

Alex Murray

Giorgio Agamben.

London and New York: Routledge 2010.

168 pages

US\$95.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-415-45168-0)

US\$22.95 (paper ISBN 978-0-415-45169-7)

Leland de la Durantaye

Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction.

Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2009.

463 pages

US\$65.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-8047-6142-0)

US\$24.95 (paper ISBN 978-0-8047-6143-7)

Controversial simplifications of Giorgio Agamben's philosophy continue to raise the ire of many around the humanities: experience is now impossible, the world is irreparable, the concentration camps represent the modern age, everyone is *homo sacer*, etc. Murray and de la Durantaye's books may not succeed in alleviating this outrage, but they contribute handsomely to the literature dedicated to ensuring that it is not based on misunderstandings. Murray's introduction in the 'Routledge Critical Thinkers' series and de la Durantaye's critical introduction for Stanford's increasingly impressive work in continental philosophy both assist in clarifying why Agamben's philosophy deserves our attention.

In general terms, one might learn from these two books that Agamben's work challenges us to render 'inoperative' those conceptions of language, time and experience that obstruct our understanding of human 'potential'. Murray and de la Durantaye's books will certainly play a significant role in clarifying the notions of 'inoperativity' and 'potential'. Moreover, each book adds considerably to our understanding of Agamben's approach to his own influences, which range from Plato and St. Paul to Hegel, Kafka and perhaps most importantly, Benjamin.

Alex Murray reads Agamben as someone who loathes the contemporary age, in particular the ignorance and obsequiousness of a global population ('docile bodies') submitting to apparatuses of power. In particular, he understands Agamben's agenda to be a deactivation of these apparatuses (and the language they involve) in order to speculate on the conditions of a 'coming' philosophy preparatory for a 'coming' community. Agamben does not advocate any militant praxis outside of contemporary institutions, only a subversion of the status quo by means of the operations of representation and language 'within' the internal contradictions of the present.

Chapter 1 addresses the 'unthought' relation between death and language.

Metaphysics itself, Agamben has argued, necessarily creates a negative space or void on which to establish an account of the world. In the Hegelian ‘this’ of sense-certainty and the Heideggerian ‘there’ of existence, it becomes clear to him that human being is a place of negativity. In this place, it is necessary for language to guard what is unspeakable by putting it into speech and by grasping it in its negativity. At this point, Murray notes, Agamben introduces the distinction between voice, which must be removed from language in order for language to make sense, and Voice, which, in creating time and articulating consciousness of being, is the simple act of language, or the singular fact of language taking place now. Voice is the void created when individual voices are removed from language so that language itself can have meaning. In Hegel and Heidegger, however, Agamben finds that Voice is merely the original negative articulation of something that can communicate only silence while obscuring any immediate voice we possess. For Agamben, according to Murray, it is necessary to reveal another language by returning (non-nostalgically) to the point of origin where Voice emerges. Requiring a ‘liquidation’ of the mystical foundations of language, the question of the eruption of a ‘common community’ arises whenever the inclusive / exclusive logic of the metaphysics of negativity is disrupted. Ultimately, Murray argues, Agamben has identified a split in the human condition, a split that is used to construct a world and to conceive narratives that explain our place in it. We should recognize an imperative to render the origin of this split inoperative; we should violently strip away the jargons of political ideology that merely express the negativity at the heart of metaphysical philosophy.

In Chapter 2, Murray tackles the problem of the role of ‘infancy’ in Agamben’s archaeological method. Following from Agamben’s view that contemporary ‘experience’ is not actually experience at all, he notes that Agamben calls us to explore the destruction of experience by means of the concept of ‘infancy’, best understood as the experience of language as such. This experience enables us to name the grounds of the separation of mankind from language and the split between language and discourse (or speech). Agamben’s archaeological method is attuned to the manner in which this split emerges in certain forms in the present—or in truth, how the present arises as such a split.

