Agamben’s political messianism in ‘The Time That Remains’

Antonio Cimino

To cite this article: Antonio Cimino (2016) Agamben's political messianism in ‘The Time That Remains’, International Journal of Philosophy and Theology, 77:3, 102-118, DOI: 10.1080/21692327.2016.1226934

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21692327.2016.1226934

© 2016 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 04 Nov 2016.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 212

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Agamben’s political messianism in ‘The Time That Remains’

Antonio Cimino

Center for the History of Philosophy and Science, Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies, Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT
The aim of this article is to shed light on the political ambitions of Agamben’s book The Time That Remains. First, the article examines Agamben’s political messianism in The Time That Remains by taking into account the question of political theology. Second, the article elaborates on a number of important concepts and ideas that are at the forefront of Agamben’s political messianism. Third, the author elucidates the general framework within which one has to view Agamben’s political messianism. In the fourth and last part of the article, the author assesses the innovative nature of Agamben’s political messianism by sketching out a comparison between The Time That Remains and Heidegger’s phenomenological interpretation of Paul the apostle.

Agamben’s book The Time That Remains is more than an exegetical exercise. The book is characterized not only by a complex intertwining of historical–philological analyses and philosophical considerations, but also by political claims, which are explicit only to a certain extent. The aim of this article is to shed light on the political ambitions of Agamben’s Pauline book by analyzing them in view of the messianism that comes to the fore at critical junctures of his commentary. This analysis is based on three thematic axes, whose integration is expected to display the political core of Agamben’s reading of Paul. The three thematic axes correspond to the first three parts of the present contribution.

First, I examine Agamben’s political messianism in The Time That Remains by taking into account the question of political theology. The talk of political messianism implies that the political and the theological (or religious) are somehow intertwined. It is precisely this intersection of religion and politics that is at stake in the discourse of political theology. In this context, one has to mention at least two authors who are of decisive importance for Agamben’s understanding of Paul: Carl Schmitt and Jacob Taubes. Thus, my analysis concentrates on how Agamben appropriates and reformulates a number of theses on political theology that have been worked out especially by Schmitt and Taubes. This first step allows me to describe the general theological–political tone that defines Agamben’s political messianism.

Second, I elaborate on a number of important concepts and ideas that are at the forefront of Agamben’s political messianism. In doing so, I concentrate my attention on...
the double face of those concepts and ideas, that is, the synergy of the political and the theological. It is worth noticing that this synergy characterizes Agamben’s genealogical approach to the history of ideas. When interpreting philosophical, historical, juridical, and literary sources, Agamben highlights the multiple dimensions of ideas and concepts and tries to overcome one-sided understandings of them. In doing so, he attempts to reveal the religious aspect implicit in political ideas, or by the same token, the political import of notions that seem to have an exclusively religious importance.

Third, I elucidate the general framework within which one has to view Agamben’s political messianism. This framework is the philosophical project he initiated with his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. I intend to show how Agamben’s Pauline political messianism can be understood both as an attempt to answer a number of crucial questions he poses in the book *Homo Sacer*, and as a decisive intermediate step towards solutions he outlines in later publications. In this connection, I document the extent to which Agamben considers the Pauline letters sources of inspiration for developing a new philosophical understanding in order to confront the momentous challenges facing contemporary society as we transition from the twentieth century to the twenty-first century.

In the fourth and last part of this article, I assess the innovative nature of Agamben’s political messianism by sketching out a comparison between *The Time That Remains* and Heidegger’s phenomenological interpretation of Paul.¹ There are many reasons why such a comparison can help us better understand the extent to which Agamben has opened up new horizons for the philosophical reception of the Pauline letters in contemporary European thought. At first sight, Heidegger’s reading and Agamben’s commentary are very similar because they both emphasize, albeit in different ways, the particular experience of time that characterizes the Pauline apostleship.² On closer inspection, however, one can easily notice a substantial difference. While Heidegger pays no attention to the political implications of the Pauline letters, Agamben’s reading captures the political connotations of Paul’s apostleship. I try to explain this intriguing difference by highlighting its philosophical reason, which, according to my interpretive hypothesis, lies in the different conceptions of life Heidegger and Agamben presuppose in their respective analyses of Paul. Heidegger conceives of life as facticity that is in essence deprived of any political significance. For his part, Agamben elaborates on the question of life on the basis of the conception he worked out in *Homo Sacer*, according to which life has to be understood in its original political import.

**Agamben and political theology**

The analysis of Agamben’s political messianism has first to answer the question of how Agamben conceives the relationship between the political and the theological. In this section, I intend to show that Agamben does not subordinate the political to the theological; nor does he think that the theological is derivative of the political; rather, he traces both the political and the theological back to a more encompassing foundational domain. If one takes into account Carl Schmitt’s understanding of political theology, according to which modern political concepts derive from a secularization of Christian theology,³ one can easily see that Agamben’s account of the relation between the political and the theological offers a more nuanced solution, which does
not imply any definite decision about the possible hierarchical relations between these two domains. However, a preliminary investigation into how Agamben reads Schmitt and another major figure in political theology, Jacob Taubes, provides interesting clarifications.

