

# Form-of-Life

*From Politics to Aesthetics (and Back)*

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**ABSTRACT** This article examines an often-mentioned but largely undeveloped concept in the work of Giorgio Agamben and in particular his *Homo Sacer* project: form-of-life. What is at stake in this concept is, I attempt to show, a way of thinking “politics” outside of the space of sovereignty. By examining a short text on this notion published just before the opening installment of the *Homo Sacer* sequence, this article demonstrates the way this early formulation of the concept is indebted to certain strains of Italian workerist and post-workerist thought. The fundamental question this analysis poses, however, is whether the concept of form-of-life, being to some extent “beyond” the classical space of politics, should in fact be understood as fundamentally aesthetic in nature.

**KEYWORDS** Agamben, form-of-life, politics, operaismo, aesthetics

Before the publication in 2011 of his *Altissima povertà: Regole monastiche e forme di vita*, one of the central concepts in the work of Giorgio Agamben remained an enigma.<sup>1</sup> From the first installment of his long-running *Homo Sacer* project in 1995, the notion of a “form-of-life” has remained crucial for the conceptual system Agamben has slowly articulated, even as this notion itself was nowhere developed in a substantial way. It is referred to rarely and seemingly in passing, yet a detailed examination of these instances would show that these references are always placed at crucial sites, as if a final elucidation of the concept of form-of-life would resolve any lingering problems or questions that have emerged in the course of Agamben’s primarily politico-philosophical reflections on sovereignty, biopolitics and governance. What remained (and to some extent still remains) particularly unintelligible was the exact relation between form-of-life and another central concept, naked life – at once the object and result of the sovereign act or operation. Throughout his sustained analysis of the sovereign operation and the topological space of biopolitics, Agamben has hinted at a space in some way beyond politics understood in these terms, and even “beyond” the law itself – Agamben will at times refer approvingly to antinomian messianic legacies – however difficult such an exteriority to the invaginated space of politics, with its internal exclusions, is to conceive. As the title of Agamben’s 2011 book, however, makes clear, what is at stake in the notion of a form-of-life is less a life without law – which would mean a life without “freedom,” after all – but a space in which a “rule” would become immanent to life itself:

not life submitting to the law, but life producing its own rule in the form of a consistency immanent to the living.

By speaking of a mode of life beyond or somehow external to the field of sovereignty, Agamben implicitly poses the question regarding the “political” status of forms-of-life. Since sovereignty is the fundamental, structuring frame within which the Western concept of politics has been thought, according to Agamben, we are led to believe that in a certain sense it would be impossible to conceive of such a life as political; we would even be able to think of form-of-life as the name for the “end” of politics, in a sense that resonates with the classical Marxist position that communism is not a form of politics but its abolition. It would be tempting in this case to speak of it instead as an ethical concept, with ethics understood not as a moral order or rational law that would prescribe or order the living in some way, but in the more archaic sense of an *ethos*: a way of life. The rather enigmatic and elastic notion of “form” that Agamben uses – and the source for the concept of a “form” of life seems to come at once from the practices of the Franciscan order and from Wittgenstein – would therefore refer both to a structure that organizes a space of human action and to the specific or singular way a life is *what* it is. In his 1993 book *Means without Ends*, Agamben tends to identify this form with *gesture*: a way of acting without “end.”<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, if we turn to this book – in fact, merely a collection of short essays written between 1988 and 1993 – Agamben published just before embarking on his *Homo Sacer* project, we do in fact encounter an essay devoted to the concept of form-of-life. I will discuss this essay in some detail in the pages that follow. But before entering into the specific argumentation of this text, I want to argue that in this book whose subtitle is “Notes on Politics” Agamben nevertheless suggests that the concept of form-of-life be thought not as political or even ethical but as *aesthetic* in nature. In a seemingly innocuous passage from his essay on gesture, Agamben in fact makes a crucial reference to Kant’s difficult idea of “purposiveness without purpose”: “It is only in this way that the obscure Kantian expression ‘purposiveness without purpose’ acquires a concrete meaning. Such a finality in the realm of means is that power of the gesture that interrupts the gesture in its very being-means and only in this way can exhibit it, thereby transforming a *res* into a *res gesta*.”<sup>3</sup> Readers of Kant will recall that this “obscure” notion is one of four aspects of judgments of taste: we judge a natural, *living* form to be beautiful when it seems to have been organized with a specific end in view, even as the specific nature of this end, goal or purpose must

