

Politics, Ontology, Language Giorgio Agamben and the Presupposing Apparatus

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Abstract Among the philosophers of the so-called *Italian Theory*, Giorgio Agamben has a special place thanks to his deep influence and his original reflections about Politics, Ontology and Philosophy of Language. In this paper I propose a short reconstruction of Agamben's thought in order to illuminate the "presupposing apparatus" that, according to the Italian philosopher, presides at the typical operation of human form of life in Western Tradition. The presupposing apparatus, discovered by Agamben in the analysis of Politics and Ontology, operates in the language following a mechanism of exception in which something is divided and rejected but, precisely through this exception, it is included as foundation of the opposite term. In this perspective the event of language, coinciding with the anthropogenesis, operates a triple exclusion: between linguistic and non-linguistic; between the animal who has language and animals which have not; between the essence of the linguistic animal and his existence – his bare life. At the end of Agamben's itinerary, the mechanism of exclusion is assumed as the main political, ontological and linguistic structure that defines the human form of life. After clarifying Agamben's account of language, I will present his concept of *inoperativity* as a solution for the *impasse* of Western tradition.

Keywords: Agamben, Politics, Ontology, Presupposing Apparatus, Inoperativity

1. The *Homo sacer* Project

In the last two decades, Italian philosophy has gained an increasing visibility. In particular, the close relationship between reflection about language, political themes and the investigation into human nature has formed a coherent orientation of studies whose profile is at the present moment significantly recognizable. As Giacomo Marramao says, the "Italian Difference" consists «in a re-conceptualisation of the paradigm of Politics operated from different perspectives and nevertheless characterized by a common, convergent runoff from classical schemas» (BUONGIORNO, LUCCI 2014: 15). Among the remarkable differences between important authors such as Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito, Giacomo Marramao, Toni Negri and Paolo Virno, the Italian radical thought – often referred to as "Italian Theory" by several scholars (ESPOSITO 2010; GENTILI 2012) – finds one

of its focal points in the concept of *conflict*. The assumption of conflicts as opening of the political field is typical of radical thought; what is specific to Italian theory is the triple development of this problem in the political, ontological and linguistic domains.

Rather than adopting Carl Schmitt's distinction between friend and enemy as the source of Politics, Agamben finds it in the concept of *life*. Life with its internal differentiations is the starting point from which we think about a modern form of sovereignty:

L'ingresso della *zoé* nella sfera della *polis*, la politicizzazione della nuda vita come tale costituisce l'evento decisivo della modernità [The entry of *zoé* into the sphere of the *polis*, the politicization of bare life as such constitutes the deciding event of modernity] (AGAMBEN 1995: 6-7).

Homo sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (1995) marks a turn in Agamben's work, initially devoting himself to Aesthetics and Literature (SALZANI 2013), while creating the first chapter of a larger project of the same name that ends with the recent publication of *L'uso dei corpi* (2014). *Homo sacer* Project is an articulated archaeological inquiry into Western Politics. Developing Foucault's idea of *biopolitics*, Agamben analyzes the intersections between human body and government in order to bring to pass the critique of Metaphysics started by Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit* (1927). He also approaches the theme of life – or, using a Benjamin's expression (BENJAMIN 1921), of *bare life*. As we said previously, the close relationship between political and ontological reflection involves also a deep rethinking of the role of language, not just as mean of communication, but as an item of the triadic structure that connotes the human form of life. In this paper I propose a short reconstruction of Agamben's thought in order to illuminate the “presupposing apparatus” that, according to the Italian philosopher, presides at the operation of Politics, Ontology and Language. After clarifying Agamben's account of language, we will discuss his concept of *inoperativity* as a solution for the *impasse* of Western tradition.

2. *Bios* and *zoé*

According to Agamben, the first step to understanding the rise and development of a political organization is a deep analysis of the concept of life. Since Aristotle, philosophers thought of Politics as the typical form of human life, distinguishable from animal life. In Modern philosophy, the passage from the state of nature to the state of rights marks the specification of the human form of social organization. Abandoning the Hobbesian situation of *homo homini lupus*, mankind distinguishes itself from animals and represents itself as the *zoon politikon*. The human being is the political animal, the animal who has language: his form of life is always qualified. Yet it seems that his life is always determined by a distinction from bare life.

