

Propositions for Inoperative Life

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Abstract

The concept of inoperativity, making its first appearance in the work of Alexandre Kojève, gets fully thematised across the writings of Maurice Blanchot and Jan-Luc Nancy before being taken up and further developed by Giorgio Agamben. Although already present in the very first volume of his *Homo Sacer* series, Agamben's formulation of *inoperosità* has gained increasing centrality within the rich and intricate theoretical universe constructed by the Italian philosopher over the years. However, this concept has frequently been misinterpreted or dismissed as indicating mere inactivity: a passive and complete absence of all work. This simplistic interpretation falls short of grasping what truly is at stake in the complex notion of inoperativity: namely, a much more radical and sophisticated suspension of potentiality, which Agamben seeks to rescue from the mechanisms of actualisation that have plagued much of Western thought. With this edited volume, to our knowledge the first entirely dedicated to the study of inoperativity, our primary concern is not so much that of correcting superficial appreciations of this concept for the sake of accuracy. Rather, we are here introducing a number of perspectives on, and putting forth a set of deliberately unresolved propositions for, inoperativity that may open this notion to new uses.

Keywords: inoperative life, potentiality, productivity, realisation, opening, Agamben



The theme of *inoperativity*, already mentioned in the very first volume of the *Homo Sacer* series (Agamben, 1998: 61–2) albeit only briefly, has increasingly claimed centre stage within Giorgio Agamben's rich and intricate philosophical universe. Initially discussed in terms of “unworking” or “worklessness”, as *désœuvrement*, by a small coterie of French intellectuals — Alexandre Kojève, Maurice Blanchot, and Jean-Luc Nancy, as well as Georges Bataille — Agamben has since developed his own original take on this concept. The Italian philosopher's formulation of *inoperosità*, however, has been frequently misconstrued, and at times outright dismissed, as indicating simple inactivity, as a form of passivity and utter absence of all labour, likened to an absolute Bataillean negativity. In fact, this simplistic interpretation does not begin to do justice to what is really at stake in the complex

notion of inoperativity. It is perhaps in the *Postilla* (postscript) to the 2001 edition of *La comunità che viene*, titled *Tiqqun de la noche*, that we can find the author's most incisive, pithy elaboration on the concept. Agamben writes:

The crucial question is not “what to do?”, but “how to do?”, and Being is less important than the “*like-so*”. Inoperativity does not mean inertia, but *katargesis* — that is to say, an operation in which the *how* completely substitutes the *what*, in which the life without form and the forms without life coincide in a *form of life*. (2001: 93, our translation)

The passage above suggests that what the Italian philosopher calls inoperativity is an attempt to rethink acting in terms that could neutralise the productive force routinely governing it — the necessary exhaustion and “passing into actuality” of potentiality, as he puts it (e.g., Agamben, 1999: 180). Production, in this case, is to be taken in the broadest possible sense as the attainment of results, the achievement of an end, the successful completion of a process: a *realisation*, so to speak, or, we may even say, a *closure*. In other words, what inoperativity indicates is a subversion of the established relations between means and ends, the radicality of which has far-reaching implications for debates in politics, ethics, and aesthetics.

And yet, this subversion of means and ends, undertaken by the notion of inoperativity, also implies a “subversion” at the level of ontology: it defines “man” as *argos*, that is, as lacking an essence, a being-at-work proper to him. As Agamben points out in *The Coming Community*, ‘the fact that must constitute the point of departure for any discourse on ethics is that there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize’ (1993: 39). In this sense, Agamben does not only propose to render all human works inoperative, ‘opening them to a new possible use’ (Agamben, 2014: 69), but he also lays the groundwork for the deactivation of the ontological apparatus that sustains the biopolitical violence he has forcefully denounced. Being, therefore, appears in Agamben not as a given entity that precedes its modes but rather as no other than its own “how”, that is to say, being is nothing other than its modifications. This modal ontology, as Agamben calls it, that both underpins and arises out of *inoperativity*, defines a human life ‘in which the single ways, acts, and processes of living are never simply *facts* but always and above all *possibilities* of life, always and above all power’ (Agamben, 2000: 4). As Sergei Prozorov suggests, ‘[r]ather than attempt to devise a “proper” form of life, Agamben seeks to free life from the gravity of all tasks or vocations imposed on it by privileged forms’ (2020:

235). In this sense, underscoring the significance of Agamben's notion of *inoperativity* for the understanding of politics, ethics, and aesthetics, implies paying critical attention to its double tonality: the insurrection at level of ontology that the category entails, and the radical openness of all human works archived through the deactivation of the productive force that governs all human endeavours. Hence Agamben's claim that inoperativity and use have come to replace production and praxis as the 'fundamental concepts of politics' (2014: 67).

