

Passive Politics

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Of the synthetic and the analytic

In the English-speaking world, the work of Giorgio Agamben has become widely known after the publication of *Homo Sacer* (1995) and its successor volumes, where Agamben's main preoccupation is to provide a far-reaching analysis of the structural conditions underlying the contemporary political configuration through a historical-genealogical reconstruction of Western institutions. The broad interest raised by Agamben's penetrating analyses has, however, provoked an unfortunate side effect: with rare exceptions, his work is mostly discussed within the context of *political analysis*.¹ Both terms are worth stressing, for they stand for a double reduction: first, Agamben's work is confined to an investigation of political conditions, and usually reduced to the identification of the category of *naked life* as the predominant object of political governance in the current era; second, the importance of his investigations is found in the political diagnosis it provides, while the positive side of his thought, what we may provisionally call the *synthetic* aspect, receives little attention.

The contingent cause of this double reduction has to do, in my view, with the fact that Agamben's most pronouncedly positive elaborations are found in those works which do not explicitly fall within the political domain and which present, on the contrary, a series of sustained confrontations with themes and authors belonging to a context that we may provisionally call aesthetic. I am thinking here of *Stanzas, Language and Death*, or *Idea of the Prose*, for instance, where the reader is more likely to meet Benjamin, Caproni, or the late Heidegger instead of Arendt, Foucault, or Carl Schmitt. It is in this 'aesthetic' context that we found a productive engagement with Agamben's more synthetic side that includes, for instance, the proposal of an interrelated series of concepts like the *quodlibet* (the 'whatever being'), the experience of language, potentiality as self-affection, etc.

The reception of Agamben's work, in short, seems to be constrained through a pair of mutually reinforcing oppositions: on the one side the aesthetics/*vs.*/politics and on the

other the analytic /vs./ synthetic. These interpretive categories are essentially provisional in the sense they mostly belong to the *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of his work and, moreover, mostly to the part of that reception that is limited to the English-speaking context. Indeed, my remarks are aimed precisely at undermining this double set of oppositions in order to recover the common ground underlying both. In other words, I will be trying to think the conjunction between the aesthetic and the political sides of Agamben's thought, which also means between the analytic and the synthetic. The explicit goal will be to try to exploit the results in order to provide some indications toward a further elaboration of propositive, synthetic politics in the Agambenian spirit—indications whose relevance would hopefully exceed the mere textual exegesis to invest the domain of *Wirklichkeit*.

To briefly anticipate my conclusions, I think the common ground—which indeed functions as a conceptual generator of Agamben's work—must be identified in the concept of passivity. Once a proper discussion of passivity—to be conducted in the context of Agamben's analysis of potentiality—is produced, the goal would therefore be to identify the scope and implication of the passive politics that would follow from it. The present paper is concerned with the first phase of this project: the elucidation of the connection between political analysis, passivity, and politics.

Beyond the *Muselmann*

Let me provide a quick reminder of Agamben's general diagnosis of what he calls the generalized 'state of exception'. The current political situation, he argues, is the final stage of a political and metaphysical configuration that has become lethal. Its *nomos* is the camp and its defining figure is the *Muselmann*—the reduction of human beings to their naked life, whether literally as in the proliferating spaces of exception of which the camp is the paradigm or indirectly through the generalized society of spectacle that reduces human beings to consumers and human society to mere *oikonomia*, thus degrading them to a level even lower than Arendt's *animales laborantes*.

