

BOŠTJAN NEDOH

Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts

UNDEAD¹

The French Marxist structuralist philosopher Louis Althusser once famously argued that true theoretical work or “theoretical practice” consists in producing new concepts out of pre-theoretical ideological notions.² Although Arthur Bradley’s new book *Unbearable Life: A Genealogy of Political Erasure* does not fall directly within the Marxist theoretical tradition, it admirably rises to this challenge. In its aims and scope, the book belongs, as the author himself acknowledges, to the tradition of “political theology” broadly defined (Bradley, 2019, p. 10), and, more specifically, to post-Foucauldian currents of biopolitical theory and the genealogy of sovereignty. However, unlike the multiple studies in this tradition which mostly reproduce or apply existing, well-established concepts in the field, such as bare life (Agamben), immunized life (Esposito), creaturely life (Santner) or precarious life (Butler), Bradley’s book takes a decisive step further in thinking sovereignty and offers a distinctively new concept: *unbearable life*. At first glance, this master concept indeed enters into dialogue with the above-named variations on the concept of “life” in contemporary studies on political theology and biopolitical theory. Yet, unbearable life not only substantially differs from them, it also solves some (ideological) contradictions which traverse those concepts. As we shall soon see, this is especially the case with Agamben’s concept of “bare life”. Furthermore, alongside his master concept of unbearable life, Bradley convincingly and in an original manner also develops a new logic and structure of sovereignty – corresponding to his master concept – called *nihilopolitics*, which substantially differs from the two concepts at the center of any contemporary discussion about bare life: biopolitics and thanatopolitics. Moreover, Bradley develops his master concept of unbearable life and its underpinning structure of nihilopolitics via original, clear and convincing close readings of a set of specific conceptual problems that figure in authors such as Foucault himself, Augustine (the city of Cacus), Shakespeare (Macbeth’s non-existent children), Hobbes (martyrdom), Robespierre (the already dead), Schmitt

¹ This is a short version of a longer review article “Nihilopolitics as Meta-biopolitics? On Arthur Bradley’s *Unbearable Life: A Genealogy of Political Erasure*”, *Political Theology*, vol. 22, issue 6, 2021, pp. 527–539.

² Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. by B. Brewster (London and New York, NY: Verso, 2005).

(the *katechon*), and Benjamin (the undead). In what follows, I will first briefly introduce Bradley's master concept of unbearable life and its corresponding logic of nihilopolitics, in order to, second, engage more in detail with Chapter Seven of Bradley's book, which provides a highly original reading of the concept of *Glück* (happiness, chance) from Benjamin's "Theses of the concept of history".

Firstly, the book introduces the concept of unbearable life through a seemingly obscure, marginal figure in the ancient Roman tradition, which is, of course, the same tradition from which Agamben took his master concept *homo sacer*. This figure is the one of *damnatio memoriae*. As the term alone suggests, *damnatio memoriae* was a sanction, passed by the Senate, which was usually applied to someone who dishonored Rome. It concerned not simply the death of the individual – either in the form of an immediate death sentence or in the form of declaring the subject in question *homo sacer*, that is, someone who can be killed with impunity according to the famous definition from Festus.³ Instead, it imposed "the damnation of memory",⁴ which meant the erasure of every trace that the person ever existed at all: "In order to preserve the honor of Rome, the individual would be symbolically expunged from the city as if he had never existed in the first place."⁵

To illustrate this fate "even more awful than death," Bradley offers the example of Emperor Septimus Severus's son Geta, declared *damnatio memoriae* after he was murdered by his brother and co-emperor Caracalla in AD 211.⁶ In Geta's case, every trace of his physical existence was literally erased from the public record. For Bradley, one would completely miss the true dimension of *damnatio memoriae* by understanding the death of such a person as a crude exercise of the classical sovereign right to inflict death. In fact, within this framing, life and death are both symbolic forms in which the real or physical phenomena become inscribed. For example, someone can be subjected to a violent death at the hands of the sovereign, yet still continue to live symbolically in the public memory, public discourse, etc. Conversely, *damnatio memoriae* primarily excludes its victims from the historical form of memory itself: they do not, in other words, even enter the structure of sovereignty understood in the classical sense of the right to kill and the power to let live.

³ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

⁴ Bradley, *Unbearable Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 2.

⁵ Bradley, *Unbearable Life*, 2.

⁶ Bradley, *Unbearable Life*, 2.

