



On the Possibility of Formless Life: Agamben's Politics of the Gesture*

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abstract

Human activity is routinely thought of in terms of form and teleology. In the first section, it is argued that this is due to the spell of Plato and Aristotle. In the second section, Agamben's struggle to evade teleological schemes is discussed. He argues for a politics of the gesture. This is a politics that blurs entrenched distinctions between the human and the non-human and therefore opens a perspective to a communality that questions not only positivist anthropology but also, and in relation to this, teleology.

Introduction

Many philosophers, scientists, and intellectuals have argued that work or labour is a pre-eminently human characteristic. That is, we differ from animals because our actions can be designed as if there were a goal attached to it. Work, Georg Lukàcs (1973) once argued, is 'teleological positioning' (*'teleologische Setzung'*) and I believe that most philosophers would somehow be in agreement with this. If activity loses its aim, it is no longer seen as work.

As a consequence, work is generally located in an atmosphere of objectivity and necessity. Working persons are not ordinary subjects anymore but have become, so to speak, objectified subjects: they act in conformity with rules and regulations rather than according to their own creative desires. They subject themselves to well-determined roles for they understand that this is the best guarantee to acquire means of existence. Work is routinely couched in rigid forms. We have lost the ability not to think about human activity in terms of organization. Reflections about work and organization run the risk of becoming senseless and irrelevant when elements such as form, goal, differentiation, efficiency, or coordination are lacking. It is even worse than this: such reflections do not only ignore economic or industrial essentials but also human ones. It is "a basic characteristic of human beings", argues John Rawls (1971: 523), that

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no one person can do everything that he might do; nor a fortiori can he do everything that any other person can do. The potentialities of each individual are greater than those he can hope to realize; and they fall far short from the powers among men generally. (Rawls, 1971: 523)

And who would dare to disagree with this? There are always so many possibilities that remain unfulfilled were it not that people start working together. According to Rawls, organization, training, and planning offer the sole prospect of realizing at least some of all these dormant possibilities. In fact, they even help us to overcome our anger and frustration with all that seems so unrealisable.

Yet, there is something nagging about this. Work, it is true, may help us to realize the otherwise unrealisable, but what is the price to be paid for this? To realize the unrealisable people have to divide work and the problem is that this division of work cannot be achieved without a division of their very selves. Put simply, the organization of labour cannot be detached from the organization of human beings. This has profound consequences for the communities to which they belong. These become communities of identities, functions, classes, and exclusions. These are communities based on separations.

Can human activity be thought of as formless, inclusive, integral? In the first section of the paper, I shall maintain that reflections about the subject hardly ever escape from the tyranny of timeless form. That is, they either follow a 'Platonic principle' or an 'Aristotelian principle'. According to both principles, the very idea of formless activity is meaningless. But is it? In the second section, I will discuss the concept of a gesture as it is developed by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. He introduces this concept as an alternative to Aristotelian conceptions of human activity that are, in his view, always related to means-end schemes. The concept of the gesture radically breaks with these schemes. The gesture, Agamben maintains, is a means without an end. Hence, the gesture refers to a formless kind of life that allows for a community (*polis*) without entrenched identities, functions, and exclusions. Agamben offers us the possibility of a politics of the gesture. What are we to make out of this?

The Shadow of Teleology: Plato and Aristotle

Plato

Plato understood that the division of labour in the state he logically constructed could only be successful if linked to the separation of the community in corresponding classes. The person who produces belongs to a class of producers (shoemakers, weavers, farmers are the preferred examples); the person who fights belongs to a class of fighters (soldiers, warriors); and the person who rules belongs to a class of rulers (philosophers). So already here, in a work that has been argued to have laid the foundation of Western philosophy, we have a technical and more philosophical justification of the division of labour. It is only through specialization and professionalism that we can make more than we would achieve otherwise (which is the technical justification). Specialization and professionalism are also perfect responses to people obviously having different natural aptitudes (which is the philosophical justification). In Plato's logical universe,

every talent deserves its own specific function. Indeed, this is regarded as a matter of justice and not doing what is in accordance to your natural talents is deemed to be a gross violation of this justice (Plato, 1971: 347a-347b).

Plato's trust in a state run by specialists is not innocent at all, as has been pointed out by many commentators, since it is to be understood as nothing less than an attack on Athenian democracy. A timeless and therefore incorruptible class division was proffered by Plato as an indispensable alternative to what he could only understand as chaos and weakness. His objections to democracy are crystalline clear. Admittedly, democracy is attractive for it has to offer many different colours. Sometimes, it seems as if all the colours are shown off in the shops and that is, according to Plato, a blessing for women and children (1971: 557c). He links democracy to what we nowadays would consider as immoderate consumption. Such consumption is nice for the masses (most notably, women and children) but disastrous for a state that has to wage war on enemies in order to gain wealth (which is, of course, a really masculine activity). Democracy lacks coercion and authority, respect and rightness. More importantly, it lacks sense for truth and transparency amongst its political leaders.