necessarily be absent in order for a judgment of taste to occur. Nothing with an end external to itself can be beautiful, even if this same beauty requires that the form in question be oriented by an enigmatic finality, a *purposiveness*. Such is the action or activity that Agamben identifies with life as not merely living, but invested with form. If the notion of form, and particularly aesthetic form, seems to distance us from the sphere of action – that is, from the space of ethics or politics – we must also recall that when we speak of the category of the aesthetic in Kant, we are speaking of an experience that is no way opposed to either the sphere of the ethical or the realm of nature and the living. To the contrary, Kant’s entire critical project is staked on the premise that only the aesthetic can propose the idea of a reconciliation between the ethical sphere and natural life – that is, the possibility of an ethical power or capacity immanent to the sensible world. When Agamben speaks of life with a form in this specific sense, we should understand it to mean that which, in life and its activity, gives it a specific consistency, tonality or even “taste” – that is, what makes a specific or singular way of life. This mode of life would be at once natural and ethical, living and ordered by an ethical force – and beyond this very separation or polarity. This is the exact sense in which a form-of-life would be less a political or ethical notion strictly speaking than an aesthetic one, in both the classical sense (ethical rationality becoming immanent to the sensible world) and the modern, avant-garde sense (the abolition of the separation between art and “life”).

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“Debates about the real meaning of the words life and death,” remarks the Nobel Prize winning British biologist Peter Medawar, “are signs, in the field biology, of a low-level conversation. These words have no intrinsic signification that might be clarified by a more attentive and deeper study.” To ask the question about the meaning of life and death is, for the scientist, to ask a dumb question, a question best left for those who have the hardest time rising above low-level conversations: it is best left to philosophers. For the distinction between science and philosophy is determined by the type of concepts each produces. Where philosophy pretends to develop rigorously determined concepts, to produce clear and distinct ideas, scientific concepts are what we can call, to retrieve a useful distinction proposed by Eugen Fink, operative rather than thematic concepts, units deployed in a practice that constitutes or produces,

through its interventions, the objects it seems to be describing. The spontaneous philosophy of scientists is therefore both a condition and an effect of scientific practices. And science has neither the obligation, nor the capacity, nor even the right to produce theoretical concepts that might rigorously delimit the field of life, precisely by drawing the distinction between life and its limit, death.

On the other hand, it is possible to contend that for philosophy, any discussion of “life” – of its concept, first of all, but also and important its *sense*, with the understanding that the sense of life is not necessarily living, but might have something to do with death – is just as dumb, just as banal, just as low-level a conversation as it is for science. It is not for nothing that, for example, in his fundamental ontology Heidegger describes the structure of Dasein in terms that introduce an absolute asymmetry between life and death; if Dasein is first and foremost a being-toward-death, a formulation in which all of the pressure is on the motion drawn out by the preposition, Dasein is in its determinant structure *not* a living being, and from a certain perspective not even alive. Dasein, unlike you and me, unlike animals and unlike the gods, does not live: it exists, and in this existence, that is, it is its ownmost possibility, it is actually, and is the act of the potentiality most proper to it. And even in Husserl, whose philosophical conceptuality is shot through with certain inflections of life, whether it is the lived experience of *Erlebnis*, the *Lebenswelt* of his latter work, or most importantly, the livingness of what he calls the “Living Present [*Lebendige Gegenwart*],” the present of the present as the necessary form of all experience, we never encounter a concept of life or the living, which is a matter best left to a regional ontology.

When Michel Henry concludes his enormous two-volume book on Marx with the affirmation that “Marx’s thought places us before the abyssal question: what is life?,” Henry poses a question that Marx does not dare to.<sup>4</sup> For Marx, as Henry himself knows – the Henry who, just prior to posing this question in Marx’s name argues that the vision of communism posed by Marx is not an equitable distribution of socially produced wealth, but the withdrawal of what Henry calls “living praxis” from the sphere of production, that is, a praxis that will no longer be measured by objective mediations like value, money and so on – Henry knows that for Marx, whether in the *German Ideology* and its “actually living individuals” whose praxis produces consciousness, or in the *Grundrisse*’s enigmatic figure of a “living labor” that is paradoxically both the foundation of, and yet absolutely exterior to, productive labor and the genesis of value, it is not a question of life but rather the index, through the qualifier

“living,” of the real, concrete, relation to self of an activity not regulated and normed by objective mediations.