At first sight, the influence of Jacob Taubes on Agamben’s Pauline commentary is quantitatively negligible. Agamben mentions Taubes and his book *The Political Theology of Paul* at the very beginning of his commentary. This is the sole relevant mention, the others turn out to be mere references concerning very specific exegetical questions. On closer inspection, however, this incipient mention of Taubes deserves attention. Not only does Agamben dedicate his commentary to Taubes in memoriam, but he also informs us that Taubes’s book marks a truly significant ‘turning point’ in scholarship on the Pauline letters because, according to Agamben, Taubes has been able to sense the messianic core of Paul’s apostleship. In this context, Agamben does not elaborate on the link between political theology and the messianic. However, as will become clear in what follows, it is precisely messianism that constitutes the horizon within which the question of political theology, or the question of the relationship between the political and the theological, is re-addressed by Agamben in a new way.

The influence of Carl Schmitt on Agamben’s Pauline commentary is also quantitatively negligible, but, on closer inspection, it has an immense qualitative impact on Agamben’s analysis of the Pauline epistles. As a matter of fact, Agamben uses Carl Schmitt to clarify the meaning and scope of Paul’s messianic deactivation (*katargēsis*) of the law. According to Agamben, the Pauline deactivation of the law is one of the most conspicuous and momentous expressions of the general messianic attitude that finds expression in Paul’s letters and is linked to the other main components of Paul’s apostleship, that is, the *hōs mē* (’as not’) and the performativity of faith. Agamben does not confine himself to an ad hoc use of Schmitt’s thought. Even more remarkably, he uses Schmitt’s thesis (i.e. modern political concepts are secularizations of Christian theology) against Schmitt himself. In this connection, the crucial text passage reads as follows:

> How should we think the state of the law under the effect of messianic *katargēsis*? What is a law that is simultaneously suspended and fulfilled? In answering this question, I found there to be nothing more helpful than the epistemological paradigm at the center of the work of a jurist who developed his conception of law and the sovereign state according to an explicitly anti-messianic constellation. But for this very reason, insofar as he is, in Taubes’s words ‘an apocalypticist of counterrevolution’, he cannot help but introduce some genuinely messianic *theologoumena* into it. According to Schmitt, whom you will have already indentified without my naming him, the paradigm that defines the proper functioning and structure of the law is not the norm, but the exception.

The passage contains a surprising change of perspective that cannot be overestimated. Initially, Agamben asks how one has to conceive of the condition of the law when messianic deactivation comes into play, so that the law is at once ‘suspended and fulfilled’. To clarify this seemingly paradoxical condition of the deactivated law, Agamben refers to Schmitt, but immediately afterwards, he argues that it is Schmitt himself who makes use of messianic concepts. In other words, Agamben wants to clarify Paul by using Schmitt, but he ends up using Paul to clarify Schmitt. Thus, if we carry the passage to an extreme, we could say that it is Schmitt himself that is one of the examples of the secularization of
theological concepts that defines modern politics. In fact, what Schmitt conceptualizes as the condition of the law within the state of exception coincides with the condition of the law when it is deactivated through the messianic.

The puzzling change of perspective performed by Agamben is confirmed by the way in which he elaborates on the structural convergences between exception and messianic deactivation. First, he summarizes Schmitt’s theory of exception; then, he goes on showing the correspondences between the main features of exception and the Pauline account of the deactivated law. Thus, in the wake of Schmitt, Agamben focuses on three main aspects of exception, which he phrases in terms of ‘inclusive exclusion’, a notion that famously plays a pivotal role in other major publications by Agamben, especially in *Homo Sacer* and *State of Exception*.

The first aspect, which directly derives from the intrinsic logic of exception understood in terms of an inclusive exclusion, is the lack of distinction between the outside and the inside, as is especially apparent in ‘the paradox of sovereignty’. The second relevant point of the state of exception is the indistinction between the violation of the law and the application of it. Accordingly, given the suspension of the law, one does not know how to execute the law. Finally, the third meaningful aspect is that the law cannot be formulated at all. This means that the suspension of the law does not result in the statement of new prescriptions or obligations, that is, the old law is not replaced with a new one. When explaining the structural correspondences between the messianic condition of the law and the state of exception (i.e. between the messianic deactivation of the law and the suspension of the law), Agamben thinks of the ‘indiscernability’ between the outside and the inside in terms of an indistinction between those who follow the law and those who are outside the law. Thus, Paul’s messianic deactivation, which is based on *pistis* (i.e. faith, belief, or conviction), does not allow for any boundaries between Jews and non-Jews. This is precisely the radical novelty Agamben attributes to Paul’s apostleship.

Shall we conclude that, in his reading of Paul, Agamben intends to trace back the political (i.e. the political notion of exception) to the theological (i.e. Paul’s understanding of the law)? Agamben’s position is actually more complex and ambiguous. One cannot argue that Agamben is trying to provide religious or quasi-religious foundations of the political. For some characteristics of the messianic he highlights in his Pauline commentary – especially the structure of exception – are also outlined independently of the Pauline letters, albeit in different forms, in the book *Homo Sacer*. Thus, it seems that he discovers in Paul structures that can also be found in non-Christian documents. From this point of view, Paul’s messianism would be just one manifestation of a deeper and more fundamental dimension. Accordingly, we cannot argue that Agamben articulates the question of political theology in terms of the secularization pointed out by Schmitt. Nonetheless, there are examples in Agamben’s book on Paul that are very close to Schmitt’s secularization thesis. It is helpful to briefly mention two of them at least.