In the preface of my English edition of *The Republic*, the translator argues that Plato's alternative for democracy is a kind of totalitarian aristocracy in which positions are determined by talent rather than by blood. If we are to coin modern terminology for what Plato envisaged, then 'management meritocracy' (1971: 50) would, at least according to my translator, be a serious candidate. Now, this is, of course, based on an intolerable trans-historical understanding of Plato who was, after all, not a management author *avant la lettre* – but it makes one thing very clear: in a well-ordered society, human interaction is determined by unshakeable technical and social distinctions. Plato is not a management thinker but managers are clearly enthralled by what Marx referred to as 'the Platonic principle'. This is based on an understanding of the all-importance of time:

So do we do better to exercise one skill or to try to practice several?
To stick to one, he said.
And there is a further point. It is fatal in any job to miss the right moment for action.
Clearly.
The workman must be a professional at the call of his job; his job will not wait till he has leisure to spare for it.
That is inevitable.
Quantity and quality are therefore more easily produced when a man specializes appropriately on a single job for which he is naturally fitted, and neglects all the others. (Plato, 1971: 370bc)

Marx (1981: 387) captures the Platonic principle as follows: The workman should be directed (*gerichtet, richten*) towards the job. The reverse situation, that is, when the job is directed to the workman, is deemed to be hopelessly inefficient. Lack of specialization would allow the workman to carry out as many additional jobs as he likes. As a consequence, the job would 'wait' for a workman to be picked up and hence "the right time for production would be lost" (*ibid.*). Marx argues that the Platonic division of labour is governed by serious concerns about useful and useless time. As such it should not be related, he argues, to the city-state of Sparta that Plato admired so much but to class or caste system in ancient Egypt, the first industrial model state that we know. It is well known that Plato was an admirer of Egypt and that his ideas about

the ideal state resonate with what he happened to know about the situation there (see also, for example, Popper, 2003: 242, 245-246). His image of Egypt was informed by a deep discontent with movement and change, exactly the kind of stuff that he bemoaned so much in the Athenian democracy where he lived. Social institutions, Plato contends, should be petrified in time as if they were to be denied any development of their own. Something similar was assumed with respect to the 'natural aptitudes' of the workman. A weaver is a weaver, a shoemaker a shoemaker, and a warrior a warrior, and all these people are involved not only in stupidity but also in injustice if they are deviating from the straight and narrow path that nature has laid down for them. Job enrichment would be something unheard of in Plato's ideal state.

After Plato, real states have never been able to strictly follow his recipes. It is well known that his Sicilian experiments with the totalitarian state were doomed to fail. On the other hand, we should not derive too much optimism from Plato's political failures. His ominous shadow has never been far away, not even in democratic territories. Marx (1981: 388), to mention just one of his heirs and critics, rather desperately asked himself: "*Le platonisme, ou va-t-il se nicher?*" ("Where will Platonism find its niche?").

The great German philosopher had his suspicions. Organizations and companies have never been able to get rid of their platonic mainsprings. They are the self-declared figureheads of efficiency and hence have developed, like Plato himself, a distaste for loss of time. Perhaps, one might even say that the contemporary and fashionable discontent with bureaucratic inertia might be platonically inspired. It is this inertia that justifies so many people to argue that the entrepreneur, who is seen as the master of efficiency, should become a role model for the red tape (du Gay, 2000).

Simultaneously, however, the enterprise seems to represent the seamy side in the ongoing debates about the uncomfortable relationship between democracy and efficiency. A democrat differs from the entrepreneur or the manager in that he refuses to subject others to a temporal regime: he or she modestly accepts that the adjustment of people and time will never be perfect. In other words, s/he will never transmogrify time into a scarce resource that, depending on the circumstances, allows one to tie people down to a fixed place (Moore, 1963: 7). The managers in an enterprise fancy the idea to adjust time and space and indeed struggle to fix human beings to well-defined spaces that we can best understand as tiny boxes. These boxes are denied any dynamics of their own. Movement is only possible between them rather than in them and is restricted to clear and indisputable lines. The core of the platonic principle is that a human being and his or her 'natural aptitudes' are to be understood as forms or ideas that can never change. Experts who are appointed rather than chosen see to a correct allocation of boxes.

Aristotle

Aristotle takes issue with the kind of conceitedness that is characteristic of the Platonic principle. He was the first thinker who understood that Plato's assumptions about the intrinsic relationship between the technical and social division of labour could not be taken for granted, let alone that it would in any way be sanctifying. Of course, Aristotle avers that logic and efficiency are important and that it is better when a person directs

him- or herself to only one task (1984: 1237b), but he adds that a technical division of labour need not necessarily be linked to a social division of labour. Indeed, he insists that the question of linking both kinds of divisions is not a technical but rather a political matter:

[In setting up a state,]...a number of agricultural workers will be needed to supply food; and skilled workmen will be required, and fighting men, and wealthy men, and priests, and judges of what is necessary and expedient. This enumeration being finished, it remains to consider whether they should all take part in all these activities, everybody being farmer and skilled workman and deliberator and judge (for this is not impossible) – or shall we postulate different persons for each task? Or again, are not some of the jobs necessarily confined to some people, while other may be thrown open to all? The situation is not the same in every constitution; for...it is equally possible for all to share in everything and for some to share in some things. These features are what makes the constitution different: in democracies all share in all things, in oligarchies the opposing practice prevails. (Aristotle, 1984: 414-415 or 1328b)

Aristotle argues that in the democratic city state citizens are able to carry out many different kind of functions. He assumes that these citizens have sufficient 'virtue' to carry out the many different kind of tasks that belong to a gentleman's life. If they live theirs in a 'mechanical or commercial' way, they would simply 'militate against virtue'. I will not enter here into the issue of virtuousness. My point is rather that Aristotle was perhaps the first philosopher who came to understand that the wealth that results from the division of labour might have a very strained relationship with particular social demands. This is why, in his exemplary study on Aristotelian elements in contemporary managements and economies, James Murphy labels the Greek philosopher as a precursor of Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, and Karl Marx for they all understood that history hides a tragedy in the sense that the material liberation of the human being somehow seems to require his or her spiritual subjugation:

The inexorably growing division of labour is a Promethean tale of how the destruction of the individual leads to the prosperity of the species. (Murphy, 1993: 25)

The necessity of labour undermines human freedom. In one of his fantastic footnotes, Marx (1981: 387) points out that all philosophical sympathy for the division of labour could not prevent the citizens of Athens from celebrating the ideal of 'autarky': political freedom and independence (*autarcheia*) were held in higher esteem than wealth. Now we know that it is hard to think of a political or social philosophy that does not address the fact that technology seems to be devoted to the species rather than the individual. Aristotle (1999: 322-324) was the first thinker who problematised this. In the last pages of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, to be more precise, in chapter 7 and 8 of the tenth book, he extensively elaborates on the concept of autarky. The most perfect activity of a human being belies any relationship or coordination and is, at least in this sense, truly divine.

