcend sovereign power.

41 The problems that political and legal theory face in terms of the relation between constituting power and constituted power are first explained by the fact that ‘if one really means to give the distinction between constituting power and constituted power its true meaning, it is necessary to place constituting and constituted power on two different levels. Constituted powers exist only in the State: inseparable from a pre-established constitutional order, they need the State frame, whose reality they manifest. Constituting power, on the other hand, is situated outside the State; it owes nothing to the State, it exists without it, it is the spring whose current no use can ever exhaust’ (Burdeau, 1984:173).

42 This is a position defended, among others, by the legal theorist Hans Kelsen. As Agamben suggests, within this framework, the power from which ‘the constitution is born is increasingly dismissed as a prejudice or a merely factual matter’ (Agamben, 1998:40).
Crucially, for Agamben, both accounts remain imprisoned in the paradox of sovereignty. For, ‘if constituting power is, as the violence that posits law, certainly more noble than the violence that preserves it, constituting power still possesses no title that might legitimate something other than law-preserving violence and even maintains an ambiguous and ineradicable relation with constituted power’ (Agamben, 1998:40). What this explains then, is that sovereign power is not only inside and outside the juridical order, but also, that it is located in a zone of indistinction between constituting power and constituted power.43 Against this thesis, Negri argues that constituting power cannot be reduced to sovereign power. In a passage from his 1993 Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State (1999) Negri states that ‘the truth of constituting power’:

is not the one that can (in any way whatsoever) be attributed to the concept of sovereignty. This is not the truth of constituting power not only because constituting power is not (as is obvious) an emanation of constituted power, but also because constituting power is not the institution of constituted power: it is the act of choice, the punctual determination that opens a horizon, the radical enacting of something that did not exist before and whose conditions of existence stipulate that the creative act cannot lose its characteristics in creating. When constituting power sets the constituting process in motion, every determination is free and remains free. Sovereignty, on the other hand, arises as the establishment – and therefore as the end end – of constituting power, as the consumption of the freedom brought by constituting power. (1999:20)

In order to support this claim, Negri focuses on the democratic revolutions and the power struggles between constituting and constituted power, from a historico-

43 In her analysis of the French Revolution, Hannah Arendt, to whom Agamben devotes just a few lines in his treatment of constituting power (cf. 1998:41), shows how the theoretical problem to be resolved is not that of the conception of a constituting power that does not dissolve itself in a constituted power (Arendt, 1963:185), but rather, that the first theoretical task should be the establishment of a clear differentiation between them. By not having fulfilled this task, the revolutionary tradition has failed to recognise the interconnection of constituting power with constituted power. On the differences between Agamben’s and Arendt’s reading of constituted and constituting power, Jennings claims that Arendt’s framework contrasts with ‘the political anthropology implicit in political modernity (including the revolutionary tradition up to Benjamin and Agamben) in which the very notion of a distinction between constituent and constituting power in constitutional theory still to this day necessarily implies pre-constituted people (i.e. the state of nature) choosing to form a political community outside of any pre-existing association of relationship to history’ (2011:41).
political perspective, that is to say, he asks how ‘initially, constituent power infuses its dynamism into the constitutional system and then is itself reformed by the constitution’ (Negri, 1999:7). In this sense, constituting power for Negri ‘takes the form of a permanent revolution, a process in which the subject’s independence is affirmed at the moment when it continually rolls back the enemy’s oppression and simultaneously expresses, accumulates, and organises its own power’ (1999:31). What is at stake, for Negri, is a political question concerning the difference between constituting power and the principle of sovereignty. Yet, for Agamben, Negri’s claim according to which constituting power neither limits itself to instituting constituted power nor can it be said to be derived from it, ‘still says nothing as to constituting power’s alterity with respect to sovereign power’ (Agamben, 1998:43). Indeed, if Agamben’s analysis of the paradox of sovereignty is correct, then Negri ‘cannot find any criterion, in his wide analysis of the historical phenomenology of constituting power, by which to isolate constituting power from sovereign power’ (Agamben, 1998:43).

Even though Negri’s account of constituting power fails to escape from the paradox of sovereignty, he provides, for Agamben, the groundwork to conceive the problem of constituting power in all its radicality. Indeed, for Negri the problem of constituting power is, ultimately, the problem of the constitution of potentiality and hence it ‘ceases to be a strictly political concept and necessarily presents itself as category of ontology’ (Agamben, 1998:44). It is in this sense that for Agamben, Negri’s suggestion regarding the ontological character of constituting power as a problem of the constitution of potentiality44 ‘opens the way for a new articulation of the relation between potentiality and actuality’ (Agamben, 1998:44). Central to Agamben’s approach to the dialectic between constituting and constituted power

---

44 This claim is also made by Zartaloudis, for whom ‘Negri’s valuable contribution to political theory in this regard lies with the rethinking of the freedom of constituent power as no longer a political or legal category, but as a category of ontology: the constitution of potentiality and of the new. But that is a very difficult freedom. The problem is that constituent power remains tightly woven in the dialectical matrix of sovereignty (and law) and the search for a supreme principle or arché’ (2010:125).
through the category of potentiality is his move from political philosophy to first philosophy:

The unresolved dialectic between constituting power and constituted power opens the way for a new articulation of the relation between potentiality and actuality, which requires nothing less than a rethinking of the ontological categories of modality in their totality. The problem is therefore moved from political philosophy to first philosophy (or, if one likes, politics is returned to its ontological position). Only an entirely new conjunction of possibility and reality, contingency and necessity, and the other pathē tou ontos, will make it possible to cut the knot that binds sovereignty to constituting power. And only if it is possible to think the relation between potentiality and actuality differently – and even to think beyond this relation – will it be possible to think a constituting power wholly released from the sovereign ban. Until a new and coherent ontology of potentiality (beyond the steps that have been made in this direction by Spinoza, Schelling, Nietzsche, and Heidegger) has replaced the ontology founded on the primacy of actuality and its relation to potentiality, a political theory freed from the aporias of sovereignty remains unthinkable (1998:44).

Two things are striking here. First, Agamben takes Negri’s suggestion that the problem of constituting power is the problem of the constitution of potentiality – Il potere constitutivo – further, to claim that the problem of the paradox of sovereignty is an ontological problem. And second, Agamben situates the relation between sovereignty and constituting power within a larger Aristotelian structure, namely, the relation between potentiality and actuality.45 Indeed, for Agamben ‘the relation between constituting and constituted power (perhaps like every authentic understanding of the problem of sovereignty) depends on how one thinks the existence and autonomy of potentiality’ (1998:44). The Aristotelian concept of

---

45 Agamben, in an essay entitled ‘On Potentiality’, discusses Aristotle’s conceptions of potentiality and actuality. For Aristotle, there are two forms of potentiality, a generic one, in which an alteration or transformation has to take place for the potentiality to turn into actuality (i.e. the potentiality of a child to become architect) and an existing one, in which potentiality is already there and therefore whoever has it can choose not to convert it into actuality (i.e. the potentiality of a composer to write music). It is precisely the latter form of potentiality that interests Agamben (cf. 1999:179).
potentiality is appealing for Agamben not because it precedes actuality while remaining subordinated to it, but rather because potentiality in Aristotle is also potentiality not to do or be, and in this sense, potentiality ‘maintains itself in relation to actuality in the form of its suspension’ (1998:45). This is why, for Agamben, in describing the nature of potentiality as im-potentiality, Aristotle anticipates the paradigm of sovereignty, since the sovereign ban corresponds to the authentic structure of potentiality. Indeed, just as potentiality could suspend itself and become two-faced, the sovereign structure also becomes double, suspending itself while maintaining itself in relation to the ban, and, therefore, claiming that ‘constituting power never exhausts itself in constituted power is not enough, sovereign power can also, as such, maintain itself indefinitely without ever passing over into actuality’ (1998:47).

If constituting power, that is, the violence that posits the law, cannot be clearly differentiated from constituted power, that is, from the violence that preserves the juridical order, then privileging constituting power over constituted power would result in the strengthening of this differentiating structure and clearly not in its suspension. The paradox of sovereignty indicates that sovereign power is located in a zone of indistinction between constituting power and constituted power, and hence that sovereignty is tied to the violence that posits the law, as much as it is connected to the violence that preserves it. In the background of this discussion is Benjamin’s reading of mythic violence, which I discuss later in this chapter. For now, it is worth noting that Agamben’s reading of the paradox of sovereignty is analogous to his critique of deconstruction: just as reverting the hierarchy of the signifier and the signified will not suspend the metaphysical structure of signification, privileging constituting power over constituted power will not break the link between sovereignty and constituting power. This analogy is reinforced by the fact that

46 A detailed analysis of how this category operates in Agamben’s works is provided in section 3 of Chapter 7, entitled ‘The Politics of Inoperativity: Use and Destituent Power.’
Agamben, who as we have seen in the second chapter claims that deconstruction dwells in negativity, compares the paradox of sovereignty to negative theology:

The exception is an element in law that transcends positive law in the form of its suspension. The exception is to positive law what negative theology is to positive theology. While the latter affirms and predicates determinate qualities of God, negative (or mystical) theology, with its "neither . . . nor . . ." negates and suspends the attribution to God of any predicate whatsoever. Yet negative theology is not outside theology and can actually be shown to function as the principle grounding the possibility in general of anything like a theology. Only because it has been negatively presupposed as what subsists outside any possible predicate can divinity become the subject of a predication. Analogously, only because its validity is suspended in the state of exception can positive law define the normal case as the realm of its own validity (Agamben, 1998:17).

At this point, the dialectic of the common and the proper outlined in the previous chapter comes to fore. The state of exception becomes the founding element of sovereignty, its condition of possibility. Yet, it is the sovereign power that places itself outside the law and by suspending its own singularity conceals 'its very own capture within the paradox of an inclusive exclusion' (Zartaloudis, 2010:128). Expressed paradoxically, the state of exception as a space without law is what defines the law of sovereignty that determines the creation of the state of exception: 'on the one hand, the juridical void at issue in the state of exception seems absolutely unthinkable for the law; on the other, this unthinkable thing nevertheless has a decisive strategic relevance for the juridical order and must not be allowed to slip away at any cost' (Agamben, 2005a:51).

Here, Agamben's account of the state of exception parts ways with that of Schmitt. Agamben sees the state of exception as an *anomie*, where the law is in force but at the same time is set aside. The state of exception is not a higher norm, as in Schmitt, linked to the juridical order but is rather a place devoid of law, a place that has been included in the juridical order by means of exclusion. Agamben claims that Schmitt's theory of the state of exception is fallacious in that it seeks to 'inscribe the state of
exception indirectly within a juridical context by grounding it in the division between norms of law and norms of the realization of law, between constituent power and constituting power, between norm and decision’ (Agamben, 2005a:50). On the contrary, for Agamben, the state of exception escapes a juridical definition; it is unthinkable for the law but yet, a place of pure force-of-law:47

The idea of a force-of-law is a response to this undefinability and this non-place. It is as if the suspension of law freed a force or a mystical element, a sort of legal mana, ... that both the ruling power and its adversaries seek to appropriate. Force of law that is separate from the law, floating imperium, being-in-force [vigenza] without application, and, more generally, the idea of a sort of ‘degree zero’ of the law – all these are fictions through which the law attempts to encompass its own absence and to appropriate the state of exception, or at least, to assure itself a relation with it (Agamben, 2005a:51).

To consider the state of exception as a space of pure force of law48 ‘suggests that in modernity the efficacy of the law and its force (as evident in exceptional decrees) are separated through their hidden relation’ (Zartaloudis, 2010:138). As is clear, the force-of-law is, in Agamben’s words, an illusion. It is not a law without meaning, but pure force and self-referentiality, in other words, the relation between law and force-of-law is mediated by the economy of the common and the proper. A common element – the law – seems to suspend itself in order to found the proper – force-of-law – which is an element separated from the law but which nonetheless keeps the law in motion. As Zartaloudis has claimed, the fact that the force-of-law operates with the economy of the common and the proper and hence that it becomes an image-suffused mythologeme, does not ‘diminish at all the effectiveness because it captures in itself all that is possible (absolute potentiality) and it is this particularly

47 Relevant to this discussion is Agamben’s reading of Kafka. For Agamben, Kafka’s most proper gesture consists not ‘in having maintained a law that no longer has any meaning, but in having shown that it ceases to be law and blur at all points with life’ (2005:63).

48 The syntagma of force of law is also crucial in Derrida’s reading of Benjamin’s notion of violence, to the extent that Derrida’s famous essay on violence and law is entitled ‘Force of Law: The “Mystical Foundation of Authority”’ (1992).
spectacular function of capturing potentiality and the imagination that empties out every real of social life today' (2010:138).

What is at stake here is a ‘gigantomachy over a void’ as Agamben has called the debate on the notion of the state of exception between Benjamin and Schmitt. On the one hand, Schmitt focuses on the decision that the sovereign takes on the exception and on the other he insists that the sovereign is neither inside nor outside the juridical order. Sovereign violence, for Schmitt, neither posits nor preserves the law but, as is the case in Benjamin’s divine violence, suspends it. Benjamin, for his part, locates a moment of undecidability in his conception of the state of exception. Indeed, for Benjamin, ‘the sovereign, who should decide every time on the exception, is precisely the place where the fracture that divides the body of the law becomes impossible to mend’ (Agamben, 2005a:56). In short, Schmitt tries to capture the notion of divine, pure violence within his account of the state of exception by reinforcing the relation between sovereignty and the fiction of anomie, that is the pure force-of-law. What needs to be suspended for Benjamin, namely the state of exception, is what must be decided upon, for Schmitt.

Agamben agrees with Benjamin that the state of exception opens a gap between power and its exercise, between the norms of law and the norms of the realisation of laws, that no decision is capable of filling. The state of exception becomes the rule

---

49 In State of Exception (2005), Agamben reads Schmitt’s theory of the state of exception against Benjamin’s notion of divine violence. The ‘esoteric dossier’ of this debate between Schmitt and Benjamin, as Agamben calls it, is crucial for the understanding of Agamben’s own account of the state of exception. Indeed, Agamben reads the theory of sovereignty that Schmitt develops in his Political Theology as a response to Benjamin’s essay ‘Critique of Violence’. While ‘the strategy of “Critique of Violence” was aimed at ensuring the existence of a pure anomic violence, Schmitt instead seeks to lead such a violence back to a juridical context. The state of exception is the space in which he tries to capture Benjamin’s idea of a pure violence and to inscribe anomie within the very body of the nomos. According to Schmitt, there cannot be a pure violence – that is, a violence absolutely outside the law – because in the state of exception it is included in the law through its very exclusion’ (Agamben, 2005a:54). It could be argued that Agamben is on Benjamin’s side on this debate, in that he believes that a suspension of the dialectic between law-making and law-preserving violence is possible. As it will be clear later in this dissertation, that suspension in Agamben does not take the form of divine, messianic violence, but of the politics of inoperativity.
due to an intensification of its own undecidability,\(^50\) which also means that ‘the state of exception is no longer able to fulfil the function Schmitt assigned to it in *Political Theology*’: to define the normal situation. The state of exception is not meant to produce or confirm the rule – it tends, rather, to coincide with it, that is to say, to blur it’ (Agamben, 2005b:293). For Benjamin and Agamben, the state of exception ‘no longer appears as the threshold that guarantees the articulation between an inside and outside, or between anomie and the juridical context, by virtue of a law that is in force in its suspension: it is, rather, a zone of absolute indeterminacy between anomie and law, in which the sphere of creatures and the juridical order are caught up in a single catastrophe’ (Agamben, 2005a:57). The sovereign attempt to use the state of exception to rearticulate anomie is therefore unmasked by Benjamin as ‘a *fictio iuris* par excellence, which claims to maintain the law in its very suspension as force-of-law’ (Agamben, 2005a:59). What for Schmitt serves to ‘maintain the oppressive relation between anomie and law, for Benjamin signals the need for a new way of thinking and acting that ends any kind of relation between anomie and law and any kind of nexus between violence and law’ (Zartaloudis, 2010:139).

To summarise, Agamben’s account of the state of exception deactivates Schmitt’s decisionism by instead turning to Benjamin and, in particular, to Benjamin’s claim that there is a fracture between power and its exercise that no decision is capable of mending. This implies a dramatisation of the paradox of sovereignty, since the state of exception becomes the rule as a result of an intensification of undecidability. Moreover, by invoking the metaphysical category of impotentiality in his analysis of the structure of sovereignty, Agamben relocates the problem of the paradox of sovereignty on an ontological level. The only way to escape this level is the

\(^{50}\) For Agamben, the undecidability of the norm and the exception formulated by Benjamin calls into question Schmitt’s theory of sovereignty. Indeed, as Agamben writes in *State of Exception*, ‘From Schmitt’s perspective, the functioning of the juridical order ultimately rest on an apparatus – the state of exception – whose purpose is to make the norm applicable by temporarily suspending its efficacy. When the exception becomes the rule, the machine can no longer function’ (Agamben, 2005a:58).
suspension and replacement of the ontology founded on the primacy of actuality and its relation to potentiality. Though, it should be stated that although Agamben dramatizes the paradox of sovereignty as a catastrophe and ontologises it as impotentiality, he also coincides with Benjamin in that the undecidability that marks the state of exception is the result of a fracture that divides the body of the law, between power and its exercise. Agamben returns to this fracture in The Kingdom and the Glory where, as we will see in Chapter 5, the focus is put on the exercise of power.

With the structure of the paradox of sovereignty in mind, we can now turn to its effects, that is, to the production of bare life. Sovereignty, for Agamben, is the sphere in which 'law refers to life and includes it in itself by suspending it' (1998:28); it is the 'sphere in which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide and without celebrating a sacrifice, and sacred life – that is, life that may be killed but not sacrificed – is the life that has been captured in this sphere' (1998:83). But what is bare life and how is it to be related to sovereignty? What does the reading of Agamben's method reconstructed in the previous chapters tell us about this fundamental question?

**Bare Life and its Paradigms: On the Figure of Homo Sacer**

The passage from Agamben's analysis of the structure of the paradox of sovereignty to his study of the figure of homo sacer pivots on his interpretation of Walter Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence’. In this essay, Benjamin denounces the tight link between law and violence, claiming that violence is the origin of law and that therefore justice and law cannot be related. In 'The Right to Use Force' Benjamin had already claimed that ‘the law's concern with justice is only apparent, whereas in truth the law is concerned with self-preservation' (1986:232). Law, rather than guaranteeing justice preserves and posits itself in acts and representations of violence, either in the use of violence as means to legal ends – law-preserving...
violence – or in the violence outside law which creates law – law-making violence (cf. Benjamin 1986:242). Here, we are in the terrain of mythic violence, since according to Benjamin, at the origin of the cycle of law-making and law-preserving violence lies violence as a manifestation of the gods, and thus, law is ‘merely a residue of the demonic stage of human existence, when legal statutes determined not only men’s relationships but also their relation to the gods’ (1986:243). In order to break this cycle, and therefore to dissolve the irreducible link between law and violence, Benjamin confronted mythic violence with the messianic notion of divine violence:

If mythic violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythic violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine violence only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood. (1986: 297)

We cannot fully interrogate this messianic notion here but in relation to Agamben’s argument, it is important to highlight that divine violence deposes the law, providing a parallel to sovereign violence. Although Agamben recognises the ambiguity of divine violence, he claims that its definition becomes clearer when it is analysed through the state of exception (cf. Agamben, 1998:67). Indeed, the violence exercised in the state of exception ‘clearly neither preserves nor simply posits law, but rather conserves it in suspending it and posits it in excepting itself from it’ (Agamben, 1998:67) and in this sense, sovereign violence like divine violence cannot be reduced to law-making or law-preserving violence. Both Benjamin’s notion of divine violence and Agamben’s call for a new ontology of potentiality point in a messianic direction, with the aim of breaking the link between law and violence. Crucially, for Benjamin the bearer of the link between violence and law is ‘bloßes Leben’, that is, bare life.51 He writes that ‘mythic violence is bloody power over bare

---

51 In Homo Sacer, Agamben introduces his notion of Nuda Vita, translated into English as bare life, through Walter Benjamin’s notion bloßes Leben (1998:65). This notion appears in different essays that Benjamin wrote between 1919 and 1922: ‘Fate and Character’ (1986[1919]), ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities’ (1986[1919- 1922]).
life for its own sake’ (1986:250). This is why for Benjamin, ‘it is worthwhile to investigate the origin of the dogma of the sacredness of life’ (1986:202). Even though in Benjamin’s work the notion of bloßes Leben is not defined, it is clear, as De la Durantaye states, that ‘bare life is not an initial state so much as what becomes visible through a stripping away of predicates and attributes’ (2009:203).

Similarly, for Agamben, bare Life is that which is both produced by and caught in the sovereign exception between violence and law, or to put it in Agamben’s terms, in the sovereign ban. Bare life, in this sense, is a product of the state of exception and not ‘something that pre-exists it’ (Agamben, 2005a:88). The inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the ‘nucleus of sovereign power’ (Agamben, 1998:6). Agamben, however, elevates Benjamin’s concept of bare life to the level of a signature. Indeed, Western politics, for Agamben, is founded on the isolation of bare life, which appears as the unthinkable and indeterminate limit against which the political clashes. For Agamben the exclusion of bare life becomes analogous to the fundamental activity of metaphysics, namely the isolation of pure Being. Therefore, ‘reason cannot think bare life except as it thinks pure Being, in stupor and in astonishment’ (1998: 182). Bare life appears as the unthought ground of Western metaphysics underpinning the political systems of the West. It is a presupposition that haunts us from the very ‘arising of the political in the West, Greek democracy and Roman law’ (Agamben, 1998:32). In The Open (2002), Agamben reinforces this argument, stating that in the West, Life is ‘what cannot be defined, yet, precisely for this reason, must be ceaselessly articulated and divided’ (2002:13).

As we haven seen, Life, occupies a privileged position in the Homo Sacer project
since, as becomes clear in the first volume of the series, ‘the fundamental categorial pair of Western politics is not that of friend/enemy but that of bare life/political existence, zoë/bios, exclusion/inclusion. There is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion’ (Agamben, 1998:8). What Agamben examines is the transmission of Life as a signature, from classic to modern thought, showing how this signature has allowed ‘for very different things to occur politically’ (Watkin, 2014:185). There is, in fact, as Watkin contends, no such thing as Life: ‘it is a discursive construct permitted by structures of power to sanction different forms of behavior and which we have been complicit with for centuries. It is then an intelligible signature, not a thing as such’ (Watkin, 2013:3). The commonly quoted and often misread passage from Means Without End (2000) on the Greek distinction between zoë and bios acquires new light when examined in these terms. The passage, originally published in a 1993 article entitled ‘Form-of-Life’, reappears in the first pages of Homo Sacer (1998) and reads as follows:

> The ancient Greeks did not have only one term to express what we mean by the word life. They used two semantically and morphologically distinct terms: zoë, which expressed the simple 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. In modern languages this opposition has gradually disappeared from the lexicon (and where it is retained, as in biology and zoology, it no longer indicates any substantial difference); one term only – the opacity of which increases in proportion to the sacralization of its referent – designates that naked presupposed common element that it is always possible to isolate in each of the numerous forms of life. (Agamben, 2000:3)

In ‘Bare Life or Social Indeterminacy?’ Ernesto Laclau argues that Agamben misreads Aristotle.\(^52\) According to Laclau, ‘living beings are not distributed between

\(^{52}\) Laclau is certainly not alone in making this argument. James G. Finlayson’s article “Bare Life” and Politics in Agamben’s Reading of Aristotle’ focuses ‘on the textual evidence on which Agamben bases his thesis of the
two categories – those who have exclusively *bios* and those who have exclusively *zoē* – for those who have *bios* obviously have *zoē* as well’ (2007:17). For Laclau, Agamben’s thesis does not hold, as ‘he would have to prove that, in some circumstances, bare life ceases to be an abstraction and becomes a concrete referent’ (2007:17). What this investigation has shown, however, is that the *zoē-bios* distinction is a moment of arising of the common and the proper dialectic, a particular distribution of the signature of Life that constitutes only a paradigmatic case of the logic of inclusive exclusion in which the political is founded, and not the founding moment of politics as such. *Zoē*, or animal life, occupies the position of the common, that is to say, the founding element. *Bios*, on the other hand, stands for the proper (singular, particular way of social political life), that is to say, the founded element. Hence, besides the discussion of whether Agamben misreads Aristotle or not, what is crucial for Agamben, and what Laclau completely misses, is that it is the specificity of political life (*bios*) as differentiated from animal life that founds *zoē*.