Agamben points out the fact that Marxism entails elements that derive from a secularization of the messianic:

Benjamin’s thesis, that the Marxian concept of a ‘classless society’ is a secularization of the idea of messianic time, is obviously pertinent to us here. We will therefore attempt to take
Dionysius’s etymology seriously for a short moment in bringing together the function of messianic klēsis for Paul with the function of class for Marx. Just as class represents the dissolution of all ranks and the emergence of a split between the individual and his own social condition, so too does messianic klēsis signify the hollowing out and nullification of all juridical-factual conditions through the form of the as not.\textsuperscript{13}

Agamben argues that ‘Marx’s secularization of the messianic seems to me to be accurate and precise, up to this point’.\textsuperscript{14} However, it is important to avoid rushed conclusions. In my opinion, when visualizing the link between Marxism and Pauline messianism, Agamben does not want to suggest that the actual meaning of Pauline messianism lies in revolution. Pauline messianism is not revolutionary if we understand revolution in the way modernity understands it. The ‘nullification of all juridical–factual conditions’ Pauline messianism is supposed to signify does not mean the actual ‘dissolution of all ranks’. In other words, Pauline messianism does not want to destroy factual social, juridical, and political conditions but intends to experience them through the filter of the hōs mē.

Agamben also uses Schmitt’s secularization thesis with regard to Hegel’s notion of sublation (\textit{Aufhebung}), which he traces back, via Luther’s translation, to Paul’s notion of deactivation. Here, Schmitt’s thesis is used to display the hidden theological core of Hegel’s philosophy:

That Hegel’s dialectic is nothing more than a secularization of Christian theology comes as no surprise; however, more significant is the fact that (with a certain degree of irony) Hegel used a weapon against theology furnished by theology itself and that this weapon is genuinely messianic.\textsuperscript{15}

This short passage contains at least three theses that cannot be overestimated in the context of Agamben’s Pauline commentary. As already said, the first thesis is that Hegel’s dialectic is a secularization of Christian theology. This point is neither new nor surprising, as Agamben himself admits. However, he substantiates this thesis with a new insight into the concept of sublation by tracing it back to Pauline \textit{katargēsis}. The second thesis is that Hegel uses a secularized theological concept against theology itself. In my opinion, Agamben refers to the fact that the dialectical logic based on sublation allows Hegel to attribute to philosophy a more foundational role than that of religion and theology, which means that at the end of the dialectical process they are both absorbed in the absolute self-knowledge of the spirit. The third thesis is even more fascinating because it can be applied to Agamben himself. Here, the crucial point is that the secularized instrument of sublation – secretly theological and used by Hegel against theology itself – is actually messianic in nature. What does Agamben mean with his claim to display the messianic core of Hegel’s dialectic? He outlines the following genealogy: The Pauline deactivation of the law has an original messianic meaning. In the course of the history of Christianity, however, such a messianic meaning has been lost because theology (i.e. the institutionalized theological doctrines) disempowered the genuinely messianic element of Paul’s apostleship.\textsuperscript{16} When Hegel incorporates the Pauline deactivation of the law into his philosophical system, he does not confine himself to the philosophical secularization of Paul’s account of deactivation, but his use of it is messianic precisely because it is anti-theological. In other words, it is not a mere dialectical process within theology itself. Regardless of whether Agamben’s
messianic interpretation of Hegel’s dialectic is plausible or not, in this context the crucial point is that Agamben’s approach to Pauline messianism is not that far from what he attributes to Hegel himself. What is Agamben actually doing with his commentary on the letter to the Romans? He is indeed rediscovering the original meaning of Pauline messianism, with the intention of using the rediscovered core of messianism while highlighting the limits of theological discourse itself. In the final analysis, in Agamben’s eyes, his reversal of Schmitt’s secularization thesis has an instrumental function as his actual aim is to point out precisely the ‘zone of indistinction’ where the theological and the political enigmatically and ambiguously overlap.17

Agamben’s attempt to challenge and supplement Schmitt’s thesis is clearly attested by his approach in another book that belongs to the Homo Sacer cycle, which is The Kingdom and the Glory. In that context, he explicitly refers to Schmitt’s secularization thesis:

In 1922, Carl Schmitt encapsulated the theological-political paradigm in a lapidary thesis: ‘All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts’ (Schmitt 2005, p. 36). If our hypothesis about the existence of a double paradigm is correct, this statement should be supplemented in a way that would extend its validity well beyond the boundaries of public law, extending up to the fundamental concepts of the economy and the very idea of the reproductive life of human societies. However, the thesis according to which the economy could be a secularized theological paradigm acts retroactively on theology itself, since it implies that from the beginning theology conceives divine life and the history of humanity as an oikonomia, that is, that theology is itself ‘economic’ and did not simply become so at a later time through secularization.18

This crucial passage supports my interpretive hypothesis according to which Agamben significantly changes the perspective when approaching Schmitt’s thesis. It is worth noticing that in this case his approach concerns not only the political, the theological, and the juridical, but also the economic. As a matter of fact, his analysis does not end up in a mere reversal of Schmitt’s thesis but, more precisely, in a genealogical view on the origin of those distinctions themselves. Such an analysis is fully in line with the ‘topological’19 method Agamben adheres to in Homo Sacer, where he aims to problematize a number of allegedly self-evident differentiations by pointing out what he calls a ‘zone of indistinction’.20 At this juncture, it is useful to take into account some concrete examples with particular reference to Agamben’s commentary on the Pauline letters.