Two remarks need to be made here. First, the Aristotelian focus on activity can be seen as a correction of the Platonic focus on production; so, it is in the Aristotelian scheme of things that the emphasis lies on practical wisdom (*phronesis*) rather than on knowledge (*episteme*) or expertise (*techne*). Second, Aristotle links the activity of *autarcheia* to theorising, thinking, and contemplating rather than to production or scientific labour. The point that I want to put forward here is that the Aristotelian idea of perfect activity

cannot be related to production, coordination or the division of labour. It belies the very idea of boxes. Or so it seems.

Rawls (1971) speaks of the ‘Aristotelian principle’ which he understands as a basic principle concerning human motivation. As indicated above, Aristotle assumes that there is an innate good in each human being, a good, moreover, that is superior to their very selves in that it directs their actions to some ultimate good (1999: 310, 1173a). That Aristotle thinks of this innate good in terms of an instinct that brings the human being into touch with the divine as a formative principle is relevant here. Even a contemporary thinker as Rawls argues that this principle allows the human being to attain for something higher, even though he does not link it so much to the divine as to the reasonable and the good. Insofar as the division of labour frustrates these high-spirited intentions of the person, it should be condemned as unreasonable and perhaps even as evil.

Rawls rephrases the Aristotelian principle as an intuitive idea with two elements:

- a) The more people improve their performance when carrying out certain tasks, the more they enjoy what they do;
- b) If they have to choose between two activities, then they will generally prefer the one that calls on “a larger repertoire of more intricate and subtle discriminations” (Rawls, 1971: 426).

Lurking behind these elements is the thought that complex activities are more pleasant because they “satisfy the desire for variety and novelty of experience” (1971: 427). Here, Rawls emphasizes the importance of anticipation, surprise, personal style, and expression, all elements that we would not associate with the Platonic principle discussed earlier. The point is that these elements become irrelevant when one is to carry out highly specialized and rather simple tasks. The Aristotelian principle explains why it is that people are motivated to carry out complex rather than simple tasks, why it is that they want to exercise at least some influence on what they have to do and also why it is that their desires change over the years. I submit that this emphasis on change and dynamics in motivational patterns of human beings is the most important Aristotelian correction of the management meritocracy that Plato had in mind. Rather than resting petrified in Plato’s ideal state, the human being is now envisaged as a lover of complexity, self-improvement, and more or less radical innovation.

However, Rawls points out that the Aristotelian principle is not universally applicable. He alerts us to the risks that are involved with complex tasks, to the learning process that can become as tedious as they are fruitless, and also to all kinds of social and psychological inhibitions. As a matter of fact, Aristotle was well aware of these problems. When it comes to work, one has to accept the obvious fact that not everybody will be capable of actualising his or her potential. Having said this however, it seems to be that the strive for actualisation is more intense than ever (ten Bos and Rhodes, 2003). We may wonder whether this should be something that we are to endorse and whether we should not opt for a somewhat moderated version of the Aristotelian principle. Why would everyone engage in the game of ever increasing complexity and subtlety? A certain nostalgic craving for simplicity and even for non-activity does not seem to be

unwelcome at all. However, such musings notwithstanding, it is the full-blown Aristotelian principle that has become widely accepted. Even Rawls, who has doubts about it, allows for the fact that the principle fits in with our nature to such an extent “that in the design to social institutions a large place has to be made for it, otherwise human beings will find their culture and form of life dull and empty” (Rawls, 1971: 429).

In our culture, dullness and emptiness is, no doubt, the worst that can happen to a human being. In the philosophical talk show *Das philosophische Quartett*, broadcasted by German television on the 16th of February 2003, Rüdiger Safranski, a well-known German philosopher, claimed that the core problem of our entire civilization, our culture and our education is to prevent that human beings, when they become older, will be bored stiff. That is why we should have them read newspapers or watch television, and, most important of all, have them do some decent job. Emptiness and boredom are omnipresent enemies for a life that is there to be enjoyed, also on the job, indeed, especially on the job. The well-known Greek fear for emptiness is still very much with us today.

Rawls is a case in point. He invokes the image of a chain of activities in which n is an activity that implies all the kind of skills that are necessary to carry out activity $n-1$ and some more skills added to this. The further you are on this chain, the more likely it is that enjoyment and happiness will prevail. Hence, the Aristotelian principle assumes that human nature always has a tendency to become less empty and to move onwards along the chain of activities that is life. We are all fastened to this chain.

Of course, we do not have to accept this story. It smacks of implacable teleology: no matter how difficult it sometimes is, in the end all work aims at the achievement of happiness and virtuousness (which are, in the Aristotelian scheme, inextricably linked). We only have to look at the behaviour of those who apparently have arrived at the full actualisation of their potential, that is, at the idiosyncrasies of leaders in business and politics to understand that teleology might boil down to a false promise. But even so, Rawls seems to have a point when he states that the Aristotelian principle seems to express nothing less than a “deep psychological fact” (1971: 432) that, in combination with rational planning and an understanding of the world as it is, accounts for many of our judgments. Put more straightforwardly, in our culture many people think that it works like this. We all seem to plan with a certain goal in mind. Of course, sometimes we come to an understanding that not everything in life can be planned, but a life without *telos* is deemed to be unacceptable. I have said that The Aristotelian principle differs from the Platonic one in that it allows for some movement and dynamics, but these new dynamics is carefully designed and not at all the same as agility or liveliness. What we have to do over time is very well organized. The community of human beings is directed towards happiness and virtuousness.