The presupposition of animal life as a zero-degree of life, upon which qualified human life is founded is in fact a historically constructed illusion. In other words, it is *bios*, that is qualified political life as the proper element, that constructs its founding ground (*zoē*), only to legitimate itself. Yet, the *zoē-bios* distinction is just one paradigmatic case which illuminates the fact that the presupposition of biological life from which so called political life emerges is in fact, created by what it founds.53

---

53 In *The Open: Man and Animal* (2004) Agamben engages with Heidegger in order to think about the division between the human and the animal. It is in these terms that the distinction between *zoē* and *bios* should be understood. In this text, Agamben studies the history of both philosophy and science, in relation to what he constructs as the ‘anthropological machine’ through which the notion of human and inhuman are produced against the notion of the animal. Early versions of this machine produced an inside by the inclusion of an outside; that is to say, that the non-human was produced by the ‘humanization of an animal: the man-ape, the *enfant sauvage* or *Homo ferus*, but also and above all, the slave, the barbarian, and the foreigner, as the figures of an animal in human form’ (2004: 37). Symmetrically, in the modern version of the machine, ‘the outside is produced through the exclusion of an inside and the inhuman produced by animalizing the human’ (2004: 37). In this particular sense, the human-animal divide not only appears as a political feature but it also establishes the very possibility of politics: ‘who is included in human society and who is not is a consequence of the politics of ‘humanity,’’ which engenders the polis itself. In this regard, politics is the product of the anthropological machine, which is inherently lethal to some forms of (human) life’ (Oliver, 2007:1). Hence, man’s humanity
With this in mind, it is easy to dismiss Finlayson’s argument that ‘not only do the words zoē and bios not capture the distinction that Agamben claims exists between bare life and politics, but also it cannot be the case that mere life and the good life in Aristotle are related by mutual opposition, that the latter excludes the former, and that they thus constitute what Agamben calls an exception’ (2010:110). Therefore, as his argument continues, ‘the idea of a single underlying paradigm of Western politics since the Greeks is ridiculous’ (Finlayson, 2010:99). What we have shown is that for Agamben there is not one paradigm of bare life, let alone the idea of single paradigm of Western politics. Agamben’s archaeology does not intend to explain modernity or politics by tracing them back to a historical origin. On the contrary, as Agamben writes, ‘as their very multiplicity might have signaled, each time it was a matter of paradigms whose aim was to make intelligible series of phenomena whose kinship had eluded or could elude the historian’s gaze’ (Agamben, 2009a:31).

Agamben is clear that the zoē-bios distinction, however important it might be as a paradigm, ‘contains nothing to make one assign a privilege or a sacredness to life as such’ (Agamben, 1998:66). This is the reason why Agamben approaches the ‘dogma of the sacredness of life’ through another paradigm, namely, homo sacer.

What interests Agamben is the way in which politics constitutes itself as an inclusive exclusion of bare life and how, across different times and discursive formations bare life is politicised. This makes clear that bare life is not simply biological life, it is not zoē but rather an empty and indeterminate element (proper) made intelligible by a constant process of exclusion. Bare life is not a concrete referent that can be

---

depends on the exclusion of animality, especially his own. Indeed, Agamben maintains that by suspending his own animality, man holds his advantage position in the duality of man-animal. In this sense, ‘man cannot let animals be themselves because as human he is dependent upon seeing animals as closed systems from whom he differs in his openness – as opposed to their closedness’ (Oliver, 2007:6). This is why, for Agamben, Heidegger’s abyss between man and animal constitutes a paradigmatic example of the anthropological machine. Needless to say, the distinction between zoē and bios is not the same as the distinction between the human and the animal. Rather, my claim here is that although they operate with under same signature, they belong to the same structure of which they are only paradigmatic cases.
empirically pointed out, it is not even a sociological category that refers to those excluded from the political realm. Rather, it is the very logic of inclusive exclusion that founds, distributes, and controls the political:

This forms as the subjectivity (bare life or pure essence) of subjectivity (qualified life, political and juridical life). The negative metaphysics of power and of law presupposed a founding Power that is absolute, outside and simple, which reproduces not only the myth of a self referential origin of power and of law, but also a form of life devoid of life (bare life). (Zartaloudis, 2010:186)

As what is founded, bare life is the originary political element (Agamben, 1998:88), it is the ‘ultimate and opaque bearer of sovereignty' (Agamben, 2000:6): ‘neither political bios nor natural zoë, is the zone of indistinction in which zoë and bios constitute each other in including and excluding each other’ (Agamben, 1998:90). Therefore, sovereign power presupposes and at the same time produces a distinction between life and bare life and paradoxically, the isolation of bare life creates the need for political power:

[L]ife originally appears in law only as the counterpart of a power that threatens death .... The state of exception, which is what the sovereign each and every time decides, takes place precisely when naked life – which normally appears rejoined to the multifarious forms of social life – is explicitly put into question and revoked as the ultimate foundation of power. The ultimate subject that needs to be at once turned into the exception and included in the city is always naked life. (Agamben, 2000:5-6)

Understood in this sense, as Zartaloudis points out, the presupposition of bare life operates ‘in parallel, and stands as the condition of possibility itself, of the presupposition of sovereignty’s and government’s an-arche (the lack of a foundation, even a self foundation, other than its emptiness or absence)’ (2010:156). The dialectic of the common and the proper has two different registers here: it is not only the case that bare life occupies the position of the common element in which human life is founded – an unconditioned element that is
nonetheless founded by what it founds – but bare life also acts as the proper in terms of sovereignty, that is to say sovereign power as the common element founds bare life only to be legitimised.

This leads us to homo sacer – who could be killed, according to Roman law, but not sacrificed and whose killing is not considered to be a crime – as a figure that helps us to make intelligible the fact that political power founds itself on the separation of a sphere of bare life from the context of other forms of life. Homo sacer is a paradigmatic figure, a moment of arising of a particular economy of power that is explained by the dialectic of the common and the proper. Even though this figure acquires a central place in Agamben’s archaeological project, it is only one paradigm among others constructed by Agamben, that by suspending its own singularity explains how the signature of Life has been transmitted through Western politics.

The importance of the figure of homo sacer is that it makes intelligible the sacredness that, in the modern episteme, is tied to the signature of Life. Indeed, according to Agamben, for the Greeks the distinction between zoē and bios does not assign a sense of sacredness to life itself. As Agamben writes, ‘even in those societies that, like Classical Greece, celebrate animal sacrifices and occasionally immolated human victims, life in itself was not considered sacred’ (Agamben 1998:66). It is later, with the introduction of Roman law, that the character of sacredness is tied to the notion of human life. Homo sacer is included in the political realm in his capacity to be killed, he belongs to God in the form of unsacrificeability: ‘life that cannot be sacrificed and yet may be killed is sacred life’ (Agamben, 1998:82). In this sense, what defines the status of the homo sacer is ‘the double exclusion into which he is taken and the violence to which he finds himself exposed’ (Agamben, 1998:82).
Central to the double exclusion of the sacred\(^{54}\) is Agamben’s invocation of the ban as the original political relation. Agamben quoting Cavalca, states that to ban someone is ‘to say that anybody may harm him’ (1998:104). The ban, however, is not simply a sanction, rather it entails abandonment. It is through a reading of Jean-Luc Nancy that Agamben is able to approach the problem of the experience of law implicit in the structure of the ban, that is, the law that is in force without significance, the pure force of law. For Nancy, the structure of the force of law is that of abandonment, and hence, the history of the West is nothing but the ‘time of abandonment’:

> One always abandons to a law. The destitution of abandoned Being is measured by the limitless severity of the law to which it finds itself exposed. Abandonment does not constitute a subpoena to present oneself before this or that court of law. It is a compulsion to appear absolutely under the law, under the law as such and in its totality. In the same way – it is the same thing – to be banished amounts not to coming under a provision of the law but rather to coming under the entirety of the law. Turned over to the absolute of the law, the abandoned one is thereby abandoned completely outside its jurisdiction .... Abandonment respects the law; it cannot do otherwise. (Nancy, 1993;44)

In this sense, the relation of the ban becomes, for Agamben, a relation in which a form of life is abandoned by a law ‘that prescribes nothing and not even itself’ (1998:60). The life caught in the sovereign sphere is the life that has been abandoned in the juridical paradox of sovereignty, the sacred life that may be killed but not sacrificed.\(^{55}\) It is in this light that one should read Agamben’s claim that the production of bare life is the ‘originary activity of sovereignty’ (1998:83). Unlike

---

\(^{54}\) As William Connolly has argued, Agamben’s conception of the sacred as a twofold structure differs from conventional approaches to this notion. Indeed, Agamben’s notion of the sacred is defined by the violence that opens a sphere that is neither the sphere of the profane nor that of the divine (2007:28). Hence, sacred life can be killed but not murdered (cf. Bartonek, 2004), constituting an inherent principle in the formulation of sacred life itself and also in the structure of sovereign power: ‘in the figure of this sacred life, something like a bare life makes its appearance in the Western world. What is decisive, however, is that from the very beginning this sacred life has an eminently political character and exhibits an essential link with the terrain on which sovereign power is founded’ (Agamben 1998:100).

\(^{55}\) The threshold figure that embodies the sacred man, for Agamben, is the werewolf. It is the man banned by his community. The werewolf, by definition, has no collective identity and is completely defenseless: ‘it is a threshold of indistinction and of passage between animal and man, between physis and nomos, exclusion and inclusion’ (1998:105).

82
Nancy, however, Agamben is not satisfied with the identification of the extreme form of law as being in force without significance, producing bare life. Indeed, for Agamben ‘every thought that limits itself to this does nothing other than repeat the ontological structure that we have defined as the paradox of sovereignty (or sovereign ban)’ (1998:59).

At this point, we can go back to Laclau’s critique of Agamben, in order to dismiss its central arguments. Laclau asserts that Agamben has hypostatised *homo sacer* as the only figure outside the law produced in the double exclusion to which the sacred is exposed. There is no room, according to this critique, to think the antagonistic social practices articulated within those who are banned from the juridical-political community. For him the political in Agamben appears as a unidirectional relation of exclusion. Bare life is, in this sense, an artificial product, an obscure bareness that hides social relations of resistance and political articulations and that only serves to personalise what is excluded from the protection of law without capturing all the possibilities opened up by being outside the law. Hence, for Laclau, some extra presuppositions should be added to Agamben’s argument:

> In the first place, the sheer separatedness – absence of relation – of the outside involves that he/she is a naked individuality, dispossessed of any kind of collective identity. But, secondly, it also involves that the situation of the outsider is one of radical indefension, wholly exposed to the violence of those inside the city. Only at that price can sovereign power be absolute. Are, however, these two extra presuppositions justified? Do they logically emerge from the mere category of “being outside the law”? Obviously not. (Laclau, 2007:14)

In the same vein, there are critiques of Agamben’s work that point to an assumed contradiction in the notion of bare life, given that it is presented as sacred life in the paradigm of *homo sacer*, and yet, in Agamben’s analysis of modern democracy, it is
tied to secularised figures, or what Agamben calls ‘modern avatars.’ In fact, Agamben reconstructs different paradigms of bare life in which the notion of biological life comes to the fore. When presenting the notion of bare life through the case of a patient – Karen Quinlan – Agamben makes clear that it is \textit{zoē} rather than the notion of the sacred which becomes determinant in the formation of this paradigmatic case:

Here biological life – which the machines are keeping functional by artificial respiration, pumping blood into the arteries, and regulating the blood temperature – has been entirely separated from the form of life that bore the name Karen Quinlan: here life becomes (or at least seems to become) pure \textit{zoē}. (1998:186)

For this reason, Agamben is accused of relating bare life to two different historical situations at the same time and yet, of being incapable of examining the particularity of the forms of life deprived of value. This is, for instance, the position defended by Thomas Lemke, for whom Agamben ‘cannot account for these processes since his attention is fixed on the establishment of a border – a border that he does not comprehend as a staggered zone but as a line without extension that reduces the question to an either - or’ (2011:59).

Needless to say, these critiques miss the fact that the figure of the \textit{homo sacer} is treated by Agamben as a paradigm. In this sense, the \textit{homo sacer} is only a ‘singular case that is isolated from its context only insofar as, by exhibiting its own

56 All of these critiques, however, miss the underlying methodological function of the paradigmatic cases that Agamben uses in his analysis of bare life. No doubt, Agamben uses both \textit{zoē} and \textit{homo sacer} (and even more figures) to refer to bare life. For instance, in his analysis of the refugee he refers frequently to bare natural life and to \textit{zoē} (cf. Agamben, 1998:126) and yet, in his approach to the camp, he introduces another figure, the \textit{Muselmann}, in whom nothing natural or common is ‘left in him, nothing animal or instinctual remains in his life’ (Agamben, 1998:185). It could be argued, however, that this is not a contradiction, since \textit{zoē}, \textit{homo sacer} and the \textit{Muselmann} as paradigms are deactivated from their normal use, ‘not in order to be moved into another context, but on the contrary, to present the canon – the rule – of that use, which cannot be shown in any other way’ (Agamben, 2009:18). In short, Agamben’s bare life is never presupposed by the paradigms he uses to make it intelligible.

57 Needless to say, the notion of biological life should be understood as the common element upon which political life is founded. Yet, it is an index created by what it presupposes.
singularity, it makes intelligible a new ensemble, whose homogeneity it itself constitutes’ (Agamben, 2009a:18). In other words, Laclau takes the figure of the *homo sacer* as a fixed structure whose singularity is to be transferred to different historical phenomena without suspending its own particularity, or as Agamben has put it, without deactivating its ‘normal use’ (Agamben, 2009a:18). Agamben’s intention when using the figure of the *homo sacer* is to present a canon detached from its singularity and in this sense, he is moving away from both deduction and induction. Rather as I noted above it is a case of analogy.

The way in which the different paradigms of bare life that Agamben provides in Homo Sacer are organised and distributed through the signature of Life in the West has not yet been examined. Neither has the question of biopolitics and its relation to sovereignty been discussed. These crucial issues will be considered only when a complete picture of the articulation of Power has been provided and, more importantly, when the production of bare life has been relocated from the pole of sovereignty to the very centre of the governmental machine, articulating both sovereign power and governmentality.
Chapter 5
The Signature of Secularisation: Economic Theology, Government and Bare Life

What our investigation has shown is that the real problem, the central mystery of politics is not sovereignty, but government; it is not God, but the angel; it is not the king, but ministry; it is not the law but the police – that is to say, the governmental machine that they form and support. (Agamben, 2011:276)

I contended in Chapter 4 that in Homo Sacer Agamben ontologises the paradox of sovereignty through the Aristotelian category of potentiality and amplifies its effects to the point that, through an intensification of undecidability, the exception becomes the rule. This intensification has been mistakenly understood as an overemphasis on the juridico-institutional dimension of power. Indeed, Agamben has been heavily criticised and disregarded as a legalistic thinker, especially by Foucauldians unfamiliar with Agamben’s work in its entirety. Thomas Lemke claims that ‘while Foucault’s analysis and critique of the biopolitical project stresses the link between forms of subjectivation and political technologies, this important dimension is completely lacking in Agamben’s work, who subscribes to exactly the juridico-discursive concept of power that Foucault has shown to be insufficient for the analysis of modern biopolitics’ (2005:3). As he concludes in his ‘advanced’ introduction to biopolitics, ‘Agamben’s analysis remains in thrall to the law’ (2011:60). Nevertheless, years before Lemke’s critique of Agamben was published, Agamben had already shown, in his State of Exception that the juridico-political machine of the West does not operate through law, but rather through the articulation of two different axes of power:

---

58 Although Agamben’s work on the notion of governmentality is only fully developed in Homo Sacer II, 2, namely The Kingdom and the Glory: for a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government (2011[2007]), a close reading of both Homo Sacer and the State of Exception already points to the double articulation of power. Agamben’s reading of Benjamin’s account of the state of exception and his rejection of Schmitt’s decisionism indicate that Agamben is far from embracing an eminently juridical understanding of power. Indeed, as Agamben claims in The Kingdom and the Glory, the double articulation of the governmental machine appeared in his State of Exception (2005) in the correlation between auctoritas and potestas (2011:x1).
It is perhaps possible at this point to look back upon the path traveled thus far and draw some provisional conclusions from our investigation of the state of exception. The juridical system of the West appears as a double structure, formed by two heterogeneous yet coordinated elements: one that is normative and juridical in the strict sense (which we can for convenience inscribe under the rubric *potestas*) and one that is anomic and metajuridical (which we can call by the name *auctoritas*). The normative element needs the anomic element in order to be applied, but, on the other hand, *auctoritas* can assert itself only in the validation or suspension of *potestas*. Because it results from the dialectic between these two somewhat antagonistic yet functionally connected elements, the ancient dwelling of law is fragile and, in straining to maintain its own order, is always already in the process of ruin and decay. The state of exception is the device that must ultimately articulate and hold together the two aspects of the juridico-political machine by instituting a threshold of undecidability between anomie and *nomos*, between life and law, between *auctoritas* and *potestas*. (Agamben, 2005a:85-86)

It is, however, in *The Kingdom and Glory* that an archaeology of the articulation of *auctoritas* and *potestas* is fully developed. In this work, Agamben inquires into the reasons why, in the West, ‘power has assumed the form of *oikonomia*’ (2011:xi). Indeed, through an archaeological investigation of economic theology Agamben examines the articulation of the two different polarities that constitute, what he calls, the ‘governmental machine’: the transcendental pole of sovereignty and the immanent pole of the administration, the Kingdom and the Government. In contrast to the special focus Agamben had previously given to the juridical-institutional pole of sovereignty (cf. 1998, 2005), the strong emphasis on economy in this work emphasises the immanent order over the transcendent norm, re-orientating sovereignty towards an understanding of government. Needless to say, this archaeology of economic theology does not represent a break with the theses that Agamben had developed in the first volumes of the project. On the contrary, this archaeology complements his works on the signature of Power in the West: in *Homo Sacer* the emphasis was placed in sovereignty as one of the poles of the governmental machine, in *The Kingdom and the Glory* Agamben emphasises...
government as the second pole, and presents an account of the way in which they are articulated. Arguably, *State of Exception* serves as a link between the two parts of Agamben's archaeology of Power.

Yet, what Agamben does not offer in *The Kingdom and the Glory* is a rearticulation of the problem of bare life in terms of his comprehensive analysis of the governmental machine. In other words, Agamben does not return to the problem of the production of bare life – as the originary activity of sovereign power – in terms of the articulation between sovereignty and governmentality. Crucially, as Agamben argues, ‘the real problem, the central mystery of politics is not sovereignty, but government; it is not God, but the angel; it is not the king, but the ministry; it is not the law, but the police’ (Agamben, 2011:276). Therefore, if today, as Agamben suggests ‘we are witnessing the government and the economy’s overwhelming domination of a popular sovereignty empty of all meaning’ (2011:276) then the production of bare life needs to be re-thought.59 This is precisely the aim of this chapter, where I examine the double articulation of Power, arguing that this articulation is made operative through the production of bare life. In the first part I critically engage with the central arguments of *The Kingdom and the Glory*. In particular, I focus on both the treatment of the notion of *oikonomia* in the early Christian discussions of the divine Trinity and on its relation to the providential paradigm of government. I then focus on the relation between *oikonomia* and Glory, that is, between power as governmental management and power as ceremonial and

59 *The Homo Sacer* series has brought together the two distinct poles of what Agamben calls the governmental machine: the transcendental pole of sovereignty and the immanent pole of governmentality. As Agamben suggests, with few exceptions modern political theorists have failed to recognise the bipolar character of the governmental machine by putting emphasis only on sovereignty or only on governmentality. Agamben, on the contrary, launches an archaeological investigation into economic theology in order to reveal the articulation between sovereignty and *administratio*: law and police; the kingdom and the glory. The aim of *Homo Sacer* is to reveal the hidden link between the sovereign exception and the production of bare life as the original activity of sovereign power. Here, the production of bare life appears as a juridico-political act that takes place by means of an inclusive exclusion. From the publication of *Homo Sacer* II, 2, *viz. The Kingdom and the Glory* (2011) Agamben concentrates on the second pole of the governmental machine, stating that ‘in order to understand the peculiar governmentality under which we live, the paradigm of the state of exception is not entirely adequate’ (Agamben, 2013c:1). Therefore it is crucial to relocate the problem of the production of bare life in terms of a comprehensive understanding of the governmental machine.
liturgical regality. I conclude by suggesting that the doxological aspect of power does not fully explain the articulated operativity of the governmental machine, claiming that it is the production of bare life that brings together sovereignty and governmentality.

An Archaeology of Economic Theology: *Oikonomia* and the Fracture Between God's Being and His Action

It is with a methodological focus on signatures that Agamben opens up in *The Kingdom and the Glory* (2011) his inquiry into the reasons why, at least in the West, power has assumed the form of an *oikonomia*: ‘If we are not able to perceive signatures and follow the displacements and movements they operate in the tradition of ideas, the mere history of concepts can, at times, end up being entirely insufficient’ (2011:4). This is how he treats the notion of secularisation: as a signature that refers our modern political and economic concepts back to their theological origin. In *The Signature of All Things* – which we have fully examined in Chapter 2 – Agamben provided an indication as to how he treats the notion of secularisation in his works. When noting that certain central concepts in the humanities are actually signatures, Agamben writes:

One such concept is secularization, about which in the mid-1960s in Germany there was a sharp debate that involved figures like Hans Blumenberg, Karl Lowith, and Carl Schmitt. The discussion was vitiated by the fact that none of the participants seemed to realize that ‘secularization’ was not a concept, in which the ‘structural identity’ between theological and political conceptuality (Schmitt’s thesis) or the discontinuity between Christian theology and modernity (this was Blumenberg’s thesis *contra* Lowith) was in question. Rather, secularization was a strategic operator that marked political concepts in order to make them refer to their theological origins. To put it differently: secularization acts within the conceptual system of modernity as a signature, which refers it back to theology. Just as, according to canon law, the priest reduced to a secular status had to bear a sign of the order to which he had belonged, so the ”secularized” concept shows its past in the theological sphere as a signature.
Secularization, then, is a signature that marks or exceeds a sign or concept in order to refer it to a specific interpretation or to a specific sphere without, however, leaving it in order to constitute a new concept or new meaning. What is really at stake in the (ultimately political) debate that has engaged scholars from Max Weber’s time to the present can be understood only if we grasp the signatory character of secularization. (2009a:76-77)

Agamben is certainly not making an argument for the theological foundation of all politics. Rather, as Watkin argues, ‘the displacement of oikonomia from home economics, for the Greeks, into theological economy and then political economy describes merely how certain things could be said in terms of theology and politics, rather than how one proceeds from the other’ (2014:22). The signature of Secularisation does not indicate a structural identity between theology and politics nor does it refer to an epistemological break between the sacred and the secular, but rather it distributes and controls the political and the theological through a relation of ‘mutual referentiality.’