Agamben’s “Form-of-Life” was originally published in the journal *Futur Anterieur*, a Parisian review that in the 1990s brought together various tendencies within Italian post-*operaismo*, Michel Foucault’s late work on biopower, and the thought of Gilles Deleuze, can be situated at the switching point between the political and ethical reflections developed in *The Coming Community*, first published in 1990, and the appearance of the first volume of the *Homo Sacer* suite in 1995. *The Coming Community*, it will be recalled, proposed a convergence among an ontological reflection on Being determined not as substance, predicate or whatness, but as *thusness*, as what is its mode, manner or how; an ethical reflection that located the possibility of ethics in the acting of one’s own inactuality or potentiality; and a political projection characterizing the “coming politics” as a struggle between a community of “whatever singularities” who appropriate their own-non-belonging, their own lack of proper identity or properties, and “State organization.”<sup>5</sup> In the *Homo Sacer* suite, a series of texts that is now several books long, what is at stake is, as readers of Agamben well know, the topological relation between sovereign or state power, defined as the capacity to decide on a state of exception, and the extraction or production of so-called “naked life,” that is, a life extracted or separated from its “form” and exposed or abandoned to sovereign power over life and death. Now, the question of just what this term “form” means will be crucial in the remarks that follow. But for the moment I simply want to note that in the short, transitional text on “Form-of-life,” where this topological structure of internal exclusion between sovereign power and naked life is first proposed if not formalized, what is at stake is first and foremost *not* the nature of sovereign power and its obscure “bearer,” but of what Agamben calls a “unitary power that constitutes the multiple forms of life as form-of-life,” that is, an “antagonistic power [*puissance*]” that should be, he counsels, the “unitary center of the coming politics.”<sup>6</sup> In this short text, then, Agamben projects two lines of inquiry, centered on two antagonistic poles in contemporary politics: the operations of sovereign power and the production of naked life, on the one hand, and the constitution, on the other, of a form-of-life that unifies or “gathers” together what Agamben here calls the “multiple forms of life” – elsewhere in the text, importantly, he qualifies these forms of life as “multiple forms of social life”<sup>7</sup> – into a singular “form-of-life.”

Before returning to Agamben’s citation of Medawar, then, I want to quickly propose an initial line of questioning that this short text, and the

specific passages I have already indicated, proposes. If so much emphasis is placed, in the books that form of the *Homo Sacer* configuration, on the distinction in the Greek language but also in Greek thought between *zoè* and *bios*, that is, between the life that is indifferently distributed among animals, humans and gods, and the way a mode or manner of life individuates either an individual or a group, what this doubling or division within what the modern languages efface with a single word for life obscures is the triangulation of *three* terms in Agamben's 1993 text, where it is a question of naked life – here identified with *zoè* – and two other terms, the multiplicity of “forms of life” that have been identified as “social,” on the one hand, and the “form-of-life” that emerges as a power, a *potenza* and not a *potere*, antagonistic to sovereign power in so far as it is capable of resisting the sovereign operation of isolating naked life from its form. In short, then, three terms and two opposed operations. Starting from multiple forms of life, we witness the confrontation between the separation of a life from its form on the part of sovereign power; and on the other hand we are told of a coming “anti-state” politics that will be constituted through a practice that traverses without canceling the multiplicity of forms of *social* life – transforming this multiplicity of forms into a single form-of-life that is nevertheless traversed by a certain “multitudo,” as we will see. Finally, what we can think of three separate “situations,” to use Agamben's term: the “normal situations” in which naked life remains “tied” to forms of life in their social articulation; states of exception in which naked life is extracted from, or separated from, any “form” or mode of being by state or sovereign power; and finally, what we could call a revolutionary situation, in which a certain traversal of the multiplicity of forms of life occurs, a negation that is *in no way* symmetrical to that performed by sovereign power, a process that we must be reminded is both political and ontological in nature.

To return, once again, to the Medawar passage. Agamben cites this passage, it must be noted, *not* in order to confirm Medawar position, but in order to demonstrate that in contemporary discussions of bioethics and biopolitics – that is, the increasingly dominant discourse of the Western biopolitical democracies or the society of the spectacle, as Agamben also puts it – what is most conspicuously lacking is any interrogation of the biological, medical and scientific concept of life. Medawar's remark is marshaled in order to underline that the biological sciences and more generally science does *not even have a concept of life to begin with* – it is, as I tried to underline before, first and foremost a practice that has no need to reflect critically on its own conditions of possibility – with

the result being the wholesale appropriation, in contemporary political discourse, of “scientific pseudo-concepts” and “pseudo-scientific representations of the body” that function primarily as means of political control rather than guides for scientific inquiry. The contemporary political space of the biopolitical democracies, then, is one in which sovereign power and medico-scientific ideology converge. This convergence represents, in turn, a mutation within the nature of sovereign power itself, whose exceptionality and whose status as punctual decision that cuts across the flow of everyday life and its forms, has now become banal: the increasingly medicalized space of everyday life, the integration of politics and medicine, produces a situation in which “the same *prélèvement* [*prelievo*, sampling, taking a specimen] of naked life that the sovereign could perform in certain circumstances on forms of life is currently massively realized daily by pseudo-scientific conceptions of the body, sickness and health, and by the ‘medicalization’ of increasingly vast spheres of life and the individual imagination.”<sup>8</sup>

What is important about this passage, for my purposes, is not the assessment of the exact nature of contemporary forms of domination, but rather the way in which the citation of Medawar allows Agamben to propose what he considers a properly philosophical conception of life. This operation has two parts. First, the identification of the current spontaneously philosophy of both biologists and bioethicists with a “secularization” of a properly philosophical, that is, political conception of life: biological life is nothing more than the secularization and depoliticization of a term that can only be understood through its intimacy with, or to use a Lacanian term, its *extimate* relation to sovereign power. That is, not as simply as object to be identified, evaluated, and measured, but as a condition whose production is the very definition of sovereign power. And then, inversely, another politics of life, another political operation: the constitution of a form-of-life through what Agamben will enigmatically call *thought*.