‘Potentiality’ is the subject of Chapter 3. Here Murray offers an introduction to the concepts of ‘potentiality’, ‘inoperativity’ and the ‘coming community’. In his view Agamben has striven to ‘deactivate’ binary and dialectical relations in order to make them ‘inoperative’. Murray chooses the excellent example of the dominant, ‘working’ relation between humankind and animals, which can be seen to be both non-working and un-working itself. With respect to potentiality, Agamben is understood to emphasize the temporality of being able to do and not to do something. Intriguingly, ‘im-potentiality’ is the inoperativity of human potential, specifically those actions that could have been performed by the human yet have now been rendered unworkable. Neither community nor human nature remains static as long as its potentiality and impotentiality are equally present in its actuality. Furthermore, Murray surveys the notion of ‘coming community’, reminding us not to think of this as a future community that approaches the present, but

rather as a community in the present that has a potential not yet grasped. And since ‘coming community’ names the collective potentiality of beings, it is the political task of our generation to actualize it by means of linguistic and practical de-operations within the global order.

Chapter 4 surveys the significance of Agamben’s well-known distinction between biological and political life and the introduction of the concept of ‘bare life’. Arguing against Foucault that biopolitics is not modern, Agamben is seen to explore the logic of sovereignty and notion of *homo sacer*, exemplified by the refugee and concentration camp inmate. Generally speaking, Murray follows Agamben in utilizing a binary ‘logic’ of exclusion and inclusion to understand the powers of government in a post-9/11 age.

Chapters 5 and 6 explore art, cinema and literature. Utilizing Debord and Warburg, Murray considers that cinema in particular is able to disrupt the smooth narratives of history and reveal what is understood to be the potentiality of gesture. Contemporary art’s nihilism reveals that art can no longer move us and that the artist is now ‘solipsistic’. With respect to literature, Murray grapples with the manner in which Agamben understands criticism to emerge from the split between philosophy and poetry. Interestingly, Agamben is seen to examine how several literary figures (especially in Kafka) render the narrative of literature ‘inoperative’ and how poetry reveals the manner in which voice has been covered over by the development of language.

Ethics, testimony, profanation and time are the subject of Chapter 7. Ethics—which must be tied to politics and language as philosophical problems and is quite distinct from the legality of guilt and shame—is understood to be an effort to realize the potential of human beings, namely to offer testimony or use language in a way that challenges dominant orders and discourses. From Auschwitz, Agamben learns that our age is typified by the destruction of traditional ethical identities and by the resubjection by political states. Profaning the world so as to make it ‘human’ opens the time in which the true ‘homeland’ of humanity can be revealed. In order to do so, it is necessary to sacrifice what is ‘sacred’ in the human condition and return the sacred to the common use of humanity. Capitalism, which fetishizes our bodies, should be stripped of its privileges and forced to concede that the world is profane and thus our own. Key to the process of making the present ready for the emergence of the common community that it bears within itself is time: messianic time in particular will render the difference between the present and the future inoperative. For Agamben, this coming community, the proper ‘homeland’ of humankind, has never been realized: it has always already happened, yet it is a ‘present’ in which we have never been.

At 463 pages, Leland de la Durantaye’s book is considerably longer than Murray’s. Owing to its goal of offering a critical introduction that traces the development of certain concepts through Agamben’s evolving work and the critical reception of such evolution, it shows a delicate touch in noting important conceptual connections many

might overlook in the primary sources. While both books can be read fruitfully from beginning to end, de la Durantaye's can also be read contextually. In particular, he traces the significance of *kairos* in Agamben's work on ethics, religion, politics, literature and art. He concludes each chapter with a number of scholia that assist the reader in contextualizing the chapter's major subject. Although it would be too much to follow every chapter here, Chapter 3's critical examination of *Infancy and History* and its four scholia pertaining to the influence of Walter Benjamin might illustrate this contextualization best.

In *Infancy and History*, the author argues, Agamben is interested in the manner in which potentiality is the intersection of linguistic and historical categories. Drawing from Benjamin's notion of the 'poverty' of experience, Agamben asserts that modern life has made us certain of one thing only: experience is now 'destroyed', 'impossible' or 'expropriated' because life is rich in events, not in experiences we can 'live through', undergo or endure. Noting that this loss of experience is a theoretical extension of Agamben's earlier concern for the loss of tradition, de la Durantaye briefly follows Agamben's genealogy of experience from the Middle Ages through Descartes, Kant and Hegel. The conclusion is that the Hegelian dialectic in particular is based on a negative conception or 'expropriation' of experience. In order to offer a critique of this dialectic, Agamben employs the concept of 'infancy', which denotes language's absence or the human condition before speech is forced upon human beings. Unlike animals, we are born deprived of speech and must acquire it from elsewhere. The entire process of language acquisition implies a certain conception of time that is not the continuous, homogenous and quantified time presupposed by the linear models of historical progress the dialectic involves. Instead, the nature of the experience of coming to language and of the experience of the time that transpires leads us to the potentiality for another 'revolutionary' conception of time.