As Agamben notes, Foucault’s historical investigations into the government of man and things ‘were only the shadow of his theoretical questioning of the present’ (2008:1). In Agamben’s case, this shadow is prolonged until it reaches the beginnings of Christian theology. Certainly, Agamben locates his own work on the governmental machine in ‘the wake of Michel Foucault’s investigations into the genealogy of governmentality’ (Agamben, 2011:xi) but he dislocates Foucault’s work into a larger context, digging a path that was not available to Foucault (cf. Dean, 2013:167). In The Kingdom and the Glory this path is opened with the identification of two political paradigms – functionally related to one another but yet antinomical – derived from Christian theology:

---

60 Once again, the dialectic of the common and the proper, as developed in Chapter 4 comes to the fore, demonstrating that this is the economy through which signatures operate and control the intelligibility of discursive formations.

61 In Chapter 6 I provide a detailed analysis of Agamben’s archaeology of power in relation to Foucault’s genealogy of governmentality.
Political theology, which founds the transcendence of sovereign power on the single God, and economic theology, which replaces this transcendence with the idea of an *oikonomia*, conceived as an immanent ordering – domestic and not political in a strict sense – of both divine and human life. Political philosophy and the modern theory of sovereignty derive from the first paradigm; modern biopolitics up to the current triumph of economy and government over every other aspect of social life derive from the second paradigm. (Agamben, 2011:1)

While modern political theorists, theologians, and historians have focused on political theology, Agamben tries to bring to light the economic signature of government derived from the second paradigm. It is with the discovery of the crucial role that the Greek notion of *oikonomia* played in the theological debates of the first centuries concerning the doctrine of the Trinity, that Agamben starts his archaeology of the governmental machine. In this sense, the Schmittian thesis on public law as being formed by secularised theological concepts is extended to the economy, yet the understanding of Secularisation as a signature avoids Schmitt’s unidirectional analysis of the secular.\(^{62}\)

In its classical Greek connotation, *oikonomia* means administration of the ‘house’ – *oikos* – understood not as the modern family house but rather as a ‘complex organism composed of heterogeneous relations,\(^{63}\) entwined with each other’ (Agamben, 2011:17). More importantly, as Agamben traces it from Aristotle, in the Greek philosophical tradition economy differs from politics just as the *oikos* differs from *polis* – the city (2011:17-18). That is to say, *oikonomia* as the administration of the house is opposed to the political, as the art of ruling and administrating the city (Salzani, 2012:269). Furthermore, *oikonomia* is not a science, but an administrative paradigm, a praxis that implies contextual measures and decisions that take place

\(^{62}\) As Agamben notes, in 1922 Schmitt encapsulated the theological-political paradigm in a lapidary thesis: ‘all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularised theological concepts’ (Schmitt, 2005:36). For Agamben, who argues that there are two paradigms derived from Christian theology, one political and one economical, Schmitt’s thesis ‘should be supplemented in a way that would extend its validity well beyond the boundaries of public law, extending up to the fundamental concepts of the economy and the very idea of the reproductive life of human societies’ (2011:3).

\(^{63}\) For Aristotle, these relations were despotic, paternal, and gamic, and were linked to an administrative paradigm (Aristotle in Agamben, 2011:17).
and can only be understood in relation to a particular problem (cf. Agamben, 2011:18). This is why, as Agamben quotes, for Aristotle ‘the term “head of the family” [despotes] does not refer to a science [epistemen] but to a certain way of being’ (Aristotle in Agamben, 2011:17). In this sense, as Zartaloudis suggests, oikonomia is always ‘praxiological and non-epistemic referring to particular activities’ (2010:47). Indeed, commenting on Xenophon, Agamben writes:

\[\textit{Oikonomia} \text{ is presented here as a functional organization, an administrative activity that is bound only to the rules of the ordered functioning of the house (or of the company in question). This “administrative” paradigm defines the semantic sphere of the term } \textit{oikonomia} \text{ (as well as that of the verb } \textit{oikonomein} \text{ and the noun } \textit{oikonomos} \text{) and determines its gradual analogical extension outside its original limits. (Agamben, 2011:18)}\]

In \textit{Security, Territory, Population} Foucault links this notion of \textit{oikonomia} with the Christian pastorate. Indeed, for Foucault, the Greek notion of \textit{oikonomia}, as reintroduced with the pastorate, ‘assumes a different dimension since in comparison with the fundamentally family economy in the Greeks – \textit{oikos} as habitat – [the economy of souls, MF] will take on the dimension, if not of all humanity, at least the whole of Christendom’ (Foucault, 2007:192). Crucially, Foucault dismisses the literal translation of \textit{oikonomia} and argues that the best possible translation of the term is the word ‘conduct’, understood both as activity of leading and conducting and as a form of behaviour. At the beginning of his analysis of the Christian pastorate, Foucault holds that the ‘least bad translation for the \textit{oikonomia psuchōn} Gregory Nazianzen spoke about could perhaps be the conduct of souls, and I think that this notion of conduct, with the field it covers, is doubtless one of the fundamental elements introduced into Western society by the Christian pastorate’ (2007:193).

Agamben too begins his archaeology of economy and government with the role that the notion of \textit{oikonomia} plays in the Christian tradition. Unlike Foucault, Agamben
locates the decisive articulation of the Greek term *oikonomia* in the theological field in the early centuries of Christian theology when the elaboration of the Trinitarian paradigm was made possible through the incorporation of the notion of *oikonomia*. What is at stake in the elaboration of the Trinitarian doctrine is the moment of arising of the economic government of men and the world. However, locating government in ‘its theological locus in the Trinitarian *oikonomia* does not intend to explain it by means of a hierarchy of causes, as if a more primordial generic rank would necessarily pertain to theology’ (Agamben, 2011:xii). Instead, Agamben sees the Trinitarian *oikonomia* as a paradigm, as a ‘privileged laboratory for the observation of the working and articulation – both internal and external – of the governmental machine. For within this apparatus the elements – or the polarities – that articulate the machine appear, as it were, in their paradigmatic form’ (2011:xii).

After presenting the core meaning of *oikonomia* in classical Greek – as a managerial, administrative activity – Agamben turns to St. Paul’s use of this notion in his letters to the Corinthians. In these letters the term *oikonomia* refers to the task God assigned to Paul: namely, the task of ‘announcing the mystery of redemption hidden in the will of God that has now come to completion’ (2011:23). Here, as Agamben shows, *oikonomia* does not acquire a teleological or a political sense as it remains of the domain of the administration, and thus, the Christians are, in this sense, the first proper economic men (cf. Agamben, 2011:24). As Zartaloudis argues, in Paul’s

64 Moreover, Agamben does not translate the Greek *oikonomia* into conduct but rather as management and administration.

65 The crucial passage from the letters of the Corinthians (1:24-26) reads as follows: ‘Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and fill up on my part that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for this body’s sake, which is the assembly; [25] Of which I was made a servant, according to the stewardship [οἰκονομος] of God which was given me toward you, to fulfill the word of God, [26] The mystery which has been hidden for generations. But now it has been revealed to his saints’.

66 Contrary to the belief that in St. Paul’s letters *oikonomia* obtains a theological meaning and that this meaning refers to a plan of salvation, Agamben claims that a careful reading of St. Paul’s letters reveals that *oikonomia* is the task (as in Septuagint, Isaiah 22:21) that God has assigned to Paul, who therefore does not act freely, as he would in a *negotiorum gestio*, but according to a bond of trust (pistis) as *apostolos* (envoy) and *oikonomos* (nominated administrator). *Oikonomia* is here something that is assigned; it is, therefore, an activity and a task, not a “plan of salvation” that concerns the divine mind or will’ (2011:23).
letters the *oikonomia* that is entrusted to Paul by God, is ‘entrusted as a fiduciary task (*pistis*), a matter of faith, where Paul acts as *apostolos* (apostle) and as *oikonomos* (administrator)’ (2010:59). In this sense, the term refers to the *oikonomia* of the task entrusted to Paul, a task that, as Paul himself mentions, is a ‘mystery which has been hidden for generations. But now it has been revealed to his saints.’ This is why, for Agamben, what is revealed in Paul’s letters is an ‘*oikonomia* of the mystery’.

It is with the reversal of Paul’s formula ‘the *oikonomia* of the mystery’ into a ‘mystery of the *oikonomia*’ that the term ceases to be a mere analogical transposition and becomes a technical term whose function is to articulate the entities of the Trinity. Indeed, with the intervention of Hippolytus and Tertullian the technicisation of *oikonomia* serves to combat the monotheism of the Monarchians by resolving the mystery of the Trinity, not on ontological terms but on economic ones, reconciling the unity of God with the figures of divine life: the providential organisation of the world (the Holy spirit), God’s will (the Son) and the Father. Agamben shows that the argument was that God, as far as his substance is concerned, is absolutely one, but that He is three in terms of His *oikonomia*, that is to say in the way in which He manages the divine house and life. In this sense, the articulation of the Trinity is not conceived in ontological terms, since the three divine figures are one and the same in *status*, *potestas*, and *substantia*; they only differ in form, so that the Trinity is itself a *dispensatio*, that is, an *oikonomia* of the internal disposition of the divine substance:

The mystery reveals itself to be the mystery of administration, delegation and government. The articulation of the divine life’s Trinity and the salvation of humanity are at the same time divided and inseparable. The *oikonomia* renders possible a reconciliation of the transcendent God, at the same time one and Trinitarian, in order to remain transcendent, assumes an *oikonomic praxiology* and finds an immanence of government as praxis where the mystery of sovereignty coincides with the history of humanity. (Zartaloudis, 2010:65)
In short, Agamben shows that early Christian theologians used the term *oikonomia* in order to solve the problem posed by the presence of three divine figures by locating the real mystery not in the *being* of God but in its *praxis*, while at the same time avoiding polytheism. What is mysterious then is not the Trinity in itself but its *oikonomia*, the praxis through which God orders both the divine figures articulated in the Trinity and the earthly world, the world of creatures. The mystery of *oikonomia* is presented as the mystery of delegation and government: ‘the *oikonomia* renders possible a conciliation in which the transcendent God, at the same time one and Trinitarian, in order to remain transcendent, assumes an *oikonomic praxeology* and founds an immanence of government as praxis where the mystery of sovereignty coincides with the story of humanity’ (Zartaloudis, 2010:65).

Crucially, in avoiding a split in the Being of God, the doctrine of divine *oikonomia* introduced a division that shapes the very form of the modern governmental paradigm, that is, the division between God’s being and His action, between His ontology and economy: ‘this is the secret dualism that the doctrine of *oikonomia* has introduced into Christianity, something like an original Gnostic germ, which does not concern the caesura between two divine figures, but rather that between God and his government of the world’ (Agamben, 2011:53).

What is at stake in the Trinitarian paradigm is not only the articulation of the divine figures but also the conciliation of the rupture between the transcendent Trinitarian God and the history of salvation, that is, between the substance of a non-temporal transcendental God and His divine intervention on the earthly world through an immanent government. For Agamben, this rupture, which was not present in the

---

67 Polytheism is avoided because the division of the Trinity takes place at the level of *oikonomia*, that is, at the level of praxis and administration. In this sense, for Agamben, the paradigm of *oikonomia* conciliates the gnostic proliferation of divines hypostates with the strict monotheism of the Monarchians and Judaism. As Zartaloudis shows, the Trinitarian doctrine was, in this sense, ‘an attempt to save Christianity from the accusation that that it was falling into the polytheistic and pagan routines of earlier times’ (2010:62).
classical world, marks the primacy of the will that characterises the history of Western metaphysics and gives birth to modern ethics. What is at the core of the debate is the character of the immanent government of the world, which is to say, the character of Christ.

Indeed, the question posed to the Church fathers who elaborated the Trinitarian doctrine was whether Christ, as the Son of God, was founded in the Father or, if like the Father, Christ was anarchos, that is to say, without principle, ungrounded (2011:57). The thesis that finally prevailed is that Christ – the Son of God who represents His word and action and who has ‘assumed the economy of salvation’ (Agamben, 2011:58) – is unfounded in the Father, is anarchos and constitutes itself as a mystery. The fact that Christ has no foundation, means, for Agamben, that ‘in the last instance, language and praxis do not have a foundation in being’ (2011:59). Indeed, contrary to the Aristotelian unmoved mover, whose actions fully coincide with his being, Agamben shows that for the Christian fathers God’s actions are dissociated from his being, and thus not only ethics but also politics become problematic. According to the paradigm of oikonomia the divine praxis, which entails not only creation but also redemption, has no foundation in the Being of God, in its transcendence and substance, but rather this praxis is realised in the Logos of God, that is, in Christ, the Son. Christ, however, according to the Church fathers, is anarchos, which means that his praxis, his administration of the earth is an anarchic practice. This is why, as Agamben has put it, ‘through the idea of a free and

---

68 For Agamben, ‘the problem that makes the image of the world in the classical tradition explode when it collides with the Christian concept of the world is that of creation. What is incompatible with the classical concept here is not so much the idea of a divine operation, but rather the fact that this praxis does not necessarily depend on being, and nor is it founded on it, but is the result of a free and gratuitous act of the will’ (2011:55).

69 The reason for this is that, within the divine Trinity, Christ, the Son, represents God’s will. The rupture between being and action produced with the Trinity is resolved through the notion of oikonomia, which emphasises praxis over being. This has a direct relation with the history of Western philosophy, with its ethical caesura between ontology and praxis. The fact that Christ is “anarchic” means that, in the last instance, language and praxis do not have a foundation in being. The "gigantomachy" around being is also, first and foremost, a conflict between being and acting, ontology and economy, between a being that is in itself unable to act and an action without being; what is at stake between these two is the idea of freedom’ (Agamben, 2011:59).
voluntary action – which associates creation with redemption – this paradigm had to overcome both the Gnostic antithesis between a God foreign to the world and a demiurge who is creator and Lord of the world, and the pagan identity of being and acting, which made the very idea of creation unconvincing’ (Agamben, 2011:65). For Agamben, this has two crucial consequences. On the one hand, it implies that this anarchic nature of the divine oikonomia grounded in the fracture between God’s being and praxis, makes intelligible the link that in the West unites anarchy and government, and therefore, ‘[n]ot only is something like a providential government of the world possible just because praxis does not have any foundation in being, but also this government – which has its paradigm in the Son and his oikonomia – is itself intimately anarchic’ (2011:64). On the other hand, this implies that from the very beginnings of the Church, Christian theology is:

economic-managerial, and not politico-statal [politico-statale] – this was our original thesis contra Schmitt. The fact that Christian theology entails an economy and not just a politics does not mean, however, that it is irrelevant for the history of Western political ideas and practices. On the contrary, the theological-economic paradigm obliges us to think this history once more and from a new perspective, keeping track of the decisive junctures between political tradition in the strict sense and the “economic-governmental” tradition. (Agamben, 2011:66)

The Providential Machine: On the Collateral Effect as an Act of Government

With the Trinitarian doctrine and the fracture it produced between God’s being and action the harmony between the transcendent, non-temporal God and the immanent ordering of the creaturely world is broken, and therefore, for Christian theology, ‘the problem of the “government” of the world and of its legitimization becomes the political problem that is in every sense decisive’ (Agamben, 2011:67). This is precisely what the paradigm of providence intended to reconcile, presenting a development of the Trinitarian doctrine that constitutes the epistemological core of the modern paradigm of government. The idea of providence refers to the way in
which God governs the world, and it functions, according to Agamben, as a bipolar machine (cf. 2011:110). The persistent feature of the theological and philosophical reflexion on providence is the claim that God does not govern the world in a direct fashion, that is, controlling every single detail of earthly beings, but through universal principles. This order of universal and transcendent laws – i.e. the order of *ordinatio* – is complemented with the order of the particular immanent providence entrusted to the angels – i.e. the order of *executio* –, forming the two poles of the divine government of the world (cf. Agamben, 2011:111). The activity of government is therefore both providential in the transcendental sense, and fateful, in terms of the distribution and administration of the universal principles: ‘the governmental machine functions like an incessant theodicy, in which the Kingdom of providence legitimates and founds the Government of fate, and the latter guarantees the order that the former has established and renders it operative’ (2011:129). In other words, fate as a special providence and universal principles as general providence, constitute a bipolar system that produces a zone of indistinction between primary and secondary; general and particular; final cause and effects. Governance is possible only through the production of this zone of indistinction, and is therefore ‘an activity that, in the last instance, is not targeting the general or the particular, the primary or the consequent, the end or the means, but their functional correlation’ (Agamben, 2011:122). Therefore, what is at stake in the split between being and action is the operation of the governmental machine, the division between Kingdom and Government produced by the Trinitarian *oikonomia* that was supposed to be solved with the providential paradigm.

In *Security, Territory, Population* Foucault’s genealogy of governmentality had identified in the techniques of the Christian pastorate the matrix and the model of political government (Foucault, 2007:147). The pastorate, for Foucault, operates over individuals but also over mankind as a whole, and hence it individualises and totalises at the same time; ‘it looks after men *omnes et singulatim*’ (Agamben,
For Foucault, the notion of *oikonomia* operates at the core of the Christian pastorate, and therefore in the same way as the pastorate represents an economy of souls – *oikonomia psychon* – the ‘essential issue of government will be the introduction of economy into political practice’ (Foucault, 2007:95). As we have seen, unlike Foucault, who traces the genealogy of the governmental techniques from the development of the Christian pastorate, Agamben claims that the ‘first seed of the division between the Kingdom and the Government is to be found in the Trinitarian *oikonomia*’ (2011:111). Agamben is able thus to present providence and government as that through which both theology and philosophy try to ‘come to terms with the splitting of classical ontology into two separate realities: being and praxis, transcendent and immanent good, theology and *oikonomia*’ (Agamben, 2011:140).

What is crucial about the paradigm of providence is that the transcendent pole is ‘never given by itself and separated from the world, as in Gnosis, but is always in relation to immanence’ (2011:141) and thus, the government of the world is that which results from the articulation of these two poles. This is why, for Agamben, the ontology of an act of government is founded in the form of the collateral effect. Indeed the act of government is not driven by particular purposes but neither is it moved only by means of transcendental decisions. Rather, it represents a grey area

---

70 What is crucial here is that Foucault, in Dean’s reading, rejected the theological interpretation of Adam’s Smith’s metaphor of the invisible hand, as ‘being something like Malebranche’s “providential god” and subsequently concluded that economics is an atheistic discipline’ (Dean, 2013:185). On the contrary, Agamben’s archaeology of economic theology – his reading of the Trinitarian *oikonomia* and the detailed and intense engagement with the medieval theory of providence – shows that this is not the case. For instance, in his discussion of Thomas Aquinas’s *De gubernatione mundi*, a crucial book which was ignored in Foucault’s lectures of governmentality, Agamben presents ‘the basic elements of a theory of the government as distinct from the kingdom .... Providence is the name of the “oikonomia,” insofar as the latter presents itself as the government of the world. If the doctrine of *oikonomia* – and that of providence that depends on it – can be seen, in this sense, as machines that found and explain the government of the world, and become fully intelligible only in this way, it is equally the case that, conversely, the birth of the governmental paradigm becomes comprehensible only if it is set against the “economic-theological” background of providence with which it is in agreement’ (Agamben, 2011:111-112, emphasis in original). In Chapter 6 I will examine the implications that this debate has for the understanding of governmentality.
of interlacement between the general and the particular, between what is not-wanted and what is expected (Agamben, 2011:141):

Governing means allowing the particular concomitant effects of a general “economy” to arise, an economy that would remain in itself wholly ineffective, but without which no government is possible. It is not so much that the effects (the Government) depend on being (the Kingdom), but rather that being consists of its effects: such is the vicarious and effectual ontology that defines the acts of government. (Agamben, 2011:142)

Agamben’s analysis of the collateral effect as an act of government pivots on the work of the Aristotelian commentator Alexander of Aphrodisias. What is important here, is that the providential action, according to Alexander, is neither ‘by accident’ nor ‘for itself’, but rather appears as a ‘collateral effect that is calculated’ (Agamben, 2011:118). For Agamben, although the providential machine is unitary in its form, it articulates itself into two different polarities: first causes/second causes, transcendence/immanence. The collateral effect is a paradigm of the act of government in which the general and particular are suspended. In the providential machine, then, the ‘[t]wo levels are strictly entwined, so that the first founds, legitimates, and makes possible the second, while the second concretely puts into practice in the chain of causes and effects the general decisions of the divine mind’ (Agamben, 2011:141). This is why, for Agamben, ‘the government of the world is what results from this functional correlation’ (Agamben, 2011, 141).

The transcendent pole of the providential machine is never given by itself, it is not detached from the earthly world but it is always articulated in relation to the immanent pole. The theological machine of government is therefore both providence and Faith; ordinatio and executio; primary act and collateral effect. The Gnostic germ that the Trinitarian oikonomia introduced into modern governmentality, expressed through the distinction between sovereign legislative
power and governmental executive power, is how the state inherits the double structure of the governmental machine:

At each turn, it wears the regal clothes of providence, which legislates in a transcendent and universal way, but lets the creatures it looks after be free, and the sinister and ministerial clothes of fate, which carries out in detail the providential dictates and confines the reluctant individuals within the implacable connection between the immanent causes and between the effects that their very nature has contributed to determining. (Agamben, 2011:142)

What Agamben’s archaeology of oikonomia reveals is that there is no essence of power, but only oikonomia, that is, government as management. The Trinitarian fracture between being and action and the attempt at its reconciliation through providence, means that two different registers – transcendental/immanent – had to be articulated in a bipolar machine. Oikonomia, in this sense, is nothing but the ‘functional relation between a glorified transcendental power (that appears but cannot be used) and an immanent praxis (that is invisible and yet effective)’ (Zartaloudis, 2010:85). It is in this light, that Agamben’s key question in The Kingdom and the Glory should be understood, namely the question of the relation between oikonomia and Glory, that is, between ‘power as government and effective management, and power as ceremonial and liturgical regality’ (Agamben, 2011:xii).

An Archaeology of Glory and the Production of Bare Life

The most noticeable difference then between Agamben’s work on governmentality and that of Foucault is that for Agamben the state’s splendour – which for Foucault is the ‘visible beauty of the order and the beautiful radiating manifestation of a force’ (Foucault, 2007:313) – is more than a mere residue of an archaic form of power surviving in a new constellation of liberal governmentality. A central thesis of The Kingdom and the Glory is that sovereign reign and economic government should always be articulated for power to become operative. The counterpart of this
argument lies in the answer to the question: ‘why does power need glory? If it is essentially force and capacity for action and government, why does it assume the rigid cumbersome and “glorious” form of ceremonies, acclamations, and protocols? What is the relation between economy and Glory?’ (Agamben, 2011:xii). For Mitchell Dean, the raising of such a ‘why’ question is antithetical to Foucault’s analysis of government, since Foucault’s genealogy of governmentality has an emphasis on the ‘how’ rather than on the ‘why’ of power (Dean, 2013:200).