Nevertheless, it is precisely this critical attention to inoperativity and use that is lacking in the attempts to derive the politics of Agamben from his biopolitical critique of our current predicament. Therefore, straying from readings of Agamben that posit the figure of the *homo sacer* as the earthly "hero" of his politics (Chiesa, 2009: 105) and as the messianic man that for Badiou remains as the 'one who has nothing left' (2009: 560), but from those readings that interpret Agamben's politics as a form of accelerationism (Whyte, 2013), as pure political nihilism (Laclau, 2017) or as being 'singularly unproductive' (Negri, 2007: 121), this Special Issue devotes attention to form-of-life, to use, and to inoperativity. In so doing, it contributes to the discussion on the strategic resources to conceive Agamben's politics as the emergency brake of the train of history that Benjamin had in mind:

While the modern State pretends through the state of exception to include within itself the anarchic and anomic element it cannot do without, it is rather a question of displaying its radical heterogeneity in order to let it act as a purely destituent potential. (Agamben, 2015: 279)

Needless to say, the terrain to which this special issue contributes, has already been irrigated by others who have put a stoplight on the notion of inoperativity as a central category for the study of Agamben's coming politics: certainly William Watkin (2014) and Tyson E. Lewis (2018), with whom we have been fortunate enough to collaborate in this issue, but also Sergei Prozorov (2014), Greg Bird (2016), Mathew Abbott (2016) and many others. We join them in thinking about inoperativity not as normative narrative of emancipation that responds to the everlasting concern of revolutionary theory, "what is to be done?", but rather as a set of openings that dislocate constituent power from the central place given to it by the revolutionary tradition.

With this in mind, editing a volume on the theme of inoperativity comes with its perils and opportunities — some rather evident, others more subtle. An obvious quandary, barely needing mention, is represented by the fact that

academic publishing appears to be, by nature and intention, an irredeemably “operative” machine. It is, after all and irrespective of any commercial vocations, structurally invested in — perhaps even condemned to — the capture and packaging of intellectual labour into ostensibly finished products, as *opere*. Furthermore, isn’t much academic writing, particularly when performed under the arrogantly correctional rubric of critique or critical theory, one of the most egregious forms of constituent power, hence antithetical to an inoperative ethos? Now, although we may be tempted to claim that this volume is aiming to be performatively inoperative, that would be both false and disingenuous. However, what we do hope is that, in the curation of this collection, enough priority has been given to the “how to do?” over the “what to do?”. Which is to say, in the writing of this introduction but even more so as editors of this Special Issue, it was our intention to address the question of — as well as the questioning around — inoperativity not as a means of providing a blueprint of sorts, not to create a map to more confidently navigate, and ultimately extricate oneself from, Agamben’s maze. Rather, the point here was to add some depth and nuance to a labyrinth that, as Lewis reminds us in this same volume, ‘renders inoperative the very notion of progress or regress’. Or, to put it differently: despite the inevitable, apparent concluded-ness of this publication, it is our greatest hope that what an edited collection (more so than a monograph) can afford is a series of openings to new uses of the notion of inoperativity itself. A *conjunctive* exercise, rather than a corrective one: “and...and...and...”, to say it with Deleuze and Guattari. Which is also to say that our preoccupation was not exclusively with upholding, rejecting, or refining something like an Agambenian tradition, but also to see how Agamben’s writing on inoperativity could be handled and mishandled, allowing it to radiate outwards and, hopefully, into new territories.

