

**Colby Dickinson.** *Giorgio Agamben's Homo Sacer Series: A Critical Introduction and Guide.* Edinburgh University Press 2022. 248 pp. \$125.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781474486699); \$24.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781474486705).

What exactly is the point of Giorgio Agamben's *The Omnibus Homo Sacer?* (OHS). After writing several reviews, I still found myself grappling with that question. Colby Dickinson's *Giorgio Agamben's Homo Sacer Series: A Critical Introduction & Guide* (GAS), by contrast, has been promoted as 'the first introductory text to Giorgio Agamben's 9-volume magnum opus' that '[un]packs Agamben's central concepts, introducing them to new readers [while] adding nuance for readers more versed in Agamben's philosophy.' But as one of the 'more versed,' I still found myself struggling with Dickinson's argument, which requires a basic grasp of Agamben's political concepts (e.g., sovereignty, secularity, the *homo sacer*, the state of exception, destituent power, inoperativity, etc.) before tackling the esoteric theological concepts (sacrality, 'form-of-life,' weak messianic force, etc.) that are the focus of Dickinson's guide, and that displace the argument into obscure theological terms that might elude the un-critical reader.

The basic elements of Agamben's *Homo Sacer* thesis, however, are encapsulated in two brief quotes from Carl Schmitt and Jan Assmann, respectively: 'all "significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts"'; and 'the significant concepts of theology are theologized political concepts' (OHS, 547). But which is it, anyway? Is Byzantine theology the source of modern politics? Or are modern politics the source of 'death of god' theology? Agamben evades this question by arguing that there is a 'signature' (OHS, 375) between secularization and sacralization that collapses political and theological terms into each other. But ever since Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* and Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *The German Ideology*, Western philosophy has been predicated upon the desacralization of theological concepts, which (it is argued) are simply mystified political concepts (i.e., 'ideology'). And if Dickinson is arguing that Agamben's *Homo Sacer* series takes a theological right turn in Western political philosophy, that thesis runs against the grain of the not-so-silent majority of critical studies (and they are legion) that celebrate Agamben's desacralization of theological concepts as crucial to resistance to sovereign power.

Because as Agamben argues in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (OHS I,1), in the Western European political-theological milieu, sovereign power marks 'the threshold of politicization' (251) between religion and politics by demarcating a distinction between politically qualified life (Aristotle's *bios*) and biological life (Aristotle's *zoe*) which is also 'a zone of indistinction' (7, 8, 20, *et passim*) between them. This threshold of politicization, Agamben argues in *The Sacrament of Language* (OHS II,3), is coeval with the anthropogenesis of the human species, when biological human beings became subject to capture by sovereign law and were made captive subjects of the structure of language, which also defined the paradigms of sovereign power (351-2, 599-600, 1098-9 *et passim*). Similarly, in *State of Exception* (OHS II,1), Agamben argues that sovereign power exists in a permanent state of exception (a state of martial law or state of siege, etc.) in which the strict limits placed upon sovereign power under a rule of law are



suspended and sovereign violence is exerted with impunity against its ‘sacred wo/men.’ And as Agamben argues, in the contemporary world, ‘we are all virtually *homines sacrii*’ (96). Precisely who is a *homo sacer*, and whether Agamben qualifies, is, however, another question.

The profoundly ambivalent figure from Archaic Roman law, the *homo sacer*---who, according to Sextus Pompeius Festus, has been rendered ‘sacred’ by the sacramental formula, *sacer esto!* (61-2, 67, *et passim*) and therefore cannot be sacrificed, but can be killed by anyone without risk of prosecution for homicide (OHS 10-1, 80, 84, *et passim*)---is then taken by Agamben as a paradigm of the situation of biological human beings under sovereign rule, who are conferred with political status as ‘sovereign subjects,’ yet are reduced to the ‘bare lives’ of biological creatures exposed to sovereign violence. And it is precisely this sacralization of ‘bare life,’ Agamben argues, that consecrates the capture of biological human beings and reduces them to ‘sacred wo/men.’ ‘Sacred life,’ Agamben claims, is ‘*life that may be killed but not sacrificed*’ (70-2, 76, 85, *et passim*); and the sacred origins of sovereignty are a mystification which must be debunked to expose the brutal reality of sovereign violence. Finally, in *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (OHS III), Agamben desacralizes *the sacrality of life itself*, which had already been stripped of sacrality in the Nazi and Soviet camps: Auschwitz and the Gulag.