**Agamben’s genealogy of political-theological concepts**

In the first part of this article, I showed how Agamben challenges and supplements Schmitt’s secularization thesis and reformulates it to offer a new reading of the Pauline account of the law. In this part, I want to elaborate on the role deactivation plays within the framework of Pauline messianism. This topic provides a good example of how Agamben concretely conceives the relationship between the political and the theological.

The similarity between the Pauline deactivation of the law and the state of exception can be documented by viewing the former in the light of specific features of Paul’s messianic experience, especially the ἥσος μέ and Paul’s messianic vocation, which Agamben understands in terms of ‘the revocation of every vocation’.21 The link between
Paul’s messianic vocation and the state of exception becomes particularly apparent in the following passage:

The messianic vocation is not a right, nor does it furnish an identity; rather, it is a generic potentiality [potenza] that can be used without ever being owned. To be messianic, to live in the Messiah, signifies the expropriation of each and every juridical-factical property (circumcised/uncircumcised; free/slave; man/woman) under the form of the as not. This expropriation does not, however, found a new identity.22

The crucial term in the passage is ‘potentiality’. The messianic deactivation of juridical-factual conditions does not result in a new identity, that is, in the actualization of new conditions. If this were the case, certain actualized factual conditions would be replaced with other actualized conditions. Yet Agamben stresses precisely the fact that the messianic does not introduce ‘a new identity’. Indeed, the specific feature of the messianic is that it cannot ever be exhausted by the actualization of new properties. Otherwise, the messianic would turn out to be just one factual element among others.

In this context, Agamben links the messianic to two pivotal notions that define his approach to Paul, that is, the notion of use and that of expropriation. If the messianic does not found a new identity and does not replace certain factual conditions with other ones, it actually consists in an expropriation. Expropriation does not mean, however, the loss of factual-juridical properties, but rather a different way of experiencing them by means of the filter of the ἡσμ. Accordingly, one does not lose her or his properties and social, economic, political, etc., conditions. They are still there, but she or he lives and experiences them from the point of view of the ἡσμ. They are not her or his belongings, nevertheless she or he uses them. The condition of using factual conditions and properties without possessing them can be described as analogous to the state of exception. Let us elaborate on the structural analogies between the messianic experience of the world and the state of exception.

The first thing one can notice is that the state of exception does not destroy or abolish the law, rather it deactivates the normal juridical situation; the law is still present but as suspended law, that is, a law that is not being executed.23 The same applies to the factual conditions experienced by means of the ἡσμ. Those conditions are not abolished or destroyed but suspended in an intermediate state between full possession and complete dismissal.

Second, it is important to understand why Agamben is using the word ‘expropriation’ to characterize the messianic use of properties, things, and qualities. In this context, expropriation cannot be understood as alienation, that is, an act of transferring properties, things, and qualities to another. One gives up ownership, but she or he keeps using these things nonetheless. Thus, expropriation is an intermediate state between full ownership and alienation. In accordance with Agamben’s reading, exception means precisely an intermediate state between inclusion and exclusion, in the sense that it is an inclusion by means of an exclusion.24

Third, both in the state of exception and in the messianic experience of the world, the law is deactivated. Neither one of these conditions implies the destruction or abolishment of the law. In the state of exception, the law itself allows for its own suspension, so that it no longer applies.25 In the messianic, the law is not abolished but is deactivated in such a way that it is fulfilled at the same time. As Agamben points out,
there is no opposition between *pistis* (faith) and *nomos* (law), but what seems to be an
opposition is actually an interplay within a more fundamental dimension.\(^{26}\)

In order to explain this important point, it is useful to summarize Agamben’s
understanding of Pauline *pistis*.\(^ {27}\) This analysis, too, shows the intertwining between
the political and the theological in which Agamben is most interested. Agamben’s
genealogy of the notion of *pistis* provides, in fact, a further example of the extent to
which Agamben wants to clarify basic concepts of traditional religious and political
vocabulary by tracing them back to their own emergence from a ‘zone of indistinction’,
in which the political, the juridical, and the theological are intertwined. This way of
proceeding seems to be quite counterintuitive. One would expect the opposite, that is, a
clarification that disentangles the multiple connotations of the ideas to be examined.
Nevertheless, the strength of Agamben’s genealogical method lies precisely in that he
shows how the seemingly obvious approach does not succeed in explaining the relation-
ship these areas have with one another. In other words, a genealogical approach is more
fruitful than a synchronic analysis that pays attention to the already established mean-
ings of words and notions:

\[\text{since } \textit{pistis} \text{ is tightly bound up in its origin with oath and only takes on the technical-
juridical meaning of ‘guarantee’ and ‘credit’ later on, it then it comes from this same obscure
prehistoric background. Even more significantly, this means that when Paul sets}
\textit{pistis} \text{ against law, he does not intend to set a new and luminous element against the}
‘antiquity of the \textit{nomos}.’ Rather, he plays one element of prelaw against the other, or, at the
very least, he tries to disentangle two elements that present themselves as being tightly
interwoven at their origin.}\(^ {28}\)

Thus, even if Agamben seems to follow Schmitt in detecting secularized notions, he is
more nuanced when he goes back to the primordial dimension in which both the
political and the theological are rooted.