Vi è politica, perché l'uomo è il vivente che, nel linguaggio, separa e oppone a sé la propria nuda vita e, insieme, si mantiene in rapporto con essa in un'esclusione inclusiva [There is Politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, concurrently, keeps himself in a relationship of exclusive inclusion with it] (AGAMBEN 1995: 11).

Far from Western tradition, Agamben thinks that Politics is not totally different from bare life; on the contrary, the sovereign power decides about what is in and what is out of law and thereby maintains a strong link with what remains excluded. *Nomos* and *Physis* are not simply opposite fields. The former substitutes the latter by excluding it but, precisely because of this exclusion, « la vita è originariamente eccepita nel diritto [life is originally excepted in law]» (*Ivi*: 33). The most representative figure of this retention of bare life simultaneously outside and at the heart is the *homo sacer* (expression that Agamben translates with *separated man*). In the ancient Roman Right the *homo sacer* is guilty of murder and can be killed, even though his life cannot be sacrificed. By the means of a *ban* he embodies the bare life that in itself defines the limit of Politics. Out of law but at the same time determining its field, bare life is not something before political life (the life of *zoon politikon*) but is the background established by the political decision itself. The *nuda vita*, inasmuch as it is excluded as a boundary of Politics, occupies a paradoxical position in the human community that coincides with the role appointed to those who are banned by the government of the *polis*: modern *homo sacer* such as the outcasts, the refugees or the Jews during the Nazi dictatorship.

The idea of the “inclusive exclusion” of bare life in the political field represents the starting point of *Homo sacer* and finds a complex development in Agamben’s later works as *The Coming Community* (1990), *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1998), *State of Exception* (2003, trad. in. 2005) and *The Kingdom and the Glory* (2007). This rethinking of Western political tradition has activated a passionate debate among the scholars of several countries (NORRIS 2005; WHITE 2013; PROZOROV 2014; SALZANI 2014). We cannot go deeper into the analysis of the political facet of Agamben’s thought – this aspect is just one of the topics of this paper. We want, however, to stress once more that in the relationship between power and bare life there appears for the first time a mechanism that we will find in the other steps of the *Homo sacer* Project. This mechanism is what we call “presupposing apparatus”. When we trace a distinction – for example, between bare life and the “qualified” life of *zoon politikon* – one of the poles is projected in an abstract past and appears as the foundation presupposed by the distinction itself. As we will see, conversely, what is excluded does not pre-exist at the opposite pole because both terms are determined by an act of decision that distinguishes and at the same time ties together what lies in and what lies out of the fixed rule.

3. Essence and Existence

We can now approach the ontological aspect of Agamben’s “presupposing device”. The Italian philosopher in effect recognizes that «ontologia e politica si corrispondono perfettamente [Ontology and Politics perfectly correspond with each other]» (AGAMBEN 2014: 173), i.e., the operations of the former find in the mechanism of the latter a strict counterpoint. In both domains, the distinctions establish two opposite poles that exclude – and in this way, obliquely, include – each other.

In the last volume of the *Homo sacer* Project, Agamben specifies his work of critiquing Western philosophy analyzing Aristotle’s conception of being and taking as starting point the *Categories*. In the first book of the *Organon*, the Stagirite

[...] tratta delle cose, degli enti, in quanto sono significati dal linguaggio, e del linguaggio in quanto si riferisce alle cose. La sua ontologia presuppone il fatto che, come egli non si stanca di ripetere, l'essere si dice (*to on legetai...*), è già sempre nel linguaggio [talks about things, beings, as signified by the language, and talks about language inasmuch as it refers to things. His Ontology presupposes the fact that, as he frequently repeats, being is said (*to on legetai...*), it is always yet in the language] (AGAMBEN 2014: 157).