But why, in a political context in which the “pseudo-concept” of life has not only become an increasingly dominant reference, but has even made possible the banalization of the sovereign exception, introducing a certain indiscernability between “normal situations,” to use the term Agamben identifies with the multiplicity of social forms of life, and states of exception, in which these same forms are stripped away – why, in this context, insist on a politics *of life*? That is, what Agamben calls “a political life [...] oriented toward the idea of happiness and gathered up in a form-of-life,” a “non-state politics” or even an anti-state politics

whose sole possibility consists in “an irrevocable exodus from any and all sovereignty”?<sup>9</sup> I insist on this as a real question. Earlier, I underlined the absolute asymmetrical relation between naked life, as the effect of sovereign power’s decision, and the practice that constitutes a form-of-life, even as both of these operations perform different forms of negation of the predicates and differential markers that structure forms of life in normal situations. This is important, I think, for there is a certain image of Agamben’s thought, encouraged by certain passages from his work over the past twenty years, which contends that what is at stake in Agamben’s political and historical thought is a variant of the Hoelderlinian formula according to which, “where danger is, the saving power grows.” Whatever the actual meaning of this formula as it surfaces in Hoelderlin’s poetic work, the reading given to this phrase is always a catastrophic, that is, dialectical one: salvation is nothing more than the appropriation, conversion, or assumption of the danger itself. As if the content of catastrophe and salvation were the same, and what must be produced is a new form of appearing of this content, that is, a new subjective relation to it. (To this logic would correspond what Benjamin Noys has recently diagnosed as an “accelerationist tendency” in 1970s French thought, specifically the early 1970s development of various forms of “libidinal economy” found in Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard, Baudrillard, but also many others.) And yet it is precisely this logic that Agamben swears off or disqualifies, when he explicitly cites Bataille’s elevation of this naked life, in its very abjection, to the level of a superior principle, “sovereignty” or the sacred itself – and we should note that in this account of Bataille’s thought, there is an immediate identification of abjection and sovereignty, rather than either a topological mapping of the relation between them, or a process of appropriation.

This asymmetry between naked life and a “life of potential [*vita di potenza*]” that is the form-of-life, this asymmetry between the operations of sovereign power and revolutionary politics would be *more* pronounced if this other of sovereign power were not also a politics of life, a politics that operates on forms of life. I have already mentioned the manner in which Heidegger insists, in his early fundamental ontology, on the non-correlation between life and death, on a death that is the limit not of life, but of existence, of Dasein as being-toward-death, as that being that throws itself upon a pure possibility, its own. And even when Heidegger confronts the question of life directly, in his long reflection on the life of animals in his famous seminar in 1929–30 – whose title does not refer, it should be underlined, to the figure of the animal, or even to



the *Stimmung* of boredom which concerns its first half, but to finitude, world and solitude – it is not in order to offer a philosophical account or ontology of the living, but in order to insist on *treating* the animal *not*, first, as a living thing but as a being that, unlike the worldless stone and worldforming Dasein, has a very peculiar relation to the world: it has a world by being deprived of one. This was the source of what Heidegger strikingly referred to as its poverty. This is, however, a poverty without lack, or so Heidegger insists, as his treatment of the animal is, he claims, non-normative. Where the situation of the animal, caught between the worldless stone and the worldbuilding Dasein, suggests a certain mediating figure, a kind of figure of negativity that marks and makes possible the passage from the sphere of nature to the kingdom of spirit – in this sense, an Hegelian configuration or movement – we can nevertheless, in this context, take him at his word. I emphasize this strategy on Heidegger's part in particular in order to underline how striking Agamben's insistence on maintaining a certain symmetry, if not continuity, between two figures of life, naked life and a "life of potential," mediated in *their* turn by a third term, the forms of social life encountered in so-called normal situations. Indeed, in the first definitions of "form-of-life" offered by Agamben, his language exactly replicates the formulas used by Heidegger – famous formulas, which everyone knows – in describing the structure of Dasein: if Dasein is that being for whom Being itself is at issue or stake, the being for whom, to use the French translation, "il y va de l'être même," for Agamben this form-of-life is a mode of life in which, in living, in its concrete acts, and in its behavior or comportment, life itself is at issue, "il y va de la vie même," to cite the French translation of "Form-of-Life." Agamben develops this formula, in which a form-of-life would be said to live in such a way that, in each determined act – ethical, political, or of thought – it would also, simultaneously, live or put into play its own potentiality, its own non-actuality, such that each act is irreducible to a fact or state of affairs, nor simply the actualization of a possibility or exercise of a faculty or capacity, but the existing of a potentiality. In short, a life that experiences its own threshold not by throwing itself upon its singular limit, but by dwelling in, appropriating, its part of potentiality – a potentiality that, as we will see, is precisely a *common* power, that does not belong to me.