Rawls has his doubts. Sure, you have to adjust the design of your institutions to the state of affairs as Aristotle might have seen them, but to what extent? Is the Aristotelian principle irrefutably ‘good’ or ‘true’? What kind of people do we get when they only think in terms of future realizations or actualisations? Will they not think that everything that belongs to the past, their past, is stupid or boring? Is the past only a way

through to what in the end will turn out to be a success? And have we really laid down our adherence to the Platonic principle? Or is it more that we have adopted a hybrid position between the two principles, one that faces the temptation of dynamics but refuses to accept it as such? Is not what we are left with a kind of movement that is restricted because it is so well ordered? In our society, Kingwell (1998) explains, most people long for happiness, even those who work in organizations, but who of them is willing to go for happiness without relying on recipe and technique? Success needs to be certain. It should therefore be carefully extracted from organized and purposeful work. This is what Plato and Aristotle, for all their differences, would agree on.

Can we escape from their shadows? Is it possible to conceive of work or activity in a way that evades the teleological scheme? Is it possible to relate them to formlessness? It is to these questions that I will turn now.

Non-Teleological Activity: The Gesture

The Anthropological Machine

The French philosopher Michel Serres (1987: 132-133) has argued that work is always a struggle against noise. If you let the things in the world fend for themselves, then foxes will eat the poultry, aphids will destroy the vine, and the canals will be filled with mud. Without work, everything gets blurred. In this sense, Serres points out, work is not related to human beings. Life is always a struggle against the endless flow. Order, isolation, and organization are the weapons of life itself against the omnipresent tendency towards formlessness.

So, Serres doubts whether work is the defining human characteristic. Animals work, plants work, everything works. But if work does not define humanity, what does? In a book called *The Open: Man and Animal* Agamben (2002) has claimed that the separation of the human from the animal is, if anything, based on a constitutive political act rather than based on a hard-boiled anthropological fact. In his entire work, Agamben therefore refuses to offer us a positivist anthropology that would indicate how and why human beings differ from non-humans. He argues that this distinction is based on a *politically* inspired formula:

[H]omo sapiens is neither a substance nor a well-defined species: the formula is rather a machine or an artefact in order to produce knowledge of the humane. (Agamben, 2002: 37)²

So, what we have here is an anthropological machine which ironically “lays bare the absence of a distinguishing feature of the human being” (2002: 39). This machine or this formula is a historical invention after which humans can envisage their own being as merely ‘anthropomorphic’. Human beings are, in other words, animals that resemble the human being. But if in this way human beings lack an essence or *telos* of their own, then they are, according to Agamben, not only human but also profoundly non-human.

2 In subsequent passages, I have not always used English texts. The translations into English are mine.

The human being is a formless creature that has never been able to escape from its own bestiality or inhumanity.

At the end of a discussion about Pico della Mirandelo, Agamben (2002: 40) submits that it is for his or her inhumanity that the human being can assume many different characteristics and faces. Man is, in other words, chameleonic. Humanism, Agamben adds, is therefore paradoxically based on the discovery of the non-human in humanity. As such it is, in words of Peter Sloterdijk (who is appreciatively quoted by Agamben, 2002: 84) in the business of ‘domesticating’ the alien element in itself. “What presents itself as reflection about politics”, writes Sloterdijk, “is in truth a fundamental reflection about the rules for the business of the human park. If there is a dignity of the human being..., then it is especially because human beings are not only kept in the political theme park, but are also keeping themselves there” (2001: 331). We are therefore the animals who have the capacity to keep themselves and we can do this only if we are able to recognize the non-human as an immanence in ourselves. The possibility to be-in-a-park requires an understanding of what it would be not to be in a park. Outside the park is an unruly hell. Inside it, you have goals, rules, laws, organization, and so on. Teleology is omnipresent in the park.

The idea to keep human beings in a park is, as Sloterdijk maintains, essentially political, and I think that Agamben would agree wholeheartedly with this. He points out that humanity claims to have a mandate for the integral management of its own bestiality (2002: 86). However, he does not write about the human beast in a park but about the human beast in and, more importantly, outside the *polis*. As is well known, Aristotle defined the human being as a *zoon politikon* (political animal). This implies that only a human being can be in the polis. What is outside the *polis* is what one might refer to as the less-than-human. It has no other dimensions than bestiality and physicality. In other words, these dimensions were not frequently *politicised* in Greece.

One of Agamben’s major claims is that it is exactly these dimensions that became a strategic objective for modern politics. This is why modern politics is essentially a bio-politics. (Indeed, with hindsight one might say that the Greek treatment of barbarians, slaves and women were an instance of bio-politics as well. Foucault is therefore wrong in claiming that bio-politics is a modern phenomenon. His claim was right to the extent that it alerted us to the exceptionality of bio-politics in the Ancient world.) Modern politics no longer focuses primarily on humanity as a well-defined form (citizen, king, employee, functionary, president, and so on) but increasingly also on the less-than-human (life itself, bare life, bodily life, animal life). Agamben writes more or less extensively about animals, children, embryos, the proletariat of modern cities, angels, drifters, comatose patients, refugees, prisoners, inmates of concentration camps, indeed, about death itself. Put otherwise, he writes about anthropomorphic creatures that somehow have not actualised their fully-fledged human form or have lost their form.