It is by working in this spirit that we are here seeking to approach inoperativity in three complementary ways. First, we are of course invested in deepening and enlarging our understanding of this concept, whether by returning to Agamben’s own early engagement with Bataille, thanks to Michael Krimper’s translation, or by exploring how inoperativity relates to other key categories in the Italian philosopher’s thought, as is the case for William Watkin’s methodological reflections on category theory, Kieran Aarons’ assessment of messianic time and destituent power, and Valeria Bonacci’s essay on use and form-of-life. Second, we are particularly interested in tracing possible intersections — whether explicit or not — between Agamben’s articulation of inoperativity and other kindred conceptualisations of political, ethical, and aesthetic practice, as found in other authors and intellectual traditions. What this

means is essentially to engage in a combinatory effort, staging imaginary, sometimes even unlikely dialogues that may alter, contaminate, and possibly enliven otherwise disconnected philosophical *œuvres* and lineages. Examples of this can be found throughout the Special Issue, as Agamben's thought is taken up *vis-à-vis* that of novelist Luciano Bianciardi, pataphysician Alfred Jarry, and theorist Fred Moten in contributions by Angelo Nizza, Tyson E. Lewis, and Elliot C. Mason respectively, as well as that of usual suspect Michel Foucault, in the case of Carlo Crosato's piece. Third, we are also committed to taking inoperativity as an observable *tonality* that can be spotted around us, in processes and phenomena of various kinds, whenever we are attentive enough to notice it, thus using this concept as something of an analytic lens. Framing inoperativity this way, striving to see the inoperative gesture in existing practices, we are reminded of an invaluable admonition by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, which we are here appropriating and adapting: not unlike their notion of "study", we want to argue that inoperativity is 'important precisely because it is *not* special' (Harney and Moten, 2020). It is perhaps in keeping with this approach that one should read Malte Fabian Rauch's archaeologies of contemporary art, also nested in this volume.

Clearly, it may sound like we established a rather broad, ambitious, hence hardly achievable set of goals for this collection. It may be that, in the end, what we are talking about here is a direction to take more so than a route having been travelled. Yet, is this not precisely what we can learn from inoperativity, namely, invoking the anonymous 2003 pamphlet *Appel*, 'never letting the search for results become more important than the attention to the process' (Anonymous, 2003: 68)? This is why we want to kickstart this volume by offering a number of "propositions" for inoperative life. Deliberately presented in the guise of questions — some addressed by the articles in this collection, as noted above, others not — we hope that the following prompts will serve to tease out the possible as well as actual relevance of inoperativity across a number of fields, theories, and practices.

On method and philosophical archaeology

A reflection on method, writes Agamben in the preface to *The Signature of All Things*, 'usually follows practical application, rather than preceding it. It is a matter then, of ultimate and penultimate thoughts' (2009: 7). In Agamben's case, these "ultimate thoughts", as set out in this very book, give explicit contours to his own approach to Philosophical Archaeology. The underlying question from

which his inquiry departs is: how to understand the notion of the *archē* to which *archē*-ology regresses? The overall aim of his philosophical method is to render inoperative the signatures that control the intelligibility of Western politics and culture by tracing the *archē* of discursive formations through the use of paradigms. In this sense, archaeology, for Agamben, is a form of metaphysical critique that aims to go beyond negation (Primera, 2018: 35). In one of the most compelling studies of Agamben's method, William Watkin (2014) focuses on the systems of intelligibility that regulate and sanction what can be said, and the moments when discursive formations become operative, in order to discuss the political possibilities of the suspension of this dialectic, which he captures through the notion of *indifference*. If the arts, poetry and other human practices have a political significance it is because they have the *archaeological capacity* of rendering inoperative the biopolitical machine and the works of life, language, economy, and society, as argued by Agamben in *The Use of Bodies*. The question that remains open, then, is how to understand the nature of the relation between inoperativity and philosophical archaeology?