As bad as this configuration is, Agamben is quite clear that there are no theoretical reasons that would allow us to turn the clock back. Rather, the only possible action, that is the only possible way out of this lethal situation consists in jamming the theoretical—and ultimately, politico-metaphysical—machine that has been running on empty, as it were, at least since the end of World War I and the twilight of the historical missions of the nation-States. In *Stato di eccezione*, for instance, Agamben states: "It is not a matter of bringing the state of exception back within its temporal and spatial boundaries in order to affirm the primacy of a norm and a law which find in it, in the last analysis, their ultimate foundation." On the contrary, "to live in the state of exception means [...] ceaselessly trying to arrest the functioning of the machine that is leading the West toward the global civil war."² In other words, the only political action is to think the end of history (which has happened) together with the end of the state (which has happened as well) without

following into the trap of thinking the former without the latter (as in the triumphal accounts of the Fukuyama's kind) or the latter without the former (as in what Agamben calls the 'naive progressivist views'). We should remark in passing that it has recently been said that after 9/11 the thought of the end of history makes little sense (see for example Baudrillard's remarks about the true event-like character of the attack). But isn't the opposite true, instead? What makes little sense is a thought of the end of history as triumph as envisioned (and recently repeated) by Fukuyama. What has followed 9/11 is increasingly a state without a reason—that is, increasingly 'irrational'—on the one hand, and a reason without a state, on the other. Plus those caught in between, 'us Europeans' who cannot make up their minds which way to go. Perhaps 9/11 and its afterwards are reminding us of the self-contradictory nature of the rosy views mentioned above insofar as they present a series of symmetrical zones of historical resistance to their narratives: current US policy as contradicting the ultimate rationality required by a state at the end of history, its alleged enemies as resisting the progressive assimilation of world population into a stateless Western-style society.

At any rate, it is clear that for Agamben the political operation that acknowledges the end of history cannot become a return to a mythical origin, perhaps to an undivided unity of *bios* and *zoē*, or the recovery of a pure life that precedes its annexation into *bios*, because, as he has made clear in *The open* and lately in *Stato di eccezione*, he holds that "naked life is a product of the machine, and not something that precedes it."³ Analogously, 'the purity' of pure life (a concept that must be kept rigorously distinct from 'naked life') is to be seen as an achievement and as a production or, borrowing the Benjaminian conception Agamben repeatedly exploits, as a relational concept that follows, not precedes, its impure use.

Here is the fundamental question that opens up the space of Agamben's 'synthetic' work, then: where would this neo-Luddite theoretical act throw the wrench that stops the infernal machine thus allowing it to start again? The question is double, it seems, because it requires us to identify the weak link in the current politico-metaphysical configuration, or rather the fundamental joint that allows its functioning; additionally, it would also, once the destructive act is over, require us to identify the starting point for the extraction—or perhaps the purification—of a new figure to oppose to the *Muselmann*. Although theoretically distinct, these two questions receive a common answer because, according to Agamben's analysis, the nevralgic point that bears the weight of the political machine grinding down the planet is at the same time its weakest link and the original starting point for a new configuration. Indeed, it seems to me that the relationship is even tighter: the negative act of destruction—what I called the Luddite act—is equivalent to the production of a new alternative.⁴ This is why, perhaps, we often end up in frustration when trying to isolate the analytic from the synthetic aspects in Agamben's thought and why, as I mentioned above, the distinction itself is structurally provisional. There is an area of fundamental indistinction between the 'analytic' and the 'synthetic' which finds its ultimate ground in the analysis of the link between ontology and politics. Even though I cannot go into an adequate discussion of this issue here, some of the considerations

that follow have a direct bearing on it. Be that as it may, the questions that marks a shifty threshold between these two components, and thus points to the core of Agamben's overall project, is clearly defined: where is the fundamental joint of the machine? How do we find it? How do we dis-articulate and dis-join it?