In Aristotle's account of being – as in all later Western Metaphysics – there is an ambiguity between logical and ontological level. The categories of language coincide with the genus of being. To be and to be predicated are so strictly related that it is impossible to separate them but, at the same time, the being – as far as distinguished from language – seems to be an ineffable plane, pre-existing words and later being caught by them. In Aristotle's conception language and being are inseparable but, conversely, the latter appears as the foundation of the former. Things form the non-linguistic world that words have to represent. In the distinction between the object of world and object of language there is a clear foundational intent. In this philosophical move Agamben recognizes one more time the contour of the "presupposing apparatus":

La relazione pre-supponente è, in questo senso, la potenza specifica del linguaggio umano. Non appena vi è linguaggio, la cosa nominata viene presupposta come il non-linguistico o l'irrelato con cui il linguaggio ha stabilito la sua relazione. Questo potere presupponente è così forte, che noi immaginiamo il non linguistico come qualcosa di indicibile e di irrelato che cerchiamo in qualche modo di afferrare come tale, senza accorgerci che ciò che in questo modo cerchiamo di afferrare non è che l'ombra del linguaggio. Il non-linguistico, l'indicibile è, come dovrebbe essere evidente, una categoria genuinamente linguistica [The presupposing relation is, in this sense, the specific potentiality of human language. As soon as there is language, the thing named is presupposed as the non-linguistic or the unrelated with which language has established its relation. This presupposing power is so strong that we imagine the non-linguistic as something ineffable and unrelated that we try somehow as such to catch, but we do not realize that what we try to catch is nothing but the shadow of the language. The non-linguistic, the ineffable is, as it should be evident, a genuine linguistic category] (AGAMBEN 2014: 160).

The Aristotelian ontological apparatus has the peculiarity of dividing the being into two different poles, essence and existence. In this way there is always a presupposed not qualified subject (*upokeimenon*) about which something is said in a predication that attributes to it some specific features. As Agamben remarks, «l'essere è stato scisso in un essente inessenziale e in un'essenza inesistente [the being is divided in an unessential existence and in a unexisting essence]» (AGAMBEN 2014: 167). In this crucial step of Western Ontology we can see the same mechanism that presides over the institution of Politics. A division operates a differentiation between two poles; one of the results is not qualified (as bare life or pure existence), the other (the political form of life, the essence) represents the connoted term. This last element finds its foundation in the other. Human life detaches itself from a generic, presupposed animal life (AGAMBEN 2002). The essence is said to be the specific and distinctive form of a not qualified existence. In both of these cases what results from the act of separation is divided in an ineffable element that works as

background for the other pole, against which it is defined. The analogy between Politics and Ontology is clearly remarked by Agamben:

Politica e ontologia, dispositivi ontologici e dispositivi politici sono solidali, perché hanno bisogno gli uni degli altri per realizzarsi [Politics and Ontology, ontological devices and political devices are integrally supportive, because they need each other to realize themselves] (AGAMBEN 2014: 176).

4. Language and World

As we saw in the previous paragraphs, Politics and Ontology share the same presupposing apparatus. In his last book, Agamben adds that this mechanism presides also as the operation of language because «l'ontologia pensa l'essere in quanto è detto e chiamato in causa nel linguaggio [ontology thinks of the being inasmuch as it is said and implicated in language]» (AGAMBEN 2014: 175).

Although the reflection about language is developed in the books that compose the *Homo sacer* Project, it is already present in the previous works of the Italian philosopher. For example at the end of *Stanzas* (1977), an essay devoted to «the word and the phantasm in Western Culture», Agamben remarks on the internal fracture of signifying, in which there are always two opposite poles that contrast each other. The sign, in fact, is composed – according to Ferdinand de Saussure – of two facets: on one hand there is the signifier (that Agamben calls «il manifestante [the manifester]»), on the other there is the signified («la cosa manifestata» [the manifested thing]). In the heart of the language, in the heart of the sign, there is a division between something present (the signifier in its materiality) and something absent, something excluded (the thing in the world, signified by the signifier).