In this sense, his work seems to resonate particularly well with a number of recent studies in history or in art history about extreme violence that renders people formless, wordless, or faceless. Krauss and Alain-Bois (1997) have used Bataille’s concept of ‘*informe*’ to discuss some scatological tendencies in modern or post-modern art. Groebner (2004) embroiders on the concept of the *Ungestalt* (formless) to discuss the

way in which representations of extreme violence in the late Middle Ages are related to contemporary representations of the same (in film, in graffiti, and so on). His discussion is guided by some very ‘Agambenian’ questions: “How, then, was medieval violence portrayed, and how were the hideously injured bodies given a voice? What role did anonymity play? Finally, how was illegitimate, threatening violence distinguished from proper, ‘ordering’ violence?” (Groebner, 2004: 16). In the next subsection, we will see that Agamben thinks that ethics, as he understands it, is about giving a voice to the voiceless.

The Capacity to Die and the Capacity to Speak

The stakes of Agamben’s philosophy are enormous. To understand why we must briefly consider some of his intuitions about the relationship between death and language. The less-than-human is only alive and has no voice at all in the polis. This implies that it has no relationship to death for it is only the speaking animal (*zoon logon echon*) that has an idea of its own mortality. According to Agamben (1991: xi), it is philosophers like Hegel or Heidegger who have alerted us to the strange relationship between the human capacity to speak and the human capacity to die. In the words of Heidegger, only *Dasein* is being-to-death (*Sein-zum-Tode*). Anthropomorphic creatures – be they animals or inmates of prison camps – do not speak but are only living. They are, as it were, “immortal living things” (Derrida, 2003: 130; see also: Sloterdijk, 2000). In a sense, therefore, they cannot be killed because they, being unaware of their mortality, cannot die. Yet, they *are* killed. But since they cannot properly die, we can kill them, by dint of a sovereign act, *unpunished* (Agamben, 2002). In Heidegger’s famous words: we can make them “cease to live” (see also: Agamben, 1991: 2). This is what routinely happens to animals who are hunted, to comatose patients in hospitals where the plug is pulled out, or to refugees that are sent back to their lands of origin. Agamben wants us to understand that even in these situations we are actually talking about death and about killing. Such an understanding, however, assumes that the less-than-human gets a voice of its own. Only when they can speak, can they die. We may also, for example when we are unable to give them a voice, render ourselves voiceless. Only by making ourselves less-than-human can we hope to see the less-than-human. This might be the only chance that we, as humans, have.

What is excluded by the anthropological machine from the community of human beings takes central stage in Agamben’s work. To bear witness to the less-than-human is what Agamben understands as an ethical duty for human beings. As he explains in a deeply moving passage:

Just as in the starry sky that we see at night, the stars shine surrounded by a total darkness that, according to cosmologists, is nothing other than the testimony of a time in which the stars did not yet shine, so the speech of the witness bears witness to a time in which human beings did not yet speak; and so the testimony of human beings attests to a time in which they were not yet human. (Agamben, 1999a: 162)

Agamben’s entire work is about the (im)possibility of encounters with the less-than-human and, for him, this is in fact a question about the (im)possibility of ethics. This is by no means a settled question for we have to undertake some very difficult thinking. More precisely, we have to think of a community that includes whatever there is

(Agamben, 1993), we have to think of a post-sovereign politics that does not exclude life (Agamben, 2002), and, indeed, we have to think of a language that is not just the vehicle of thought as such but that, in its openness to the voice of life itself, ultimately brings thought to a standstill (Agamben, 1991). In short, we may have to think the kind of thought that thinks nothing anymore. Only this might make encounters with the less-than-human possible. But this possibility should not be taken for granted. As Groebner (2004: 37) has it, it implies that we would really be able to see what we probably fear most.

Can we ever therefore really understand the (non)voice that speaks to us from the *Muselmänner* who were sent into the gas chambers? Immediately after the just quoted passage, Agamben elucidates how disturbing the ethical demand of an encounter with the less-than-human is:

Or, to take up an analogous hypothesis, just as in the expanding universe, the farthest galaxies move away from a speed greater than their light, which cannot reach us, such that the darkness we see in the sky is nothing but the invisibility of the light of unknown stars, so the complete witness (...) is the one we cannot see: the *Muselmann*. (*ibid.*)

Even if we abandon our claims to language, sovereignty, or humanity in order to see or hear the less-than-human, there is still the possibility that we see or hear nothing. Basically, this is what ethics is all about: to think a possibility that might prove to be impossible.

A Politics of the Gesture

It is against this backdrop that we should understand the concept of the gesture. Agamben invokes the idea of the gesture as an element of a coming politics that takes the body or the less-than-human as the starting point. But is this not the same as bio-politics? Did not bio-politics depart from similar assumptions?

No, bio-politics can only think of the body in order to exclude it by an act of sovereignty. It is this sovereignty – the very claim that we are positioned to end another creature's life by excluding it from our community – that is the starting point in bio-politics. A politics of the gesture, on the other hand, wants to include the body, the physical, the less-than-human. It wants to undo the unholy effects of the anthropological machine that allows us to think in terms of humans and non-humans, in terms of represented and non-represented bodies, in terms of qualified life and bare life. Central to a politics of the gesture is an understanding that the concept of the human being is very insecure.

Only if we see this, may we lend an ear to a new politics, that is, a politics which subverts all claims to sovereignty and thus defies any legitimacy to the distinction between bare life on the one hand and the qualified life on the other. In terms I used earlier, this politics wants to overcome the distinction between a human life that has attained a perfect form and a life which somehow has not. It argues that, given the unstable nature of the *anthropos*, we should refrain from referring to this creature in terms of fixed essences evidencing his or her alleged sovereignty (the thinking animal, the political animal, or, indeed, the working animal).