The *desoeuvré*

It is not difficult to identify the texts in the Agambenian corpus that contain an answer to these questions. In all the books he has published at least since *Language and Death* included (but with important anticipations in *Stanzas* and even earlier), there is one recurring figure that comes up every time his discourse opens up toward its positive potential: the *voyou desoeuvré*. The term was initially applied by Kojève to the protagonists of three novels by Raymond Queneau—the most famous one being *Le dimanche de la vie*—which contain three different avatars of the figure of the sage after the end of history. Kojève's interpretation of Queneau appeared in *Critique*, but was severely criticized by Bataille and gave rise to an intense debate between them. Agamben refers to the latter in one of the “digressions” of *Language and Death*, in all the *Homo Sacer* installments, in *Il tempo che resta*, in *Stato di Eccezione*, etc. It is difficult to translate this term into English. Blanchot used it extensively, and his translators seem to have accepted the semi-grammatical ‘worklessness’ as an adequate English translation. Agamben's own translators normally adopt *inoperosity*, which is in fact an English version of Agamben's Italian term: *inoperosità*. We should not forget, however, that the expression *voyou desoeuvré* is a colloquial phrase perhaps closer to ‘lazy rascal’. In other words, there is a lot of latitude in a term that hovers between the most rarefied philosophical speculations of Blanchot, Nancy, and Agamben himself, and the street language so dear to Queneau. This latest reference—as well as the tension between speculative thinking and colloquial language that is so typical of Queneau—are indeed crucial, I believe, for a proper understanding of the role that *desoeuvrement* plays in the texts we are considering. The excessive emphasis on the technical role that the concept plays in French thought and, especially, in the work of Blanchot, may lead us to believe that is where Agamben's primary sources are to be found. Instead, I would suggest that the terminological affinity between Blanchot and Agamben does not point to a process of linear causality between the two but it is more easily explained—not, perhaps, at the biographical level but at the theoretical one that only concerns us here—as derivation from a common source. Namely, the debate among Bataille, Queneau, and Kojève over the proper shape of the end of history in the early 1950s. Whether the Agambenian use of *desoeuvrement* coincides with Blanchot's or, as the textual evidence seems to suggest, diverges in virtue of a renewed attention to the *homo quenellensis* Bataille once derided, is an issue that cannot be properly assessed here. What is clear, however, is that everything,

and not only in Agamben's thought, hangs on the interpretation of the *desoevrement* of the *voyou desoeuvré* as he once remarked.⁵ Confronted with an abundance of riches, and keeping in mind the political nature of my remarks, I will take my point of departure from a very recent text in which Agamben provides an explicit link between politics and *desoevrement* through a reading of a passage from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* that adds a few more details to his very allusive discussions mentioned above.

The *argos*

The text at stake is *Nicomachean Ethics* I, 7, 1097b22-1098a18, where Aristotle, on the way to providing a definition of happiness as the supreme end of ethics and politics, examines what constitutes 'the work of man' (*to ergon tou anthropou*). The standard English translation of this phrase is 'the function of man', but this rendering loses the most important part of the semantic content of *ergon* Agamben relies upon, namely, the connection to 'work' as a product and as the action that brings that product about, and the connection to *energeia*, i.e. to the 'act', as opposed to *dynamis*, potency or potentiality. In what follows I will therefore use the term 'work' for *ergon*, well aware that is closer to a transliteration than a translation.⁶

It is in this text that Agamben finds the root or rather the crucial joint that allows the political machine of the West to function and which, therefore, provides the preferred locus for its dislocation. Aristotle is discussing how to define the good to be found in human life and begins with an analogy: as for the flutist, the sculptor, and every craftsman, the good consists in their work (*ergon*) and in their activity (*praxis*), similarly, he argues, what is good for man should be found in his work. Unless, he adds, we admit that the cobbler and the carpenter have their own *ergon* but man doesn't. Unless, that is, we admit that man was born without work, *argos* (Agamben notes in passing that *desoeuvré* is a perfect translation of *argos*). Agamben sees in this possibility, and in Aristotle's negative answer to the very serious question he had himself raised, the critical joint of the machine we have inherited. Aristotle seeks the work of man in the sphere of life, or rather in the conservation and preservation of a certain form of life. After a series of well-known distinctions between various forms of living (vegetative life, animal life, life according to the *logos*, etc), Aristotle comes to the conclusion that the 'work of man' is life according to the *logos* and that the supreme good of man and therefore the goal of politics is the actualization of the rational potency of life. Two consequences follow from this point, according to Agamben, two 'theses on politics' that Aristotle has left to Western political thought:

- 1) Politics is politics of activity, or rather of 'operosity': it is the politics of an *ergon*, because it is defined through a relationship to the work of man.