This strategy is at work at several critical junctures in other writings by Agamben.
The most important example is the notion of *homo sacer* (sacred man). At first glance,
this notion seems to have a religious origin. However, Agamben explicitly rejects an
exclusively religious emergence arguing that the notion becomes clear only when it is
also considered in light of its juridical and political implications.\(^ {29}\) Agamben tries to do
justice to the complexity of the notion of *homo sacer* by emphasizing the fact that *homo
sacer* inherently implies a double exception, with regard to the human law (*ius
humanum*) as well as the divine law (*ius divinum*).\(^ {30}\) On the one hand, *homo sacer* is
exceptional with reference to the human law in that someone can kill another without
committing homicide. Thus, *homo sacer* is included in the human community precisely
by the fact that homicide does not apply to her or him. On the other hand, *homo sacer*
is exceptional in relation to the divine law because she or he may not be sacrificed
within the frame of a ritual.\(^ {31}\) Thus, the enigma of *homo sacer* is located at the
intersection between the political and the religious, neither an exclusively political
issue nor a solely religious problem. More interestingly, according to Agamben’s
genealogical approach, this enigma allows us to see more clearly juridical patterns
that shape contemporary political orders. For example, think of the exceptional status
of presidents or kings in contemporary Western democracies or constitutional mon-
archies. The fact that presidents and kings may not be subject to ordinary trials and the
fact that killing a president or a king is usually regarded as more than a homicide are traces of the ancestral intertwining between the political, the religious, and the juridical.  

It is worth noticing the double function of Agamben’s genealogical approach, which is very consistent with the messianic task of his own philosophical project. The genealogy of *homo sacer* does not have a merely antiquarian meaning but is instrumental to an understanding of new forms of *homo sacer* in the contemporary world. In other words, his genealogy provides a diagnosis and at the same time an etiology of current political and social diseases affecting our age. But Agamben’s genealogy is also expected to offer therapies in that it can rediscover possibilities in our tradition that have been forgotten or distorted. Messianism, especially as presented by Agamben in its Pauline fashion, is a latent force that genealogy reactivates with a view to finding solutions to current problems. It is no exaggeration to say that Agamben’s genealogy, as articulated in the books that belong to the *Homo Sacer* cycle, is a political act that he expects will show a way out of the biopolitical management of *hominis sacri*.

The execution of Agamben’s genealogy is not that far from the function he ascribes to the messianic. Agamben presents the messianic as an element that breaks with the established political and juridical orders. Similarly, Agambenian genealogy is supposed to break with allegedly fixed concepts and ideas by showing their origin and especially the intertwining of juridical, political, and theological connotations that have forged them. And yet, the relation between the messianic and genealogy is more than similarity or analogy. When one reads the first pages and the last pages of Agamben’s Pauline book, one realizes that Agamben’s messianic appropriation of Paul is expected to show a new way of understanding the political and the religious in order to break the gridlock of the contemporary world.

The question of life: Pauline political messianism and the *Homo Sacer* cycle

Agamben’s book on Paul is not included in the *Homo Sacer* cycle. Nevertheless, it contains important links with the philosophical project Agamben started in 1995 with the publication of *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. The political messianism Agamben outlines in his Pauline book is an attempt to answer the questions he poses in *Homo Sacer* and an anticipation of themes on which he elaborates in his writings published in the last few years. A clear example is the category of potentiality. Both in his Pauline commentary and in *Homo Sacer*, Agamben comments on language in the light of potentiality. This may be understood as a further confirmation of the theoretical ties that connect the two books. More remarkably, potentiality plays a central role in an analysis of the relationship between constituted and constituting power. This problem is crucial in understanding the theoretical background against which Agamben more or less explicitly highlights the political scope of the messianic. Constituted power is another face of actuality, that is, of what needs to be deactivated. In his book on Paul, Agamben does not mention the question. However, the problem is still in play when Agamben argues that the messianic can serve as a renewing force in order to overcome (i.e. deactivate) rigidified social, juridical, and political orders.
Concerning the question of constituted and constituting power, I find Agamben’s use of Schmitt’s framework of exception to be problematic because he does employ it to explain the role of sovereignty in biopolitical modernity and to describe messianic deactivation. If they both end up with a suspension of the law (i.e. sovereign exception and Pauline katargēsis), then it is not clear the extent to which the Pauline deactivation of the law can act against sovereign exception. It seems to me that in his commentary on Paul Agamben is still looking for a new conception of potentiality that is supposed to explain the nature of the messianic and, at the same time, cannot be reduced to the potentiality specific to the sovereign exception. Nonetheless, the Pauline book contains interesting elaborations that point to a possible solution. Let us focus on them.