On inoperativity in/and practice

One of the central criticisms levelled against Agamben's inoperativity — and indeed his whole *œuvre* — is a perceived lack of concrete and contemporary examples of how this particular notion either translates into or can be codified as actual, material practices, beyond the scant paradigmatic figures he does mention, such as Hermann Melville's *Bartleby* or the Franciscan order. That is to say, in Prozorov's words (2014: 1–2): '[w]ith a few exceptions Agamben's works rarely address concrete contemporary or historical events and when they do, it is usually in an abstruse historico-philosophical context that is apparently devoid of immediate political significance'. If some may find such vagueness frustrating, Gavin Rae has perceptively suggested that Agamben's account '*must be vague so as to prevent him from creating a political program to be realized, one that would reconstitute the means-end logic to be overcome*' (2018: 981–82, emphasis added). In other words, it can be argued that it is precisely thanks to this conscious strategy that Agamben avoids falling himself prey to the constituent prescriptiveness that inoperativity seeks to neutralise — hence maintaining his focus squarely on the "how" rather than on the "what". Further complicating things, we have of course Agamben's insistence on messianism and a politics "to come": a politics that, as Prozorov puts it, 'is not yet practiced, let alone encapsulated in a fixed regime or system, but rather remains entirely to be

invented’ (2014: 2). But as we are here unapologetically *not* in the business of pledging allegiance, a perhaps misguided sense of urgency compels us to ask (in spite of Agamben): how may an elaboration of inoperativity be inspired by *existing* social practices, artworks, or interventions and, conversely, what actual examples of contemporary social practices, artworks, or interventions may embody, manifest, or capture the spirit of inoperativity particularly well?

On the collective dimension of inoperativity

The inoperative community that Agamben has in mind is nothing like the Aristotelian *polis*, in which autarchy has the strategic function to define ‘the measure of population and “life” that permits one to pass from a mere *koinonia zoes* or a purely ethnic community to a political community’ (Agamben, 2015: 198). The fact that this passage from a community of living to a political community is necessary implies the existence in the West of a life that is *not* political in itself and which, therefore, has had to become autarchic in order to be a part of the polis. Autarchy, for Agamben, is nothing other than ‘*a biopolitical operator, which allows or negates the passage from the community of life to the political community, from simple zoè to politically qualified life*’ (2015: 198, emphasis in original). Against “autarchic life”, that is, against this bio-political filter that safeguards the political community, Agamben develops throughout his works the notion of *form-of-life*, which is central to the study of inoperativity. But, we ask, how can we rethink the collective dimension of form-of-life — its ‘being singular plural’ (Nancy, 2000), as it were — if we were to suspend the biopolitical apparatus of autarchy through a politics of inoperativity? Moreover, attacking this question from yet a different angle, how can the ‘politics in the middle voice’ (Marmont, 2019: 193) that Agamben’s use unlocks serve to more convincingly foreground a sociality of inoperativity?

On inoperativity and anarchism

References not only to anarchy but also to anarchism, more or less explicit, can be found dotted throughout Agamben’s writings. However, as Simone Bignall has rightly observed (2016: 49), such references are almost never directly connected to the various figures and strands composing what we may call the “anarchist philosophical tradition”. Often pointing to Rainer Schürmann’s atypical reading of Heidegger, Agamben indeed seems much more preoccupied with exploring the very concept of anarchy as an ontological category (also see Lamb, 2019) than

he is with contributing to past and present debates on anarchist praxis. This is perhaps why some scholars of anarchism have taken issue with Agamben's alleged vagueness when it comes to theorising concretely insurrectionary action (e.g., Newman, 2017). Furthermore, as Daniel McLoughlin has noted, Agamben's writing appears to be more directly indebted to, and engaging with, 'a range of thinkers who actively identify with the Marxian tradition including Guy Debord, Walter Benjamin, Antonio Negri, Theodor Adorno, Alain Badiou and Marx himself' (2016: 5–6), rather than avowedly anarchist authors. On the other hand, many of Agamben's ideas have also proven to be highly influential within circles that are certainly closer, in spirit and intentions, to anarchism than to any other breed of radical anti-capitalist politics, such as *operaismo* and autonomous Marxism — as in the case of the “post-situationist” Tiqqun-Comité Invisible milieu. This is not only true for Agamben's critique of property and the law but, we argue echoing Lorenzo Fabbri (2011) and contra Bingall (2016: 51), for his elaboration of inoperativity, too. Hence our question: how does inoperativity, as something of an “expression” of destituent potential, fits within and contributes to the anarchist tradition's conceptual trajectory, particularly in relation to themes of ungovernability and insurrection?