Il fondamento di questa ambiguità del significare è in quella frattura originale della presenza che è inseparabile dall'esperienza occidentale dell'essere e per la quale tutto ciò che viene alla presenza, viene alla presenza come luogo di un differimento e di un'esclusione [The foundation of this ambiguity of signifying is in the original fracture of presence that is inseparable from the Western experience of being and for which all that comes to presence do it as the place of a deferment and of an exclusion] (AGAMBEN 1977: 160).

In the duality of signifier and signified, in the problematic reciprocal mirroring of words and facts, lies the original ambiguity that characterizes the relationship between language and world. What is present is what it is juxtaposed against the background of an absence: the signifier stands for a signified thing that belongs to the world, the word is referred to as a non-linguistic thing that is possible to grasp only in the language. Even though this interpretation of de Saussure's *Cours* is not really faithful to the Swiss linguist's idea – signifier and signified, in fact, are both internal to language, are both linguistic facts (DE SAUSSURE 1916; CIMATTI 2010) –, in Agamben's reconstruction what is important is the opposition between language and world and the idea of a «fracture of the presence» which has the typical features of the presupposing mechanism. Language and world, although opposed, presuppose each other in a relationship of exclusive inclusion. «E l'umano è precisamente questa frattura della presenza, che apre un mondo e su cui si tiene il

linguaggio [And the human is precisely this fracture of the presence, that opens a world and on which stands the language]» (AGAMBEN 1977: 188).

The same mechanism is pointed out by Agamben in *Infancy and History* (1978), which is a deep inquiry into the possibility (or impossibility) of experience in contemporary society. Dealing with this topic, the Italian philosopher observes the division between language and experience. It seems, in fact, that the subject, being always a linguistic subject, could not have a pure, authentically pre-linguistic experience. For the human being this kind of pristine experience is possible only in the form of an *infancy*, etymologically intended as “being without language”. Not yet linguistic, the infancy is always in a relationship with language. Agamben’s account of infancy does not coincide with a psychological sphere of pre-linguistic experience but it underlines the constant relationship of presupposition that ties together linguistic and non-linguistic dimension. The infancy of human being is not in a historical past or in an unconscious dimension but it is the condition of possibility of language. It is not “before” the language but it is implied in it, representing what language have to “expropriate” in order to produce the human as subject.

In a later work, *Language and Death* (1982) which is devoted to the double characterization of man as the speaking living and mortal living being in Western Culture, Agamben remarks that in the concrete enunciative acts we can distinguish between the plane of the meaning and the plane of the simple pronunciation of words. Recalling Émile Benveniste’s analysis of pronouns as utterance markers (BENVENSITE 1966), the Italian philosopher comes to the conclusion that «l’enunciazione e l’istanza di discorso non sono identificabili che attraverso la voce che li proferisce [the utterance and the speech’s occurrence are not identifiable but through the voice that pronounces them]» (AGAMBEN 1982: 44). Therefore the voice is the internal limit of language, something that is removed but preserved in our utterances, something that is presupposed as the natural and animal background of our faculty of language but cannot appear in itself within the speech:

Abbiamo visto che l’apertura originale del linguaggio, il suo aver-luogo, che schiude all’uomo l’essere e la libertà, non può essere detta, a sua volta, nel linguaggio. Solo la Voce ne mostra, in una muta meraviglia, il luogo inaccessibile e pensare la Voce è, perciò, necessariamente il compito supremo della filosofia [We saw that the original opening of language, the fact that it takes place, opening to man the being and the freedom, cannot be said, in turn, in language itself. Only the Voice shows, in a mute amazement, its unapproached place and thinking the Voice is necessary, therefore, the supreme task of philosophy] (AGAMBEN 1982: 115).