But although Dickinson also denounces ‘the false forms of sacrality [...] to expose their violent mechanisms’ (GAS, 103), his argument is still predicated upon theological terms. And whatever the demystifications of Dickinson’s argument, he clearly considers the crypto-mystical concept of ‘form-of-life’ (which, Agamben explains, is ‘a life [...] linked so closely to its form that it [is] inseparable from it’; OHS, 887) to be ‘the most significant concept [...] toward which the entire *Homo Sacer* series is aimed’ (GAS, 11). Yet Dickinson admits that ‘form-of-life’ presents critical readers with a ‘conundrum’: ‘how are we to be done with all apparatuses like language (*logos*) and law (*nomos*) that shape and control humanity so that [...] a form-of-life can emerge?’ (49). And ‘the question remains [...] how [Agamben’s argument] avoids making a form-of-life sovereign precisely through [...] its ability to remove itself from all particular configurations of sovereign power’ (73). Actually, this is more a problem for Dickinson than for Agamben, since it is he (Dickinson) who argues that ‘form-of-life’ embodies ‘*another form of sovereignty*’ (4, 36, 69, 72, *et passim*), predicated upon a ‘weak messianic force that searches for a form-of-life lived beyond the inscriptions of sovereign power’ (6). By making ‘form-of-life’ the ‘bearer of sovereignty’ (OHS, 1216), Dickinson risks reifying a strictly subjective concept that must, as he argues, resist ‘the inscriptions of sovereign power’ (GAS 6, 64) to remain ‘a significant counter-force to the sovereign powers that permeate [...] our world’ (198).

Still, Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* series, Dickinson argues, also contains a counter-theological subtext, through which Agamben attempts to deconstruct the basic theological terms that support ‘the fiction of sovereign power’ (GAS 6, 9, 35-42, *et passim*; cf. OHS 109, 209, 240 *et passim*) and to replace them with the strictly negative counter-terms (inoperativity, destituent potential, etc.) that support what Dickinson calls ‘*another form of sovereignty*’ (references above). Hence following the deconstructive method of the first volumes of the *Homo Sacer* series, subsequent volumes like *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life* (OHS IV,1) and *The Use of*

*Bodies* (OHS IV,2) suggest that Western European political theology also provides a counter-paradigm that collapses the binary oppositions between ‘rule’ and ‘life’ (893-937), ‘master’ and ‘slave’ (833, 1030, 1059-62), and *bios* and *zoe* (153, 887, 1226, 1230). This renders sovereign power inoperative (OHS, 53, 371, *et passim*) and causes ‘*zoe* and *bios* [...] [to] fall together’ to allow “a third [term] to appear’ (1230): i.e., ‘form-of-life.’ But if ‘the autonomous sovereignty of the form-of-life [...] contests the political forms of sovereignty’ (GAS, 4-5), Dickinson concludes, it is still only ‘a physical embodiment of the pure thought’—Aristotle’s ‘thinking of thinking’ (OHS, 42)—that ‘resides in a space beyond any ability to inscribe it’ (GAS, 207) and ‘is not inclined toward the construction of recognizable sovereign forms’ (209), making its viability as a counter-force to sovereign power questionable. And how the ‘whatever singularities’ of a ‘form-of-life,’ which Agamben defines as the ‘alone-by-oneself,’ are ‘to establish a political community with the others’ (OHS, 1243) is also finally questionable.

What Agamben is proposing in OHS, then, I would argue, is a secularized version of a Christian anarchist community (per St. Paul’s *Epistle to the Romans*; cf. Agamben’s *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*) that requires ‘a weak messianic power’ to bring it into existence. But unlike Dickinson, Agamben does not present his secularized messianism as supported by ‘another version of sovereignty.’ Instead, what Agamben proposes is a utopian community (cf. Agamben’s *The Coming Community* and Jean-Luc Nancy’s *The Inoperative Community*) in which desacralized human beings (*homines un-sacrii*) are liberated from sovereign capture into a world of ‘whatever singularities,’ in which ‘the social and biological conditions into which [they] find [themselves] thrown’ (OHS, 1279) are suspended and sovereignty no longer exists. The problem with this argument, however, is that by displacing sovereignty into the theological realm, it endorses what the Marxist critic Louis Althusser would call ‘a false (aesthetic) solution to real problems’ which leaves sovereign violence still in effect.

Considered from a Marxist perspective, then, it could be argued that by transposing the real problems created by sovereign domination over the *hominies sacrii* into the rarified realm of Western European political theology, Agamben and his disciples are simply reversing the critical work performed by the Young Hegelians, Feuerbach, Marx and Engels, in demystifying the Hegelian metaphysics of Spirit and the State, while proposing a Christian anarchist utopia as a solution to the problems of 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalist caste/class societies. But perhaps Dickinson and Agamben should still be applauded for attempting to find a way out of the contemporary political-economic predicament without succumbing to the virtual retreat from political problems characteristic of 21<sup>st</sup> century Anglo-American philosophy. Whatever its failings, continental philosophy at least addresses those problems, without (alas!) actually solving them.

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