

ANTONIO NEGRI

SOVEREIGNTY: THAT DIVINE MINISTRY OF
THE AFFAIRS OF EARTHLY LIFE
(Trans. Gabriele Fadini with assistance from Robert Valgenti)

A review of Giorgio Agamben, *Il Regno e la Gloria: Per una genealogia teologica dell'economia e del governo*. Neri Pozza, 2007. ISBN 88-545-0169-7. 288pp.

"The arcanum of policy is not sovereignty but government, not the king but the minister, not the law but the police force." Giorgio Agamben

A critical reading of the recent theoretical work of Giorgio Agamben beginning with the volume "Il Regno e la Gloria" [The Reign and the Glory], which is a philosophical study that reconstructs the theological genealogy of economic thought after political theology. His thought is a critical theoretical radicalism of the forms of resistance that produce concrete works because they are aimed to become a means of power. Hence the proposal of "unindustriousness," taken as an ethical device of suppression.

Il Regno e la Gloria. Per una genealogia teologica dell'economia e del governo [The Reign and the Glory: A Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government] by Giorgio Agamben should be considered one of the intermezzos between the philosophical anthropology of *Homo Sacer* and a fourth volume—"dedicated to the forms of life" and the clarification of "the crucial meaning of unindustriousness as the properly human and political praxis"—that has not yet arrived, but which is already underway and said to be his next venture. The second volume in this series was *Stato di eccezione* [State of Exception], which gave a close critique of the power of the modern state. Now, *Il Regno e la Gloria* constitutes ideally the second part of this volume of *Homo Sacer*. This essay actually contains two books. The first (*Il Regno*) finishes the operation started by the German philosopher Carl Schmitt, which is the reduction of policy to political theology, and thus is joined coherently to *Stato di eccezione*, however by moving from the analysis of the nature of sovereignty toward the practice of government. The second part (*La Gloria*) is instead an analysis of "consensus in the modern state," a phenomenon here assumed in terms of sacred history. And if in the past consensus was inscribed in the forms of "acclamation" and enthusiasm, today it is presented as alienation of/in the states of "democratic" public opinion. Because of this theme and its characteristics, *La Gloria* would therefore be related to his book on Auschwitz, which represents the third volume of the series *Homo Sacer*.

Genealogy of Economy

Il Regno e la Gloria is an extraordinary book of the archaeology of modern politics. It is worthy of the great excavations of “theological-politics” started in the 17th century that continue until Kantorowicz. Exactly as it happens in those studies (beginning from Spinoza), it connects itself to its own times. It is not by chance that archaeology, genealogy and critique are here translated into political terms. This work, in direct line with Agamben’s *political radicalism*, touches upon *discussable elements, and if necessary, on which to express approval or disapproval*. Allow me therefore—rather than state what is contained in this exhaustive study (among other things, it is *copyleft*, therefore readable and reproducible in any form)—to define critically a thematic field that better allows for its discussion.

In the first part of the volume, that of the *Regno*, Agamben builds a theological-political, genealogical configuration of the economy that parallels the one he made in *Stato di eccezione*, where the theological-political figure had been forged to represent the practice of state violence. In this book, there is an important step forward, particularly when Agamben brings economy, political theology and bio-politics into close relation. The author now says that beginning with Christian patristics, economy is represented as the articulation of bio-politics, where the language of “housekeeping” is translated into the definition of the Trinity, for the living *ecclesia*. *Oikonomia* therefore represents the original theological-political reconstruction of life in the divinity or, better said, the articulation of the divinity in the *biòs*. The development of this theme is very rich. It could be said that, after having destroyed every articulation of the violence of modern politics by pushing the decision to its extreme limit (the move made in *Stato di eccezione*), Agamben here shows how economy becomes a simple agency of theological-political power: an exercise, thus, of violence in the worldly reproduction of social life.

One notes, however, that compared to what happens in politics, this extreme force can be silent, invisible, and infinitely indirect in the economy. “Governmentality” in action is the place and the political-theological device of the intervention of the “angels” (ministers, administrators, policemen) into social life when it is prefigured in the movement and/or in the imagination of the divinity. No less, even in front of the synchronic state of political decision, Agambenian economy remains a state of exception in daily life.

The Lost Subject

I would like to note that this emptying of the bio-political economy is at least very doubtful. In situationism (to whose conclusions Agamben comes very close), the meaning of the denunciation of exploitation is not lost in any case through the emptying of every articulation of economic command within the absoluteness of political rule. The subject, crushed as it may be, was still there—at the limit, on the edge, down there or behind that door... but still there. On the other side, it is not even said that “angelology” has to be given in this unique

form. For example, biblical angelology takes away from Job neither the ability to exist nor the will to resist—even if Jehovah concedes to the angel Satan terrible powers. Here instead the theological reabsorption of economy—the consideration of the Divinity, of the State and of Capital, or that trinity of R's who the German poet Heinrich Heine insulted: Richelieu, Robespierre and Rothschild—builds a framework where the action of power is expressed in a homologous way. Where are the subjects of the state, or even the economic subjects? I don't think that Agamben means that working immediately and necessarily constitutes subjects as subjects of the state (if it were so, an economic conception of society would never be stated nor definitely affirmed). And where does he want to lead us then? In a world in which singularity is in any case definable neither as work (and not even as refusal of work), nor as resistance (and not even as struggle)? *Without being theologians we can realize that the effort to comprehend production (creation) in the theological circle need not result in impotence and sterility, but rather in resistance and activity. Liberation theology has been very close to this truth of atheism.*