Excluded by the language, the voice represents the internal limit of it. Presupposed by the faculty of language, it cannot be included in the field of speech except as its natural and animal presupposition. With this presupposition the language stands in a relationship of exclusion (the articulation between human and animal will be the topic of AGAMBEN 2002). As in *Stanzas*, in *Language and Death* the language is involved in a puzzling relationship with what is external to it, with what lies out of its domain. At the same time its sphere is not but the counterpart of a previous division from this non-linguistic pole. Finally, this mechanism becomes more evident

in the pages of *Homo sacer* where Agamben compares the operation of language to the inner constitution of sovereignty.

Solo la lingua come pura potenza di significare, ritirandosi da ogni concreta istanza di discorso divide il linguistico dal non-linguistico e permette l'apertura di ambiti di discorso significanti, in cui a certi termini corrispondono certi denotati. Il linguaggio è il sovrano che, in permanente stato di eccezione, dichiara che non vi è un fuori lingua, che esso è sempre al di là di se stesso [Only language as the pure potentiality to signify, withdrawing itself from every concrete instance of speech, divides the linguistic from the nonlinguistic and allows for the opening of areas of meaningful speech in which certain terms correspond to certain denotations. Language is the sovereign who, in a permanent state of exception, declares that there is nothing outside language and that language is always beyond] (AGAMBEN 1995: 26).

Within the sign, the thing signified is out of the linguistic field but remains in a problematic relationship with it thanks to the power of signifying that characterizes the sign itself. In every utterance, the Voice stands as the internal limit of language: though ineffable it is presupposed by every speech act. In both cases the non-linguistic (the things in the world as well as the natural dimension presupposed by human language) is posed by the linguistic element as its opposite. Within the language there operates a presupposing apparatus that divides language into two opposite poles and then projects one of them out of the linguistic field, as an abandoned past or an unthinkable foundation. In this perspective, the origin of mankind does not coincide with the birth of language; on the contrary, the anthropogenic event consists in a fracture between the living and the speaking, between life and language. As Agamben writes in the last volume of *Homo sacer* Project:

Il mistero dell'uomo non è quello, metafisico, della congiunzione fra il vivente e il linguaggio (o la ragione, o l'anima), ma quello, pratico e politico, della loro separazione [The mystery of man is not the metaphysical one of the conjunction between the living and the language (or reason, or mind) but the practical and political one of their separation] (AGAMBEN 2014: 265).

The presupposing apparatus, discovered by Agamben in the analysis of Western Politics and Ontology, operates in the language following the same mechanism of the exception previously described. Something is divided and rejected but, precisely through this exception, it is included as foundation of the opposite term. In this perspective the event of language, coinciding with the anthropogenesis, operates a triple exclusion: between linguistic and non-linguistic; between the animal who has language and animals which have not; between the essence of the linguistic animal and his existence – his bare life. At the end of Agamben's itinerary, the mechanism of exclusion is assumed as the main political, ontological and linguistic structure that defines the human form of life, according to the Western tradition of thought.

5. Conclusions

By means of the exclusion, language remains in a close relationship with its negation. Actually it is bound to the non-linguistic and its articulation represents one

of the most puzzling paradoxes for Western philosophy. This problem, together with that of the articulation between nature and culture (but we could say between animal and human form of life), denounces «il vuoto incessante che la macchina della cultura occidentale custodisce al suo centro [the constant void that the machine of Western culture guards in its center]» (AGAMBEN 2014: 336). The strategy of exclusion devised by means of the presupposing device claims to define who the participants allowed to political life are; who the adequate candidates to the degree of human are; who the capable actors of the faculty of language are. But at the very center of this mechanism there is not a self-consistent predicate – such as, for example, the idea “humanity” – that could determine autonomously the members of its class in a totally unthought way because every political, ontological and linguistic determination depends on its excluded *Doppelgänger* being surreptitiously rejected but assumed as the bedrock of the positive pivotal term. According to Agamben’s critique, the opposition between human and non-human is not a conflict between two autonomous and rival items because humanity is rather the suspension of animality. In this sense, humanity is totally empty of content: its consistence is nothing but the assumption of its animality. Far from being a natural presupposition of humanity, animality in turn is what is excluded by anthropogenesis and what at the same time stands pending in the heart of human being.

