

LABYRINTH Vol. 21, No. 1, Summer 2019

Book Review

EKIN ERKAN (New York)

Technology as the God-Command

Giorgio Agamben, *Creation and Anarchy: The Work of Art and the Religion of Capitalism*. Stanford, California: 2019, 84 p.

Giorgio Agamben's *Creation and Anarchy* is comprised of five meditative essays compiled over the last few years and presented as an anthologized collection. The initial few chapters' survey postmodern art qua divinity, with particular interest to a contradictory dialectic: inspiration and critique. Drawing from an idiosyncratic amalgam of thinkers – ranging from bastion thinkers such as Kant and Heidegger to zoologist Jacob von Ueküll and prescient media philosopher Gilbert Simondon – Agamben carves a historiographic lineage between politics, animal studies, landscape painting, and religion.

With marked attention to the "inoperative" and "non-appropriable," Agamben surveys Titian's late paintings, Duchamp's readymade sculptures and Dante's poetry. Unlike Derrida, whose aesthetic endeavor problematized the Kantian vestige of exclusion – a logic concerned with the limit conditions of the frame – Agamben distinguishes the archeology of creation as a complicated dialectic between the two-stage premise of creation as "non-individuated (...) and individual." (Agamben 2019, 21) Agamben, steeped in Simondon's writing on the "pre-individual," evinces that the human being is informed through "pre-individual funds," which both coexist with and remain irreducible to chronology.

Agamben begins with Deleuze's writing on creation as articulated in his seminal essay "What is the Creative Act" (1987). Both here and in his "Postscript to Societies on Control" (1990), Deleuze ascertains that future technologies, stilted on the circulatory flow of cybernetics and modulation, will displace Foucauldian modes of biopower, increasingly inching towards the psychological realm of "autoexploitation." Deleuze presciently remarked that computer viruses and digital activism would displace strikes and protest, providing a beacon of optimism: these technologies of control could, simultaneously, serve a pharmacological role (both poison and cure). For Deleuze, control was a scientific (cy-

bernetic) and ontological category, which allotted for the emancipatory politics of the "creative act."

Drawing from Deleuze's late work, Agamben further develops the categorical dialectic between "creation," a marker of potential, and resistance, or impotential. Understanding art as the nexus of liberation, Agamben remarks that "each act of creation there is something that resists and opposes expression." (Agamben 2019, 18) Agamben's erudite analysis is validated by the appropriative cycle of the art market, whose economic imperative suspends the creative freedom of artistic "self-reference."

Moving from art objects to the dynamic inquiry of being and history, Agamben invokes a theological query vis-à-vis the polysemy of languages, underscoring that *archē* is both the Greek word for "command" and "origin." (ibid., 51) Such is the crux of this book, which ultimately concerns the collective closure between the archeology of the command and the doctrine of transmittance. Conceding that power cannot be defined solely by its capacity to confer obedience, Agamben asks "[w]hat is a command from the point of view of language? What are its grammar and its logic?" (ibid., 55)

Examining Aristotle's *Poetics*, Agamben illuminates that Aristotle, and the subsequent Western tradition of logic-cum-metaphysics, excludes non-apophantic discourse. In both Aristotle's *Poetics* and Parmenides' *On Nature*, the fundamental ontological proposition assumes the form "*esti gar einai*, 'there is actually being'; Agamben asks that we imagine another proposition, which inaugurates a distinct ontology – "*estō gar einai*, 'let there actually be being.'" (ibid., 59)

According to Agamben there are, in Western culture, two ontologies, distinct though not unrelated: the first is the ontology of the "apophantic assertion," which is expressed in the indicative. The second is the ontology of the command, which is expressed in the imperative. Non-apophantic language, or discourse that can be neither true nor false, was originally abandoned to the competence of rhetoricians, moralists, and theologians, which inadvertently meant renouncing any astute philosophical inquiry of the command. How, then, can we attempt to understand what happens when someone expresses non-apophantic discourse in the form of an imperative, as, for example, in the command "walk"?