2) This *ergon* of man is, in the last analysis, just a certain form of life which is primarily defined on the basis of the exclusion of naked life, i.e. of non-rational (animal, vegetative) life.

Agamben concludes his brief discussion with a refrain that is well-known to his readers: “Consequently, in the modern age, Western politics has been thought as the collective assumption of a historical task (a ‘work’) by a people or a nation. This political task coincided with a metaphysical task, that is the accomplishment of man as living rational being.” (121) When, after WWI, this paradigm experiences a crisis and it becomes progressively clear that there are no historical missions for the nation-states, the biological life of man becomes the ‘ultimate and decisive historical task’. Biopolitics, in the extensive sense that Agamben gives to this term—and thus the camp, the *Muselmann*, and the debased state of *homo economicus* in the society of spectacle—are a direct consequence of the Aristotelian foundation (his two theses on politics) joined to the exhaustion of its legacy. The lethal machine now running on empty finds here—in the positive definition of the work of man and the parallel definition of politics on the basis of *energeia*—its ultimate ground. Jamming the machine, therefore, requires us to advance where Aristotle hesitated and to claim the fundamental *argia* of humanity, its *desoeuvrement*.

If the true political gesture is identified with the thought that thinks the *desoeuvrement* of man and disarticulates the contemporary machine by throwing the *voyou* at it, as it were, it still remains to be seen how this *desoeuvrement* is to be thought. Here again we are confronted with an abundance of possibilities, so much so, indeed, that the real problem seems to be where *not* to go while seeking an analysis of the term. Just in Kojève’s works, for instance, we find a number of different figures—the animal, the snob, the Japanese formal nihilist, the woman, etc. — which are, in more than one instance, mutually contradictory.⁷ Repositioning the discussion from the Hegelo-Kojèvien background to the Aristotelian text gives us an indication of the direction in which Agamben wants to take this concept.

We may be tempted to think that the the critical advantage the *voyou desoeuvré* enjoys upon its historical counterparts (it is an ‘it’, of course, since we are now in post-historical times) is to be found in the the lack of finality or, to be more precise, in the lack of a more or less historical or onto-theological *telos*. That is, the argument might go as follows: historical beings act in order to brings about certain ends; in the political realm, they act in order to transform the ideal ends provided by the metaphysical description of man into actuality by transforming or empirically negating the given reality. Post-historical beings, being the rascals they truly are, just act with no particular end in sight. Their life is pure self-contained action that does not receive its meaning from a transcendent *telos*, but becomes, paradoxically, meaningful in its being meaningless. As the actions of a player absorbed in a game are ultimately meaningless outside the ludic event but perfectly meaningful within its boundaries, so it is for the *voyou*. Its distinctive feature is to be completely absorbed in a series of perfectly playful actions: its life is a game,

is lived as a game, and it is only meaningful as such.⁸ One of the reasons behind the intellectual fascination so many European thinkers of the 20th century felt for the world of game and play—from Huizinga to Gadamer, Axelos, Derrida, and Lévi-Strauss, to name just a few—is to be found here. At times Agamben comes close to this version of *desoeuvrement* as ludic engagement, for instance in the discussion of the pure means, ‘mezzo puro’ in *Means without End*, where he claims that, in the political arena, “the means without end is a game/play (*gioco*) with the law that frees it completely from its canonical use.”⁹ However, it seems to me that he should resist this particular interpretation, because it does not reach the core of the issue of *desoeuvrement*. The problem is that the lack of (transcendent) finality is only derivatively important to the *argos*, because the *telos* is just the actualization of the *ergon*, of work; it is the leading light that directs its transformation from potency into act. The abolition of teleology which can be achieved by a refiguration of the *voyou* as the being deprived of transcendent finalities leaves the essential point of Aristotle’s legacy untouched (according to Agamben’s reading, of course). That is, it still allows for the presence of an *ergon* of man.