For Agamben, however, the close examination of the doxologies and liturgical acclamations is more useful for the understanding of the ‘why’ of power, its functioning and its structure than the ‘pseudo-philosophical analysis of popular sovereignty, the rule of law or the communicative procedures that regulate the formation of public opinion and political will’ (Agamben, 2011:xiii). Indeed, for Agamben, the two political paradigms derived from Christian theology – political theology, which founds the transcendent sovereign power on the single God, and economic theology, which founds the immanent ordering of the world – are antinomical but functionality related through the category of Glory. The theology of Glory constitutes the ‘secret point of contact through which theology and politics continuously communicate and exchange parts with one another’ (Agamben, 2011:194). It is here that the bipolar character of power become intelligible and the relation between politics and theology comes to the fore.

As explained in the first section of this chapter, theology thus reveals two different trinities at operation produced in the fracture between God’s being and His action: the economic trinity of revelation and the transcendental trinity of substance. In turn, these trinities ‘match the division between praxis and ontology that make up the economic theology or God’s operativity in the world’ (Watkin, 2014:229-230). The articulation of these two paradigms constitutes the basis of the divine government of the world in terms of both the transcendental and the immanent
order. Glory is nothing other than the ‘place where theology attempts to think the
difficult consolation between immanent trinity and economic trinity’ (Agamben,
2011:208). For this reason, in Glory, writes Agamben, ‘economic trinity and
immanent trinity, God’s praxis of salvation and his being are conjoined and move
through each other’ (Agamben, 2011:208).

The governmental machine consists in the articulation of this polarity, in which ‘the
theo-doxological machine results in the correlation between the immanent Trinity
and the transcendental Trinity, where the two aspects glorify each other and result
in the other, reciprocally’ (Zartaloudis, 2010:89). Agamben examines this
theological problem through a study of the role of angels as God’s bureaucrats. The
central question here is what would be the function of angels after redemption.
Agamben shows that according to the Christian theologians, ‘the angelic ministers
survive the universal judgment only as a hymnological hierarchy, as contemplation
and praise of the glory of the divine. With every providential operation exhausted
and with all administration of salvation coming to an end, only song remains.
Liturgy survives only as doxology’ (Agamben, 2011:162). What is important to
highlight here is that angels are left without practice. God, after redemption, no
longer needs to act on the earth, but is inoperative. Glory, in this sense, acquires a
decisive meaning: ‘glory is what must cover with its splendor the unaccountable
figure of divine inoperativity’ (Agamben, 2011:163).

What this implies, is that if power is in fact bifurcated, as Agamben’s archaeology of
economic theology reveals, then both poles of the governmental machine are,
through mutual glorification, articulated: ‘The government glorifies the kingdom
and the kingdom glorifies the government. The oikonomia of the Trinity is, in this
sense, an oikonomia of glory’ (Zartaloudis, 2010:89, emphasis in original). It is in this
sense that for Agamben the theology of Glory constitutes the secret point of contact
between kingdom and government.
Crucially then, what defines the character of the governmental machine is not the articulation of kingdom and government, but the empty throne of sovereignty exposed in this archaeology of Glory: ‘glory precedes the creation of the world and survives its end. The throne is empty not only because glory, through coinciding with the divine essence is not identified with it, but also because it is in its innermost self-inoperativity and sabbatism’ (2011:245). Agamben’s genealogy of governmentality shows that Glory is not the ‘sublime splendour that emanates from the void, as philosophers all too often claim It reveals and veils, at the same time, the presupposition of a central vacuity at the heart of the bipolar machine of Western power’ (Zartaloudis, 2010:89). Sovereignty then remains in force as an empty throne through oikonomia and glorification but at the same time, it legitimates and founds government. In short, for Agamben, Glory covers divine inoperativity with its splendour: Glory ‘takes the place of that unthinkable emptiness’ (Agamben, 2011:242) of the governmental machine that has been missed by Foucault’s genealogy of governmentality. It is in this sense that for Agamben inoperativity is ‘the political substance of the Occident, the glorious nutrient of all power’ (2011:246):

What is at stake is the capture and inscription in a sphere of the inoperativity that is central to human life. The oikonomia of power places firmly at its head, in the form of festival and glory, what appears to its eyes as the inoperativity of man and God, which cannot be looked at. (Agamben, 2011:245)

It is finally with the notion of Glory that the fracture between economy and theology produced by the Trinitarian doctrine is resolved. The problem, however, is to consider what potential for resistance is offered in the notion of inoperativity and the invitation to profane the empty centre of the governmental machine, covered up with glory. The modern form of public opinion operates through the media it is the function of glory and acclamations which becomes crucial in modern democracies,
not because it enables the control of public opinion but also because it dispenses glory. In this sense, sovereignty mirrors the governmental machine in that it has two constitutive poles. On the one hand, it is the transcendental idea of power and, on the other, it is a void rearticulated through an immanent practice of glorification. The point Agamben tries to make is that the acclamative and doxological aspect of power become indistinguishable from *oikonomia* and government and at the same time, become essential to the nourishment of sovereignty. For this reason Watkin considers Glory the “signature of all signatures”:

> [G]lory constitutes the final, and in fact, most significant signature of Western power, for it renders articulate and indifferent the two modalities of power, not just the sacred power of the sovereign but also the glorious power of government. Glory is the name of the economy of power, the signature of political signatures par excellence. (2014:229)

For Agamben when the government and the economy's overwhelming domination of popular sovereignty comes to light it is Glory that allows us to 'bridge that fracture between theology and economy. The doctrine of the trinity was never able to completely resolve this. It is only the dazzling figure of glory that provides a possible conciliation’ (2011:230). In the concluding section of this chapter, I put forward a different argument. Indeed, it will be argued that it is the production of bare life that allows for this articulation, bringing together the murderous vocation of sovereign power with the immanent functioning of government and the economy.

**The Production of Bare Life and the Governmental Machine**

I argued in the previous chapter that the production of bare life appears in *Homo Sacer* as a juridical-political act that constitutes ‘the first content of sovereign power’ (1998:27). Sovereignty, hence, is described as the sphere in which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide and without celebrating sacrifice (Agamben, 1998:83) and as the threshold within which ‘law refers to life and
includes it in itself by suspending it’ (1998:83). Law, as Agamben takes it from Savigny, ‘has no existence in itself, but rather has its being in the very life of men’ (1998:27) and hence the production of bare life becomes the originary activity of sovereignty.

The critique of Agamben’s theory of the production of bare life in terms of its fundamental connection to the transcendent pole of sovereignty are numerous (e.g, Ojakangas, 2005; Fitzpatrick, 2001; Norris, 2000; Negri, 2010, Jennings, 2011). They constitute – along with the critiques that target the notions of bare life and *homo sacer* in themselves (Laclau, 2007; Patton, 2007; Lemke, 2011; Negri, 2007) – a theoretical reaction to Agamben’s reconstitution of the centrality of sovereignty through the juridical exception. However Agamben offers a far more comprehensive account of political power. The notion of bare life disappears from Agamben’s archaeology of the articulation of sovereignty and governmentality.

What these critiques fail to address, however, is the genealogy of economic theology that Agamben develops in *The Kingdom and the Glory*. As Mitchell Dean has stated – without further analysis –, ‘might compensate for the earlier absence of a consideration of how decisions on life are today handed over to the realm of the economy’ (2013:165). It is precisely by articulating Agamben’s location of government ‘in its theological locus in the Trinitarian *oikonomia*’ (2011:xi) with his analysis of the production of bare life, that a more subtle understanding of both bare life and the governmental machine becomes possible. If the paradigm of sovereignty is derived from political theology and governmentality has a signature that refers it back to economic theology, then the point of contact between political and economic theology is the production of bare life: ‘the present inquiry concerns precisely the point of intersection between the juridico-institutional and the biopolitical models of power’ (Agamben, 1998:6), writes Agamben about the production of bare life in *Homo Sacer*. 
The simple question to ask at this point is, therefore: If the 'production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power' as Agamben claims in the introduction to Homo Sacer, then how should we understand what constitutes an ‘activity’ of sovereign power, giving the fracture between being and action introduced with the Trinitarian doctrine? What remains to be interrogated then, is not only, as Agamben suggests, the relation between politics and life (given that life presents itself as what is included by means of an exclusion), but also the relation between the signature of Life and the oikonomic apparatus through which the governmental machine operates. In other words, the question of whether the separation of bare life from concrete forms of life upon which Western politics is founded is in agreement with the primacy of the will which originated in the fracture between Being and action at the core of the theological oikonomia.

What is then, the structure of the act of producing bare life? As Agamben claims, the substantial link between logos and being that characterises classical ontology collapses with the formulation of the economy of the mystery that enable the Trinitarian doctrine to operate. This means that any attempt at founding the production of bare life on the transcendent being of sovereignty is destined to fail. This theological inheritance that breaks with the Aristotelian coincidence between being and action points toward the dislocation of the production of bare life from an eminently juridico-political domain.

The production of bare life as an ‘activity’ of sovereign power is always already transferred to the domain of government. Indeed, this production, as a praxis, is ungrounded in being as such and it is only partially moved by transcendent norms that prescribe nothing – at least nothing other than the presupposition of the production of bare life in itself. It is precisely the groundless and anarchical character of being and action that locates the production of bare life in the
interlacement between the immanent and the transcendent. Indeed, for Agamben, ‘the ontology of the acts of government is a vicarious ontology, in the sense that, within the economical paradigm, every power has a vicarious character, deputizes for another [fa le veci di un altro]. This means that there is not a “substance” of power, but only an “economy of it”’ (Agamben, 2011:141). There is no substance then behind the production of bare life but only *oikonomia*. This means that the production of bare life, as an act of sovereignty, is not founded in sovereignty itself but inversely, that it is the activity of producing bare life that covers up the inoperativity of sovereign, transcendent power. When seen through the articulation of kingdom and government, that is through the bipolar structure of the governmental machine, the production of bare life appears in a zone of indistinction between *ordinatio* and *executio*, Reign and Government, and, ultimately, between sovereignty and economy.

If the aim of *Homo Sacer* was to show the inner link between the sovereign exception and the production of bare life, that is, sacred life that ‘has an eminently political character and exhibits an essential link with the terrain on which sovereign power is founded’ (1998:100), then *The Kingdom and the Glory* provides a subtle account of what constitutes an act of government, from which the production of bare life as an activity of sovereign power is redirected towards the articulation of a limited sovereignty with the immanent functioning of an economical-governmental power. The fact that Agamben’s account of the production of bare life in *Homo Sacer* has an eminently juridico-political emphasis does not limit the strength of the genealogy of economic theology that could disseminate this production in terms of *oikonomia*. The lesson to be learned from *The Kingdom and the Glory* is that government cannot be fully reduced to the mere execution of sovereign decisions. Even when bare life appears in a fundamental relation to the operation of law, its production exceeds ‘abstractions and vacuous mythologems, such as the Law, the general will, and popular sovereignty’ (2011:276).
Paraphrasing Agamben, it could be said that the mystery of bare life is the mystery of its *oikonomía*. The transcendent pole of sovereignty fades in importance when compared to the immanent operation of governmentality, or as Kotsko has put it, ‘the exemplary figure for what we call political theology is no longer the sovereign president, with his power to declare alleged terrorists *homo sacer*, but the technocratic banker, whose invisible hand moves the entire economy through actions that few notice or understand’ (2013:108). Nevertheless, as has been shown, the production of bare life, under the triumph of the economy, remains connected to the empty throne of sovereignty, that is, the headless king. If understood in this sense, the production of bare life ‘operates in parallel, and stands as the condition of possibility itself, of the presupposition of sovereignty’s and government’s *an-arche* (the lack of a foundation, even a self-foundation, other than its emptiness or absence)’ (Zartaloudis, 2010:156).

This ontological-*oikonomic* ambivalence of bare life, namely its inherent connection to a Law that prescribes nothing on the one hand, and its production through an immanent administration on the other hand, is already present in a precarious form in the category of the ban, that Agamben borrows from Jean-Luc Nancy (Agamben, 1998:29). As Anton Schütz suggests, ‘the sacredness of the Homo Sacer transforms his life by banning it and abandoning it to a necessarily insignificant death. This tension in the semantic word “abandon” between its two components “to leave somebody to himself”, “to give somebody into the ban” – two diverging meanings that the word nonetheless authenticates equally and simultaneously – is not discussed’ (2008:125-126). However, as might be inferred from *Homo Sacer*, in the interpretation of this ban-structure, lawlessness could be registered as a legal status, and thus sovereignty, in this context, is described by Agamben as this ‘law beyond the law to which we are abandoned’ (1998:59). On the contrary, a reading of the production of bare life from the perspective of the fundamental rupture between
being and action displaces the sovereign structure of the law and the peculiar force that it takes in the form of the state of exception, relocating the activity of producing bare life in a zone of indistinction where there is nonetheless a clear primacy of ‘the police, over the Law’.

We can now return to Agamben’s central claim about the operativity of the governmental machine and Glory:

In what way does liturgy “make” power? And if the governmental machine is twofold (Kingdom and Government), what function does glory play within it? For sociologists and anthropologists it always remains possible to turn to magic as the sphere that, bordering upon rationality and immediately preceding it, allows one to explain that which we do not understand about the society in which we live as ultimately a magical survival. We do not believe in the magical power of acclamations and of liturgy, and we are convinced that not even theologians or emperors really believed in it. If glory is so important in theology it is, above all, because it allows one to bring together within the governmental machine immanent trinity and economic trinity, the being of God and his praxis, Kingdom and Government. By defining the Kingdom and the essence, it also determines the sense of the economy and of Government. It allows, that is, for us to bridge that fracture between theology and economy that the doctrine of the trinity has never been able to completely resolve and for which only the dazzling figure of glory is able to provide a possible conciliation. (Agamben, 2011:230)

For Agamben in modern democracies, the doxological function of power is subsumed under the form of public opinion and the media, keeping the governmental machine in motion. However, as it has been argued, what in the last instance articulates the two polarities of the governmental machine and covers up its empty centre is bare life, a notion to which Agamben has devoted the first two volumes of the Homo Sacer series. This disappears from his analysis of power as the articulation between auctoritas and potestas. It is the signature of Life that renders operative the governmental machine. It is the production of bare life as the activity through which ‘the nudity that must be covered up by a garment of light at any cost’
(Agamben, 2011:221) is dressed. With this in mind, I offer an analysis of the production of bare life, of sovereignty and of biopolitics in the final chapter of this dissertation. Before that, however, I critically engage with the archaeology of Power that Agamben provides in *The Kingdom and the Glory* in order to underscore its relevance for the understanding of governmentality.
Chapter 6
Neoliberalism, Governmentality, and Sovereignty: The Lessons of The Kingdom and the Glory

In The Kingdom and the Glory Agamben charges the republican tradition with inheriting, rather unconsciously, the theological paradigm of providence through the influence that Malebranche has on Rousseau’s political theory. Indeed, Agamben shows how with Rousseau’s notions of volonté générale and volonté particulière the governmental machine of providence is transferred from the theological to the political domain, giving form to the fundamental structure of Rousseau’s économie publique, that is, ‘the relationship between sovereignty and government, law and executive power’ (Agamben, 2011:272-273). As has been shown in Chapter 5, general providence and special providence do not represent a conflict within God’s general will, nor do they stand in a direct contrast to one another. On the contrary, the occasional causes – or special providence – are precisely the particular actualisations of the divine will as it appears in Malebranche. This particular articulation of general and particular providence is inherited in Rousseau’s account of government as a pole of political power which fully coincides with sovereignty, but which nevertheless ‘distinguishes itself as its particular emanation and actualization’ (Agamben, 2011:275).

In his analysis of population as an essential factor for the understanding of the development of the art of government, Michel Foucault notes that in Rousseau’s On the Social Contract the problem is how to construct – through the notions of general will, contract, and nature – a general principle of government that allows for both ‘the juridical principle of sovereignty and the elements through which an art of government can be defined and described’ (Foucault, 2007:107). It is in this light that Agamben reads Rousseau’s Discourse on Political Economy – and Rousseau’s
1775 article on ‘Political Economy’ – locating at the core of Rousseau’s political thought the distinction and yet articulation of sovereignty and government:

I urge my readers also … to distinguish carefully public economy, about which I am to speak, and which I call government, from the supreme authority, which I call sovereignty – a distinction that consists in the one having the legislative right and in certain cases obligating the body of the nation itself, while the other has only the executive power and can obligate only private individuals. (Rousseau in Agamben, 2011:274)

One of the lessons of The Kingdom and the Glory is that the primacy of legislative power – and hence the subsequent reduction of government to execution of the general will – should be called into question. For Agamben, the ambiguity that consists in conceiving government as mere executive power has meant that ‘modern political thought becomes lost in abstractions and vacuous mythologems such as the Law, the general will, and popular sovereignty, and has failed to confront the decisive political problem’ (2011:276). This is the problem of government and its economy. Crucially, Agamben notes – and this was not entirely perceived by Foucault – that in Rousseau the theological apparatus of providence is fully adopted and hence:

[T]he entire economic-providential apparatus (with its polarities ordinatio/executio, providence/fate, Kingdom/Government) is passed on as an unquestioned inheritance to modern politics. What was needed to assure the unity of being and divine action, reconciling the unity of substance within the trinity of persons and the government of particulars with the universality of providence, has here the strategic function of reconciling the sovereignty and generality of the law with the public economy and the effective government of individuals. The most nefarious consequence of this theological apparatus dressed up as political legitimation is that it has rendered the democratic tradition incapable of thinking government and its economy …. (Agamben, 2011:276)

However, by focusing on the immanent pole of administration rather than on sovereignty, Agamben does not eliminate the problem of the transcendental register of power, given that for the governmental machine to operate the two axes of power
need to always be articulated. The world, writes Agamben, is ‘governed through the coordination of two principles, the auctoritas (that is, a power without actual execution) and the potestas (that is, a power that can be exercised); the Kingdom and the Government’ (Agamben, 2011:103). This thesis, which is developed in The Kingdom and the Glory, signals a major shift in the treatment of power as a category of analysis in the Homo Sacer series:

If it appears in Homo Sacer that the double articulation of inside and outside produces power which then grounds the political, The Kingdom and the Glory radically modifies this claim by showing how government effectively produces the power which grounds it, making the kingdom (sovereign power) operative through the inoperativity of the power of glory. (Watkin, 2014:211)

Agamben’s genealogy of economic theology highlights this complex bipolar structure of power that underpins the historical tensions between sovereignty and government. In other words, Agamben is not directly concerned with the decapitation of the King in itself, but with the question of ‘How is it possible that his headless body often behaves as if it indeed had a head?’ (Dean, 1994:156). Needless to say, Foucault also recognises in various parts of his lectures that we cannot simply talk of a ‘replacement’ of a society based on sovereignty by a society based on government. Rather, he insists on a triangle: sovereignty, discipline, and governmental management, which has the population as its target and the apparatus of security as its essential mechanism (Foucault, 2007).

Agamben suggests that he locates his work ‘in the wake of Michel Foucault’s investigations into the genealogy of governmentality’ but also that it ‘aims to understand the internal reasons why they failed to be completed’ (2011:xii). Given that this is the case, it is worth posing the following question: what exactly is brought about by Agamben’s genealogy of the theological paradigm of oikonomia – in terms of our understanding of political power and of the articulation between government and sovereignty – that was not already present in Foucault’s Security,
Territory, Population? In what follows, I will examine the significance of Agamben’s investigation for the understanding of governmentality and sovereignty as a way of opening up new directions for the critique and analysis of neoliberalism. More importantly, in doing so I relocate the production of bare life within the bipolar structure of the governmental machine.

Agamben and Foucault: Two Genealogies of Governmentality

Foucault deploys the notion of governmentality as a theoretical tool for developing a genealogy of the modern state. In its most general sense, governmentality refers to ‘the conduct of conduct’, ranging from ‘governing the self to governing others’ (Lemke, 2011:45). In his lectures at the Collège de France of 1977-1978, named Security, Territory, Population Foucault defines the three central features of governmentality: ‘the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument’ (2007:108). Secondly, governmentality is the ‘tendency, the line of force, that ... has constantly led towards the pre-eminence over all other types of power – sovereignty, discipline, and so on – of the type of power that we can call “government”’ (2007:108). And finally, the word refers to ‘the process, or rather, the result of the process by which the state of justice of the Middle Ages became the administrative state in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and was gradually “governmentalized”’ (2007:108-109).

For Foucault, the transition in the eighteenth century from a regime based on structures of sovereignty to a paradigm dominated by techniques of government does not mean that sovereignty ceases to play a role when the art of government becomes central. Rather, he argues, ‘the problem of sovereignty was never more
sharply posed than at this moment, precisely because it was no longer a question, as in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, of how to deduce an art of government from theories of sovereignty, but rather, given the existence and deployment of an art of government, what juridical form ... could be given to the sovereignty typical of a state’ (Foucault, 2007:206). Furthermore, for Foucault, the sovereign right to take life – its power over life and death – is replaced by a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death. With this transformation, there is a displacement of the law and violence as the means of sovereign power. Instead, there is a growing importance of the norm of action, of regulatory and corrective mechanisms ‘capable of optimizing forces, aptitudes, and life in general’ (Foucault, 1978:141) at the expense of the juridical system of the law.

Crucially, Foucault’s concept of governmentality, and in particular liberal governmentality, is ‘a critique of power as much as a form of power’ (Dean, 2013:51), which was developed first on the basis of the archaic model of the Christian pastorate and then from the emergence of a set of particular instruments and techniques in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such as the science of the police. Foucault captures this in a general sense under the name of the art of government. This is, indeed, what for Foucault explains the transitions in the major economies of power, from the state of justice – which corresponds to the feudal type of territoriality – to the administrative state of the society of discipline and, from there, to the state of government defined by the emergence of the population, the economic knowledge and the apparatuses of security. For Foucault, the survival of the state after these transformations is only explained on the basis of the general tactics of governmentality:

Governmentalization of the state is a particularly contorted phenomenon, since if the problems of governmentality and the techniques of government have really become the only political stake and the only real space for political struggle and contestation, the governmentalization of the state has nonetheless been what has allowed the state to survive. (Foucault, 2007:109)
It could be argued then, that Foucault’s concept of governmentality tries to escape from the system of sovereignty, which has captivated political thought, not by eliminating the problem of sovereignty itself, but rather by analysing the state as a governmentalised structure and, more precisely, by presenting liberalism and liberal techniques of government in opposition to the strategies of the state, law, and sovereignty. In short, Foucault’s notion of governmentally, unlike Agamben’s, is not centred on the articulation of the two poles of the governmental machine but plays off one of its poles against the other. Indeed, Foucault’s concept of governmentality differs from Agamben’s in that it seeks to overcome the bipolar structure of power by asserting the pre-eminence of government over discipline and, more importantly by ‘making the critique of the state and sovereignty a feature of the art of government itself, that is of liberalism’ (Dean, 2011:67).