Agamben dreams of a politics which radically subverts this sovereignty. The problem with contemporary (pseudo-democratic) politics is, he argues, that it has become a media spectacle which cannot but expropriate our sense for community. Here, Agamben is a true follower of Guy Debord's analysis of the society of the spectacle (Debord, 1967). In this society, language is no longer able to forge communities. It rather transforms human beings in solitary atoms who are merely capable of absorbing images like commodities. "The extreme form of the expropriation of the communal is the spectacle, that is to say, the kind of politics in which we are living. But this also means that in the spectacle our linguistic nature meets us in the wrong form" (Agamben, 2001: 81).

Against this, we need to reinvent a language that is a truly communal and non-exclusive language. This might entail that politics needs to be conceived of not so much as a process of talking (*parlare*, parliament) but as a politico-bodily practice. Such a practice does not assume that the talkative citizen is a standard unit of analysis but rather takes the body as its starting point. The new post-democratic practice that Agamben has in mind departs from an understanding of bodies. In the end, a gestural politics should enable the encounter between the human being and the less-than-human. What does Agamben expect of this new politics? In a crucial article, he quotes Max Kommerell, a German literary theorist who wrote about gestures in literature: "[A] new beauty begins, one that is similar to the beauty of the gestures of the animal, to soft and threatening gestures" (Agamben, 1999: 80).

What are we to make of this new beauty? Agamben does not have in mind a new kind of aesthetics that purports to elevate life into art or art into life, but rather an understanding that there is an indifference between life and art. Only a politics, Agamben (2001: 77) argues, that understands the fundamental indifference between both understands its true tasks (which is and should always be related to the community). The new political practice is about the organization of *situations* – Guy Debord is never far away and neither is (silent) film and theatre – in which you are willing to say, in Nietzsche's sense, that you want this over and over again, if necessary, countless times. The point is to completely change the world without violating or harming it, that is, you change the world by affirming it. Saying 'yes' to life as such entails that you refuse to exclude – exclusion is, of course a way of saying 'no' (a 'no' to this particular group, a 'no' to an identity that differs from yours, a 'no' to your body or a 'no' to the animal in you). The refusal to exclude is based on a refusal to accept form or teleology.

In the society of the spectacle, we only organize with particular goals (*telos*) in mind. Even here, Plato and Aristotle are not too far away. For example, we want to obtain certain commodities in the hope that the quality of our lives will improve. As a consequence, we have lost our capacity for the gesture which is, Agamben (2001: 78) claims, exactly the other side of the commodity (for it totally lacks any use and exchange value). Paradoxically, however, in a society dominated by images and commodities, everybody becomes obsessed by the possibility of the gesture. Yet, what we have are oftentimes false gestures, that is, gestures "as foreign as the gesticulations of marionettes" (1999: 83). Nietzsche – that is, the Nietzsche that Agamben makes him

out to be – understood this very clearly. His insistence on a life-affirming activity is a case in point:

[T]he eternal return is intelligible only as a gesture (and hence solely as a theatre) in which potentiality and actuality, authenticity and mannerism, contingency and necessity have become indistinguishable. Thus spoke Zarathustra is the ballet of a humanity that has lost its gestures. And when the age became aware of its loss (too late) it began its hasty attempt to recuperate its lost gestures in extremis. (Agamben, 1999: 83)

Beauty, Ethics, Gag

What we have here is a call for a politics that is about the creation of situations allowing for a gesture. To understand the power of this call, one should bear to mind that Agamben (2001: 77) defines capitalism (or the society of the spectacle) as a project that aims at the elimination of possibilities and potential from life itself or, perhaps better, at the elimination of chance – and it has to achieve this by pushing everything into a well-defined directions. Agamben is in doubt about this project as it excludes the less-than-human of which he argues all ethics should be about. As we have just seen, he opts for a politics that effaces the distinction between the human and the non-human. I opened the article by saying that, for many philosophers, the key distinction between humans and non-humans is linked to an understanding that humans are capable of teleological activity. Now, Agamben's strategy is to ponder the possibility of human action that is not teleological (and therefore not anthropological at all). We need a concept that allows us to escape from the '*teleologische Setzung*' that Lukacs had in mind when he discussed the working animal. The gesture is exactly such a concept.

He (2001: 59) introduces a subtle distinction made by the Latin writer Varro between *facere* (making, creating), *agere* (acting, performing), and *gerere* (fulfilling, taking on). The idea is that, for example, a poet can create (*facere*) a play without performing (*agere*) in it. The artist, on the other hand, can perform in the play without having created it. Now, Varro argues that the emperor in a country engages in an entirely different kind of activity: he neither creates nor performs but takes on certain responsibilities and fulfils duties. It is as if he 'carries' a task, an office, and so on. This is referred to by the expression '*res gerere*' (thing that is carried). How should we conceive of this carrying activity that Agamben describes as 'gesture'?