A similar objection can be raised against other more or less post-modern paradigms that substitute a reinvention of tasks for the fulfillment of transcendently given missions by trying to recast human beings as engaged in a process of continuous self-fashioning.¹⁰ We find examples of this kind not just in certain readings of Foucault’s care of the self (for instance, in Nehamas), but also in those discourses that propose the cyborg as the mythical figure that embodies the possibility of freeing ourselves from age-old binary oppositions (man/*vs.*/woman, or natural/*vs.*/artificial or active/masculine/*vs.*/feminine/passive) and allows a constant recreation of (post-)human possibilities. Here as well, we have not really reached the crucial point of Aristotle’s legacy, because the human is still defined on the basis of an *ergon* and an activity—a freely chosen *ergon*, to be sure, but an *ergon* nonetheless.¹¹ A clean break would be required—although this formulation is misleading within the context of the Benjaminian sense of purification I mentioned above. To say it better, then: What is required is not to abstract, but rather to *extract* the *ergon* from man (it is always a man) in order to produce a purified *argos*.

We are finally in a position to introduce the notion of passivity. The opposition to the work of man, and thus the *argos*, must be found by a detour through the terms that Aristotle links to it—*energeia*, actuality, and its opposite, *dynamis*, potentiality. If the work of man, his *ergon*, is ultimately connected to the notion of *energeia*, that is to man in his actuality, then the *argos* is, conversely, the being of pure *dynamis*, and is therefore a potential being.

Since Agamben’s insistence on this concept is rather well-known, I will limit myself to pointing out an aspect that is not always adequately emphasized. Agamben remarks that the potentiality of human beings is always the potentiality not to do something (as opposed, for instance, to the potentiality of the child who does not know but eventually will, once she has ‘suffered’ the proper alteration). The architect who knows how to build a house, on the contrary, has at the same time the potential not to build it. She does not need to undergo any any alteration: she has it already (that is, she has already

learned how to build one) and it is on that basis that she may decide not to build it. After having generalized his reading to Aristotle's treatment to sensation and perception (see *de An.* 418b-419a1), Agamben moves on to *Met. Theta* 1 (1050b10) and remarks that if to be potential means to be in relation to one's own incapacity, to the potential not to be, then what is potential is capable of both being and not being. He concludes that "the potential welcomes not-Being, and this welcoming of non-Being is potentiality, *fundamental passivity*."¹²

Here I think we have reached our first conclusion: the being of *desoeuvrement* that is at stake in the definition of the *argos* is to be found in potentiality as fundamental passivity, as fundamental opening to non-Being. The *voyou* is not just *inoperose*, it is lazy, or rather it is *inoperose because* it is lazy, and it is lazy *because* it is always capable, as a purely potential being, of not-being, that is, of not-doing. The *voyou* welcomes not-Being and its fundamental passivity is exposed in this welcoming. As I said above, it follows that the fundamental problem of Agamben's thought—and I use the word here in the sense of *Sache (des Denkens)*—is passivity. Or, to be more precise, it is the thought of *desoeuvrement* as passivity. If this statement is true in general, that is, when applied to Agamben's thought as a whole, it follows that it is true a fortiori, for the reasons briefly mentioned above, when applied to the political dimension of his project. Thus, I think we are allowed to clarify and amend the visionary statement found in the "Postilla 2001" to the *Coming Community* in the following fashion: "Not work, but inoperosity and decreation, [that is, fundamental passivity] are the paradigm of the politics to come (*to come*, does not mean *future*)."¹³ The politics to come (*à-venir*) will be a passive politics.

Passive politics?