This insistence on life and on a "political life" – again, this is Agamben's expression, in which an ontology of life as power is said to be "immediately political" – is, it should be pointed out, not anomalous at the historical conjuncture in which Agamben is writing. In the same year

Agamben's short text was published, Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* appeared as well, a text which has as its core a reading of Marx's philosophy – that is, that layer or aspect of Marx's text which spontaneously secretes philosophical or metaphysical theses, since the fundamental operation of Derrida's reading is to locate a force of enunciation in Marx's text that breaks with, and is even antagonistic to, this philosophical dimension of his work and legacy – a reading of Marx's philosophy, then, as an ontology of life, as founded on the "hyper-phenomenological principle of the presence in flesh and bone of the living person, of the being itself, of its effective and non-fantomatic, of its flesh and bone presence."<sup>10</sup> It is on the basis of this principle or rather this axiom, that is, an unverifiable decision or wager, that an entire philosophico-critical system is launched, in the form of an obsessive tracking down of phantoms, ghosts and so on, a system equally visited by, hounded and pursued in its turn by these same ghosts it thinks it is chasing. Now, what is surprising about Derrida's reading of Marx, in those sections where he actually turns to the letter of Marx's text itself, is that it is nowhere a question of examining, say, the antagonistic relation between living and dead labor, as it is developed elliptically in the *Grundrisse*, but also presupposed throughout Marx. Rather than traverse this historically and materially determined space of antagonism, Derrida appeals instead to "all philosophies of life, indeed of the real or living individual," assigning Marx among these ranks while, in classical fashion, also drawing out a spectral thread or chain at work in Marx's textual practice that excepts it from its characterization as merely one philosophy and one philosophy of life among others.<sup>11</sup> Derrida's reading of Marx, his strategic decision to read it through the prism of an ontology of life, and to assimilate the Marxist thesis that identifies the source or effective genesis of value and the value form in the living presence of labor to itself in its activity to a philosophical thesis or position concerning life is inflected to an extent as yet developed in commentaries on this work by his *Auseinandersetzung* with the two volume book on Marx by Michel Henry I referred to earlier. In this book, one finds a portrait of Marx as a thinker of radical or absolute immanence of life to itself, of a certain pathos or auto-affective feeling of life that excludes all objectivity, that is, that murmurs beneath the fourfold or quadripolar structure of correlation – morphe and hyle of intentional acts, real and unreal – that guides all phenomenological investigations into the constitution of objectivity and the intentional life of subjectivity. Now, in qualifying or reinscribing this reading of Marx as a "philosophy of life," Derrida insists that it is not a question of *opposing*

this proposition; Derrida proposes to supplement this immediate self-affection or auto-production (without objectivation) of life with a logic of survival and a spectral presence whose virtuality – a real virtuality, leaving traces and effects in the present, if not constituting it in its very torn or ecstatic consistency – is not completely foreign to, at least in terms of structure, what Agamben calls potentiality.

(The difference is one of inflection, as the specter is that which comes and goes, visits, like the dead; potentiality has other connotations.)

It at this point that I want to address what I consider to be the real stakes of this short essay. In the final sections of this elliptical text, Agamben develops what he calls *form* – a term that, it should be quickly noted, is quickly identified with manner or mode, that is, not with what “life” is but how it is what it is – through the figure of “thought.” The “life of potentiality” is first of all determined by the activity of thought, thought understood in the terms Aristotle famously develops in *De Anima*. Thought is a *sense* among others; but it is an exception to the activity of sensation insofar as, unlike touch, taste, sign or audition, it is a “being,” Aristotle asserts, “whose nature is to be *en puissance*” (429a–b), that is, a being whose being is to remain inactual in the very movement of its actualization; or, better, that capacity that, in each determined act, with each determined content of thought, also experiences or feels its own capacity to be affected as such, its own potentiality. Now, importantly, Agamben quickly grafts this experience of thought to another, post-Aristotelian conception of thought or the intellect, namely the Averroian affirmation of a “single possible intellect accessible to all men” – that is, the very potentiality of thought experienced in each determined act is identified with the universality, the pre-individual or diffuse nature of the intellect itself. Thought is a sense; thought senses its own potentiality in exercising itself; this potentiality is precisely the common or diffuse nature of the intellect, what exceeds any process of individuation. This conception of the intellect as a common power is, according to Agamben, what marks the threshold of “modern political thought,” a rupture first formulated in the 14th century by Marisilio of Padua and, importantly, Dante Alighieri’s *De Monarchia*.