First of all, it might be appropriate here to grasp the *historical* appeal of Agamben's musings about the gesture. In the Roman Empire, politics was always about gestures. An oration by a politician in the Senate or in a stadium could obviously not be understood by all members of the audience for microphones had not been, as far as we can tell, invented yet. Good orators therefore knew that they were not understandable for many people. But when you cannot fully rely on the power of your voice, gestures become quintessential for your political performance. As Aldrete explains:

Gestures were an indispensable part of oratory and served many purposes. Hand and body motions could mirror the verbal component of an oration, impart emotional shadings to a word, serve as an alternative language for communication and enhance the innate rhythm nature of many orations. Gesture truly offered a way for Roman orators to achieve eloquence not only with their words but also with their entire bodies. (1999: 42-43)

Agamben's reflections on the gesture are based on an understanding that politicians nowadays have lost the capacity for the gesture, not only in a literal but also in a figural sense. All we see on TV-screens are talking heads and mikes. We ought not to forget that the head is the pre-eminent site of the tic or the spasm – it is the site of the non-gestural. No wonder then that (business) politics nowadays is not about beauty and eloquence anymore but about goal-setting, decisiveness, and toughness. Politics has therefore become a largely anaesthetic affair: it is not about beauty nor is it about the capacity to be affected or to be passionate (see also Nancy, 1991). All these elements are cancelled out by the project-nature (or, if you like, managerial nature) that so much politics has assumed. When we glance at people like Blair and Bush, we sense in their highly programmed speeches and their spastic focus on pre-established goals that the syndrome of Gilles de la Tourette might be lurking behind all that they say: their speech as well as their behaviour betray the eclipse of the gesture. Flexibility – that is a key element of the gesture – is understood by them as a weakness, backbone is all that matters.

Second, there is a subtle *philosophical* argument as well. Agamben point out that Aristotle (1999: 185, 1140b) makes a famous distinction between *poiesis* (production) and *praxis* (acting): production always has a goal outside the activity of producing itself, whereas successful acting is always its own goal. It is this distinction, as I explained above, that has determined much thought about work and organization. On the one hand, there are activities that are means to realize certain extrinsic goals; on the other hand, there are activities that can do without means and are goals within themselves. Agamben (2001: 59-61) points out that both activities, *poiesis* and *praxis*, are dominated by the *telos*, that is, by some conceptualisation of goal, form, intention, and so on. (I have discussed this to some extent in the first section.)

The gesture, however, refers to activity that is liberated from the teleological straightjacket. Agamben describes the gesture as a means without end and he argues that we have to take this in the sense that it *both* refuses to become a means to an end *and* refuses to become an end in itself. He refers to the French poet Mallarmé who has referred to a similar principle in terms of a *milieu pur* and to Kant (2001: 61) who defined the entire domain of aesthetics, both in art and in nature, as “finality without end” (*Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*, translated in Italian as: *finalità senza scopo*).

Now, for Kant it was quite clear that ethics is about ends. We cannot find goals outside ourselves (for example, in nature) and therefore we have to look for them in ourselves: the final end of our lives lies in our own moral destination (2001: 185). As Kant sees it, nature and art have a purely “formal finality” (2001: 79): in them, there is finalization, realization, actualisation, but there is no underlying end. This is indeed what defines beauty: it is “the form of finality in an object inasmuch as it can be perceived without the idea of an end” (2001: 93). For Kant, aesthetics and ethics are therefore separated: in the first domain only finality prevails and in the second domain, which is essentially human, there are (also) ends.

I take Agamben's reflections about the gesture as a correction of Kantian (and, indeed, all teleological) schemes. The reason is that, like Plato and Aristotle, Kant has succumbed to the temptations of the anthropological machine: ethics is excluded from

the non-human domain. We may think of a tiger or, to mention an example by Kant himself, of a tulip as beautiful, but they are not to be understood in any ethical sense. As I indicated earlier, for Agamben, ethics is precisely related to the non-human (or less-than-human) domain. I take him as saying that Kant was destined to be (morally) deaf for the voice of the non-human for he made such a rigid distinction between aesthetics (as something that can be related to the non-human sphere) and ethics (as something that cannot be related to the non-human sphere). It is exactly this distinction that Agamben wants to overcome. The concept of the gesture allows him to unify aesthetics and ethics. The provocation is, of course, that we have here an ethics without ends. In Agamben's view, ethics is neither about *poiesis* nor about *praxis*. Varro is important here for he opens up an old and almost entirely forgotten dimension of activity: a gesture shows (rather than says or, as Wittgenstein would say, *zeigt* rather than *sagt*) that one is willing to function as a means that remains uncontaminated by ends.

Yet, the gesture is not detached from the linguistic. Kommerell, to whom I referred earlier, claimed that the gesture is always an expressive showing of a person who makes us aware that s/he is somehow lost in the very language that s/he is able to use. As such, we may infer from this that the gesture is closely linked to language. Yet, it opens up to another side of language, to a kind of non-communicative speechlessness dwelling inside it: the more people struggle with words, the more they seem to be at a loss within these words. When we speak, it is as if an unsayable labyrinth weighs us down. The person who makes a gesture might perhaps be argued to show us a way out of this linguistic labyrinth.

The gesture interrupts language precisely at the moment when it is actualising itself. To put it more clearly, the *factum loquendi*, that is, the fact that human beings are-in-language is what cannot be said, but is shown by the gesture. It shows language as pure communicability. But as pure communicability, there is no need to restrict language to humans. Communicability opens up a possibility of language that stretches further than the human voice and that is open for communication with non-human or less-than-human spheres as well. This is exactly why Agamben takes such a great interest in where communication seems to be a failure (at least from a rational-humanistic point of view): echolalia, stuttering, spastic behaviour, animal sounds, and so on. The gesture opens up to an *ethos* (a dwelling place) where communicative success cannot be guaranteed beforehand.

This allows Agamben to link the gesture to the idea of a 'gag'. A gag, of course, is something that might be put into your mouth in order to prevent you from speaking. But it is also something that is linked to the mimic or theatrical. The struggle with speech can also be a silent improvisation of the artist. Here, we have an example of non-language that is not without communicability. The gesture is not about communication but about communicability. The gesture should intercept the process of language which lies at the heart of the polis and replaces it by a formless communicability. "What unites human beings among themselves is not a nature, a voice, or a common imprisonment in signifying language; it is the vision of language itself and, therefore, of experiencing language's limits, its *end*. A true community can only be a community that is not presupposed" (Agamben, 1999: 47, emphasis in original).