Bradley's concept of unbearable life refers precisely to this spectral dimension of *damnatio memoriae* beyond life and death. The introduction of unbearable life also implies a shift in perspective that paves the way for a thorough redefinition of sovereignty itself as irreducible to both the classical concept of sovereignty and its modern biopolitical reversal – in short as nihilopolitical. For Bradley, nihilopolitics is:

neither a power to make die and let live (as the famous Roman formula puts it) nor the power to make live and let die (as Foucault's biopolitical reversal of the Roman dictum puts it) but rather the power *to make life neither live nor die*. It is not the power to decide upon life and death, in other words, but the more originary and fundamental power to decide upon living and nonliving, upon what counts as being alive and what does not, upon which lives are "bearable" (in every sense of that word, from metaphysical through the juridico-political to the biological) and which are "unbearable." If the sovereign declares someone or something an unbearable life, in other words, they perform arguably the most radical biopolitical – or rather *nihilopolitical* – gesture imaginable: what is socially, politically, or philosophically intolerable in the eyes of the state, for whatever reason, is simply deemed to be ontologically or politically nonexistent in the first place. In ancient Rome, recall, *damnatio memoriae* was considered to be quite literally a fate worse than death.⁷

In short, nihilopolitics is the power neither to kill life nor to let life live but to make life unbearable or inexistent within the symbolic antinomies of life and death – excluded even from the realm of memory, public discourse, etc. So conceived, nihilopolitics does not concern simply the (biopolitical) politicization of life, nor its (sovereign) violent physical repression, but a kind of *meta-decision* on which life counts as life and is worthy of being included in the space of sovereign decision over life and death, and which should be expelled into a kind of "black site"⁸ of sovereignty. So, in other words, nihilopolitics might be regarded also as *meta-biopolitics*: a decision on which life ontologically counts and may be subjected to the sovereign decision over life and death (or the modern biopolitical optimization of life), and which should be expelled even from the realm of sovereignty and thus rendered unbearable.

⁷ Bradley, *Unbearable Life*, 4–5.

⁸ Bradley, *Unbearable Life*, 189–190.

Yet, precisely because a nihilopolitical sovereignty tries to exclude the unbearable life from all symbolic registers, such a life starts hunting the political present as a shadow from the past, a shadow that points to the spectral, “undead” dimension of a political subject that is neither alive nor dead. This “undead” dimension of political subjectivity has been developed by Žižek out of Lacan’s re-reading of Freud’s concept of “death drive”, in which Lacan noticed not simply the tendency to return to a dead, inorganic state, as it usually reads, but, to the contrary, the “undead” dimension of the drive that insists beyond the death itself – and thus resists it.

Despite Bradley’s book offering no extensive engagement with Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis, apart from few engagements with Žižek, it nevertheless comes to its own conception of the “undead,” which, again, enters into a productive dialogue with the Freudian-Lacanian death drive. This is especially the case in chapter seven, entitled “Undead: Benjamin and the Past to Come,” which I consider to be unequivocally the most ground-breaking reading offered here. In the spirit of the “esoteric dossier”⁹ constructed between Benjamin and Schmitt in 1921-22 on the “critique of violence” and the “state of exception,” this chapter might be read as Bradley’s own reply to his equally original reading of Schmitt’s conception of the Pauline *katechon* in the previous chapter, which he reads not as a kind of sovereign “restrainer” or “delayer” of history, as is the case in the majority of interpretations, but as a peculiar “kind of sovereign *accelerator* of anomia or anarchy”.¹⁰ In the chapter on Benjamin and the “undead,” Bradley, conversely, offers a thorough and original reinterpretation of the concept of *Glück* (happiness, chance) and the messianic redemption of history from Benjamin’s second of his “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” To start with, Benjamin’s idea of messianic redemption of history has been the subject of different and influential interpretations from Žižek to Eagleton, but despite many differences, there is a common twofold tendency underlying the majority of these readings. In short, they read the past that the Benjaminian historical materialist seeks to redeem as, on the one hand, a once-actually-existing but now repressed reality and, on the other hand, as something that can be reached only through the repetition of the repressed past in the present (Žižek’s “redemption-through-repetition”¹¹).

⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* trans. by Kevin Attell (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 52.

¹⁰ Bradley, *Unbearable Life*, 143.

¹¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 78.