The decisive term in Dante’s account of what we can call, for convenience’s sake, the general intellect is a term that will be familiar to us all: *multitudo*. In a passage from the third section of the first book of *De Monarchia*, Dante underlines that what constitutes the “mode of existence” specific to the human is exercise of the “potential intellect.” Lower creatures are capable solely of sensation; angels are endowed with an intellect. But the intelligence proper to these beings is completely *de-*

*prived* of all potentiality – that is, in a certain, deprived of the privation, the lack, potentiality is supposed to be. Since “such beings exist only as intelligences and nothing else,” there “being is very simply the act of understanding that their own nature exists.” Now, the human intellect is, as already mentioned, singular. And yet this singularity exists in the form of a potentiality that, according to Dante, “cannot be fully actualized all at once [*tota simul*] in any one individual or in any one of the particular social groupings enumerated above [“single household,” “small community,” “city” or “individual community”],” there must be, then, “a *multitudo* in the human race, through whom the whole of this potentiality can be actualized.”<sup>12</sup> (*Monarchy*, 6-7). These lines constitute the most widely cited passage in *De Monarchia*, and there are libraries full of commentaries meant to clarify the content of this “multitudo.” For my purposes, though, what is at stake in this passage is Agamben’s use of this passage, which allows him to complete, in a very abbreviated manner to be sure, his figure of thought, which we will recall is identified with the “unitary power that constitutes the multiple forms of life into form-of-life.” Once again: thought is that sense which, in sensing this or that, senses its own capacity to be affected, its pure potentiality. And: thought, as a singular power, is necessarily a common power which can never be exhausted by singular acts of thought or, to use the language of Dante, any individual person, community, city, or kingdom – that is, by any form of life. The term *multitudo*, in this instance, therefore names that which alone the whole of this potentiality can “be actualized”; such a *multitudo* can, however, neither be a singular individual or social grouping, nor can it be a single “time” or instance, since, the potentiality of the intellectual can never be realized all at once, *tota simul*. *Multitudo*, then, is the condition for actualization of the potential intellect, as well as the name for an irreducibility of that potentiality itself.

This is all relatively schematic. But these propositions are the condition for understanding Agamben’s intervention in this text. The final paragraph is quite clear: it is only when we conceive of the *multitudo* as a common power of the intellect, as that thought which traverses the multiplicity of forms of life in order to constitute a form-of-life as *multitudo*, that the nature of “Marxist general intellect” takes on its full significance. *Multitudo*, general intellect: it is to Antonio Negri that these lines are addressed. And in particular, these two passages, which I will want to begin my conclusion with. Here’s the first passage: “Intellectuality and thought are not one form of life among others which articulates life and social production....” The second, which follows directly upon this first

proposition, is that what is at stake in the coming politics is the clarification of the difference between “the simple and massive inscription of social knowledge in the production process, which characterizes the current phase of capitalism, and intellectuality as antagonistic power [*puissance, potenza*] and form-of-life ....”<sup>13</sup> Two figures of the multitude: one, a name for the “articulation of life and social production” or the “simply inscription of knowledge of social knowledge in the production process,” the other, form-of-life as antagonistic power.

If we quickly trace the evolution of the work of Negri as it changes course between the late 1970s and the late 90s, that is, particularly after the crushing of the *autonomia* movement by the Italian state (and an historically compromised Italian Communist Party), his own arrest and his subsequent turn to the philosophy of Spinoza in *The Savage Anomaly*, we find it characterized by an ontologization of the proletariat as a productive force and as living labor – even “life” itself. Where in the mid-to-late 1970s Negri attempted to expand or even surpass the classical definition of worker identity by including classical non-productive or reproductive labor within it, a tenuous theorization that was nevertheless an attempt to diagram the conflictual dynamics of the area of *Autonomia*, this figure of the “socialized worker” and these new “social subjects” come, by the 1980s and 90s, to be defined as an ontological power cast in Spinozan terms as an infinite substance expressing itself through the production of difference. Where the Negri of the 1970s defined the socialized worker by its dual capacity for “sabotage” – that is, an antagonistic withdrawal of labor-power as source of value -- and for what he called, in the language of capital, “self-valorization,” by the 1990s and the book *Empire*, the “multitude” came to be understood simply as life itself, producing itself as value, however “immeasurable.” This life, as Negri puts it in a recent text, “leads a life parallel with respect to constituted power.”