As opposed to the third person, or indicative (e.g. "he walks"), the imperative is a "simple semanteme," or an expression that expresses the pure ontological relation between language and the world. (ibid., 57) The "simple semanteme" is used in a non-denotative mode: it does not refer to a concrete segment of the world or to a state of things but, instead, serves to intimate something to the receiver. Such is the nature of the command,

typified by God's commanding Abraham to sacrifice Isaac: it does not describe a relation between the world and language but, instead, enjoins the two.

Following Agamben, the linguistic partition corresponds to the partition of the Real – it is critical that we recognize that Agamben is working within the metaphysical tradition of immanence, whereby language is entirely disparate from the psychoanalytic/post-Lacanian Real (where the linguistic partition, as well as the jurisprudential/legal partition, correspond to the Big Other). Agamben bisects the Real into two correlated, though distinct, spheres: the first (assertive) ontology defines and governs the sphere of philosophy and science; the second (performative) sphere is that of "law, religion and magic." (ibid., 59). Agamben proffers this latter sphere as that of God's edict and His Commandments, this is also the realm of Kantian indistinct judgments and aesthetics. As such, Agamben facilitates a bricolage between the command and art, theology and aesthetics.

The imperative also couples the human to the ethereal: through prayer, humans address God, much like God addresses human beings through the command. This is the Janus-faced "bipolar machine" of Western ontology – the "performative" represents the survival in language of an epoch when the relation between words and things was not apophantic but, instead, had the form of a command. Following Agamben, one could say, thus, that the "performative" represents a "crossover between the two ontologies" (ibid., 60), in which the command has taken the place of the ontology of the assertion, not in the clear form of an imperative but in the form of an invitation, warning, advice, etc. God's word is given in the name of security, as the command takes the form of an operation, given and taken by God's worshippers.

Relating his study to today's forms of control, Agamben muses over the sphere of technological apparatuses, with particular credence to the "commands" contained in texting, coding, or electronic typography. Such apparatuses are defined by the subjects who use them and their belief that they, themselves, are "commanding" these apparatuses by pushing buttons – on the computer keyboard these are, in fact, defined as "commands." In truth, however, these apparatuses do "nothing but obey a command already inscribed in the very structure of the apparatus" (ibid., 61), as substantiated by circuit boards and preprogrammed lines of code.

As the religious veil was a reminder of freedom's limits, today's technologic constraints assume ubiquitous control. As Agamben notes, today's denizens are "beings who incessantly obey in the very gesture with which they impart a command" (ibid.). Agamben's

strict determinism unfastens notions of free will rooted in epiphenomenal convictions and our technological apparatuses serve the same role as God's edict, that "Thou shalt not..."

Furthering his "archaeology of the command," Agamben introduces the command's clandestine companion – the will. Following Nietzsche, Agamben affirms that "willing means nothing other than commanding." (ibid., 62) Where Greek philosophy posited *dynamis*, or potential, at its center, Christian theology, the Scholastics and modern philosophy place the will at its center. For Agamben, the will's superseding the command marks the threshold between the ancient and the modern epoch. Where the "ancient man" was a being of potential, or "a being who *can*," the "modern human being is a being of will, a subject who wills." (ibid., 63)

For Agamben, the decomposition of the ethical experience and declension of dynamism is modernity's epochal tenet, inflamed by our apparatuses, which simply make control more visible. Returning to God's omnipotence, Agamben analyses the status of dogma. Recalling that the Council of Nicea reads, "[w]e believe in one God the omnipotent Father," Agamben illuminates the obverse "scandal of divine omnipotence," whereby God wields absolute unconditional power:

If God can do everything [...] it follows he could do anything that did not imply a logical impossibility, for example become incarnate not in Jesus but a worm or, even more scandalously, in a woman, or even damn Peter and save Judas or lie and do evil or destroy his entire creation. (ibid., 64)

The "divine potential's" shadow is the irrational and the ridiculous, which, historically, has neurotically occupied theologians' thought. Following the Scholastic tradition, Agamben decouples *potentia absoluta*, God's "abstract potential," from *potentia ordinate*, or "the command God has imposed on the will." (ibid., 65) Returning to the apparatus, we see that it sublimates the command, occupying the strategic function of containing and curbing potential, bracing a limit to the unbridled anarchic chaos and the immensity of divine omnipotence.