By ‘completing’ Foucault’s genealogy of governmentality in The Kingdom and the Glory, Agamben is able to depict the internal logic of the double structure of the governmental machine showing, perhaps more clearly than Foucault does, both that sovereignty is not a function of a theory of government – hence that it cannot be totally reduced to a governmentalised register of power – and that government exceeds the implementation of sovereign decisions. Foucault, as Agamben recognises, ‘has come as close as he possibly can to the intuition of the bipolar character of the governmental machine, although the methodological decision to set aside the analysis of the juridical universals prevents him from articulating it fully’ (Agamben, 2011:273). In a nutshell, although both genealogies of governmentality locate government over sovereignty as the central political problem of our time, Agamben’s archaeological investigation into the paradigm of oikonomia shows a larger picture in which government itself is unthinkable without the transcendental pole of sovereignty. In this sense, for Agamben, even under the primacy of governance and the managerial form of administration, governmentality could not
be based on the opposition of the Kingdom and the Government but on a particular articulation of the two that highlights the police over the law, but which nonetheless keeps referring to the law in order to become operative.

By denying the sovereign’s claim to transcendence, Foucault’s notion of governmentality is unable to fully rearticulate the juridical-institutional apparatuses of the state and the law into a comprehensive account of government. Agamben, on the contrary, agrees with Foucault that the political problem we are confronted with is that of government – rather than that of the law – but he nonetheless wants to rescue the residues of the sovereign claim to transcendence by undertaking an archaeological investigation into Glory and by stressing the vicarious character of power. By doing so, Agamben’s genealogy of oikonomia shows that, contrary to the common assumption, liberal governmentality cannot be presented in a sharp opposition to the strategies of the state:

If we live in an era of governmentality, or of governmental reason, or of a liberal art of government, which is as much a critique and grid of power as a form of power, then the language of state, sovereignty and law, would be inadequate to the analysis of government, the preeminent form of power in this era. In doing so, have we not rejoined with liberalism, or at least a kind of economic liberalism, in the desire to find another grid of analysis outside the state and to limit and restrict power that would be sovereign? (Dean, 2011:48)

Agamben’s notion of the governmental machine avoids precisely that critique. If today, as Thanos Zartaloudis has shown, the ‘old-European model of law and of politics as an immobile, sovereign, transcendence-suffused grounding of social and political life has been effectively replaced by a contingent-driven, crisis-managing form of governing as managerialism or administration’ (2010:51) then Agamben’s genealogy of economic theology not only locates the moment of arising of this managerial and anarchical form of power but, more importantly, in doing so it also becomes a tool for politically thinking the current articulation of the two axes of
power and for the rethinking of liberalism without playing one pole off against the other.

Crucially, what the fracture between being and action within the paradigm of economic theology and the archaeology of oikonomia demonstrates is that whatever the historical configurations of the two polarities of the governmental machine, the two registers of power need to be present. Even if ‘the real problem, the central mystery of politics is not sovereignty, but government’ (Agamben, 2011:276) we should recall that for Agamben it is only through the irreconcilable scission and yet mutual exposure of the two poles of the governmental machine that power becomes operative. What the paradigm of economic theology helps to elucidate then is that government is not a straightforward implementation of sovereign decisions. Indeed, as Agamben has spelled out in the reading of Rousseau that we have presented at the beginning of this chapter, ‘the ambiguity that seems to settle the problem of government by presenting it as the mere execution of a general will and law has weighed negatively not only upon the theory, but also upon the history of modern democracy’ (Agamben, 2011:276).

By highlighting the importance of the economic theological paradigm in his genealogy of governmentality, Agamben is not simply repeating the call to cut off the king’s head. The Kingdom and the Glory does not reinforce pure ‘immanentism’, since an account of power that fails to articulate the transcendent registers of sovereign power would be incapable of thinking the antinomian inheritance of Christian theology. However, as Mitchell Dean has clearly shown, the problem with some of the eminently immanent understandings of power is not that they undermine sovereign power but rather that they are ‘drawn against a political and theological imaginary of a divine or worldly sovereignty as all-powerful’ (2013:167).
This is, then, how Agamben proposes to read the maxim 'The king reigns, but he does not govern'. Contrary to the Foucauldian call to 'cut off the king's head in political theory', and the opposite reading from Schmittian political theology which asserts the foundation of sovereign power, Agamben proposes to read it as a reaffirmation of the double structure of an act of government. He analyses the interlacement between an always limited and impotent sovereignty with an anarchical oikonomia, being and praxis, transcendence and immanence. The roi mahaignie, the doctrine of the rex inutilis and the Fisher King are paradigmatic cases of this structure, representing the mutilated, useless and absent king: 'the transcendence of the King in his persona ficta (his sovereign body) entailed itself an internal fracture between being and praxis ..., the persona ficta of the King had no origin other than in the empty throne, the anarchic time-space of sovereignty, the image of a do-nothing King' (Zartaloudis, 2010:95).

Needless to say, Foucault’s notion of governmentality is already suffused with the problematic of the headless king. His notion of government exceeds the simple execution of sovereign decisions, allowing an economy that not only administers sovereign power but also creates an autonomous space for the self-government and management of the polis. Agamben, however, as we have shown, answers the question of 'how is it possible that this headless body often behaves as if it indeed had a head?' through an archaeology of oikonomic government. Even if the king's head is cut off we will still have an empty throne, and the government of men is only possible if the kingdom and the government are imbricated. In this sense, as Zartaloudis writes, ‘from the inception of neoliberalism to the current dissolution of the nation state, what takes place is not a mere retreat of the State of sovereignty but the assumption of oikonomic practices and techniques of the whole political life while maintaining a functional relation to a transcendental righteousness’ (2010:168).
Agamben, on the contrary, examines how even under the consolidation of a managerial paradigm of government, the empty throne of sovereignty needs to be articulated for government to be possible. He is certainly not giving normative or analytical pre-eminence to either pole of the governmental machine. What he shows is that although both political and economic theology remain functionally related, it is only through an archaeology of the paradigm of oikonomia that the Christian inheritance in Western politics become intelligible. Crucially, Agamben should be taken à la lettre when in the very preface of The Kingdom and the Glory he writes that ‘locating government in its theological locus in the Trinitarian oikonomia does not mean to explain it by means of a hierarchy of causes, as if a more primordial generic rank would necessarily pertain to theology’ (2011:xii). Instead, he insists that Trinitarian oikonomia constitutes only a privileged ‘laboratory’ for the analysis of the governmental machine. In other words, the Trinitarian oikonomia is a paradigm through which Agamben traces the signature of Secularisation.

But does Agamben’s theoretical choice in The Kingdom and the Glory – focusing on the paradigm of oikonomia rather than on chrematistics – have an impact on his understanding of power? In a short article entitled ‘Divine Management: Critical Remarks on Giorgio Agamben’s The Kingdom and the Glory’ (2011) Alberto Toscano discards Agamben’s archaeology of economic theology for being mute about the ‘constitutively unmanageable economies (chrematistic) that management (oikonomia) seeks to govern’ (2011:132). For him, Agamben’s analysis is incapable of grasping the ‘anarchic order of capital accumulation’ and provides no insight into ‘the (value) forms that determine the (dis)order of the contemporary economy’ (2011:132). Although I will not respond extensively to Toscano’s critique of Agamben,71 I will briefly refute the general coordinates of his work as a way of

71 Adam Kotsko has already shown in detail that Toscano misconstrues Agamben’s project and its relationship to theology in a systematic way (2013).
affirming the pertinence of The Kingdom and the Glory for a radical critique of contemporary politics and economics.

In a nutshell, Toscano’s argument is that Agamben’s archaeology of economic theology fails to incorporate chrematistics, that is, the science of ‘accumulation, circulation and interest that is opposed to the managerial stability of the paradigm of oikonomia’ (2011:130). It becomes incapable of a ‘total critique of the status quo’ (2011:125). More importantly, however, for Toscano, Agamben’s failure to register the logics of accumulation – chrematistics – into his genealogy reinforces the ‘tired idea’ of presenting Marxism as ‘secularization’ of hidden theological concepts:

The signatures just aren’t there. Neither capitalism nor Marx’s theory thereof can be encompassed by the notion of oikonomia and its genealogies, theological or otherwise, and it does not suffice to combine political theology with economic theology to overcome the shortcomings of Agamben’s work as a tool for politically thinking the present. (Toscano, 2011:132)

Two things are striking here. First, Toscano’s reading of the notion of secularisation does not do justice to Agamben’s use of signatures as methodological tools. The signature of Secularisation does not merely show how economic theological concepts move and operate through, for instance, Marxism. Rather, as William Watkin has claimed, our current economic processes are accessible through their origins in the paradigm of economic theology only ‘inasmuch as these origins themselves are made accessible for the first time by our present situation’ (2014:216). In other words, Secularisation founds its own founding ground in a retrospective process whereby ‘theological economy is possible only as the origin of profane economy because profane economy allows this to be an operative structure of meaning’ (Watkin, 2014:216).

A signature, then, is not a concept, or the hidden content of a concept but rather a process of transference whereby a concept or discourse is transposed from one
domain to another ‘through a series of shifts, substitutions and displacements’ (Fuggle, 2009:86). Signatures, contrary to Toscano’s reading of Agamben, do not respond to the logic of cause and effect, they are not ‘the’ sources of modern concepts. Hence, it would be pointless to accept Toscano’s invitation to simply consider ‘what an attention to their theological precursors would have to tell us about modern concepts of economic order – for instance Hayek’s notorious neoliberal ontology of spontaneous order’ (2011:130).

Indeed, what Agamben has shown with the notion of secularisation is that signatures also work backwards through time, and therefore ‘the thesis according to which the economy could be a secularized theological paradigm acts retrospectively on theology itself’ (Agamben, 2011:3). In short, Toscano is defending Marxism from accusations he does not entirely understand. Agamben is certainly not trying to ‘perpetuate the tired idea of Marx’s thought as a secularization of some cloaked and damming theological content’ (Toscano, 2011:132) simply because this is not how signatures work, and for Agamben, secularisation does not reveal ‘an identity of substance between theology and modernity’ (2011:4).

Secondly, by insisting on the relevance of chrematistics, Toscano is knocking at an open door. Indeed, Agamben would not deny the importance of capital accumulation, the logics of monetary circulation, capital flows, or the anarchic regimes of interests for the understanding of economic behaviour. Nevertheless, the problem that concerns Agamben in The Kingdom and the Glory (2011) exceeds that of money as a real abstraction, however important that might be for the understanding of the economy. Indeed, Agamben’s project in the Homo Sacer series, as I have demonstrated in previous chapters, is primarily concerned with the question: ‘Why is power split?’ (Agamben, 2011:100), that is to say, with the double structure of the governmental machine and the vicarious character of an art of government. In order to truly undermine Agamben’s project then, Toscano needs to
demonstrate that the economic paradigm of chrematistics has influenced – or at least tells us something new about – the operativity of power as a signature in the West, besides its obvious importance for the understanding of the functioning of the economy in itself.

Mitchell Dean has also pointed out that the theme of chrematistics has escaped Agamben. However, far from reading this omission as a refutation of Agamben’s genealogy of oikonomia his analysis of financialisation is presented as a corroboration of Agamben’s project. Indeed, for Dean, while Agamben recognises the anarchic character of the economic order and its permanent cross-referencing to a constitutive foundation, he also ‘neglects the role of money and transformations of finance which, if they do not escape it entirely, provide significant challenges for economic management’ (Dean, 2013:219). However, as Dean also states, it is precisely the effects of chrematistics that ‘make the economic-governmental axis operable’ (2013: 220). The central claim is that whereas Marxism regards financial crises as evidence of the necessary destruction of non-economic social relations, ‘our societies display a remarkable capacity for retroversion, reactivation and reinvention of quasi-transcendentals in the face of the crisis’ (Dean, 2013:221). As Agamben has put it, the financial crisis ‘has become an instrument of rule. It serves to legitimize political and economic decisions that in fact dispossess citizens and deprive them of any possibility of decision’ (Agamben, 2013c:1). In short, although chrematistics constantly challenges the attempt at stabilising the economic management of societies, those challenges do not undermine but reinforce the immanent ordering derived from the paradigm of oikonomia.

---

72 Maurizio Lazzarato has also highlighted the role of financialisation in terms of neoliberal transformations, showing how for Marxism social relations that are ‘neither purely economic or juridical are remnants that the capitalist machine is bound to destroy. Yet, in reality, what is supposedly destined to disappear keeps returning to haunt a theory that is unable to foresee this’ (2009:131).
But, ‘by what right does Agamben’, as Alberto Toscano asks, ‘pass from the insistence of certain conceptual constellations and semantic kernels across different epochs and discursive formations to the overarching conviction that such an archaeological inquiry is of urgent political significance?’ (2011:127). First, by reaching beyond the chronological limits of Foucault’s genealogy of governmentality, Agamben is able to shed light on the self-referential constitution of political power. Indeed, The Kingdom and the Glory unveils this dynamic whereby the power that is founded as legitimate founds its own founding ground. Thanos Zartaloudis, following Agamben, names these particular formations of power – that I have closely studied in Chapter 3 under the scope of the common and the proper schema – foundational mythologemes and their recognition and scrutiny in The Kingdom and the Glory constitutes a vital contribution to political and juridical thinking:

[The historical, political and theoretical celebration of such mythologemes and their continued transmission is highly problematic since it misleads thought from considering the fact that it is the founded power or concepts that project their so-called founding referent (as their metaphysical – transcendental – principle). In other words, it is the act of founding (the search for the origin or essence of authority and power, and the need to render them stable, infallible and ordered), which presupposes not only the particular form of the founded power, but also the source of its justification as if from an outside, higher realm that is to be rendered sacred, concealed, absolute and allegedly just and most powerful. Whether it is sovereignty (in despotic understandings of power) or the People (for instance, in democratic understandings of power) that are claimed as the originary foundation of power, it is instead the act of their specific manner of presupposition by what they allegedly found and justify (government-administration-police) that projects their imaginary transcendence, absolution and perfection. (Zartaloudis, 2010:185)

In this sense, Western political concepts – and in fact all abstract concepts – are only quasi-transcendental (cf. Watkin, 2014:xiii). One of the lessons to be learned from Agamben, then, is that government produces the power that founds it, or to put it in a paradoxical form, that it is the founded element that founds its founding ground.
Needless to say, it is not only that government actualises the founding fiction constantly but also government itself is ‘allowed to occur because of a held-in-common foundation’ (Watkin, 2014:x). It should be said that a similar claim is also present in a very specific form in Foucault’s lectures on neoliberalism, albeit rather less explicitly. Indeed, for Foucault ‘the economy, economic development and economic growth, produces sovereignty; it produces political sovereignty through the institution and institutional game that, precisely, makes this economy work’ (Foucault, 2008:84).73

Secondly, as has already been mentioned, Agamben’s genealogy of oikonomia calls into question the common assumption of Western political thought – and more precisely of modern democratic theory – of conceiving government as mere executive power. Modern democracy, for Agamben, could be seen as an attempt to coordinate in a stable structure the two anarchical poles of the governmental machine, which is why it has been lost in abstractions and mythologemes: ‘always exhilarating between a lack and an excess of government, always looking for a holy spirit or a charismatic principle that could be able to hold together the anarchic powers that it has inherited from Christian theology’ (2007:3). The Kingdom and the Glory is the first rigorous study that brings together the problematic bipolar structure of power, without reducing government to execution, or celebrating it as simple retreat or governmentalisation of sovereign power.

This leads us back to Foucault. For Maurizio Lazzarato the most striking limitation of Foucault’s lectures – specifically of The Birth of Biopolitics – is that ‘they take for granted that liberalism and liberal techniques of government exist or have existed in

73 Maurizio Lazzarato also holds that with the emergence of neoliberalism ‘a new conception of sovereignty takes shape, one in which the economy becomes indistinguishable from the state, political power from the power of capital, and governmentality from sovereignty. The latter no longer derives from the people, from democracy, or from the nation but from capital and its development, which entails a radical renovation of the concept of state capitalism’ (2015:100).
opposition or as an alternative to the strategies of the state’ (Lazzarato, 2015:92). Indeed, for Lazzarato, Foucault’s genealogy of governmentality is unable to capture the articulation between sovereignty and the techniques of governmentality, showing that ‘the supposedly immanent functioning of production and the market has always depended on the intervention of sovereignty’ (2015: 92). For Lazzarato, the analysis of governmentality should therefore focus on ‘the alliance between the state and capital (between the state and the market, as economists would say) and, therefore, on state capitalism’ (2015:93). As it has been demonstrated, Agamben’s theological genealogy of oikonomia allows for an analysis of power in terms of the articulation, alliance, and mutual dependency of both sovereignty and government, or in a more specific way, of the strategies of the state and the liberal techniques of government.

Neoliberalism: Rearticulating Sovereignty and Governance

Most of the Foucauldian studies of neoliberalism have focused on the modes of subjectification and the different technologies of governing that constitute this political rationality that renders inoperative the juridico-institutional understanding of sovereignty (cf. Brown 2015, Dean 2013, Lemke 2005). They inquire into the patterns, the strategies, and the techniques of government that allow the extension of a market rationality into different domains of social, political, and even biological life. Less attention has been given to the transcendent registers of sovereignty that are reconstituted through acts of government under neoliberalism. Indeed, what has taken place with the rise of neoliberal governmentality is not a mere retreat of the

---

74 It is worth mentioning that in his Lectures of 1978-1979 at the Collège de France Foucault examined two major streams of neoliberalism, Chicago School’s neoliberalism and German ordoliberalism. Crucially, for Foucault, although German ordoliberalism was partly opposed to the state intervening in the market directly, for them the state still had an essential role to play in the economy. Indeed, for Foucault, this is precisely where ordoliberalism break with liberalism: ‘Laissez-faire cannot and must not be the conclusion drawn from the principle of competition as the organizing form of the market. [...] Government must accompany the market economy from start to finish. The market economy does not take something away from government. Rather, it indicates, it constitutes the general index in which one must place the rule for defining all governmental action’ (2008:199-121).
state or of sovereignty but the assumption of economic ‘practices and techniques of the whole political life while maintaining a functional relation to a transcendental narrative’ (Zartaloudis, 2010:168).

The significance of Agamben’s theological genealogy of economy and government lies in the fact that it opens up a theoretical terrain from which to rethink neoliberal governmentality and the way it rearticulates, in a novel way, the two axes of power. For Adam Kotsko, Agamben’s shift from the study of sovereignty to analysis of the economic-immanent pole of government – and in particular Agamben’s *The Highest Poverty* – constitutes ultimately an attempt to confront neoliberalism (2013). There is no doubt that Agamben’s radicalisation of the notion of *use* in the *The Highest Poverty* (2013b) and in his *L’uso dei corpi* (2014a) offers a new way of conceiving resistance within the neoliberal horizon in which we live today. I will turn to these notions in the final chapter of this dissertation. Here, while agreeing with Kostko that Agamben’s belated engagement with economic theology in *The Highest Poverty* and in *The Kingdom and the Glory* is partly his way of talking about the neoliberal economic order, I will focus on the importance of *The Kingdom and the Glory* for the understanding of neoliberalism as a political rationality in terms of the consolidation of governance as its primary administrative form.

When analysed through the filter of the governmental machine, neoliberalism can be located within a larger spectrum of political shifts and configurations of sovereignty and government. The genealogy of *oikonomia* provides a robust framework to understand the reasons why, under neoliberalism, governance ‘reconceives the political as a field of management or administration’ (Brown, 2015:116).

---

75 In Brown’s work on neoliberalism, which is based on Foucault’s lectures at the Collège de France on neoliberal governmentality – entitled *The Birth of Biopolitics* – the term political rationality serves to explain the way in which neoliberalism governs as a normative order of reason that is ‘anterior to political action and a condition of it’ (Dean, 2010:181). As Wendy Brown puts it, political rationality is not an instrument of governmental practice, but rather, the condition of possibility and legitimacy of its instruments, ‘the field of normative reason from which governing is forged’ (2015:116).
Yet, Agamben’s investigation reminds us that neoliberalism does not merely operate through an immanent administration but that government, even when it is suffused with governance, effectively produces the power which grounds it (Watkin, 2014:210), creating at points the illusion of transcendent registers or simply presenting itself as its own justification.

In this sense, neoliberalism cannot be reduced to a group of economic formulas since it is also a political rationality that organises this set of particular policies, expands itself outside markets and, more importantly, recasts the bipolarity of the governmental machine. Indeed, neoliberalism as a political rationality, ‘is not only or even primarily focused on the economy; rather it involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action, even as the market itself remains a distinctive player’ (Brown, 2003:4). Crucially, under neoliberalism, government is submitted to an immanent, economic rationality and governance becomes its primary administrative form, which implies a specific mode of governing that is ‘evacuated of agents and institutionalized in processes, norms and practices’ (2015:214). Agamben then, provides a genealogy that locates governance at the very centre of the paradigm of government. Needless to say, for Agamben the mystery of oikonomia is nothing other than the ontological paradigm of modern governance (cf. Agamben 2007, 2011). What Agamben demonstrates is that the economic-governmental vocation of government and the primacy of the immanent pole of the governmental machine, so evident under the neoliberal political rationality, is not an accidental event but a constitutive part of the theological legacy (cf. Agamben, 2011:143). The gnostic germ that the Trinitarian oikonomia has introduced into modernity is expressed through the consolidation of a ‘contingency-driven, crisis-managing form of governing as managerialism or administration’ (Zartaloudis, 2010:51). The distinction between sovereign legislative power and governmental executive power through which the state inherits the double structure of the governmental machine mutates into a new form under
neoliberalism. It is in the attempt to understand this articulation of *oikonomia* and political theology, an articulation that neoliberalism keeps in motion, that *The Kingdom and the Glory* becomes decisive. What Agamben helps us elucidate is that government under neoliberalism is only possible as a twofold machine, so even if the economic managerial pole of the governmental machine – governance – reaches a higher degree of pre-eminence, sovereign registers still need to be articulated in the acts of government. In short, neoliberalism can be understood as a new configuration of the relationship between sovereignty and governmentality, as representing ‘a new stage in the union of capital and the state, of sovereignty and the market, whose realization can be seen in the management of the current crisis’ (Lazzarato, 2015:94).

Without contesting the triumph of divine management or giving analytical priority to the law, Agamben’s genealogy of *oikonomia* provides a different angle for the study of neoliberalism, one that highlights the existence, in its background, of a headless king, a king who reigns but who does not govern and to whom the acts of government keep referring. In particular, what appears perhaps more clearly in Agamben’s genealogy of governmentality than in Foucault’s, is that the state and the law cannot be reduced to ‘historical residues masking the real operation of the new powers, archaic leftovers of feudalism and absolutism and the struggles around them’ (Dean, 2013:68). Indeed, if the law and the claim to sovereign transcendence of the state were nothing more than a complex set of techniques of government, if they were totally governmentalised, then why does ‘local, immanent exercise of power keep referring to the state as a source of its authority and legitimacy, and why does it need to wrap itself in the symbols, traditions hierarchies and topologies of the law?’ (Dean, 2013:68).

Neoliberal government, as Lazzarato shows, ‘centralizes and multiplies authoritarian government techniques, rivaling the policies of so-called totalitarian
or “planning” states’ (2015:95). Moreover, as the economic crisis of 2007 demonstrates, neoliberalism is not only compatible with, but relies upon a strong state and sovereign interventions. For Lazzarato, the crisis has made clear that the capitalist apparatus ‘has no reason to replace the state’. The problem is rather how to integrate the state’s sovereignty, administrative and legal functions into a new governmentality whose administration it is not entirely responsible for (Lazzarato, 2015:127).