An Angelic Extremism

In *Homo Sacer* there was a negative defense of power. It turned out that the poor wage-earner could not find an outlet for productive action and the proletariat could not sustain its resistance against sovereignty. Now, in *Il Regno*, this One of power is split in Two: or rather, in the framework of Agamben's strategy, on one side there is the "state of exception," on the other "the reign"; on one side "the field," on the other "the glory"; on one side the Sovereign, on the other the government. In *Stato di eccezione*, the political defense of absolute of power could be read in exasperated Schmittian terms.

In the economy of exception this extremism is not confirmed, and angelic mediation and powers of state came into play. And if the "State of political exception," in its excess of decisions, denied the "enemy," in the "State of economic exception" the actor, the productive subject, however subjugated it may be, cannot help being there: economy and exploitation hardly (or perhaps never) split up. I have a feeling, in a word, that, in spite of the change of the assumptions, Agamben does not manage to modify the rules of the game. As it happened in *Stato di eccezione*, in *Il Regno*, the economic is projected onto a web on which there is no productive subject, there is no worker—there is only the subject of the state and the machine—pure alienation. How will the economy work then without the productive subject? *Archaeology cannot confuse the concept of this.*

The Violence of Accumulation

In the capitalistic economy, that excessive and founding political act that is the exception finds its equivalent in the act of original accumulation, of taking possession. Now, no matter what the violence by which that original act has been done, there is still the fact that "primitive accumulation," granting "possession" as the source of "right," are operations that, far from reassembling

the unit of power, split it up. "Primitive expropriation means separation of the worker and the implements of work," writes Marx, "inaugurating," so to say, the class struggle. Here there is neither unity nor trinity: there is only the two.

And then comes *La Gloria*. The subjects exalt the power: *Christus vincit, Christus regnat, Christus imperat*. The only mediation that power allows is therefore that of standing inside it as something that it receives as its own dialectic, or better said, economic expression.

It seems that Agamben once again affirms, by denouncing theological enthusiasm, the critique of the Enlightenment by Adorno and Horkheimer. Debord made more or less the same argument, and saw in the light of power every capacity of resistance being shattered and every alienated condition becoming, in a matter of speaking, normal. And nevertheless, by moving into the field of negative dialectics, he imagined (at the level of totality) the sudden and unexpected emerging of absolute resistance, the explosion of negativity. In the political theology of Agamben any kind of resistance, on the contrary, fails completely. There are here still glimpses of the reflection, hopefully for the last time, of that Benjaminian theory of violence that in its apocalyptic movement has brought about great damage.

The Desecration of Nothing

After the state of exception has invaded even the space of the reproduction of life, of the economy, and above all, its public. How is it possible to leave this situation? We wait for the fourth volume from Agamben to understand it better, even though there are some indications in this volume. It is *unindustriousness*, which Agamben promises us as an ethical device for liberation from the totalitarian slavery of an always exceptional power. It is a resistance that is interiorized but never realized through concrete works, which would become (insinuates Agamben) themselves means of the biopower. But why could not Heideggerian *Gelassenheit* (that is so resonant here) be connected to, or better transformed into, a device of value? For now, in any case, the introduction of *unindustriousness* seems to consist only in the desecration of nothing.

That said, two genealogical acquisitions, important for political theory, come at the end of this book. The first is that "the true problem, the main arcanum of policy is not sovereignty but government, not the king but the minister, not the law but the police force, that is, the state machine that they form and keep in motion." *That is to say, that the exception that is at the base of every power, would rather be taken "in motion."*

The second, important acquisition is that classical economics, that is, liberalism (in a word, the economic theory that has taken shape between Quesnay and Adam Smith), uses an absolute providential model. Consequently, Agamben can come to this conclusion: "in this majestic image, in which the world created by God is identified in the world without God and contingency and necessity, freedom and slavery blur into each other, the glorious centre of the state machine

appears right in the light. Modernity, by taking away God from the world, has not only been unable to come out from theology, but it has, in a way, only carried out the project of the providential *oikonomia*." Feuerbach and Marx didn't say it better: to destroy the state of owners was to destroy their God. Both the One and the Triune. *We wait for Agamben at a important critical crossing: let him say finally who is the subject that suffers, lives, dies, resurrects, is the winner in this struggle for liberation and where (if it still there) this subject of the theological-political is.* There is room for hope: the renewal of the theological-political in the Spinozian way. Agamben could do it.

ANTONIO NEGRI has been a Lecturer in Political Science at the University of Paris and a Professor of Political Science at the University of Padua. He is the co-author of *Empire* and author of *Political Descartes: Reason, Ideology and the Bourgeois Project* (2007).

© All Rights Reserved. Antonio Negri.
Negri, Antonio. "Sovereignty: That Divine Ministry of the Affairs of Earthly Life." *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, vol. 9, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 96-100.