Agamben's final passage is his most perceptive, as it reconciles the apparatus with capitalism. Today's Benjaminian philosopher par-excellence, Agamben culls Benjamin's penetrating posthumous fragment, "Capitalism as Religion." It was in this essay that Benjamin argued that capitalism does not only represent the secularization of the Protestant faith, as Max Weber had claimed, but that it is simultaneously "essentially a religious phenomenon, which developed in a parasitical way *from* Christianity." (ibid., 67, emphasis added) According to Benjamin, capitalism is a "cultic religion" (ibid., 68), uninterested in

ideation, atonement, or the expiation of guilt but aimed, instead, at *creating* guilt, itself. As evidenced by capitalism's conspiratorial admixture of "labor and the feast," modern capitalism's celebratory mode is invested in ludic play.

Agamben deftly anchors his analysis in a historical index: August 16, 1971, the day that, under the presidency of Richard Nixon, the convertibility of the dollar into gold was suspended, evacuating money of any value that is not purely self-referential. Thus rang the death knell of the state's "exercise of monetary sovereignty." (ibid., 67) This lineage can be traced back to fiduciary paper money assuming the role of credit by displacing metallic money, which was originally valued for its content of precious metal. However, after August 1971, money functioned as a credit both founded in, and corresponding to, itself and itself, solely.

Drawing from religion scholar David Flusser's research on the word *pistis*, the Greek term that Jesus and the Apostles used for "Faith," and *pistēōs*, which banks use for "credit," Agamben traces the etymological lineage between faith and *creditum*. Demonstrating that capitalism, emancipated from the object, has its nexus in pure faith, Agamben demonstrates that "[c]apitalism, then, is a religion in which faith – credit – has been substituted for God. Said differently, since the pure form of credit is money, it is a religion whose God is money." (ibid., 70) The bank is the high priestess, administering the sacrament of credit-debt to the faithful.

Where Moses' destruction of the golden calf annulled its idolatrous connection, the decision to suspend gold's convertibility affirmed credit's absoluteness as a purely immaterial being, or *ousia*. Exacerbated by digitization, today's "finance capitalism" is the realm of solvency and the immaterial; labor is primarily extracted by unwitting knowledge-workers (e.g. metadata-producers surfing the web) rather than workers at the factory. Not solely businesses but families and individuals, too, are made to live on credit or debit.

Returning to his linguistic bricolage, Agamben argues that, just as money constitutes objects as commercial commodities, "so does language refer to things by rendering them sayable and communicable" qua denotative signification. (ibid., 70) Severed from its referents, language "communicates nothing" and, consequently, celebrates its ephemeral triumph over the world. Detached from gold, money exhibits its own "nothingness" as an absolute measure.

Augmenting his thesis, Agamben states that the capitalist religion declares a "state of permanent crisis," drawing on "*crisis*," which, etymological, means "[d]efinitive judgment." (ibid., 74) As a state of exception that becomes normalized, the eschatology of "cap-

italist religion" renders a blank eschatology, both devoid of an origin/foundation (*archē*) and redemption/judgment. Agamben's Nietzschean roots have never gleamed more brightly, as a new Marxian modality supplements the apothegm "God is dead."

Turning to a thorough archaeology of Arianism, Agamben further substantiates modern capitalism's "an-archic" relationship qua Homoousian Christology. Much like the divine Father who lacks a creator, the Son is "nothing other than the word and action of the Father" (*ibid.*, 76). If we turn to Christology's "originary anarchic vocation," we see that "Christ is anarchic means, in the last instance" as in the case of "Modern language" and economy, each of which "have no foundation in being." (*ibid.*)

While Agamben make no mention of specific digital technologies, an overview of cryptocurrencies' immaterial functor very well validates this post-monetary thesis, whereby human action is no longer founded in pure being. Where freedom and the will were closely engaged and enacted through ontology and praxis in the classical world, today we are condemned to a kind of empty uncertainty. Nonetheless, Agamben offers a glimmer of optimism, noting that that capitalism would immediately collapse were the masses to cease their faith in credit and stop living according to it. In turn, Agamben does not intend to invoke a return to a solid foundation in "being," which would ultimately be folly. Instead, Agamben exalts "a clear comprehension" of the profound anarchy underlying our societies – or, as Foucault termed it, an "unfolding of a space in which it is once more possible to think." (*ibid.*, 77)