Agamben proposes to approach this secret void by the means of the category of *inoperosità* (inoperativity), a way of deactivating the preeminence of the category of act that permeates the whole history of Philosophy. According to the Italian philosopher the different human activities are thought departing from the distinction between production (with an external *ergon*) and act (a form of self-oriented *energeia*). This has been thought since Aristotle’s definition of *praxis* and *poiesis* in *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI (1140a, 1-1140b, 5). However, in both there is a preeminence of act over potency. Against the couple *ergon/energeia*, Agamben tries to rethink the political, ontological and linguistic problems departing from the concept of *chresis*, “use”, in order to define a different point of view that would privilege the virtual and potential dimension of human life.

Far from trying to organize its political and ontological structures as departures from the idea of self-consistent predicates, the contemporary philosophy has to detach itself from the presupposing device in order to think what is excluded in a non-subordinate way. In this perspective, the essentialist idea of humanity as qualified life, opposed to natural and animal life, has to make room to a new concept – that of form-of-life. Politics and Ontology qualify life by means of several partitions and the content of them is nothing but the pure fact of the partition itself, without other consistency. In order to think of the concept of life in itself we must deactivate the presupposing device. Only in this way could we think of a life that coincides with itself, indivisible from its own form, which is not an ineffable presupposition of qualified life but a self-contained power.

From a linguistic point of view, the exhibition of the void that occupies the center of Western Ontology and Politics coincides with a word that deactivates the efficiency of verbal communication, intended as reference to world. Since *Bartleby. La formula della creazione* (1993), where the Italian philosopher comments on Melville’s novel in a fruitful dialogue with Gilles Deleuze, we find the idea of a word, a statement, a

formulation (as the well-known “I would prefer not to”) that can operate a *decreazione* (de-creation), i.e. that can suspend language’s power of signifying in order to attain a complete autonomy of language, separated from subsisting or non-subsisting status of things in the world. Stopping the communication, Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to” shows a language that coincides with its form, without reference to reality. The opposition between linguistic and non-linguistic is definitively suspended; language does not hint at the world but stays in a situation of *inoperosità*. In *L’uso dei corpi* Agamben attributes this suspending power to Politics and Art:

Contemplazione e inoperosità sono, in questo senso, gli operatori metafisici dell’antropogenesi, che, liberando il vivente uomo da ogni destino biologico o sociale e da ogni compito predeterminato, lo rendono disponibile per quella particolare assenza di opera che siamo abituati a chiamare “politica” e “arte”. Politica e arte non sono compiti né semplicemente “opera”: esse nominano, piuttosto, la dimensione in cui le operazioni linguistiche e corporee, materiali e immateriali, biologiche e sociali vengono disattivate e contemplate come tali per liberare l’inoperosità che è rimasta in esse imprigionata [Contemplation and inactivity are, in this sense, the metaphysical operators of anthropogenesis which, delivering the living from every biological and social destiny and from every preconceived task, make it available for that particular absence of act that we use to call “Politics” and “Art”. Politics and Art are not tasks nor simply “act”. Rather they name the dimension in which linguistic and bodily operations, material and immaterial, biological and social, are deactivated and contemplated as such in order to release the inactivity that got stuck in them] (AGAMBEN 2014: 351).

With the concept of “use” (closely related to the Aristotelian term of *hexis*), Agamben tries to indicate a new paradigm for human activity, in which the subject is not the owner of his faculties but a living being that use itself and the world. Unfortunately, the term “inoperosità” seems to suggest a form of inactivity and aestheticism that hardly could explain human form of life, much less in a political sense. More than giving a solution or providing a political project, Agamben opens a new field for philosophical reflection. Once undermined the presupposing device that permeates Western culture, we can try to think of life coinciding with its form or as Deleuze said a life that would be «life *tantum*» (DELEUZE 1995). We can try to think of a language that would not be useful to organize and define different species in an exclusive way but would show the inner void around which our culture is built. With the last chapter of *Homo sacer* Project, Agamben establishes the mission for Philosophy yet to come.

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