This later Negri, in which the mass worker and its refusal of work assumes the form of the socialized worker and finally the multitude as living labor or quite simply life itself, life as potentiality, must be read against the more classical formulations of worker antagonism found in the essays of Mario Tronti from the 1970s. For Mario Tronti, the “Copernican revolution” represented by the Italian tendency called *operaismo*’s method of reading Marx meant that the history of capitalism or of the capital relation was neither simply a certain phase in the development of productive forces nor a system of logical categories – from absolute to relative surplus value, say, or formal to real subsumption of labor by capital – developing according to their own internal necessity, as if the history of

capital was nothing more than its becoming increasingly adequate to its own concept. To the contrary, the wager or axiom articulated by Tronti was that capital has no history of its own, and that its mutations are compelled by pressures exerted by proletarian aggression and conflict, a proletariat that is defined not by its capacity to produce surplus-value but by its refusal of its own identity as a class and a class defined by work. This refusal of work, this struggle against work, this relentless sabotage of its own identity as a commodity – labor-power – that is sold in exchange for wages, cannot be reduced to a simple “resistance,” on the part of a living, laboring humanity to its domination by capital; its definition, if this word even applies, is articulated in its active destruction or sabotage of its own objective existence as labor-power, its *own* identity as a category of capital and as an objective component in the organic and technical composition of capital (as “variable capital,” say). In this way, the building or construction of a worker power, to use the name of an organization that emerged in the wake of Tronti’s work, and which included among its founders Antonio Negri, requires the destruction of worker identity and the abolition of the objective existence of the working class – as a class, as a productive force.

The figure of the worker, then, is not to be situated at some point exterior to the capital relation and imaged as a “living” labor or as a creative force crushed by the dead weight of the past (dead labor), as a productive energy that is siphoned off by a undead vampire whose days are, all the same, numbered. The proletariat is not one pole of a relation from which it might withdraw in order to come into its own, being nothing more than what Benjamin Noys refers to as a “relation of rupture,” an activity of sabotage or undermining the relation that is the whole of its existence. The proletariat is, for Tronti, neither an ontological given (a human essence, a productive substance) that alienates itself in the form of capital, nor is it an historical force that might survive its own mutual implication in the capital relation, organizing itself into socialist or communist relations that would be still governed by the categories of capital: value, production, work.

Agamben’s concluding paragraph, then, stakes out the space in which this figure of thought he develops in the second half of his essay – thought as potentiality exercising, thinking itself, thought as a common power, thought as thought of the multitude – assumes its value as an intervention: in relation to the tradition of the Italian *operaismo* tradition, for whom Marx’s so-called “Fragment on Machines” from the *Grundrisse* was so crucial. This tendency, whose Copernican revolution in method I

have just sketched out through the work of Tronti is important not only for its emphasis on this passage in the *Grundrisse*, but for its articulation of two decisive yet enigmatic threads in these notebooks, namely the theme of the general intellect with that of living labor. Living labor, to recall and expand what I have already underlined, is understood by Marx and by this tendency to be not simply a transcendental condition of productive labor – that is, labor as labor-power, labor as capital, labor as productive of value and surplus-value – but an active, material force at the heart of the capital relation, a force that, while supplying productive labor for the needs of capital and its valorization, antagonistically hollows a space of self-valorization internal to this process: the expansion of worker “needs,” to use the language of the late 1960s class struggle, an expansion of worker demands that escalates according to its own exigencies, independent of the logic of the valorization of capital. To this figure of living labor, understood not as an ontologically creative force, much less as “life” itself, but as a lever of antagonism at the heart of the capital relation, is wedded what Marx calls the “general intellect.” The general intellect refers to the moment, in the development of the productive forces, when scientific knowledge and the accumulation of knowledge produced collectively by society over the course of centuries, comes to be an immediate and dominant force in the production process. This knowledge, this “common power” to use Agamben’s terms, assumes material form in increasingly complex machines and systems of automation, which replace both the physical exertion characteristic of previous figures of labor-power and the quantity of labor-time necessary for the production of social wealth. Indeed, for Marx, what is decisive about this moment when the general intellect – again, scientific, abstract knowledge – comes to dominate the production process is that, at a certain point, with the proportional diminution of labor-time in the production process, labor-time itself can no longer function as the measure of value, so “monstrous” – this is Marx’s word – is the disproportion between labor-time and produced wealth. For Marx, this is a breaking point: a mode of production founded in the production of exchange-value, that is, on the extraction of surplus labor, literally has no sense if the quantity of surplus labor time is reduced to an absolute minimum, to next to nothing.