This conception of time cannot be found in the Greek, Christian, secularized Christian or Hegelian and Marxist traditions. Rather, it is found in the work of the 'message bearers': Gnosticism, stoicism, Heidegger and Benjamin. The time that creates the potentiality of revolutionary change is *Jetztzeit*, the now-time or dynamic instant of opportunity and transition known commonly in Agamben's work as *kairos*. The presumption is that such an intense moment, rich in meaning and power, can restructure time if its richness as an experience is truly acknowledged. The problem, of course, is to situate it in history, or to find a place for it in our conception of history. De la Durantaye observes that a little-read section of *Infancy and History* works through an engagement between Adorno and Benjamin about the nature of materialism and the question of redemption. The issue—opened and explored, but not resolved—is whether a certain messianic conception of time's redemptive power of experience in historical materialism can assist us in conceiving of a dialectic capable of being historical without falling into linear time.

The scholia that follow the chapter address precisely what a reader might need clarified. Scholium 1 briefly surveys the reception of Benjamin's 'Theses' as an 'encrypted testament', which de la Durantaye notes is precisely how Agamben has worked through them. Scholium 2 remarks on the question of the 'now of knowability', which is to say that moment of elucidation facilitated by the fact that a document of the past is now ready to be read fruitfully. In other words, Agamben pursues Benjamin's proposal of a 'historical index' with his own theory of historical transmission. The author puts it beautifully: 'Axes that had been blocked for centuries or longer are liberated, and long-obscured elements suddenly come to the surface of the page' (115). One might wonder whether Agamben believes that only now can Benjamin's work be read by his own methods, or indeed whether the author of this critical introduction thinks the same of Agamben's work. Scholium 3 is a reminder of the multifaceted dimension of Agamben's kairology. The final scholium looks forward to the manner in which a 'messianic freezing' of a dialectic will prepare the way for Agamben's later work on the means without ends, which is, among other things, a critique of instrumental rationality.

Of course, this emphasis on time, history and experience reverberates throughout all Agamben's work after *Infancy and History*, figuring prominently in *The Coming Community*, *Homo Sacer* and *Remnants of Auschwitz*. However, the question of the role of the messianic is only fully addressed in Chapter 10 of de la Durantaye's book, where messianism is seen to be central to understanding the notion of potentiality itself. Left 'unformulated', the meaning of the messianic is nonetheless sharply divested of any millennial or mystical connotations. Clearly engaging with theology in all of his books, Agamben appears to have been led to his presentation of many concepts, including potentiality, through his interest in a theological messianism, yet his approach to the messianic itself involves some engagement with communism. At the core of this complex relation of concepts is the relationship between religion, philosophy and law, a confrontation represented by the figure of the messiah. Messianic time, we are to understand, is not about an apocalypse, but rather immediacy, the now-time of kairology. If the world is 'transient', then it is necessary to understand the nature of profanation in the secular world in order to render the distinction between sacred and profane 'inoperative'. It is important to recognize, however, that the task here is to isolate the dangers of the notion of a 'sacred order', to render the distinction 'sacred / profane' inoperative in order to expose the secular realm as neither profane nor non-profane, but simply what it is.

The presence of Walter Benjamin throughout Agamben's work, and de la Durantaye's book about it, is both necessary and fulfilling. The author does a fabulous job of tracing even minor references to Benjamin in Agamben's work back to Benjamin's oeuvre. While the benefits of this are obvious, there is one shortcoming. In a few instances, the author digresses back to Benjamin's texts in order to explain Agamben's position, often for many pages, only then to say relatively little about what that explanation is. In other words, it can be difficult to distinguish the manner in which

Agamben puts Benjamin's notions to work from the influence Benjamin has had upon him. Since occasionally de la Durantaye might not do enough to locate those often very subtle distinctions between their positions, the inattentive or inexperienced reader might be left with the impression that Agamben has written merely specific glosses on Benjamin's work. But, of course, there is much more to Agamben's work than a mere engagement with Benjamin. And that is where de la Durantaye and Murray's books both contribute to our collective effort to understand precisely what is most timely about one of the most intriguing philosophies of the 21st century.

Benjamin Hutchens

Rutgers University