The same could be said of what Foucault describes as liberal governmentality, so that rather than consisting in ‘the maximum limitation of the forms and domains of government action’ (Foucault, 2008:21) liberalism has always relied upon much more than an invisible hand. Indeed, the crisis ‘has largely undercut the notion that the problem of liberalism is “governing too much,” that critique should focus on “the irrationality peculiar to excessive government” and that, as a consequence, “one must govern as little as possible”’ (Lazzarato, 2015:105). So to put it in Agambian terms, even if liberalism represents a tendency that pushes to an extreme the supremacy of the pole of the “immanent order-government-stomach”, the pole of the “transcendent God-Kingdom-brain” is still present in an empty form. In this way ‘the economy that is derived from it will not thereby have emancipated itself from its providential paradigm’ (Agamben, 2011:285):

The two planes remain correlated in the alleged mode in which the first founds, legitimates and makes possible the second (as its condition of possibility); and in turn the second realizes concretely the causes and effects of the general (sovereign) decisions of the divine will. The government of the world is this mythologeme of functional correlation. (Zartaloudis, 2010:81)

The turn from liberal to neoliberal governmentality has intensified the process whereby the state is suffused with an economic logic, but rather than presenting a conflict between the immanent anarchical pole of government and the
transcendence suffused pole of sovereignty, neoliberalism has effectively integrated them. This is clear, for instance, in the ‘convergence between finance, as the expression of the power of capital, as the politics of capital, and money, as the expression of the sovereign power of the state’ (Lazzarato, 2015:116). In order to fully understand the neoliberal arrangement of sovereignty and government, neoliberalism should not be interpreted according to an opposition of politics, the juridico-institutional apparatus of the state and the economy, but rather in light of the constant need for their articulation, even when one pole clearly dominates the other. More importantly, this is also true for liberal governmentality, although liberalism has presented itself in terms of the conflict between the state and political economy. For Agamben, this is evident in the metaphor of the invisible hand. Indeed, ‘[i]f it is probable’, Agamben writes,

that the Smithian image of the invisible hand is to be understood, in this sense, as the action of an immanent principle, our reconstruction of the bipolar machine of the theological oikonomia has shown that there is no conflict between “providentialism” and “naturalism” within it, because the machine functions precisely by correlating a transcendent principle with an immanent order. Just as with the Kingdom and the Government, the intradivine trinity and the economic trinity, so the “brain” and the “stomach” are nothing but two sides of the same apparatus, of the same oikonomia, within which one of the two poles can, at each turn, dominate the other. (Agamben, 2011:284)

In short, by removing God from the world, modernity – and with it, liberalism – ‘has not only failed to leave theology behind, but in some ways has done nothing other than lead the project of the providential oikonomia to completion’ (Agamben, 2011:287). And if we see under neoliberalism the reappearance of the state through, for instance, the constant need for legal intervention in the market, the management of public debt and the rise of militarism in South America, it only unveils the fact that from the beginning, economic liberalism from which neoliberalism emerges, could not have been consolidated in direct opposition of techniques of governmentality and the strategies of the state.
To conclude this chapter, it could be said that the achievement of Agamben’s genealogy of governmentality is that it highlights the theoretical and historical vicarious character of power that has been maintained even under the primacy of governance as the administrative form of neoliberalism. By doing so, Agamben brings back into question the problem of the state, the law and the sovereign registers reconstituted through acts of government, providing a framework for the understanding of both liberal and neoliberal governmentality. However, the instances of acclamations and Glory (in the form of public opinion and consensus) as what keep in motion the sovereign pole of the governmental machine in modern liberal democracies eludes the role of the production of bare life as that which rearticulates the function of killing of sovereign power with the ‘make live and let die’ of the governmental dimension of power.
Chapter 7
Life, Biopolitics, and Inoperativity

How to understand the notion of life and the politics that addresses it in the work of Giorgio Agamben? What is the nature of the relation that forces together *bios* and the political? To what extent is Agamben's biopolitical theory different from that of Michel Foucault? And finally, what is the underlying structure of the biopolitical machine and how can it be deactivated? This chapter aims at examining the general coordinates of Agamben's biopolitical theory and at studying both the ontological implications of this theory and the politics of resistance that follows from it. The central premise of this chapter is that both Agamben’s biopolitical theory and his notion of destituent power (politics of inoperativity) can only be fully grasped when examined in the light of Agamben’s philosophical method. First, the notions of signatures, paradigms, and philosophical archaeology; second, the structure of the common and the proper, as developed in Chapter 3.

In order to further clarify the notions of life and politics in Agamben, I first examine how these terms are articulated in Foucault’s understanding of biopolitics. I locate Agamben’s intervention in the field of biopolitics within a larger theoretical debate, and present Agamben’s biopolitics as a step beyond the limits of the Foucauldian approach. After providing a comprehensive account of Agamben’s critique of biopolitics I will present the fundamental categories that constitute the general framework of his politics: impotentiality, inoperativity, use, form-of-life, and destituent power.
Foucault's Notion of Life and the Enigma of Biopolitics

For Foucault, as Davide Tarizzo puts it, 'we are no longer, rather, we live' (Tarizzo, 2011:54). Our condition is therefore defined by a new ontology, an ontology of actuality that introduces life at the center of the notion of Being. Both biology, as the regime of knowledge about life, and biopolitics, as the eminently modern power over and of life ‘are possible only against the background of a specific abstraction of life’ (Tarizzo, 2011:54). Indeed, in The Order of Things, Foucault shows how the notion of life, along with the notions of labour and language, is constituted as an historical and an epistemological a priori. Labour, life, and language, according to Foucault, appear in modernity as the transcendental notions par excellence, making possible objective knowledge of living beings, of laws of production, and of forms of language. Crucially, ‘in their being, they – labor, life, and language – are outside knowledge, but by that very fact they are conditions of knowledge' (Foucault, 2002:265). This is why, for Foucault, they correspond to Kant’s discovery of a transcendental field and yet they differ from it: ‘they are situated with the object, and, in a way, beyond it; like the idea in the transcendental Dialectic, they totalize phenomena and express the a priori coherence of empirical multiplicities; but they provide them with a foundation in the form of a being whose enigmatic reality constitutes, prior to all knowledge, the order and the connection of what it has to know’ (Foucault, 2002:265). Indeed, the emergence of a transcendental register in thought in the 19th century is the condition of possibility for biology, as a new set of positivities.

To put it in terms of the common and proper scheme that we have developed in Chapter 3, Life, with regards to biology, acts as the ‘common’, that is, as the foundational power that creates biology only to legitimise itself, to produce the need for its fictional transcendence so that in reality, it is biology that founds life, or to put it in a paradoxical form, it is the founded element (biology) which founds its own
founding ground (Life). Needless to say, it is not only that biology, as a regime of knowledge about life, actualises its founding ground constantly, but also biology itself is allowed to occur because of an abstraction of life, as a common foundation. Indeed, biology is made possible on the basis of life as its transcendental object; an object that as Foucault has put it, occupies ‘that never objectifiable depth from which objects rise up towards our superficial knowledge’ (Foucault, 2002:266).

The representational episteme of the classical age and its ‘natural continuum’ is disrupted by the modern notion of life as an unknowable dimension beyond representation: ‘Life is nowhere to be found in the positive objects of the science of life itself’ (Mader, 2011:100). Indeed, the natural order of the Classical age was replaced by a biological continuity. The modern notion of life supplants the notion of being as the founding ontological ground and therefore life, as a modern invention, prevails over being. However, in the same way that Being is the unthinkable ground upon which Western metaphysics is founded; life becomes an obscure force that organises and explains organisms and their functions. It was the continuum of life itself that was established by biology. Life, as that in which all the possible distinctions between living beings have their basis, is no longer a taxonomic notion but represents a ‘distinctly supra- and trans-organismic reality that ontologically prevails over living beings taken as individuals, populations, species or any other supra-individual biological category’ (Mader, 2011:103).

76 This modern category of life represents a break with the classical episteme in which the classification and definition of natural beings was organized in the form of a natural history. Natural beings, as opposed to living beings, form the ontological basis upon which the classical age was founded. ‘A sheer continuity of being and not of life, holds Foucault, undergirds the differentiation of natural beings in the Classical Age’ (Mader 2011:101-102). This means that the spatial classification of natural beings was not organised with reference to abstract vital functions or external factors or any transcendental unity. Hence, beings were displayed in a natural continuum in which there were not higher taxonomic categories, giving a certain ontological homogeneity to the chain of beings represented in a one-dimensional table. Classification and representation were therefore the key elements in the developing of this natural history.

77 Although the modern advent of the notion of life introduces a particular kind of discontinuity into the classical natural order of things, by carving out a new abstract and invisible depth and a visible surface, this very discontinuity is the basis for the creation of new forms of continuity and sameness in the modern era. (cf. Mader, 2011:103)
What are the characteristics of life as a modern invention for Foucault? Davide Tarizzo, in his exhaustive study of the notion of life in Foucault La vita, un’invenzione recente (2011) (Life, a Recent Invention), proposes three indicators to grasp the notion of life as a modern ontological abstraction. First, life appears in Foucault as a synthetic unity. In modernity, the living being ‘no longer acquires the meaning of “living” in relation to the other living beings and to its position among them, but in relation to the secret and synthetic unity that each of them conceals’ (Tarizzo, 2011:54). So to put it in Foucault’s words, living beings are regarded as living ‘only because they are alive and on the basis of what they conceal’ (Foucault, 2002:291).

For Foucault, what living beings conceal, what makes them live, strictly speaking, is ‘life itself understood as a force’ (Tarizzo, 2011:55). Indeed, according to the second indicator of the modern abstraction of life, life appears as a secret force: if in the classic natural continuum the knowledge of life was primordially a knowledge of the forms-of-life, in the biological continuum of modernity the knowledge of life is, above all, a knowledge of the force-of-life that ‘animates every living being and concentrates itself in a sort of focal point of identity’ (Tarizzo, 2011:54). This is why, for Foucault, in modernity life ‘withdraws into the enigma of a force inaccessible in its essence, apprehendable only in the efforts it makes here and there to manifest and maintain itself’ (2002:297).

Finally, as Tarizzo points out, life appears in Foucault as an obscure will of the self:

Every form-of-life is reduced to the precarious and transient expression of a force-of-life, of a blind and eager will to exist, of a “mute and invisible violence that is devouring [...] in the darkness” every living being, right after bringing it into existence. It is the dawn of a new ontology, that does not know the abyss between being and non-being, but dynamically insinuates itself in their tension. It is the dawn of modernity, the dawn of life, which replaces the old ontology of the one and the many with the untamed ontology of the Self. (Tarizzo, 2011:55)
Life then appears as a secret force, as a synthetic unity and as an obscure will of the self. The representational and taxonomic knowledge of the classical world and its flat ontology of being is replaced by what Foucault defines as an ‘untamed ontology’.\textsuperscript{78} The field of knowledge is ‘no longer split between existing and non-existing things, divided by the border between being and non-being; it is now pervaded by something that neither is nor is not, but wants to be in every living being: Life’ (Tarizzo, 2011:55).

Crucially, death appears imbedded in the modern notion of life, yet life outlives death. To put it differently, due to the ontological priority of life over the concrete and subsidiary category of the living being, the death of living beings is conceptually required for the notion of life to become operative. In other words, as Foucault has put it, ‘beings are no more than transitory figures, and the being that they maintain, during the brief period of their existence, is no more than their presumption, their will to survive’ (Foucault, 2002:303). The modern synthetic notion of life is then the basis not only of a scientific discourse but also of a new metaphysical knowledge. However, life in itself is not a scientific or a metaphysical concept but the basis upon which the scientific and the modern metaphysical discourses are founded. It is, to use Foucault’s words, an ‘epistemological indicator’:

\begin{quote}
For life – and this is why it has a radical value in nineteenth-century thought – is at the same time the nucleus of being and of non-being: there is being only because there is life, and in that fundamental movement that dooms them to death, the scattered beings, stable for an instant, are formed, halt, hold life immobile and in a sense kill it – but are then in turn destroyed by that inexhaustible force. (Foucault, 2002:303)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{78} The notion of untamed ontology is developed by Foucault in \textit{The Order of Things} where he argues that the experience of life in modernity is ‘posited as the most general law of beings, the revelation of that primitive force on the basis of which they are; it functions as an untamed ontology, one trying to express the indissociable being and non-being of all beings. But this ontology discloses no so much what gives beings their foundation as what bears them for an instant towards a precarious form and yet is already secretly sapping them from within in order to destroy them’ (Foucault, 2002:303).
The synthetic notion of life is neither historical nor natural; ‘it cannot be simply ontologized nor completely historicized, but it is inscribed in the moving margin of their intersection and their tension’ (Esposito, 2008:31). Crucially, this biological continuum and its synthetic notion of life is itself the condition for the emergence of biopolitics. The notion of bios that is subsumed in Foucault’s concept of biopolitics is indeed this synthetic notion of life, in which life appears both as a force and as an epistemological indicator. The meaning of biopolitics for Foucault is then negotiated ‘in this dual position of life that placed it at the same time outside history, in its biological environment, and inside human historicity, penetrated by the latter’s techniques of knowledge and power’ (Foucault, 1978:143). But, what exactly does biopolitics mean for Foucault? And, how does politics relate to this modern notion of life? At this point, as has been suggested by Roberto Esposito, Foucault’s response diverges in directions that involve two categories implicated in the notion of life and in its connection to politics, namely the categories of subjectivisation and death:

With respect to life, both constitute more than two possibilities. They are at the same time life’s form and its background, origin, and destination; in each case, however, according to a divergence that seems not to admit any mediation: it is either one or the other. Either biopolitics produces subjectivity or it produces death. Either it makes the subject its own object or it decisively objectifies it. Either it is a politics of life or a politics over life. Once again the category of biopolitics folds in upon itself without disclosing the solution to its own enigma. (Esposito, 2008:32)

Foucault’s account of biopolitics is therefore marked by this ambivalence. It refers not only to the way in which life is captured, managed, and penetrated by politics but also to the limits that the force of life imposes on the political. It is power of life and power over life; it refers to a politics that fosters life and to a politics that disallows it to the point of death. The synthetic notion of life allows not only for the political techniques that ‘optimize forces, aptitudes, and life in general without at the same time making it more difficult to govern’ (Foucault, 1978:139) but also for the objectification of life. It is, as Esposito has put it, as if life and politics for
Foucault could not be ‘articulated except through a modality that simultaneously juxtaposes them. Either life holds politics back, pinning it to its impassable natural limit, or, on the contrary, it is life that is captured and prey to a politics that strains to imprison its innovative potential’ (Esposito, 2008:32). Foucault’s notion of biopolitics opens up these two contrasting possibilities that cohabit within the same theoretical field as the logical extremes of the relation between life and politics as the two terms from which biopolitics is formed.

This tension comes to the fore in Foucault’s work when the notion of biopolitics is placed within the genealogy of the transformation of the mechanisms of power, that is to say, when the notion of biopolitics is contrasted to the paradigm of sovereignty. Although Foucault holds that we cannot simply locate a substitution of sovereignty by biopolitics, he understands biopolitics as emerging in a moment at which sovereignty retreats into the shadows. The paradigm of sovereignty, for Foucault, is incapable of grasping and managing the complexities that the emergence of both the synthetic notion of life and the notion of population impose on the political sphere.

Henceforth, a certain discontinuity between sovereignty and biopolitics runs throughout Foucault’s genealogy of governmentality, either as a chronological

---

79 Foucault observes a significant alteration in the mechanisms of power starting in the seventeenth century. These alterations directed the juridico-institutional model of power to evolution in two linked poles of development: ‘one of these poles – the first to be formed, it seems – centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls, all this was ensured by the procedures of power that characterized the disciplines: an anatomo-politics of the human body. The second, formed somewhat later, focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these mechanisms vary. Their supervision was effected through an entire series of interventions and regulatory controls: a biopolitics of the population’ (Foucault 1978:139). This transformation was somehow animated by the explosion of different techniques for the subjugation of the body that Foucault relates not only with the development of several disciplines but also with the emergence in the field of economics and politics of the problems of public health, migration, birth-rate and longevity (Foucault, 1978:140). As a consequence of this dynamic, the power of death – that symbolized sovereign power was now carefully supplanted by the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life (Foucault, 1978:140).
rupture or as an analytical division. In any case, from the perspective of this discontinuity the contrast between biopolitics and sovereignty is sharply presented: ‘an important phenomenon occurred in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: the appearance – one should say the invention – of a new mechanism of power which had very specific procedures, completely new instruments, and very different equipment. It was, I believe, absolutely incompatible with relations of sovereignty’ (Foucault, 2003:35). This supposed absolute incompatibility allows Foucault to define biopolitics as a ‘type of power [that] is the exact, point-for-point opposite of the mechanics of power that the theory of sovereignty described’ (Foucault, 2003:36). The sovereign right to take life – the right of killing – is replaced by a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death; the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life is then what becomes the centre of political strategies, as opposed to the right over life and death of sovereign power (Foucault, 1978:140). In short, biopolitics for Foucault, as Esposito has put it, is ‘primarily that which is not sovereignty’ (2008:33). Here, the synthetic notion of life is at the core of the discontinuity between sovereignty and biopolitics:

Whereas in the sovereign regime life is nothing but the residue or the remainder left over, saved from the right of taking life, in biopolitics life encamps at the centre of a scenario of which death constitutes the external limit or the necessary contour. Moreover, whereas in the first instance life is seen from the perspective opened by death, in the second death acquires importance only in the light radiated by life. (Esposito, 2008:43)

In the background of the opposition between biopolitics and sovereignty another rupture is thus present, one that sustains the hypothesis of discontinuity between the two political paradigms: the rupture produced by the transformation from the right to kill80 – through which sovereign power operates – to the biopolitical right to

80 Foucault holds that juridico-institutional power can be synthesised in the formula: power of life and death (Foucault, 1978:136). This sovereign power, as Ojakangas maintains, ‘exercises his right to life only by exercising his right to kill, or by refraining from killing, the sovereign right as the power of life and death is in reality the right to take life or to let live’ (2005:6). Indeed, one of the privileges of this power for a long time was precisely the right to make decisions on death and life. In a formal sense, as Foucault suggests, ‘it derived no
make live. On the back of this contrast an affirmative conception of biopolitics emerges. Indeed, the right to make live is traced back by Foucault to the development of the science of the police, whose role is ‘to keep the citizens happy – happiness being understood as survival, life, and improved living’ (Foucault, 2000:322). In other words, biopolitics is seen as a power of life that contrasts to the deadly operation of sovereign power. From the perspective of discontinuity, biopolitics refers to a power that aims at strengthening life, at expanding it, at maximising its forces. In short, in the biopolitical horizon life ‘appears to dominate the entire scenario of existence; even when it is exposed to the pressure of power – and indeed, never more than in such a case – life seems capable of taking back what had deprived it before and of incorporating it into its infinite folds’ (Esposito, 2008:38).

However, the thesis according to which the relation between biopolitics and sovereignty is marked by rupture coexists, within Foucault’s genealogy of power, with a narrative of continuity between these two paradigms. The question that remains unanswered when biopolitics is depicted as a power of life is, as Foucault himself has put it, ‘[h]ow can a power such as this kill, if it is true that its basic function is to improve life, to prolong its duration, to improve its chances, to avoid accidents, and to compensate for failings?’ (Foucault, 2003:254).

To answer this question, Foucault backs away from the claim that there is an absolute incompatibility between sovereignty and biopolitics. Indeed, the

*doubt from the ancient patria potestas that granted the father of the Roman family the right to dispose’ of the life of his children and his slaves; just as he had given them life, so he could take it away. (Foucault 1978:135). However, this power was not an absolute privilege since the sovereign would put someone to death only as a punishment for transgressing his laws: ‘To those who transgress the law, it replies, at least as a last resort, with the absolute menace’ (Ojakangas, 2005:6). Since it was only by exercising his right to kill – or by refraining from killing – that the sovereign power exercised his right of life, the sword was its symbol par excellence. Hence, according to Foucault, power was, in this instance, ‘essentially a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself; it culminated in the privilege to seize hold of life in order to suppress it’ (Foucault, 1978:136).
oppositional relation between them according to which the ‘ancient right to take life and let live was replaced by a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death’ (Foucault, 1978:138) is transformed into a relation of complementarity: ‘I wouldn’t say exactly that sovereignty’s old right – to take life or let live – was replaced, but it came to be complemented by a new right which does not erase the old right but which does penetrate it, permeate it’ (Foucault, 2003:241).

The power of life overlaps then with a power over life; the discontinuity between sovereignty and biopolitics is softened as a way of explaining the mass production of death in totalitarianism. This is indeed the paradox of biopolitics to which Foucault refers to in “Society Must be Defended” and from which he is unable to escape: on the one hand, he holds that it was the retreat of sovereign power which liberated a vital force, a power of life, and on the other, his account of biopolitics requires the return of a phantasmagorical sovereign power in order to explain the killing in Nazism. This is perhaps the limit of Foucault’s thought on biopolitics, the enigma of biopolitics that Roberto Esposito carefully presents:

If the thesis of the indistinction between sovereignty, biopolitics and totalitarianism were to prevail – the continuist hypothesis – he [i.e. Foucault] would be forced to assume genocide as the constitutive paradigm (or at least as the inevitable outcome) of the entire parabola of modernity. Doing so would contrast with his sense of historical distinctions, which is always keen. If instead the hypothesis of difference were to prevail – the discontinuist hypothesis – his conception of biopower would be invalidated every time that death is projected inside the circle of life .... If totalitarianism were the result of what came before it, power would always have to enclose and keep watch over life relentlessly. If it were the temporary and contingent displacement, it would mean that life over time is capable of beating back every power that wants to violate it. In the first case, biopolitics would be an absolute power over life; in the second, an absolute power of life. Held between these two opposing possibilities and blocked in the aporia that is established when they intersect, Foucault continues to run simultaneously in both directions. (Esposito, 2008:43)

We have then arrived at a theoretical tension that marks the limit of Foucault’s
account of biopolitics. The relation between life and politics in Foucault allows simultaneously for two opposing accounts of biopolitics to emerge: an affirmative biopolitics, that is a politics of life – upon which Negri and Hardt construct their account of the multitude – and an account of biopolitics as a power over life, which is the path followed by Agamben. Yet Foucault’s notion of racism fails to provide a theoretical framework that fully articulates these two opposing ends. Roberto Esposito’s category of *bios* aims at mediating between these two contrasting possibilities. However, after calling for a deconstruction of the coincidence of politics and biology through the paradigm of immunisation, Esposito stills favours an affirmative account of biopolitics. In what follows, I will demonstrate how Agamben avoids the paradox that marks the limit of the Foucauldian approach. By doing so, he develops a radical alternative to the biopolitical foundation of Western politics.