At first look, the messianic can be identified as a form of constituting power. But this is inaccurate and is not in line with Agamben’s intention. On closer inspection, in Homo Sacer Agamben argues that it is necessary to break with the circularity that characterizes the interplay between constituting and constituted power. According to him, a new form of power is much needed, and in this connection, he tries to take inspiration from Walter Benjamin’s concept of divine violence. In Homo Sacer, however, Agamben does not come to a final answer. Instead, the Pauline commentary shows a more definite step forward. In fact, the messianic seems to be a very suitable candidate to break the circular interplay between constituting and constituted power. In later publications, Agamben speaks of ‘destituent power’. In a recent interview, in which Agamben seems to suggest a solution for Europe’s current crisis, the link is made very explicit indeed. Pauline messianism and ‘destituent power’ are in fact nothing but different names for the same renewing force Agamben deems necessary for enacting new forms of politics. Let us outline Agamben’s answer to the question of how the messianic or ‘destituent power’ can break the circularity of power.

In Homo Sacer, Agamben frames the question of life in a triangle: qualified life, natural life, and bare life. Agamben conceives the Aristotelian opposition between bios and zōē in terms of the distinction between qualified life, that is, the life that has been shaped in a certain way – especially with regard to the political community – and the natural life shared by humans and the other living beings. At the beginning of Homo Sacer, natural life and bare life seem to overlap and almost coincide. On closer inspection, however, a basic difference between natural life and bare life comes to the fore so that bare life, that is, the life of homo sacer, is precisely the zone of indistinction between qualified life and natural life and, more importantly, the zone where the political emerges. In other words, bare life, understood as the life of homo sacer as distinct from natural life in the widest sense of the word, is the condition of the possibility of sovereignty, in that the sovereign constitutes itself precisely in relation to bare life, which turns out to be the life exposed to sovereign violence. More precisely, on the one hand, bare life is the object of the sovereign, that is, what is subject to the sovereign. On the other hand, the sovereign also constitutes itself in terms of homo sacer due to its exceptional nature, which I have already mentioned earlier.

Thus, it seems that life is necessarily embedded in this triangular framework, with the result being that life does not seem to escape sovereignty. However, it is precisely in his reading of Paul that Agamben starts to see a fourth possibility, which indeed can be considered as a way of breaking both with the triangular framework of sovereignty and with the circular interplay between constituting and constituted power. This fourth
possibility is precisely a ‘destituent’ form of life. How does a destituent or messianic form of life act towards the sovereign? The messianic form of life does not intend to introduce a new form of sovereignty, so it never acts as a new form of constituting power, which is fated to become another form of constituted power sooner or later. It is precisely for this reason that Agamben rejects any attempt to institutionalize the messianic. He considers a messianic institution as a contradiction in terms and assumes that the messianic is inherently resistant to institutionalization. Messianic life does not want to subvert or destroy established social and political orders with a view to introducing new orders. Rather, it experiences and lives those orders through the filter of the hos mē. Thus, the Pauline revolution is radically different from modern revolutions, which are still included in the logic of sovereignty, and disempowers the sovereign insomuch as the messianic does not battle against it. Messianic life is revolutionary precisely because it gives up any attempt to destroy the established order of social and political relationships. It maintains them and at the same time deactivates them by means of the hos mē. Agamben’s basic idea is that Pauline messianism deactivates sovereignty.

As previously mentioned, however, severe ambiguities can be pointed out once one tries to contextualize Agamben’s reading of Paul within the framework of the theory elaborated in the Homo Sacer cycle. In Homo Sacer, Agamben clearly criticizes the condition of the state of exception that defines modern and contemporary sovereignty. Thus, it seems that Agamben evaluates the state of exception in a very negative way and argues for the necessity of overcoming the indistinction between the law and exception – between the state of nature and the state of law, between the law and fact – that is increasingly affecting the contemporary age. And yet, his evaluation of Pauline katargēsis, which is explicitly said to be at least structurally analogous to the state of exception – if not another manifestation of it – is largely positive, to the effect that the messianic, understood as a deactivating force, is considered by Agamben precisely the dimension that should be experienced again if we want to overcome what he calls ‘[t]he juridicizing of all human relations’. By such a ‘juridicizing’ Agamben means a condition in which the experience of language has lost its original performativity and articulates itself by means of precepts without any link to the living dimension of personal or interpersonal experience. In other words, as a consequence of this ‘juridicizing’, language has become a dimension detached from life. It is important to stress that when Agamben concentrates his attention on the performativity of Pauline language, his analysis of what he calls ‘performativum fidei’ presupposes an overriding issue, which is not only the religious importance of linguistic performativity, but also the political and juridical relevance of performativity. This crucial point becomes clear if one also takes into consideration his archeology of oath, which is outlined in The Sacrament of Language. Here, too, Agamben does not isolate the religious, the political, and the juridical, but tries to trace these back to their roots. It is only against the background of this genealogical approach that the relevance of the Pauline commentary for Agamben’s philosophical program in general becomes apparent. If one decontextualizes the Pauline book, it is not clear why Agamben pays much attention to the juridical and political significance of Paul’s apostleship, and why juridical, political, and religious aspects are investigated in close conjunction with one another.
The originality of Agamben’s messianic interpretation of Paul

Agamben’s political messianism becomes clearer when one compares his reading of Paul with Heidegger’s apolitical interpretation of the Pauline letters. The comparison is especially intriguing because the question of life is the primary focus of Heidegger’s reading as well as of Agamben’s commentary. In other words, they both read the Pauline letters through the lens of that question, but come to very different conclusions. It is, therefore, useful to elaborate on the substantial differences between Heidegger’s phenomenological interpretation and Agamben’s commentary on the letter to the Romans.