Unlike these readings, Bradley's first step towards a real *tour de force* on Benjamin's "Theses" is to place them in their original context, namely, Benjamin's engagement with the medieval scholastics and particularly with Peter Damiani's idea of *potentia absoluta Dei*. Following Damiani's insistence on absolute divine power, the political theological tradition revolved around the idea of *potentia ordinata Dei*, that is, God's power was limited to the administration of the world he created in the past. As such, *potentia ordinata Dei* relied on Aristotle's assumption that history has a fixed, objective order that even God cannot change and undo. Yet, against this tradition, Damiani maintained that divine omnipotence can only be absolute, that is, unlimited, which indeed means that God's power can change the past: all of a sudden, God is able to change and undo even what He had already created (for instance, He is now able to restore virginity to a fallen woman).¹² Absolute divine power thus became a real game-changer: the order of history, in fact, ceases to be the "apparently fixed and immutable field of the *past*"¹³; instead, it becomes "open, soft, and future-oriented"¹⁴, and as such also the realm of struggle. Now, against this background, Bradley admirably shows that while Damiani and his political theological successors (from Duns Scotus and William of Ockham up to Carl Schmitt) reserved this power to "unmake what really happened, and make real what never happened" for God only, Benjamin assigns to historical materialism "an equivalent messianic capacity to short-circuit the teleological progression of time from past to present ... by synchronically actualizing real but virtual alternative potentialities that lie unrealized in history."¹⁵ This is what Bradley calls, rewriting Jacob Taubes's own famous rewriting of Carl Schmitt, a Benjaminian divine power "from below".¹⁶ Hence, for Bradley, historical materialism *à la* Benjamin does not consist in a naïve belief in the magical revelation of historical "truth" (from a forgotten, repressed past), but, more radically, in changing or undoing history itself by realizing what in history actually never existed: "what must be redeemed from the past is not simply the dead, the forgotten, or the oppressed, but rather what was *never* lived".¹⁷

On this point, Bradley refers to Benjamin's concept of "happiness" (*Glück*) and reminds us how the latter defines this

¹² Bradley, *Unbearable Life*, 164–172.

¹³ Bradley, *Unbearable Life*, 164.

¹⁴ Bradley, *Unbearable Life*, 170.

¹⁵ Bradley, *Unbearable Life*, 173.

¹⁶ Bradley, *Unbearable Life*, 164.

¹⁷ Bradley, *Unbearable Life*, 173.

term in his second Thesis: “The kind of happiness that could arouse envy in us exists only in the air we have breathed, among people we could have talked to, women who could have given themselves to us.”¹⁸ As Bradley further points out, in this sentence Benjamin makes it clear that “happiness” consists not in redeeming what originally was (and was eventually repressed or forgotten afterward), but in redeeming what never existed in the first place: “unbearable life”.¹⁹

By linking the messianic redemption of the unrealized past with his master concept of unbearable life, Bradley indeed points to the Benjaminian possibility of overcoming the contractual order of sovereignty, which he associates with Benjamin’s reference to the legal theological term “*restitutio in integrum*” from his “Theological-Political Fragment”.²⁰ In a legal sense, a *restitutio in integrum* points precisely to a pre-contractual state of affairs, prior to any harms done due to the establishment of this very same order.²¹ So, Benjamin argues that messianic redemption “frees the human from the burden of obligations: a worldly *restitutio in integrum* changes the past by returning humanity to the original, pre-contractual, position we occupied before our fatal covenant with God was agreed. In restoring to us the capacity to begin life anew – the totality of possibilities natural life promises but cannot in its finitude deliver – Benjamin’s messianism also reactivates the idea of the past as a contingent field of force for the operation of (human rather than divine) power.”²² For Bradley, this restoration of the unrealized potentialities of the past can, however, occur only from the position of the past itself, not simply from the position of its present repetition. Hence, as Bradley further maintains, the task of historical materialism *à la* Benjamin is not simply to repeat the past in the present, but rather to bring the present of the past back. Perhaps paradoxically, this “bringing back” (which echoes Freudian “wieder-holung” as the main characteristic of death drive²³) of the (unrealized) past’s own present passes only through the act of remembering the past itself. In Bradley’s own words, Benjaminian historical materialism “does not simply seek to remember a past that is fixed and irrevocable but to change it *as* past by the very act of remembering it”.²⁴ This act of remembering, recall, refers not to what really existed in the past, but was forgotten or repressed,

¹⁸ Benjamin, cited in Bradley, *Unbearable Life*, 176.

