

Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

passages selected by Charles Bellinger

page 1. The Greeks had two words for life, *zoe* (the physical life of plants and animals), and *bios* (a life in community that has a story, a meaning, and is protected by law).

7. “In Western politics, bare life [*zoe*] has the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusion founds the city of men.”

8. “The protagonist of this book is bare life, that is, the life of *homo sacer* (sacred man), who *may be killed and yet not sacrificed*, and whose essential function in modern politics we intend to assert.”

10. Agamben is trying to understand “why democracy, at the very moment in which it seemed to have finally triumphed over its adversaries and reached its greatest height, proved itself incapable of saving *zoe*, to whose happiness it had dedicated all its efforts, from unprecedented ruin.” He is referring to the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century idea of moral progress and the expansion of democracy and rights, and its destruction by fascism and communism.

15. “The paradox of sovereignty consists in the fact the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order.”

31-2. “The sovereign *nomos* [law, ordering force] is the principle that, joining law and violence, threatens them with indistinction. The sovereign is the threshold on which violence passes over into law and law passes over into violence.”

35. “If for the Sophists the anteriority of *physis* [nature] ultimately justifies the violence of the strongest, for Hobbes it is this very identity of the state of nature and violence that justifies the absolute power of the sovereign. ... Sovereignty thus presents itself as an incorporation of the state of nature in society, or, if one prefers, as a state of indistinction between nature and culture, between violence and law, and this very indistinction constitutes specifically sovereign violence.”

71. An ancient Roman text reads: “The sacred man [*homo sacer*] is the one whom the people have judged on account of a crime. It is not permitted to sacrifice this man, yet he who kills him will not be condemned for homicide; in the first tribunitian law, in fact, it is noted that ‘if someone kills the one who is sacred according to the plebescite, it will not be considered homicide.’ This is why it is customary for a bad or impure man to be called sacred.”

83. “The sovereign sphere is the sphere in which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide and without celebrating a sacrifice, and sacred life—that is, life that may be killed but not sacrificed—is the life that has been captured in this sphere.”

103. “When the Jacobins suggested, during the discussions of the 1792 convention, that the king be executed without trial, they merely brought the principle of the unsacrificeability of sacred life to the most extreme point of its development, remaining absolutely faithful to the idea according to which sacred life may be killed by anyone without committing homicide, but never submitted to sanctioned forms of execution.”

105. “What had to remain in the collective unconscious as a monstrous hybrid of human and animal, divided between the forest and the city—the werewolf—is, therefore, in its origin the figure of the man who has been banned from the city. That such a man is defined as a wolf-man and not simply as a wolf is decisive here. The life of the bandit, like that of the sacred man, is not a piece of animal nature without any relation to law and the city. It is, rather, a threshold of indistinction and of passage between *physis* and *nomos*, exclusion and inclusion: the life of the bandit is the life of the werewolf, who is precisely *neither man nor beast*, and who dwells paradoxically within both while belonging to neither.”

114-15. “The Jew living under Nazism is the privileged negative referent of the new biopolitical sovereignty and is, as such, a flagrant case of a *homo sacer* in the sense of a life that may be killed but not sacrificed. His killing therefore constitutes neither capital punishment nor a sacrifice, but simply the actualization of a mere ‘capacity to be killed’ inherent in the condition of the Jew as such. The truth—which is difficult for the victims to face, but which we must have the courage not to cover with sacrificial veils—is that the Jews were exterminated not in a mad and giant holocaust but exactly as Hitler had announced, ‘as lice,’ which is to say, as bare life [*zoe*]. The dimension in which the extermination took place is neither religion nor law, but biopolitics.

If it is true that the figure proposed by our age is that of an unsacrificeable life that has nevertheless become capable of being killed to an unprecedented degree, then the bare life of *homo sacer* concerns us in a special way. Sacredness is a line of flight still present in contemporary politics, a line that is as such moving into zones increasingly vast and dark, to the point of ultimately coinciding with the biological life of citizens. If today there is no longer any one clear figure of the sacred man, it is perhaps because we are all virtually *homines sacri*.”

120. “Only because politics in our age had been entirely transformed into biopolitics was it possible for politics to be constituted as totalitarian politics to a degree hitherto unknown.”

121. “It is almost as if, starting from a certain point, every decisive political event were double-sided: the spaces, the liberties, and the rights won by individuals in their conflicts with central powers always simultaneously prepared a tacit but increasing inscription of individuals’ lives within the state order, thus offering a new and more dreadful foundation for the very sovereign power from which they wanted to liberate themselves.”