Now, Agamben’s intervention is simply this: for the Marxist thesis to “acquire its sense,” it must be understood not in terms of the objectification of scientific knowledge in the form of fixed capital, but only from the perspective of the figure of thought he has outlined. By which is meant: the concept of the general intellect only assumes its properly antagonis-

tic character when it is no longer understood, as Marx himself does, as the “simple, massive inscription of social knowledge in the production process.”<sup>14</sup> Agamben’s point is clear: what Marx, in 1858, projected as a crisis for capitalism, that is, like all crises, an objective disproportion (here, between labor-time and social wealth) that transcodes a subjective antagonism, is quite simply the “current phase of capitalism,” that is, the “society of the spectacle” (ibid.). A few lines earlier, Agamben clarifies his position. The general intellect, if it is attain its sense as a concept, cannot be understood as a “form of life among others in which life and social production are articulated” (ibid.).

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I have already developed what I consider the most important aspect of Agamben’s intervention in this text, namely the triadic schema of naked life, multiple forms of (social life), and form-of-life, a form-of-life. Naked life is, to recall the salient point, the life “common” to animals, gods and humans, and in contemporary biopolitical democracies, the “generic” part of humanity understood as the most minimal, and abject, frame in which to operate on, and devastate, modes of living. The form of life itself, in its very plurality, can and is recoded, in so-called “normal situations,” into an array of “juridico-social identities” (“voter, employee, journalist, student, but also person with AIDS, transvestite, porno star, the elderly, parent, woman”).<sup>15</sup> (Forma-di-vita, 16); in exceptional moments, those moments which, in the present, *tend* (it is a tendency, not a state of fact), to become the rule, these forms of life are stripped of both form and social identity, and naked life becomes the object of state or sovereign power. In turn, the form-of-life, is constituted – given form, precisely, not as identity but as what takes place without identity – by means of an act or, better, experience of thought in the sense proposed by Agamben. This “unitary power” that constitutes a form-of-life therefore also produces, if that is right word, a generic humanity, but a generic humanity now as a force that resists, or undoes, the operation of sovereign power.

Where the workerist tradition sees the general intellect, as the contemporary form that living labor assumes, as an antagonism internal to the capital relation, Agamben asserts that this reading of general intellect reduces it to a form of life among others – that is, the contemporary form of capitalism itself, in which life as a power is objectified in fixed capital, in machines, in systems of automation, in the spectacle. But what is crucial to the workerist reading of the general intellect is its assertion that what Marx calls the general intellect is not simply the accumulation of abstract,



scientific knowledge in the form of fixed capital – that is, the articulation of life and social production, of life as capital – but a set of capacities that are social in nature, yet cannot be objectified in the form of machinery and, more generally, can not be appropriated as capital. Forms of life, precisely: Virno, for example, speaks of linguistic competence, the circulation of affects, ethical tendencies. And insofar these forces accumulate around the figure of the general intellect, the contemporary form of production necessarily announces not simply a disproportion between labor-time and social wealth, but a bifurcation – not necessarily antagonistic, but more of a separation, even an exodus – between productive forces and the general intellect.

The key concepts mobilized by Agamben in this short, early yet lucid examination of the notion of a form-of-life – that is differentiated from forms of life, in the plural, and naked life – is of course the general intellect and its related, Spinozan double, the multitude. These choices are, clearly, strategic: at this point in the early 1990s, Agamben was developing a kind of alliance or convergence with certain aspects of the post-workerist Italian tradition. As a result, it is the figure of *thought* which is assigned the capacity to resist the sovereign operation of power, namely the separation of life from its form. In doing so, however, it is my hypothesis – one that could only fully justified through a reading of this essay along with other important texts from *Means without Ends*, including his essay on Guy Debord – that the nature of this resistance is precisely “aesthetic” in nature, in the terms that I established in the opening section of this paper. The activity associated with the aesthetic is, as I have recalled, the notion of gesture: an act that does not realize an end or potential, but is rather a pure means, purposive yet without determined goal or objective. The question that thinking this aesthetic nature of this activity that defines or constitutes form-of-life – and here, thought might simply mean “gesture” – poses is how to think this form of activity beyond the space of politics, which is to say, not only the logic of the sovereign exception but also, perhaps, that of “antagonism.”

## Notes

1. Giorgio Agamben, *Altissima povertà: Regole monastiche e forme di vita* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2011).

2. Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, tr. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). See in particular the essay “Notes on Gesture,” 49–60.

3. *Means without End*, 59.
4. Michel Henry, *Marx*, vol. 2, *Une philosophie de l'économie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).
5. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, tr. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1993), 85.
6. *Means without End*, 11, 12.
7. *Ibid.*, 5. Translation slightly modified.
8. *Means without End*, 8. Translation modified.
9. *Means without End*, 8.
10. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, tr. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 230n1.
11. *Specters of Marx*, 177.
12. Dante, *Monarchy*, tr. Prue Shaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 6–7.
13. *Means without End*, 11.
14. *Means without End*, 11.
15. *Means without End*, 6–7. Translation modified.