¹⁹ Bradley, *Unbearable Life*, 176.

²⁰ Bradley, *Unbearable Life*, 174–176.

²¹ Bradley, *Unbearable Life*, 174.

²² Bradley, *Unbearable Life*, 175.

²³ Bradley, *Unbearable Life*, 172.

²⁴ Bradley, *Unbearable Life*, 181.

but to the unrealized potentialities that nihilopolitics has erased and in so doing made unbearable. In this respect, Bradley concludes, Benjamin's "Theses" offer us "the means to render that unbearable life bearable" once again.²⁵

In any case, as Bradley also makes clear, this *restitutio in integrum* should not be confused with any kind of Agamben-style vitalist idea of the precontractual order as "natural joy",²⁶ but rather as a space of possibilities that never became actual due to the very same establishment of the symbolic order of the social contract itself. Following Bradley's reading, the Benjaminian *restitutio in integrum* here implies the subjectivation of unbearable life as such in order to create a new symbolic order without any sovereign contractual obligations and prohibitions, all of which, in psychoanalytic terms, exist in a dialectic between symbolic law and authority on the one hand, and the superegoic injunctions to transgress and enjoy as the obscene other side of symbolic law and authority themselves, on the other.²⁷ In the same way that James Bond's famous symbolic authority – "On Her Majesty's Secret Service" – carries with it the obscene superegoic injunction to transgress the law for a "greater cause" – the notorious "license to kill" – Bradley shows how modern sovereignty culminates in "enforced or involuntary disappearances": the Law (prohibition) is, in the Pauline sense, the condition for its own transgression (killing).

However, this lack of (direct) engagement with psychoanalytic theory relevant to political-theological issues leaves Bradley's reading of Benjaminian *restitutio in integrum* a little ambiguous. Precisely due to the lack of engagement with the Lacanian concept of the symbolic, it remains unclear whether this *restitutio in integrum* implies any kind of "non-symbolic" or even "pre-symbolic" life as a bearer of politics. This question is in all respects crucial insofar as a non- or pre-symbolic status of *restitutio in integrum* might suggest a re-emergence of another sort of vitalism, which, as in the case of nihilism discussed above, could be regarded not simply as a Foucauldian-Agambenian anti-sovereign vitalism resisting the biopolitical subjection of life, but as a second-degree vitalism or *meta-vitalism*, which points to the life that precedes the establishment of contractual order of sovereignty. Is this life a-symbolic (or non-symbolic) or does it refer to another

²⁵ Bradley, *Unbearable Life*, 183.

²⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. by Michael Hardt (Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 5.

²⁷ See again Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-60*, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. by Dennis Porter (London: Routledge, 1992), 83-84.

articulation of the (non-sovereign) symbolic order? Despite Bradley seeming to clearly (and rightly) argue for a disjunction between politics and vitalism, there remains a shadow of another sort of vitalism (meta-vitalism) in the sense of symbolically non-castrated life of Benjaminian *restitutio in integrum*.

This, however, does not diminish in any way the originality of Bradley's book. In fact, overall – and with this, I bring this article to a close – Bradley's book offers a highly original and distinctively new concept of life – unbearable life – which is neither alive nor simply dead, but excluded from every symbolic register of existence, even from the realm of public memory. Furthermore, Bradley also uncovers the structure and logic of what he calls nihilopolitics (which substantially differs from similar concepts of classical sovereignty, biopolitics and thanatopolitics) in an original and convincing manner. Neither the sovereign right to life and death, nor the biopolitical politicization of life, nihilopolitics rather concerns a meta-decision upon which life counts as such and should be included in the sovereign space of life and death, and which should not be included and thus may be expelled from all symbolic registers of existence. Nihilopolitics might thus be regarded also as a kind of meta-biopolitics: a meta-decision prior to the sovereign (or biopolitical) decision upon life and death. So conceived, unbearable life forcefully challenges existing conceptions of life and sovereignty in the field of political theology, and, more narrowly, in the fields of post-Foucauldian biopolitical theory and post-Agambenian genealogy of sovereignty. In this respect, Bradley's *Unbearable Life: A Genealogy of Political Erasure* should be considered a ground-breaking study and a paradigm shift, since it offers us for the first time a chance to overcome the false alternative between nihilism and vitalism with which biopolitical theory and the theory of sovereignty have been living for many decades now.