**The Signature of Life and the Biopolitical Machine**

Even though Agamben claims that the politicisation of bare life constitutes the ‘decisive event of modernity and signals a radical transformation of the political-philosophical categories of classical thought’ (1998:4), he criticises Foucault for not tracing back beyond modernity, for being unable to grasp the continuity of a

---

81 Racism is conceptualised for Foucault as a ‘way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power’s control: the break between what must live and what must die’ (2003:255); therefore its fundamental function is to create caesuras, to fragment, to segment within ‘the biological continuum addressed by biopower’ (2003:255), and in this sense, the population becomes a target to be separated via the establishment of a biological type caesura: ‘when you have a normalizing society, you have a power which is, at least superficially, in the first instance, or in the first line Biopower, and racism is the indispensable precondition that allows someone to be killed, that allows others to be killed. Once the State functions in Biopower mode, racism alone can justify the murderous function of the State’ (2003:256). According to this argument, with biopolitics individuals die not as a result of explicit sovereign decisions in a state of exception, but rather as a consequence of ‘anonymous, bureaucratized regulating that may involve things such as taxation, irrigation and sanitation’ (Houen, 2006:6), in which racism operates as a segregating machine that call for deaths without the need to call for the suspension of the rule. It is precisely the logic of racism that makes killing tolerable in biopolitical societies. In other words, ‘in the era of biopolitics only racism, because it is a determination immanent to life, can justify the murderous function of the state’ (Ojakangas, 2005:12).
biopolitical logic that was only accentuated with the advent of the modern era.\textsuperscript{82} Indeed, for Agamben, Western politics ‘is a biopolitics from the very beginning’ (1998:181), or to put it differently, the politicisation of bare life as the metaphysical task of deciding the humanity of the living man is as old as the sovereign exception. In assuming this task, Agamben argues, ‘modernity does nothing other than declare its own faithfulness to the essential structure of the metaphysical tradition’ (1998:8). At the core of this debate is the notion of life. Agamben’s biopolitics does not function with the synthetic notion of life that is central in Foucault’s work, and neither does he allow for an understanding of biopolitics as power of life. But, what then is life for Agamben and how is it to be related to politics? And how, according to this relation, is the point of contact between biopolitics and sovereignty to be sketched?

The notion of life in Agamben does not appear as a transcendental concept, it is not the secret force that marks the modern notion of life, but neither is it the taxonomical category of the natural continuum of the classical period. Rather, as we have claimed in Chapter 4, life is a signature. Indeed, for Agamben, it is the ‘primary signatory term’ (Watkin, 2014:182). Agamben’s genealogy of power in \textit{Homo Sacer} is also a genealogy of the signature Life, or to be precise, of ‘the transmission of the signature of Life through time and across discursive formations, here from classical to modern thought’ (Watkin, 2014:183). Life itself does not exist; it is a discursive structure of exclusive inclusion and nothing more. Life, as Agamben himself has put it, ‘is not in itself political, it is what must be excluded and, at the same time, included by way of its own exclusion. Life – that is, the Impolitical (\textit{l'Impolitico}) –

\textsuperscript{82} After the publication of the first volume of the \textit{Homo Sacer} project reactions against this meta-historical narrative that locates modernity within the larger genealogy of Western politics were common among Foucauldian scholars. Thomas Lemke, for instance, claimed that Agamben’s approach to biopolitics fails to grasp the specificity of modernity, that Agamben departs from the wrong premise that Foucault makes an irreconcilable separation between biopower and sovereign power and that Agamben reduces biopolitics to a sort of thanatopolitics in his attempt to bring together these two models of power, missing the productive dimension of biopolitics in the sense of surplus of life (2007:79). However, rather than pointing to the obvious differences in the two accounts of biopolitics by examining how close Agamben’s reading of Foucault is, one should treat these differences as a symptom of a deeper disagreement between the two philosophers.
must be politicized through a complex operation that has the structure of an 
exception’ (Agamben, 2014b:65).

Crucially then, Life should not be confused with the paradigms that make intelligible the relation of inclusive exclusion throughout different discursive formations.\(^\text{83}\) Life is not zoē; nor is it \textit{bios}. Life is not biological life; nor is it political life. Rather, Life is a mode of operation whereby a proper element (e.g. qualified, political life) is founded through a process of exclusion, creating at the same time a common element that appears as its foundational ground (e.g. \textit{zoē}, biological life). These two elements are distributed differently throughout time. Modernity no doubt represents a particular \textit{oikonomía} of Life, but even under the emergence of modernity as new episteme – carefully studied by Foucault in \textit{The Order of Things} – the structure of inclusive exclusion remains. In other words, ‘biopolitical modernity is really only another discursive formation by virtue of the signatory shift of Life, a transmission, not an epistemic break or event’ (Watkin, 2014:185).

If Life denotes the logic of exclusive inclusion, then bare life represents the isolated element, the by-product of a politicisation and a segregation of life from its multiple forms: ‘through its division and its capture in the \textit{dispositif} of the exception, life assumes the form of bare life, life that was divided and separated from its form’ (Agamben, 2014b:66). As Agamben has put it, ‘the ultimate subject that needs to be at once turned into the exception and included in the city is always naked life [i.e. bare life]’ (Agamben, 2000:6). It is clear then, bare life does not have a content of its own, it is rather an indeterminate and an impenetrable element, an index, an unthinkable limit. It is in this indeterminate form that bare life constitutes the first ‘referent and stake of politics’ (Agamben, 2014b:65).

\(^\text{83}\) If this reading of Agamben is correct, then Paul Patton’s critique of Agamben according to which Agamben confuses two different registers of bare life – sacred life and biological life – (Patton 2007:211) is misleading.
Something is divided, excluded, and rejected at the bottom, and, through this exclusion, is included as the foundation. This is true for life, which is said in many ways – vegetative life, sensitive life, intellectual life, the first of which is excluded to function as the foundation for the others – but also for being, which is also said in many ways (to on legetai pollakos), one of which will act as foundation. In the sovereign exception that founds the juridical-political system of the West, what is included through its exclusion is bare life. It is important not to confuse bare life with natural life (Agamben, 2014b:66).

Indeed, for Agamben, the originary place of Western politics ‘consists of an exceptio, an inclusive exclusion of human life in the form of bare life’ (2014b:65). In other words, for Agamben this inclusive exclusion defines the originary structure of the archē84 of Western politics. The zoë-bios distinction in Greek is a moment when the signature of life arises, as is the figure of homo sacer within the domain of the Roman law. However, they are only paradigms that make intelligible the fact that Western politics has been constituted through an exclusion of bare life.

Biopolitics, in this particular sense, is the politics that divides life against itself, is the politicisation of life, the isolation of bare life in which politics is founded. What this reveals, is that the link between life and politics, from the ancient Greeks, has taken the form of an inclusive exclusion. Within the Western tradition then, it is not possible to consider the realms of life and politics independently of one another. Life and politics are not separate subsisting entities, they are not constituted prior to their relation, but on the contrary, the way in which they are related – the inclusive

84 Needless to say, as it has been explained in Chapier 2, by archē, Agamben does not mean a chronological point at which something is founded, indeed, (and it is worth quoting at length) ‘the archē toward which archaeology regresses is not to be understood in any way as a given locatable in a chronology ... Instead, it is an operative force within history. ... Yet unlike the big bang, which astrophysicists claim to be able to date ... the archē is not a given or a substance, but a field of bipolitical historical currents stretched between anthropogenesis and history, between the moment of arising and becoming, between an archi-past and the present. And as with anthropogenesis, which is supposed to have taken place but which cannot be hypostasized in a chronological event—the archē alone is able to guarantee the intelligibility of historical phenomena, “saving” them archaeologically in a future anterior in the understanding not of an unverifiable origin but of its finite and untotalizable history ... the human sciences will be capable of reaching their decisive epistemological threshold only after they have rethought, from the bottom up, the very idea of ontological anchoring, and thereby envisaged being as a field of essentially historical tensions’ (Agamben, 2009a:110–111).
exclusion of life upon which politics is founded – is, in some sense, primary and constitutive.

This is, for Agamben, the ‘legacy that Aristotle’s thought has left to Western Politics’ (2007:5), a legacy that is worth revisiting in order to examine how the signature of life has been transferred from the Classic period to Modernity and to extract, from there, a more adequate account of biopolitics. Only when biopolitics is exposed to such archaeological examination would it be possible to formulate a radical alternative, a new form of politics and an opening of the question of ontology.

The point of departure for Agamben is the Nicomachean Ethics, where Aristotle poses the problem of defining the *ergon*, that is to say, the work of man as such. By work of man, Aristotle does not simply mean work as labour, but rather that which defines the *energeia*, the activity, the *being-in-act* proper to man, the being-at-work that defines man as man:

> Just as for a flute player, a sculptor, or any artisan (*tekhnitē*), and, in general, for all those who have a certain kind of work (*ergon*) and an activity (*praxis*), the good (*tagathon*) and the “well” (*to eu*) seem [to consist, GA] in this work, so it should also be for man, if indeed there is for him something like a certain work (*ti ergon*). Or [must we say, GA] that there is a certain work and an activity for the carpenter and the shoemaker, and for man there is none, that he is born with no work (*args*)? (Aristotle, 1984 in Agamben 2007:1)

This is a decisive question in Aristotle. What is at stake is not only the possibility of defining the work proper to man, the being-in-act that determines its essence, but also, as Agamben suggests, his happiness and his politics. If man were to lack an *ergon* of his own he ‘would not even have an *energeia*, a being in act that could define his essence: he would be, that is, a being of pure potentiality, which no identity and no work could exhaust’ (Agamben, 2007:2). Although defining man as *args*, that is, as lacking a work proper to him, was a hypothesis that tempted
Aristotle,\textsuperscript{85} he categorically seeks the \textit{ergon} of man in the sphere of life. For Agamben, the fact that Aristotle defines the \textit{ergon} of man as a certain form of life, ‘bears witness to the fact that the nexus between politics and life belongs, from the beginning, to the way the Greeks think of the \textit{polis}’ (2007:3).

Indeed, Aristotle defines the work of man though a series of isolations in the natural continuum of life. The definition of man as the living being that has \textit{logos} is founded on the isolation of nutritive, or vegetative life.\textsuperscript{86} The highest good of which Aristotle writes in the \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} is determined in relation to a particular \textit{ergon} proper to man, an activity that consists in the participation in the vital rational potentiality (as opposed to, for instance, nutritive or sensitive life). To put it simply, the \textit{ergon} of man, its essence, is determined in accordance with a kind of life associated with \textit{logos}:

If, therefore, the work of man is being at work of the soul in accordance with \textit{logos}, or not without \textit{logos}, and if we say that the work of this particular individual is the same kind (e.g., a lyre player and a good lyre player, and similarly in all cases), eminence in respect of excellence being added to the work (for the work of a lyre player is to play the lyre, and that of a good player is to do so well); if this is the case, we must suppose that the work of man is a certain kind of life (\textit{zōên tina}) and that this is the being-at-work of the soul and a praxis in accordance with \textit{logos}, and that the work of the good man is these same things, performed well and in a beautiful way, each act in accordance with its own excellence; if this is the case, human good turns out to be the being-at-work of the soul in accordance with excellence, and if there are more than one excellence, in accordance with the best and the more perfect. (Aristotle in Agamben 2007:4-5)

\textsuperscript{85} In \textit{De Anima}, for instance, when Aristotle defines human intellect as \textit{nous}, he claims that man ‘has no other nature than being in potentiality’ (Aristotle in Agamben 2007:3)

\textsuperscript{86} Indeed, if Agamben reading of Aristotle is correct, then the determination of the \textit{ergon} proper to man is achieved ‘by means of the segregation of vegetative and sensitive life, which leaves life in accordance with \textit{logos} as the only possible “remainder.” And, since this life in accordance with \textit{logos} can also be seen as in accordance with its pure potentiality, Aristotle is careful to specify that the work of man cannot be a mere potentiality or faculty, but only the \textit{energeia} and the exercise of this faculty’ (Agamben, 2007:4)
Human ethics and politics will be therefore defined by the participation in this rational vital function and in accordance with excellence. This is then the way in which Agamben reads the definition of the *polis* in Aristotle, as ‘articulated through the difference between living and living well’ (Agamben, 2007:5). More importantly however, the fact that politics is defined in Aristotle in relation to an *ergon* means that politics is always a politics of the act and not of potentiality. Besides, since this *ergon* is ultimately a kind of life, its meaning is ‘defined above all through the exclusion of the simple fact of living, of bare life’ (Agamben, 2007:5). Politics and life are therefore entwined. It is, Agamben suggests, as if ‘politics were the place in which life had to transform itself into good life and in which what had to be politicised were always already bare life’ (1998:7).

Moreover, the link between life and politics has its counterpart in the link that, in the Western metaphysical tradition, ties *phonē* and *logos*. In others words, both politics and metaphysics operate according to the underlying structure of the common and the proper whereby *zoē* and voice act as the founding ground for bios and language. Indeed, ‘the living being has logos by taking away and conserving its own voice in it, even as it dwells in the polis by letting its own bare life be excluded, as an exception, within it’ (Agamben, 1998:8).

With the definition of the *ergon* of man as a kind of life that has *logos* (and for that matter with the *zoē*-bios distinction) we have a paradigmatic example of the structure of inclusive exclusion that pertains to the signature Life in the West and which constitutes the centre of the biopolitical machine. In this sense, what the *Homo Sacer* project offers is an archaeology of political power in the West through the construction of different paradigms (*zoē*-bios, *homo sacer*, the figure of the *Muselmann*) that make intelligible the signatory operations of Life. As it has been said, these paradigms reveal that political power founds itself on the separation of bare life and that this separation takes the form of an inclusive exclusion.
Among these paradigms, the figure of *homo sacer* acquires particular importance in Agamben’s archaeology because by revealing and suspending its own singularity it exposes, in a clearer manner, the character of the relation that binds life and politics in the West. For Agamben, this ‘obscure figure of archaic Roman law, in which human life is included in the juridical order [*ordinamento*] solely in the form of its exclusion (that is, of its capacity to be killed), has thus offered the key by which not only the sacred texts of sovereignty but also the very codes of political power will unveil their mysteries’ (1998:8). Life appears in the juridical system of the west as a corollary of a power that threatens death.\(^87\) In Hobbes’ state of nature life is defined by its exposure to the threat of violence and in his justification of the Leviathan political life is ‘nothing but this very same life always exposed to a threat that now rests exclusively in the hands of the sovereign’ (Agamben, 2000:5). The power of the Leviathan is therefore not founded on a political consensus but – in the last instance – on bare life, which is ‘kept safe and protected only to the degree to which it submits itself to the sovereign’s (or the law’s) right of life and death’ (Agamben, 2000:5).\(^88\)

The state of exception, which is treated by Agamben as a paradigm, takes place when bare life is explicitly put into question, and therefore, when there is a clear difference with the biopolitical distribution of the common and the proper in modernity it is precisely that the exception becomes the rule.\(^89\) Foucault’s thesis

---

\(^87\) In the Roman law, as Agamben argues, life is not in itself a juridical concept but acquires a juridical meaning in the expression *vitae nacisque potestas*, which designates the father’s right over life and death of his male son. Life, then appears in law only as the ‘counterpart of a power that threatens death’ (Agamben, 2000:5).

\(^88\) It is in very same lines that Archille Mbembe talks about necropolitics, that is, from the assumption that ‘the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. Hence, to kill or to allow to live constitute the limits of sovereignty, its fundamental attributes. To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power’ (2003:11-12).

\(^89\) This is indeed one of the central claims of *Homo Sacer, Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998) that is further developed in *The State of Exception* (2005). It is worth mentioning that Agamben takes this argument from Walter Benjamin, for whom ‘the state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight.
according to which ‘what is at stake today is life’ is from this perspective substantially correct. Agamben would not deny that in modernity the politicisation of bare life signals a transformation of the classical categories of philosophical thought, or that with the emergence of the population new biopolitical techniques were developed. On the contrary, he argues that by placing biological life at the centre of its calculations, the modern state presents a new oikonomia of life and politics. The novelty of the modern episteme consists in the indistinguishability of life and politics produced through the normalisation of the juridical exception. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the biopolitical logic of the inclusive exclusion is not an event specific to modernity and hence Agamben argues that

The Foucauldian thesis will then have to be corrected or, at least, completed, in the sense that what characterizes modern politics is not so much the inclusion of zoē in the polis – which is, in itself, absolutely ancient – nor simply the fact life as such becomes the principal object of the projections and calculations of State power. Instead the decisive fact is that, together with the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life – which is originally situated at the margins of the political order – gradually begins to coincide with the political realm … (Agamben, 1998:9)

However, Agamben’s biopolitics is not a retroactive application of Foucault’s definition of this concept. As has been demonstrated, the notions of life and politics – as well as the link between the two – are substantially different in both accounts of biopolitics. The archaeology of life that Agamben provides in Homo Sacer reveals a point of intersection between sovereignty and biopolitics, a point that is missing from Foucault’s account of biopolitics. The inclusion of bare life in the political realm founds sovereign power and, following the logic of the common and the proper, sovereign power produces the bare life that in turn legitimises it.90 Furthermore,

90 Needless to say, as examined in Chapter 5, Agamben’s analysis of the governmental machine places the production of bare life into a much larger genealogy of both sovereignty and governmentality. From the perspective of the entire homo sacer project the production of bare life could be seen as the link between the two axes of power.
Agamben’s archaeology of life escapes the enigma of biopolitics. Indeed, life enters the political realm through an exclusion, a division of life against itself. This exclusion produces bare life (in whatever form it takes) which, in turn, founds sovereign power. Biopolitics is, for Agamben, the first of these operations and for this reason, it is always already a power over life, that is to say, a power that divides life, that separates it. The moment life enters into the political calculations it is already divided, separated, captured, and therefore biopolitics cannot be a power of life.

Antonio Negri (2007), Roberto Esposito (2008) and Alain Badiou (2009) have all raised similar concerns about Agamben’s account of biopolitics. In a nutshell, their argument is that Agamben’s notion of life is decisively negative and that therefore he is unable to construct an affirmative account of biopolitics as an alternative to his thanatopolitical predicament. According to Badiou, the fact that Agamben’s notion of biopolitics operates with a weak and passive notion of life means that he is ultimately left only with a vow of poverty and a Franciscan ontology as the only space from which to articulate a political project.\(^1\) Along the same lines, Negri accuses Agamben of operating with a negative ontology, based on a passive concept of life and hence, he writes:

\[\text{[T]he definition of biopolitics that Agamben ascribes to (a) fixes the indistinctiviness of life and politics, between home and city, zoë and bios;}\]

---

\(^1\) In his *Logic of Worlds, Being and Event II* (2009), Alain Badiou assumes that the political hero in Agamben’s project in the figure of the *homo sacer*, and then, through a quick reading of the *Time that Remains* (2005) he argues that Agamben’s philosophy rests on a Franciscan ontology, and hence, he ‘prefers, to the affirmative becoming of truths, the delicate, almost secret persistence of life, what remains to one who no longer has anything; this forever sacrificed ‘bare life’, both humble and essential, which conveys everything of which we—crushed by the crass commotion of powers – are capable of in terms of sense’ (Badiou, 2009:560). However, Agamben has explicitly claimed that the Franciscans failed to develop an ontological paradigm that could challenge the Western political ontology that is based on operativity. In *The Highest Poverty* (2013b) Agamben examines the Franciscan attempt at constructing a form-of-life outside law through a radicalisation of the notion of use, which was defined negatively with respect to ownership. Use and form of life, writes Agamben, ‘are the two apparatuses through which the Franciscans tried, certainly in an insufficient way, to break this mold and confront that paradigm’ (2013:114).
and (b) introduces biological life into the calculations and mechanisms of Power and, thereby, allows biopower to define and organise the biopolitical terrain. What does all this mean? ... [It means] that this new space is always invested by Power, and involved, therefore, in the destining, deathly dimension of being (Negri, 2007:120-121).

Two things are striking here. First, the underlying argument in both Negri and Badiou is that because Agamben’s conception of biopolitics operates with a negative notion of life, he is essentially unable to develop a political alternative. However, contrary to Negri’s and Badiou’s observations, Agamben has in fact developed an alternative through the notions of inoperativity, use, form-of-life, and destituent power. What is surprising about Negri’s critique, however, is that, by the logic of his argument, any diagnosis of our current predicament that forecloses his own political notion of resistance or that fails to shed light on the construction of an alternative project is, ipso facto, mistaken. In other words, far from developing an immanent critique, Negri only accuses Agamben for suggesting that his affirmative biopolitics is complicit in the same operations of power over life. Secondly, Negri’s critique pivots on the idea that there is a productive excess of life, a surplus, an innovative and productive force capable of reverting the operations of power from the very inside of the biopolitical machine.

Indeed, the idea of an affirmative biopolitics, of a power of life, is constructed on the basis of two related arguments. First, it relies on the Foucauldian claims that ‘where there is power, there is resistance’ and that ‘this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power’ (Foucault, 1978:95). The argument is therefore that the power over life produces a power of life within the same biopolitical coordinates, a power that resists it. And secondly, it heavily draws on Foucault’s notion of ‘surplus of life’, according to which in biopolitics ‘[i]t is not that life has been totally integrated into techniques that govern and administer it; it constantly escapes them’ (Foucault 1978, 143). Life as a surplus has an emancipatory potential, it is expansive and radically immanent and it is capable of transforming the
biopolitical power over life into a biopolitical production of a surplus of life. In order to do this, a ‘productive force’ of life is identified as an excess that resists objectification, and a political project is then articulated through the reappropriation of the ‘surplus of life’.

However, as has been demonstrated, the construction of an ontological and a political project on the basis of a separation of a kind of life (e.g. productive, innovative, creative) against other forms of life repeats the same gesture of Aristotle. Replacing logos with the notion of productive force as that which defines the ergon of man reinforces the biopolitical machine, rather than suspending it.

Moreover, as we have seen, the notion of life in Agamben denotes a logic of exclusion and cannot be reduced to the paradigmatic figures that make intelligible that logic. Life for Agamben is not in itself weak, passive, or helpless. What his notion of biopolitics denounces is the idea that the political is founded on an exclusion of life, a division of a kind of life and hence, regardless of the infinite possibilities of life, biopolitics is from the beginning a power over life. For this reason Agamben does not subscribe to any form of politics that seeks to overcome the biopolitical machine from the inside – let alone any form of vulgar vitalism. In other words, by defining a productive force of life as the basis of a political project, Negri is not only unable to escape from the operations of the signature of life, but he also embraces an ontology of the act and not of potentiality; that is to say, he accepts Aristotle’s definition of the ergon of man as a particular form of life based on the primacy of the act.

The Politics of Inoperativity: Use and Destituent Power

Although Agamben’s politics of inoperativity and his notion of destituent power have only been fully developed in his recent works – most notably in his L’uso dei
corpi (2014a) – it was clear, from the very beginnings of the Homo Sacer project that his philosophical archaeology aimed at cutting the knot that binds life with politics, that is, the link between sovereignty and bare life. It was also established that such a project pivoted on the Aristotelian category of potentiality, or at least, that the revision of this notion was an initial step towards the construction of an alternative ontology and a different form of politics. Indeed, for Agamben, only if it is possible to think the relation between potentiality and actuality differently will it be possible to envision a new form of politics: ‘until a new a coherent ontology of potentiality (beyond the steps that have been made in this direction by Spinoza, Schelling, Nietzsche, and Heidegger) has replaced the ontology founded on the primacy of actuality and its relation to potentiality, a political theory freed from the aporias of sovereignty remains unthinkable’ (Agamben, 1998:44).