Clearly, there are false gestures and pure gestures. It is in the latter that Agamben locates the sphere of a politics to come. Only, in an almost silent or, perhaps better, in a formless and nigh-to animal-like theatre are people able to go beyond representation and communication. Only there will they find communality.

Dancing

But where do we find examples of the gesture today? Are there people willing to abandon the sphere of necessity and to reduce themselves to pure means? The French philosopher Michel Guerin (1995) has distinguished four kinds of gestures: action, giving, writing, and dancing – and he refers to the latter as the ‘pure gesture’ for we cannot think the other three without goals or ulterior motives. Dancing is so pure, Guerin adds, because we can immediately start with it and do not have to resort to deliberation and planning. Manning (2003) develops a similar argument in relationship to Argentine tango: she refers to it as a milieu which is entirely independent of pre-ordained constraints. Precisely because these constraints are absent, an intensity and a sensibility that are alien to the objectivity of work become possible.

Guerin points out that the gesture is a meagre alternative for words. It is strongly context-dependent and always focused on what is vital or most important. This should not come as surprise for the gesture has not time or means to articulate itself in complex situations. This is why it can, contrary to language, hardly be corrected. Language is exuberant, wasteful, and shrouded, whereas the gesture is frugal and naked. This is not to imply that the gesture is subservient to language. We should not merely conceive of it as a kind of lesser language that provides us with additional information about, say, the personalities, interests, or feelings of those who speak. Indeed, the gesture is more than just gesticulation or body language for it seems to be impossible to distinguish meaning from behaviour. Like Agamben, Guerin points to the animalistic and sensual qualities of the gesture. Meaning coincides with behaviour, he argues, and becomes essentially detached from reflection and deliberation. It is almost as if meaning becomes an animalistic willing-to-say that is closely akin to life itself. In this sense, the gesture escapes the realm of bodily techniques. Perhaps, Guerin suggests, it foreshadows or prefigures these techniques.

Animalistic and unreflective as it may be, Guerin (1995: 16) understands the gesture as the pedestal of tradition or culture. The dance is a goal-less activity that initiates and imitates. Its principle is technical, but its consequences are always symbolical. The dance evades the realm of the objective but this is exactly what allows it to create unexpected communalities. Blissfully indifferent to notions such as objectivity and profitability, it denies the established system, but it is this denial that causes it to express what it wants to express. The dance never imposes certain meanings upon us. Being its own expression, it rather proliferates meanings and therefore forms of togetherness (Newell, 1999: 16). In breaking through linguistic barriers, the dance has important political characteristics: it founds and creates communality. Manning relates the tango to a

politics of touch which engages in the means, that is, in the potential of listening to the breath, the body, the distance and the closeness of another human being, a listening to what might be considered the very ethics-in-deconstruction of humanity. (2003: section 15)

Manning adds that tango is not about a fusion of two bodies in a kind of bestial ecstasy. Tango is not the same as dirty dancing. It rather expresses not only consensus with another body, a kind of sense-sharing if you like, but also a 'dissensus' with it, an impossibility to fuse with another body, a fundamental incommensurability. Gestures therefore do not so much perfect communication as betray that communication can never be perfected. This is, I suggest, how we might understand Agamben's emphasis on communicativeness rather than on communication. Where the latter is infested with teleology, the former is merely means without end. Again, The Nietzschean inspiration should be clear here:

The human being is a rope tied between animal and superman, - a rope across an abyss. (...) What is great about the human being is that he is a bridge and not a goal; what can be loved about him is that he is a passage and a downfall. (Nietzsche, 1988: 16-17)

Zwicky (1992: 46) defines lyrics as a gesture that should simplify our being in the world. Perhaps, this can be said of all gestures. They might be the droplets that allow us to concentrate on the silence of water. The gesture aspires a unity with the world that is unavailable to average language users. To invoke a well-known Heideggerian theme, we chatter and chatter but the communality of two or more people is not based on this chatter. A silent glance in the eyes can be sufficient (Barthes, 2002), a dance or a delicious meal might do as well, perhaps a piece of music – all these gestures create togetherness where language and organization fail. The lyrical gesture, Zwicky (1992: 372) points out, does not have any temporal organization. Otherwise, it would become a merely domesticated and weakened kind of gesture. Due to its bestiality and wildness, "the gesture is an activity which shows us that we cannot live in communality if we have not anything in common with the world in which we live" (*ibid.*).

Thought

The politics of the gesture refers to a post-sovereign, non-exclusive, and affirmative politics. It is an anti-humanistic politics as it refuses to acknowledge a special status for human beings or for particular human beings. If humanism is worth a thing, then it should open up itself to spheres where humanity is at issue. That is to say, humanism can only be grounded in the non-human. This implies that we have to think about the communality between the human and the non-human or the less-than-human. That is, we have to overcome the anthropological machine.

This implies that we should give up ingrained conceptualisations of thinking. It is no longer an activity linked to a particular organ that is well developed among human beings. It is rather an *experience* the object of which is the potential character of life and of human reason. Agamben quotes Aristotle who defined thought as "being whose nature is to be in potency" (2001: 18). 'Thought', he writes a few lines earlier, "is what we call the tie which places life-forms in a connection that cannot be resolved" (2001: 17). It is, in fact, an experience of a potential community in which no life whatsoever is excluded. It is about this experience that the politics of the gesture evolves. It has nothing to do with work. The politics that Agamben has in mind is a non-working practice that prefers thought, understood here as formless experiment, over the teleological positioning we know as labour.

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