It is beyond doubt that the conjunction of passivity and politics seems a perfect illustration of the *oxymoron*. One does not have to resuscitate the Hegelo-Marxian tradition that sees politics as the negation of the real in order to bring about the ideal to realize its apparent absurdity. After all, a traditional characterization which is still largely accepted defines the political domain on the basis of a tripartite distinction within the realm of human action: work, or *poiesis*, is the reproducible activity directed to an end external to itself, thought (*nous*), is the private activity of contemplation, and politics (or *praxis*) is the public and unpredictable action that has its end within itself.¹⁴ How can politics be passive, then? This preposterous definition seems to be yet another instance, in the best possible case, of that "resignation that the postmodern ideology endlessly foments."¹⁵ If this were the case, however, if the attribution of passivity to politics were to end up in 'postmodern resignation', the final assessment on Agamben's whole project would have to be severe indeed, because it would retroactively alter the status of his whole analysis of the contemporary political situation. Indeed, it would entail a strong paradox: his thought is deemed to be political, when the fundamental theoretical move forecloses the

possibility of action upon which the very existence of politics is predicated. Agamben's political thought, paradoxically, is a thought of the impossibility of politics and, therefore, a thought that proves incapable of functioning as a political analytical tool since it denies the reality of the very object it analyses.

There are, however, other possible solutions to the apparent paradox of passive politics. The most immediate one goes in the direction of the thematic affinities that seem to bring together Agamben's thought with another, somewhat older, Italian intellectual tradition: the so-called 'workerist' interpretation of Marxism that was initially proposed in the early 1960 and provided the theoretical backbone to most of the radical protest movements in Italy until the 1980s. The peculiar characteristic of 'workerism' was its reversal of the classic relationship between capital and the working class. Since workerists claimed that capital is essentially a social power that requires, as a prerequisite, the existence of productive labor, it follows that the historical evolution of capitalism is constituted by the sequence of continuous mutations of capital in order to continuously co-opt, in ever renewing modes, the struggling workers. Once translated in terms of political 'action' this thesis entails that since labor is primary, a withdrawal of labor, or more generally, a refusal to collaborate with capital in the organization of labor by presenting, for instance, demands that cannot be satisfied, is a political 'act' of destruction that would bring down the capitalist organization of society. Politics becomes passive in the sense that the canonical form of Marxist political action, the workers' struggle against capital, is identified with a denial of any action at all, as Mario Tronti declared in "The Strategy of the Refusal." We have here "a new form of struggle... the form of organization of the working class "No": the refusal to collaborate actively in capitalist development, the refusal to put forward positive programs of demands" and the promotion, instead, of "mass passivity."¹⁶ An updated version of this position has been recently presented by Paolo Virno under the name of a political theory of exodus, which he defines as "a mass defection from the state," and an "engaged withdrawal."¹⁷

The convergence between some of the conceptions derived by theorists working from a broadly defined 'workerist' version of Marxism and the concept of passive politics I have been trying to isolate in Agamben's work may prove interesting at least in the following sense. By reaching similar conclusions from a philosophical framework that is largely independent of the Marxist conceptual apparatus, Agamben's analysis provides a generalization to a broader scale that may possibly broaden the horizon of their validity. At the same time, passive politics may gain a more straightforwardly 'practical' context. These remarks notwithstanding, however, it is also clear that the alliance is rather uneasy and ultimately incapable of dissolving the paradox deriving from the injection of passivity into the core of politics. At best, the solution is 'tactical', as a Marxist would say, because it provides only the first step in a process that displaces the problem to a further, perhaps deeper level. Indeed as other workerists or perhaps post-workerist thinkers have recently remarked, the strategy of refusal is only the necessary first step for a liberatory politics that must be followed by the creative invention of "new forms of life and a new community."¹⁸ Consequently, and in direct contradiction to Agamben's thesis mentioned above according

to which 'naked life' is the ultimate limit of modern biopolitics and the real product of its Aristotelian beginnings, Hardt and Negri claim that the ontological basis for this act of creation must be found in the in the "enormous power that naked life could become" and in its 'wealth of virtualities'. Deprived of this positive and definitely very active counterpart, passive politics becomes the empty delusion of beautiful souls and the heroic trajectory toward social suicide.