121-22. “The fact is that one and the same affirmation of bare life leads, in bourgeois democracy, to a primacy of the private over the public and of individual liberties over collective obligations and yet becomes, in totalitarian states, the decisive political criterion and the exemplary realm of sovereign decisions. And only because biological life and its needs had become the *politically* decisive fact is it possible to understand the otherwise incomprehensible rapidity with which twentieth-century parliamentary democracies were able to turn into totalitarian states and with

which this century's totalitarian states were able to be converted, almost without interruption, into parliamentary democracies. In both cases, these transformations were produced in a context in which for quite some time politics had already turned into biopolitics, and in which the only real question to be decided was which form of organization would be best suited to the task of assuring the care, control, and use of bare life. Once their fundamental referent becomes bare life, traditional political distinctions (such as those between Right and Left, liberalism and totalitarianism, private and public) lose their clarity and intelligibility and enter into a zone of indistinction. The ex-communist ruling classes' unexpected fall into the most extreme racism (as in the Serbian program of 'ethnic cleansing') and the rebirth of new forms of fascism in Europe also have their roots here."

124. "Modern democracy does not abolish sacred life but rather shatters it and disseminates it into every individual body, making it into what is at stake in political conflict."

126. "In the system of the nation-state, the so-called sacred and inalienable rights of man show themselves to lack every protection and reality at the moment in which they can no longer take the form of rights belonging to citizens of a state."

130. "Fascism and Nazism are, above all, redefinitions of the relations between man and citizen, and become fully intelligible only when situated—no matter how paradoxical it may seem—in the biopolitical context inaugurated by national sovereignty and declarations of rights."

132. "The Nuremberg laws on 'citizenship in the Reich' and the 'protection of German blood and honor' brought this process to the most extreme point of its development, introducing the principle according to which citizenship was something of which one had to prove oneself worthy and which could therefore always be called into question. And one of the few rules to which the Nazis constantly adhered during the course of the 'Final Solution' was that Jews could be sent to the extermination camps only after they had been fully denationalized (stripped even of the residual citizenship left to them after the Nuremberg laws)."

142. "In modern biopolitics, sovereign is he who decides on the value or nonvalue of life as such."

148. "*The totalitarianism of our century has its ground in this dynamic identity of life and politics, without which it remains incomprehensible.* If Nazism still appears to us as an enigma, and if its affinity with Stalinism (on which Hannah Arendt so much insisted) is still unexplained, this is because we have failed to situate the totalitarian phenomenon in its entirety in the horizon of biopolitics. When life and politics—originally divided, and linked together by the no-man's land of the state of exception that is inhabited by bare life—begin to become one, all life becomes sacred and all politics becomes the exception."

171. "The correct question to pose concerning the horrors committed in the [Nazi and Stalinist] camps is, therefore, not the hypocritical one of how crimes of such atrocity could be committed against human beings. It would be more honest and, above all, more useful to investigate carefully the juridical procedures and deployments of power by which human beings could be so

completely deprived of their rights and prerogatives that no act committed against them could appear any longer as a crime. (At this point, everything had truly become possible.)”

181. “Three theses have emerged as provisional conclusions in the course of this inquiry:

1. The original political relation is the ban (the state of exception as zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion).
2. The fundamental activity of sovereign power is the production of bare life as originary political element and as threshold of articulation between nature and culture, *zoe* and *bios*.
3. Today it is not the city but rather the [concentration] camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West.

The first of these calls into question every theory of the contractual origin of state power and, along with it, every attempt to ground political communities in something like a ‘belonging,’ whether it be founded on popular, national, religious, or any other identity. The second thesis implies that Western politics is a biopolitics from the very beginning, and that every attempt to found political liberties in the rights of the citizen is, therefore, in vain. The third thesis throws a sinister light on the models by which social sciences, sociology, urban studies, and architecture today are trying to conceive and organize the public space of the world’s cities without any clear awareness that at their very center lies the same bare life (even if it has been transformed and rendered apparently more human) that defined the biopolitics of the great totalitarian states of the twentieth century.”

Questions:

>If Agamben is criticizing “biopolitics,” because it seems to always lead to thanatopolitics, what is the alternative? Theopolitics? He does not answer this question very clearly in this book, but consider this passage:

151. “Judeo-Christian and liberal thought, according to Levinas, strive for the spirit’s ascetic liberation from the bonds of the sensuous and historico-social situation into which it finds itself thrown, thus ultimately differentiating, in man and his world, between a realm of reason and a realm of the body, to which the realm of reason is irreducibly opposed. Hitler’s philosophy (in this respect similar to Marxism) is instead, Levinas argues, founded on an absolutely unconditional assumption of the historical, physical, and material situation, which is considered as an indissoluble cohesion of spirit and body and nature and culture.”

>Is Agamben saying that human culture is always based on a violent exclusion of certain human beings?

>If Agamben is assuming the moral wrongness of the Nazi and Stalinist violence, where does his perception of wrongness come from? What is it based on?