Leland De la Durantaye is certainly right when he argues that the central category of Agamben’s philosophy is the notion of potentiality, since it is this notion that informs every other idea in Agamben’s works (De la Durantaye 2009:4). In his collected essays on philosophy published under the title of Potentialities (1999) Agamben traces back the idea of potentiality to Aristotle. In both his metaphysics and his physics, writes Agamben, ‘Aristotle at once opposed and linked potentiality (dynamis) to actuality (energia), and bequeathed this opposition to Western philosophy and science’ (Agamben, 1999:177). What interests Agamben the most about this category is that it is articulated in two different forms: the potentiality to be and the potentiality not to be. The first mode simply denotes the potential to be which passes into actuality. The second mode refers to the potential that does not pass into actuality. This potentiality ‘maintains itself in relation to actuality in the form of its suspension; it is capable of the act in not realizing it’ (Agamben, 1998:45). If thought were merely the potentiality to be, to think a particular thing, it would always be by definition less than its object. Moreover, ‘if thought were merely the sum of things of which it has thought, not only would it be inferior to its object,
but it would also leave unexplained thought’s most singular feature: its ability to reflect upon itself” (De la Durantaye, 2009:5). For this reason, according to Agamben’s reading of Aristotle, every potentiality is impotentiality, what is potential can both be and not be (1998:45), and hence potentiality ‘is not simply the potential to do this or that thing but potential to not-do, potential not to pass into actuality’ (Agamben, 1999:179).

Im-potentiality, however, is not a negative counterpart of potentiality, because ‘impotentiality is not the absence of potentiality, but that without which the essence of potentiality itself cannot be thought’ (Gullí, 2007:221). What the potentiality not to do or be indicates is then the possibility of a suspension, a withdrawal from the act.\(^\text{92}\) Therefore, for Aristotle, as Agamben says, ‘if potentiality is to have its own consistency and not always disappear 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).

Agamben’s interest in Potentiality is that, besides the purposes of defining thought, Aristotle uses this category in order to open up the question of life and happiness in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Agamben’s central argument is that in order to define happiness not as a means to an end but as its own end, Aristotle had to assert the function of man, it’s essential vocation, and in doing so, Aristotle ends up subordinating potentiality to actuality. Indeed, we can now return to the problem that Aristotle poses in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that is to say the problem of defining the *ergon*, the being-in-act proper to man, the activity upon which its essence is founded. As we have seen, Aristotle seeks man’s *ergon* in the sphere of life, negating

\(^{92}\) This does not mean, as Gullí suggests, that the potential is ‘divided from the factual in the sense of being outside reality. Rather, the opposite is the case: the autonomous existence of potentiality makes potentiality absolutely real, an integral part of reality. Reality is usually reduced to the factual, the empirically given; the truth is, the potential grounds what is thus given. However, it does not ground it in a mechanical and deterministic fashion. The most important thing to keep in mind here is that what is grounded could also not have been grounded. Yet, this could and could-not modality of the grounding element is not ideal, it does not need to actually become real, but it is what, ontologically speaking, is the most real’ (Gullí, 2007:221).
the possibility of defining man as *argos*, that is, without work.

Agamben, following Dante,93 decisively moves in the opposite direction by putting aside the emphasis on labour and production in order to think man as ‘the living being without work, which is to say, devoid of any specific vocation: as a being of pure potentiality (*potenza*), that no work could exhaust’ (Agamben, 2014:69). Agamben then uses the notion of impotentiality to think man as *argos*, that is, as defined by an essential inoperativity. Needless to say, the notion of inoperativity that comes from the Greek term *argos* has no negative connotation; it does not mean dysfunctional. Rather, it means a radical opening, it means that man cannot be defined by a particular function. As Agamben points out in *The Coming Community*, ‘the fact that must constitute the point of departure for any discourse on ethics is that there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize’ (1993d:39). However, this essential inoperativity of man is not the cessation of all activity, rather it is ‘an activity that consists in making human works and productions inoperative, opening them to a new possible use’ (Agamben, 2014b:69).

Therefore, inoperativity has a twofold function. On the one hand, it defines man as *argos*, that is, as lacking an essence, a *being-at-work* proper to him; and on the other, it renders all works of men inoperative, it opens them to a new possible use. Hence, both inoperativity and use are for Agamben the central categories of his politics, to the point that he declares that the ‘fundamental concepts of politics are no longer production and praxis, but inoperativity and use’ (2014b:67).

In *State of Exception* (2005) Agamben begins a reformulation of the concept of Use,

---

93 For Agamben, Dante ‘conceives a politics that corresponds to the inactivity of man, one which is determined, that is, not simply and absolutely beginning from the being-at-work of human rationality, but from a working that exposes and contains in itself the possibility of its own not existing, of its own inactivity’ (Agamben, 2007:10).
here with reference to Walter Benjamin's reading of Kafka. In a crucial passage whose general coordinates contain the basis for his critique and reappropriation of the concept of use – as developed in *The Highest Poverty* and *L’uso dei corpi* –, Agamben writes that

One day humanity will play with law just as children play with disused objects, not in order to restore them to their canonical use but to free them from it for good. What is found after the law is not a more proper and original use value that precedes the law, but a new use that is born only after it. And use, which has been contaminated by law, must also be freed from its own value. This liberation is the task of study, or of play. And this studious play is the passage that allows us to arrive at that justice that one of Benjamin’s posthumous fragments defines as a state of the world in which the world appears as a good that absolutely cannot be appropriated or made juridical. (Agamben, 2005a:64)

The notion of use is then freed from its utilitarian connotation. To use is to liberate an object, to suspend its economy, to render it inoperative. What is decisive, however, is that for Agamben use does not only refer to a subject that uses an object, but also to ‘an object that constitutes itself only through the using, the being in relation with another’ (2014b:69). In this sense, the notion of use is closely linked to the subject to the point that through the reformulation of use Agamben seeks to produce a ‘radical transformation of the ontology (an ontology of the middle voice) of the concept of “subject”’ (Agamben, 2014b:69). What does this mean for Agamben’s ontology? This has two fundamental implications. On the ontological level, it means that man cannot be defined in terms of a praxis (*energeia*) or in terms of a work (*ergon*) but only as *potenza*, as *argos*, as inoperative. On the political level, it implies that this inoperativity imposes the task of suspending all human and divine works, to open them to a new possible use, and hence the ‘corresponding political concept can no longer be that of constituent power but something that could be called destituent power’ (2014b:70).

Crucially, the two levels coincide in Agamben’s political ontology. Man is defined as
argos, as inoperative but at the same time, through the reformulation of the concept of use, Agamben seeks to replace the ontology of substance with an ontology of modality: in other words, he seeks to rethink the problem of the relation between potentiality and actuality; ‘the problem is no longer what I am but how I am what I am’ (Agamben, 2014b:73). The Spinozan argument that there is only Being and its modes or modifications is therefore radicalised. Being appears in Agamben not as a pre-given entity that precedes its modes but rather as no other than its own ‘how’, that is to say, being is nothing other than its modifications:

Modal ontology makes it possible to go beyond the ontological difference that has dominated the Western conception of being. Between being and modes the relation is neither of identity nor of difference because the mode is at once identical and different – or, rather, it implies the coincidence – that is, the falling together [cadere insieme, GA] – of the two terms. (Agamben, 2014b:73)

We can now return to the initial concern of this chapter in order to assess Agamben’s intervention in the biopolitical debate as set by Roberto Esposito (2008). While agreeing that, for Agamben, biopolitics is fundamentally power over life, we should reject the reading of the notion of life in Agamben as essentially weak and helpless. Badiou completely misunderstands what the figure of homo sacer as a political paradigm implies for Agamben’s archaeological project when he argues that this figure entails a definition of life as ‘always sacrificed’ (Badiou, 2009). Rather, in Agamben, life appears as a signature that refers the operations of power back to the logic of the common and the proper, through which a kind of life is excluded and whose exclusion, in the last instance, founds the political. Life in this sense is like a “secret index” of which Benjamin speaks, that carries out ‘a vital and determinate strategic function, giving a lasting orientation to the interpretation of signs’ (Agamben, 2011:4). For this reason, the biopolitical machine cannot be stopped from the inside, that is, through the valorisation of one particular modality of life (productive, creative, etc.) or through the reaffirmation of surplus of life capable of redirecting the biopolitical structure.
Agamben shifts the decisive confrontation with the biopolitical machine to a different terrain. As has been shown, the deactivation of the signature of life implies rethinking the relation between potentiality and actuality, it implies the affirmation of potentiality over production and, finally it implies the construction of an ontology of modality through the notion of man as inoperative. The figure of *homo sacer*, from this perspective, is not the hero of politics that Lorenzo Chielsa imagined in his critique of Agamben\(^4\) and neither is it the messianic man that for Badiou remains as the ‘one who has nothing left’ (2009). Instead, Agamben’s political project is to deactivate the biopolitical machine through the notion of inoperativity by suspending its innermost structure, that is, the inclusive exclusion of life that founds the political. The way in which this suspension takes place is only fully developed in Agamben’s ‘*Per una teoria della Potenza destituente*’ [towards a theory of destituent power] with which he finishes his *L’uso dei corpi* (2014a). Two central notions emerge out from this work: form-of-life\(^5\) and destituent power.

By form-of-life Agamben means a ‘life that cannot be separated from its form’; a life for which ‘what is at stake in its way of living is living itself’ (2014b:264). In this sense, form-of-life does not denote a productive force or a surplus of life that escapes its objectification but rather it defines a human life ‘in which the single ways, acts, and processes of living are never simply facts but always and above all possibilities of life, always and above all power’ (Agamben, 2005a:3). That is to say, form-of-life is the life that corresponds to man as inoperative, as lacking an essence. It is a life that is never pre-established through a ‘specific biological vocation, nor is it assigned by whatever necessity; instead, no matter how customary, repeated, and

---

\(^4\) Lorenzo Chiesa suggests that, ‘the figure of *homo sacer* as earthly hero is transposed onto that of the messianic man. This can only be achieved by means of a detailed Christian – and more specifically Franciscan – development of the ontological notion of ‘form of life’. Problematically enough, Agamben is able to carry out a transvaluation of biopolitics only in the guise of a bio-theo-politics’ (2009:105).

\(^5\) This notion was already presented in *The Highest Poverty* (2013b) but acquires a more explicit political character in *L’uso dei corpi* (2014).
socially compulsory, it always puts at stake living itself (Agamben, 2005a:3). In the face of sovereign power that founds itself in the isolation of bare life from its form, the multiple forms of life should be constituted as form-of-life. Interestingly, thought appears in itself as a form-of-life in Agamben:

Thought is form-of-life, life that cannot be segregated from its form; and everywhere the intimacy of this inseparable life appears, in the materiality of corporeal processes and of habitual ways of life no less than in theory, there and only there is there thought. And it is this thought, this form-of-life, that, abandoning naked life [i.e bare life] to “Man” and to the “Citizen” who clothe it temporarily and represent it with their “rights,” must become the guiding concept and the unitary center of the coming politics. (Agamben, 2000:11-12)

Thought, in this sense, is the link that constitutes the multiple possibilities of forms of life in an inseparable relation as form-of-life. A political life, even when it is thought in relation to happiness is only conceivable when that happiness is not defined by a separation of a particular kind of life. Crucially, the sphere of thought is never given in isolation from the political practices that aim at suspending, deactivating, and opining all human works to a new possible use.

In L’uso dei corpi (2014a) Agamben claims that if the fundamental ontological category is that of inoperativity, as opposed to ergon, then the corresponding political concept would be destituent power, as opposed to constituent power: ‘Chiamiamo destituente una potenza capace di deporre ogni volta le relazioni ontologico-politiche per far apparire fra i loro elementi un contatto’ [We call destituent a power capable of depositing every time the ontologico-political relations, to make appear a contact through their elements] (Agamben, 2014a:344). Agamben locates this power within a larger tradition that he constructs through the study of different paradigms: Walter Benjamin’s divine violence, Paul’s as-not, the anarchist tradition of the 20th century, Heidegger’s destruction of tradition, the deconstruction of the archê by Shürmann and Foucault’s philosophical archaeology. All pertinent,
albeit rather ‘insufficient attempts to return to a historical a priori in order to destitute it’ (Agamben, 2014b:72). Similarly the avant-garde and the political movements of our time – which Agamben never defines – are regarded as the attempt ‘so often miserably failed – to carry out a destitution of work that has ended with the recreation of powers even more oppressive inasmuch as they had been deprived of any legitimacy’ (Agamben, 2014b:73).

What is then the difference between Agamben’s destituent power and all of those attempts at rendering inoperative all human works? For Agamben, such a power can only be carried out in a form-of-life: ‘Only a form-of-life is constitutively destituent’ (2014b:73). Indeed, for Agamben all human beings are in a form of life but not always a form-of-life. The moment a form-of-life constitutes itself, it ‘deactivates and renders inoperative not only all the individual forms of life, but first of all the dispositif that separates bare life from life’ (2014:74). The constitution of a form-of-life coincides then with the destitution of both the biopolitical machine and the social, political, and biological conditions that it has made possible. Indeed,

Così nel punto in cui una potenza destituente esibisce la nullità del vincolo che pretendeva di tenerli insieme, vita e potere sovrano, anomia e nomos, potere constitutente e potere costituito si mostrano a contatto senz’alcuna relazione; ma, perciò stesso, ciò che era stato diviso da sé e catturato nell’eccezione – la vita, l’anomia, la potenza anarchica – appare ora sua forma libera e indelibata.

[Where a destituent power exhibits the nullity of the link which claimed to hold them together, life and sovereign power, anomie and nomos, constituent power and constituted power show themselves in contact without any relation; but, for that very reason, that which had been divided and captured in the exception – life, anomie, anarchic power – appears now in its free and unrestrained form]. (Agamben, 2014a:344-345)

Destituent power is then a praxis that succeeds in exposing and then rendering inoperative all the differential structures of the common and the proper that lie at the core of political foundation of the West. It is the suspension of the signature ‘life’
that presents itself only through a division, a separation of bare life. In other words, destituent is a power capable of deactivating the underlying biopolitical structure upon which Western politics is founded; it is not a power of life à la Negri, but the radical rupture of the link that binds life and power in the West. It is, in Agamben’s words, a power capable of ‘restoring to common use what sacrifice had separated and divided’ (2009b:19). Crucially, destituent power aims at suspending the metaphysical structure of the common and the proper that we have presented in Chapter 3, not by falling back into their oikonomia in order to redirect their effects but by exposing the contingency of their articulation. Therefore, what destituent power does is establishing the common as a point of indifference ‘between the proper and the improper – that is, as something that can never be grasped in terms of either expropriation or appropriation but that can be grasped, rather, only as “use”’ (Agamben, 2000:117).
Conclusions
The Ontologisation of Politics and the Politics of Ontology

Benjamin was for me the antidote that allowed me to survive Heidegger. (Agamben, 1999:ii-iii)

This dissertation argued that for Agamben, the history of Western metaphysics is the history of an act of forgetting. At first glance, Agamben appears to be simply echoing Heidegger on this point: ‘within metaphysics there is nothing to being as such’ (1991:202) writes Heidegger in his Nietzsche. For Heidegger, the history of metaphysics is nothing but the forgetting of the ontological difference between Being and beings, or as Abbott has put it, ‘the history of being as metaphysics is a history of a blindness before the question of being’ (2012:25).

Yet, the act of forgetting that Agamben has in mind is of a different nature. It is, above all, the forgetting that the bar which separates the signifier from the signified, that the line which separates philosophy from poetry, and that the border which divides life from its form, is a metaphysical imposition. The history of metaphysics, then, is not so much the privileging of one term – signified, phonē, Being, bios – over the other – signifier, gramma, beings, zoē – and the subsequent covering up of this operation, but rather, the presentation of this very differentiation as ontological.

We have seen that philosophical archaeology, as Agamben conceives it, targets the metaphysical structure of differentiation by tracing the moment when this structure becomes operative, that is, its moment of arising; its archē. Here, to paraphrase Agamben, the difference between his thought and that of Heidegger becomes as
essential as it is difficult to grasp.96 Agamben’s commitment to what has been defined as a modal ontology in Chapter 7 indicates that his philosophical project does not aim at revealing an authentic potentiality of being, obfuscated by the metaphysical tradition. On the contrary, that which Agamben’s archaeology uncovers is precisely the emptiness and the contingency of the metaphysical structure of differentiation. Simply put: Being is nothing other than a signature. This is why, for Agamben ‘bios lies in zoē exactly as essence, in the Heideggerian definition of Dasein, lies (liegt) in existence’ (1998:188). It should be remembered that the zoē-bios opposition has a paradigmatic character and that it functions with the economy of the common and the proper. By contending that Heidegger’s account of the distinction between Dasein and existence belongs on the same stratum, that is, the stratum of paradigms, Agamben suggests that Heidegger’s existential fundamental ontology, too, remains trapped in a differentiating metaphysical structure. Indeed, as De la Durantaye notes, ‘the Heideggerian conception of facticity and the transcendental immanence, or immanent transcendence, that Agamben sees in Heidegger’s ontology exhibits the same relation, and presents the same conceptual difficulty, as the relation of bios to zoē’ (2009:235).

At this point, Agamben’s political ontology comes to the fore, both as a politics of ontology and as ontological politics. Western politics, for Agamben, has inherited or at least reproduces the same basic flaws of Western metaphysics. If, according to Heidegger, “there is nothing to being as such” in the metaphysical tradition, then, for Agamben, there is nothing to life as such within Western politics. Hence, the principle according to which ‘that which is presupposed and passed over by a system of thought will return to that system as its unthinkable (such that any exclusion of being/life is always already an inclusion)’ (Abbott, 2012:27) holds both

---

96 Needless to say, Heidegger’s thought was not the concern of this thesis and neither was the way in which it is related to Agamben’s philosophy. Rather, the point of starting this dissertation and concluding it with some lines on Heidegger is purely strategic: it is about situating Agamben’s work on an ontological plane and capturing its general gesture. Therefore, Heidegger here is merely an interlocutor that allows me to make fundamental claims about Agamben’s philosophical system.
for Western metaphysics and for Western politics. For this reason, for Agamben, bare life and pure being are analogous, as both are empty and indeterminate. It is with this in mind that we should read Agamben when he states that ‘only if we are able to decipher the political meaning of pure Being will we be able to master the bare life that expresses our subjection to political power, just as it may be, inversely, that only if we understand the theoretical implications of bare life will be we able to solve the enigma of ontology’ (1998:182).

One of the general conclusions of this thesis is that Agamben’s thought cannot be fully grasped if we do not account for the permanent intertwining of politics and ontology via the metaphysical structures of differentiation that made them possible. This is why the methodological strategy of this thesis was to first revisit Agamben’s writings on signification and language in order to reconstruct his critique of Western metaphysics. As a consequence, the point of departure in this thesis was to establish Agamben’s position vis-à-vis deconstruction. My next step was to put forward an analysis of Agamben’s philosophical archaeology as a response to his critique of metaphysics. Through this lens, I critically examined the Homo Sacer project and responded to different critiques that have been raised against Agamben’s notions of Life and Power, with constant reference to the project’s philosophical grounds and aims. Some of these grounds, I argued, have to be sought in Agamben’s earliest writings on signification.

For Agamben, the political problem *par excellence* – namely the production of bare life in which the political itself is founded – is always already an ontological problem. Simply put, politics is always ontological. However, at the same time, the question of Being always already presupposes the structures of differentiation of life from its form. It always takes the form of a struggle between the one and the many, between identity and difference. Therefore, for Agamben, the opposite is also true: ontology is always political.
In a passage from *Homo Sacer* that can only be read against the background of Agamben’s critique of metaphysics and signification – as developed in chapters 2 and 3 –, Agamben writes:

The question “In what way does the living being have language?” corresponds exactly to the question “In what way does bare life dwell in the *polis*?” The living being has *logos* by taking away and conserving its own voice in it, even as it dwells in the *polis* by letting its own bare life be excluded, as an exception, within it. Politics therefore appears as the truly fundamental structure of Western metaphysics insofar as it occupies the threshold on which the relation between the living being and the *logos* is realized. In the “ politicization” of bare life – the metaphysical task *par excellence* – the humanity of living man is decided. (Agamben, 1998:8)

The complexity of this passage lies in the manner by which Agamben’s critique juxtaposes the linguistic, the ontological, and the political registers of Western metaphysics. Yet, when read from the perspective of the now complete *Homo Sacer* project this passage reveals a point of intersection between the different signatures that control the operativity of Western society: Life, Power, Being, and Language. This thesis focused on an analysis of the signatures of Life and Power, but, precisely because of their imbrication with the signatures of Language and Being, the first part of this work revisited Agamben’s critique of metaphysics and of the Western tradition of signification. Crucially, what Agamben’s philosophical archaeology reveals is the emptiness that lies at the core of the metaphysical machine through which these signatures operate. Just as Glory covers up the emptiness and the inoperativity of the governmental machine, the economy of the common and the proper conceals the emptiness and the inoperativity of the metaphysical machine.

In this sense, the *Homo Sacer* project has shifted the very site of politics itself. Bare life appears as the first referent and the unthought ground of Western politics. Agamben’s first task was to identify the structure of the exception, that is, the
inclusive exclusion that marks the political. What the archaeology of Life and Power carried out in the *Homo Sacer* project makes intelligible is precisely that the inclusive exclusion of Life defines the originary structure of the *archê* of Western politics. Although Agamben does not use the term ‘signature’ in the first volume of the *Homo Sacer* project, we have shed light on the mode of distribution of different paradigms of bare life across different discursive formations through the operations of the signature of Life.

Through the development of this argument, a definition of biopolitics emerges, which avoids the conceptual difficulties of the Foucauldian approach. Indeed, this thesis advances the understanding of the treatment of the notions of life and biopolitics in Agamben’s philosophy by bringing together the ontological, political, and, ultimately, metaphysical registers through which the *Homo Sacer* project operates. One of the original contributions of my work in terms of the signature of Life comes from an unexpected quarter: Agamben’s early writings on signification, and in particular his analysis of the structure of the metaphor. Indeed, the first moment that the economy of the inclusive exclusion appears in Agamben’s works is to be found in his analysis of the relation between the proper and the improper within the Western tradition of signification.

In terms of the archaeology of the signature of Power, one of the conclusions of this work is that the *Homo Sacer* project represents a breakthrough for contemporary political thought in that it provides a comprehensive analysis of the double articulation of sovereignty and governmentality. Indeed, Agamben does not reduce government to the mere execution of sovereign power, but neither does he present it as pure immanent administration. Agamben’s archaeology of *oikonomia* and his analysis of the articulation of *auctoritas* and *potestas* in the governmental machine provides, as we have demonstrated in Chapter 6, a new perspective from which to rethink and challenge both the democratic tradition and neoliberal governmentality.
The wager of this dissertation is that it is only by tracing the continuities of Agamben’s works, from his critique of metaphysics to his reconstruction of archaeology, that the *Homo Sacer* project can be examined in all of its ontologico-political and politico-ontological significance. Agamben’s project speaks directly to neoliberal governmentality and its managerial reorientation of political power, to the production of forms of life exposed to violence under austerity politics and to the crisis of parliamentary democracy. At the same time, his archaeological investigations intend to locate the moment of arising of this *oikonomia* of power, in order to render it inoperative. So far, his politics of inoperativity is an invitation to profane the emptiness of the governmental machine and to construct a new ontology of potentiality, based on the idea of man as *argos*. What this implies for our understandings of art, activism and political strategies is still to be thought.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Sage publications.