Passive politics

Is this the only possible outcome of the paradox generated by the juxtaposition of passivity and politics? This is not necessarily so if we consider why its convergence with a Marx-inspired 'strategy of refusal' remains at the purely tactical level. The reason is to be found in the implicit assumption of a direct opposition between activity and passivity, action and passion that underlies the mentioned strategy. If passivity is assumed as the negation of activity or, to be more precise, if passivity is (implicitly) defined in activity-derived terms *per via negativa* as the withdrawal of action, as the reaction to someone's else action and, ultimately, as the possibility to be affected by an external agent, it is inevitable that the conceptual framework of activity, action, creation, etc. will sooner or later return — because it was never renounced in the first place.

The theoretical viability of the notion of passive politics, therefore, must not be found in a redefinition of its second term, in a new conception of politics, but, on the contrary, in a different approach to the first term of the hendiadys: passivity. The problem, or rather the task, comes down to the following question: is it possible to think a notion of passivity that is not conceived as the direct opposite of activity, not, that is, as the abstract feature that designates the re-action to someone else's action?

This is not an easy task and I will limit myself to sketch the general coordinates of the problem. A proper analysis would send us back, once again, to Aristotle and to his complex analysis, in *Categories* and other texts, of the categories of doing and suffering (*praxis* and *pathos*). It may be argued that there are two interrelated versions of passivity interlaced in Aristotle. On the one hand, a substance can be said to be passive when it is on the receiving end of another substance's action. Under this first reading, Aristotle explains passivity as the derivative outcome of the particular kind of relation that two or more substances may entertain. However, activity remains the defining, independent category and passivity is parasitic on it. On the other hand, Aristotle also talks of passivity as fundamental receptivity that acts as a precondition for all possible changes and transformations that can be imparted upon a substance. In this second reading, passivity becomes a fundamental aspect of every substance, insofar as it defines the pure, primary potentiality of a substance and it also delimits its most general capabilities. A substance's passivity is equivalent to its virtuality. As several early Aristotelian

commentators point out, these two phenomenologies of passivity coexist in a tension that resurfaces, under different guises, over many centuries of philosophical arguments and it is most visible in the constant wrangling over the determination of the nature and proper role of the passions in human life. A full discussion would thus have to follow the conjoint historical evolution of the conceptions of passivity and the passions in order to come, on that basis, to a direct confrontation of the concept of passivity that Agamben deploys and other conceptions that are constitutive of other contemporary paradigms like, to mention just a few, Gadamer's, Levinas's, or Derrida's.

The possibility of developing a consistent notion of passive politics and, as I argued above, the theoretical viability of Agamben's critical view of the development of Western society up to its current, biopolitical condition, hangs on that result.

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Notes

1. See, for instance, the recent contributions by Leland Deladurantaye, "Agamben's Potential," *Diacritics* 30, No. 2 (2000) 3-24; Daniel Heller-Roazen, "Speaking in Tongues," *Paragraph*, 25, No. 2 (200) 92-115, in addition to Thomas Carl Wall, *Radical Passivity: Levinas, Blanchot, and Agamben* (Albany, New York: State U of New York P, 1999).

2. Giorgio Agamben, *Stato di eccezione* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003) 110.

3. Agamben, *Stato di eccezione* 112.

4. See Agamben, *Stato di eccezione* 112-3, and Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without Ends* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000) 140-1.

5. The references to the Bataille-Queneau-Kojève in Agamben are abundant and the discussion of *desoeuvrement* in general even more so, especially in recent works. However, the real issue is not at all a matter of quantity: a careful reading of the relevant texts in *Homo Sacer*, *Stanzas*, and *Language and Death*, among others, should pay particular attention to the strategical role that this debate play in the overall discussion and, in particular, to the crucial role that Queneau's paradoxical *sages*, his *voyous desoeuvrés*, play in Agamben's assessment of that debate. For the relevant primary texts, see the references mentioned below in notes 8 and 10.