In Heidegger’s phenomenological interpretation of Paul, the Pauline letters are deprived of any political import. The apolitical tone of Heidegger’s Pauline commentary comes as no real surprise. It is symptomatic of the general apolitical tone that defines his project of a phenomenological hermeneutics of factical life. Despite the intriguing innovations Heidegger introduces in that project, his conception of factical life is highly indebted to the epistemological debates that determined German thought at the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century, especially in the wake of the philosophical work of Dilthey and Husserl. This is attested to, among other things, by the fact that Heidegger still considers ‘understanding’ (Verstehen) and ‘explication’ (Auslegung) as the main traits of factical life. As a matter of fact, Heidegger ontologizes understanding and explication, with the result that they are not just specific cognitive acts executed when interpreting a text or historical documents, but essential characteristics of human life as such, which becomes fully clear in his analytic of existence. By combining Dilthey, Husserl, and Aristotle, that is, the hermeneutically oriented philosophies of life, phenomenology, and ontology, Heidegger formulates a new paradigm of life as facticity, but such an ontologization is still developed on the basis of the epistemological categories of understanding and explication. This approach does not allow him to do justice to other fundamental characteristics of human life. In the context of this article, it is worth noticing that it is especially the political that disappears in Heidegger’s phenomenology of facticity. He does not pay any attention to the phenomena of power, interest, and conflict, which are essential components of any philosophical consideration of political phenomena. Intersubjectivity is present in the early Heidegger in the form of ‘the communal world’ (Mitwelt). And yet, the relations between the subjects remain abstract and void of any political significance. In other words, Heidegger might address the ontological foundations of social phenomena but is not able to open up new horizons for a philosophical understanding of political phenomena, which is a consequence of the predominantly epistemological nature of his ontological conception of facticity. This approach becomes apparent in his interpretation of Paul as well. Heidegger devotes much attention to the factical situation of Paul, that is, to his relation to Christian communities. This dimension is very visible and comes to the fore in his reading very well. However, he does not show any appreciation, not even implicitly, for the political scope of Paul’s apostleship.

The predominantly epistemological orientation of Heidegger’s interpretation of the Pauline letters can be ascertained especially in his use of phenomenological conceptual frameworks he draws from Husserlian philosophy. It is especially the use of the
threefold ‘content–relation–enactment’ pattern that attests to what Heidegger is actually interested in, that is, an analysis of the intentional structures of religious lived experiences. In accordance with this approach, Heidegger pays no attention to other aspects of Paul’s apostleship. He neglects, for example, the historical and linguistic context in which the Pauline letters are rooted. When Heidegger analyzes Pauline pistis, he still considers it from a phenomenological viewpoint, so that pistis is regarded as a lived experience that has to be analyzed in terms of content, relation, and enactment. The fact that Heidegger heavily emphasizes the role of the concrete enactment that shapes the Pauline experience of faith does not change his basic epistemological orientation. In other words, his analysis of the Pauline enactment of faith still remains abstract, despite his claim that his phenomenological analysis is supposed to do justice to the concrete facticity, historicity, and temporality that underlie Paul’s apostleship. Thus, Heidegger’s interpretation of Paul is symptomatic of a philosophy that is not able to face political and societal challenges, because the conceptual resources it is using does not allow him to penetrate them.

By contrast, Agamben’s Pauline commentary cannot be regarded as a merely philosophical or exegetical exercise precisely because his motivations are political in nature. Agamben seems to be very close to Heidegger’s interpretation, especially as concerns the attention devoted to the temporal shape of Paul’s apostleship. On closer inspection, compared to Heidegger’s reading, the paradigm shift Agamben introduces is quite innovative because what changes is the lens through which Agamben reads Paul. The question of life that is at work in Agamben’s reading of Paul no longer concerns life insofar as it is viewed from a predominantly epistemological or ontological perspective, but life with particular reference to its inherently political import, that is, life as it is exposed to conflict and sovereign power. Agamben, too, puts much emphasis on the concrete enactment of Paul’s apostleship, but his analysis turns out to be much richer and more concrete than Heidegger’s because he substantiates his reading with sharp and provocative analyses of historical, linguistic, and juridical facts. His analysis of Pauline pistis is a paradigmatic example of his general approach to Paul. Pistis is no longer a phenomenon of consciousness – as is still the case with Heidegger’s phenomenology of Pauline facticity – but a phenomenon that also requires historical, linguistic, and anthropological investigations, which, among other things, allow one to see pistis in the light of a more fundamental dimension, such as ‘prelaw’. Agamben’s innovative approach lies precisely in his attempt to overcome a purely philosophical analysis, so that he highlights the fascinating intersection of linguistic, anthropological, and historical elements that are at the core of Paul’s apostleship.