On inoperativity and the refusal of work

As mentioned, Agamben's notion of inoperativity is not only underpinned by a modal ontology but also by a form of human potentiality that does not exhaust itself in actuality. Here Agamben comes close to an anti-productivist reading of Marx, for which ‘the refusal of work, as both activism and analysis, does not simply pose itself against the present organization of work; it should also be understood as a creative practice, one that seeks to reappropriate and reconfigure existing forms of production and reproduction’ (Weeks, 2011: 99, in Abbott, 2016: 42). Yet, it is also clear that inoperativity is not just the cessation of all activity but a suspension that cannot be reabsorbed by the figures of negation and identity, nor can it be reincorporated into a politics of constituent power. This is also where Agamben's thought diverges, for instance, from the “anti-work” espoused by other intellectuals linked to the Italian *Autonomia*, such as Antonio Negri, Franco Bifo Berardi, and Mario Tronti. Rather than depicting a passive suspension of labour, in Agamben inoperativity suspends the very coordinates within which “suspension” as a political mechanism itself takes place. In so doing, it calls into question the strategies of interruption that take the form of constituent power. How can we start thinking about inoperative practices that go beyond

anti-work politics and prepare us for something of “a suspension of the suspension” — as Agamben suggests in *The Open* (2004)?

On play, profanation, and inoperative use

There is a particularly important yet complex relation linking the concept of inoperativity and Agamben’s radicalisation of use. Indeed, both terms ultimately point to the neutralisation and undoing of what Agamben calls ‘the false alternative between means and ends’ (2000: 57), which paves the way for something like a “gestural” politics of pure means. This bond is clearly expressed when Agamben affirms that ‘[t]he creation of a new use is possible only by deactivating an old use, rendering it inoperative’ (2007: 86). Furthermore, in the essay *In Praise of Profanation*, Agamben discusses a strikingly similar dynamic this time connecting profanation and play, also suggesting that ‘[t]here seems to be a peculiar relationship between “using” and “profaning” that we must clarify’ (2007: 74). If we are to assume that these terms — inoperativity and use, profanation and play — are for Agamben not mere synonyms, how are we to fully understand the processual and procedural synergy that exists between them, as well as what each illuminates about the other? Or, approaching this issue from another angle, how can the categories not only of use, but also of play and profanation advance the study of inoperativity? And finally, as the radical openness of play gets routinely recuperated within, “gamified” by, and rendered productive as key to, an economy of creativity and the ‘new spirit of capitalism’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005), what is required for playful use to instead remain inoperative?

On inoperativity beyond the Western tradition

Save for his recent foray into Buddhist philosophy in *Karman* (2017), it is arguably uncontroversial to note that Agamben’s archive is firmly rooted in the same history of Western intellectualism that his work critiques, if not more drastically Eurocentric. This is not to say that the Italian thinker is not eclectic in his choice of source material. Quite the contrary, Agamben draws from a vast cast not only of philosophers but also of poets, artists, novelists, and linguists, as partly captured by Adam Kotsko and Carlo Salzani’s volume *Agamben’s Philosophical Lineage* (2017). Nor, on the other hand, should we ignore the ways in which Agamben’s work has been productively taken up in that of authors not exclusively concerned with the Western canon (a good example being Warren, 2017). And yet, it has been

repeatedly pointed out that — such eclecticism notwithstanding — Agamben has so far completely refused to engage with other traditions that would, in fact, have much to say about some of the themes so dear to him, first and foremost the Black radical tradition (but also, we argue, Indigenous Studies). Fred Moten (2008), J. Kameron Carter (2013), Alexander Weheliye (2014), Stefano Harney (2018), and Sara Ahmed (2019) are but some of those who have identified this disregard, the repercussions of which, they all clarify, are not merely citational. In keeping with the conjunctive and compositional spirit mentioned above — which in our mind comes with an indifference towards exegetic purity — we ask: what non-Western traditions, epistemologies, and philosophical lineages might be particularly apt to expand, contaminate, or indeed profanate Agamben’s inoperativity, and how could they allow us to think this category anew?



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