6. Agamben quotes it almost without comment in the very last page of *Means without Ends* and expands on his previous discussion in a recent article: Giorgio Agamben, "L'opera dell'uomo (*Etica nicomachea* 1, 6, 1097b22—1098a18)," *Forme di Vita*, 1, No. 1 (2004) 117-123. Agamben uses *opera* for *ergon*, following standard Italian usage. On the English side, Ross's and Irwin's widely used editions of *Nicomachean Ethics* have the 'function of man', while older English translations do indeed use *work* for *ergon*. There have been recent proposals to replace the unfortunate 'function of man' with 'characteristic activity of man' or 'the definitive work of man'. See John MacDowell, "The Role of *eudaimonia* in Aristotle's Ethics," *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998) 12 ff. For a discussion of suggested alternatives. McDowell himself proposes 'business': "we have better understand the *ergon* of an F as something like: what it is the business of an F to do." The discussion over the correct rendering of *ergon* in English is largely tangential to Agamben's argument, however, since its main focus is to help determine the *kind* of activity that Aristotle takes as most characteristically human. Agamben, on the other hand, is concerned with the very

association between human life and activity.

7. Indeed it would be interesting here to go through Kojève's figures with an Agambenian sieve, so to speak, and see which are left standing. But we'll have to leave this for another occasion. The main Kojévian texts at stake are the multi-layered footnote in the second edition of the *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, and a pair of review-essays written for *Critique* and dealing, respectively, with Queneau's and Sagan's novels. See Alexandre Kojève, "Les romans de la sagesse," *Critique* VIII, No. 60 May (1952), 387-397; Alexandre Kojève, "Le dernier monde nouveau," *Critique* 111-112 (1956) 702-708.

8. For the Kojévian version of the 'playful being' see his description of the woman as a post-historical sage in Kojève, *Le dernier monde nouveau*.

9. Agamben, *Means Without Ends* 81-83.

10. In Kojévian terms, this figure corresponds to the figure of Lord Brummel, the quintessential snob he alludes to in the first few paragraphs of the essay on Françoise Sagan and to the 'Japanese' formalist he discusses in the long footnote to the *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* mentioned above. Kojève's suggestions are at the center of his epistulary debate with Bataille that Agamben discusses in *Language and Death*. See also Agamben's extensive discussion of Lord Brummel in Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993).

11. Melinda Cooper, "The Living and the Dead: Variations on *de anima*," *Angelaki* 7, No. 3 (2002) 81-104, actually seems to be reading Agamben along these lines. The cyborg paradigm was first introduced by Donna Haraway in 1985 in "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminist in the Late Twentieth Century," now in Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: the Reinvention of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1991). See also Chris H. Gray, *The Cyborg Handbook* (London: Routledge, 1996); Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999).

12. Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999) 182.

13. Giorgio Agamben, *La comunità che viene*, 2nd. edition (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2001) 92.

14. This is how Hannah Arendt recasts the traditional Aristotelian distinction in *The Human Condition*. The sources of Arendt's interpretation are most likely in Heidegger's reading of *Nichomachean Ethics*; see Martin Heidegger, *Plato's Sophist* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997) and Franco Volpi, "Dasein as *praxis*: The Heideggerian assimilation and radicalization of the practical philosophy of Aristotle," *Critical Heidegger*, ed. Christopher McCann (London: Routledge, 1996). The relevant Aristotelian texts are in *Nichomachean Ethics* Bk. VI and *Politics* Bk. 7.

15. Paolo Virno, "Virtuosity and Revolution: the Political Theory of Exodus," *Radical Thought in Italy. A Potential Politics*, ed. Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) 189.

16. See Mario Tronti, "La strategia del rifiuto" in *Operai e capitale* (Torino: Einaudi, 1966); an English translation of this text is available on the *Class Against Class* website: <http://www.geocities.com/cordobakaf/>. Later in the essay Tronti claims that mass passivity is the first, necessary step that must however become active in becoming organized, political and subjective. See below for a similar point in Negri.

17. Virno, "Virtuosity and Revolution" 196

18. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000) 204.