Accordingly, Agamben’s understanding of life has to be viewed in the light of a completely different philosophical landscape than Heidegger’s, one which is no longer characterized by the epistemological debates in play in nineteenth- and twentieth-century German thought, but by the biopolitical discourse that starts with Michel Foucault and becomes fully apparent in contemporary Italian thinkers such as Antonio Negri and Roberto Esposito. In a recent essay, Esposito provides convincing arguments in his attempt to show the radical paradigm shift that defines biopolitics in contemporary Italian thought. In the present context, I cannot elaborate on the general thesis that is developed by Esposito, which touches the Italian philosophical tradition as a whole. I am convinced, however, that he succeeds in showing the extent to
which the conception of life at stake in Italian biopolitical discourse, including Agamben, has little to do with a vague philosophy of life. Against the background of this account of life, which emphasizes the political, one can understand the reasons why Agamben attributes political significance to Pauline messianism.

Yet, Agamben’s originality is also found in the way in which he attributes political import to the Pauline letters. He presents Paul as one who is radically political, although not in the traditional sense of the word. As already mentioned, Agamben’s Paul is politically committed not because he adheres to a revolutionary program, but precisely because he constitutes an alternative to modern politics. Indeed, the concept of use Agamben sketches out in his Pauline commentary constitutes the core of his philosophical program of the last few years. This circumstance attests to the crucial role the Pauline book plays in the development of the theories outlined in Homo Sacer. In this context, at least two pivotal works by Agamben should be mentioned, namely, The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life and The Use of Bodies, which concludes the Homo Sacer cycle. An analysis of these two books goes beyond the scope of this article. I would like to mention, however, the fact that if one views Agamben’s Pauline book retrospectively, one can easily ascertain its central role. On the one hand, The Time That Remains has to be understood against the background of the problems Agamben focuses on in Homo Sacer. On the other hand, the Pauline commentary anticipates a number of themes Agamben works out more precisely in The Highest Poverty and The Use of Bodies. It is especially The Use of Bodies that clearly shows to what extent Agamben’s commentary on Paul’s letter to the Romans provided him with crucial conceptual frameworks that helped him elaborate on the questions posed in Homo Sacer. In the first part of The Use of Bodies, Agamben analyzes the concept of use by referring to a considerable number of ancient and modern sources. At first sight, Paul does not seem to play a determining role in this connection. Upon closer inspection, however, one can easily notice that Agamben recalls the main aspects of the political messianism described in The Time That Remains by mentioning his reading of the hōs mē. The hōs mē recurs in the Epilogue of The Use of Bodies, in which Agamben outlines ‘a theory of destituent potential’. Here, Agamben eventually considers Pauline messianism as ‘[a]n example of a destituent strategy that is neither destructive nor constituent’, that is, as a form of life that can help us find a way out of the deadlock of sovereign power.

Notes

3. See Schmitt, Political Theology, 36. In the present context, I cannot enter into detail on Schmitt’s account of political theology and secularization, which deserves a much more nuanced analysis. Thus, I confine myself to shedding some light on the way in which Agamben’s political messianism can be seen from the viewpoint of Schmitt’s secularization thesis. Concerning Schmitt’s account of political theology and secularization, see Strong, ‘The Sovereign and the Exception’.
5. Ibid.
6. See ibid., 95.
7. See Cimino, ‘Messianic Experience of Language’.
9. Ibid., 105.
10. See, for example, Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 21.
11. Ibid., 15.
13. Ibid., 30–1.
15. Ibid., 99.
16. Ibid., 1–2.
17. Concerning the expression ‘zone of indistinction’, see, for example, Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 19.
20. See note 17.
22. Ibid., 26.
25. See ibid., 18.
27. See ibid.
28. Ibid.
30. See ibid., 81–3.
31. See ibid.
32. See ibid., 101–3.
35. See, for example, Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 20–1; Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 126–37.
39. See ibid., 40.
40. See, for example, Agamben, ‘From the State of Control to a Praxis of Destituent Power’.
41. See Radisch, ‘Europa muss kollabieren’.
43. See, for example, ibid., 4.
44. See ibid., 90.
45. See ibid., 88–9.
46. See ibid., 102–3.
47. See Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 1.
50. See ibid., 135–7.
51. See ibid., 134.
52. See Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language*, 11.
53. See, for example, Heidegger, *Ontology*, 11–6.
55. See Cimino, ‘Fatticità politica’.
56. See, for example, Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 8.
57. See, for example, ibid., 65–7.
58. See ibid., 43.
59. See ibid., 93–111.
60. See ibid., 105–10.
61. See, for example, Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 106–7.
64. See, for example, Agamben, *The Highest Poverty*, 123–43; Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 24–30.
65. Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 56.
66. Ibid., 263.
67. Ibid., 273.

**Acknowledgements**

This article results from my post-doctoral research project *The Truth of Conviction: Attestation, Testimony, and Declaration*, financed by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). It is part of a larger project, *Overcoming the Faith–Reason Opposition: Pauline Pistis in Contemporary Philosophy* [project number 360-25-120], carried out at Radboud University and at the University of Groningen, The Netherlands.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Funding**

This work was supported by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) [project no. 360-25-120].

**Notes on contributor**

*Antonio Cimino* is an assistant professor at the Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies, Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands. He holds a Ph.D. degree in philosophy from the University of Pisa, Pisa, Italy. His main research interests are practical philosophy and history of contemporary European thought. He is the author of *Ontologia, storia, temporalità: Heidegger, Platone e l’essenza della filosofia* (2005) and *Phänomenologie und Vollzug: Heideggers performative Philosophie des faktischen Lebens* (2013).

**Bibliography**


