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Biomedical technocracy, the networked public sphere and the biopolitics of COVID-19: notes on the Agamben affair

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ABSTRACT

Giorgio Agamben's public interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic against emergency measures like lockdowns, obligatory vaccinations and the prescribed use of masks have been highly controversial. I argue that Agamben's essays must be read as a modern prophecy of doom warning for the dangers of biomedical technocracy. Agamben marshals the sound of Old Testament prophets to shock his readers into critically rethinking their complacency with governmental norms. This warning is appropriate yet ill-phrased: Agamben presumes the dominant obstacle to genuine debate in the public sphere is a standardisation of discourse under the power of monopoly capital, whereas the opposite problem of too many divergent voices is more salient for today's digitally networked public sphere. Furthermore, Agamben depicts a too strong contrast between scientifically informed technocratic government and democratic freedom, which leaves him blind for the democratic potential of the sciences themselves. I employ Ulrich Beck's theory of the risk society and social movements to introduce more nuance into Agamben's apocalyptic prophecy.

KEYWORDS

Agamben; COVID-19; Illich; risk society; democratic biopolitics

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many liberal democracies have turned to a science-based biopolitics based on lockdowns, vaccination, social distancing and masks. They try to minimise the spread of infections in order to decrease mortality rates and safeguard the public healthcare system. Countries like the United Kingdom, Brazil, Sweden or the United States have attempted alternative strategies, but they changed course relatively quickly or have faced disastrous consequences. Many of the world's leading critical theorists fundamentally agree with the dominant biopolitical response and have mostly criticised the negative side-effects on marginalised groups (Lorenzini 2020; Zizek 2020; Balibar 2021). Giorgio Agamben, on the contrary, has vehemently opposed the dominant biopolitics of COVID-19.¹ In his view,

If doctors strike a pact with governments that is necessarily ambiguous and indeterminate and put themselves in the position of legislators—as we have seen in Italy during the

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¹Most of these essays are published in the volume *A che punto siamo?*, but Agamben added further essays after this book's publication. These texts can be found on his Italian publisher's website Quodlibet (<https://www.quodlibet.it/una-voce-giorgio-agamben>).

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pandemic—this does not lead to positive results on the level of health, but it can lead to unacceptable limitations of individual liberties. In that regard, as should have become clear to everyone by now, medical reasoning can offer an ideal pretext for the unprecedented control of social life. (Agamben 2020a, 106)²

Agamben's harsh stance toward the emergency politics of biosecurity is expressed in very confrontational rhetoric. He accuses his critics of Eichmannesque irresponsibility (2020a, 51), defends the plausibility of conspiracy theories (2020b), and compares university lecturers teaching online courses to professors swearing allegiance to fascism (2020a, 101). Unsurprisingly, these essays have sparked an 'Agamben affaire' (Sotiris 2020a; Christiaens 2020; Zizek 2020; Nancy 2020).

Many responses have already been formulated and my aim here is not to evaluate their merits, but rather to focus on one aspect often ignored: Agamben's choice for an extremely confrontational tone.³ I suggest to delve into the rhetorical meaning of the 'Agamben affaire' in four steps. I first elucidate why Agamben chooses this verbally aggressive style. Agamben assumes society is subsumed under a biomedical technocracy that hinders the free use of individual reason in the public sphere. Hence, the only solution is to disrupt the dominance of one-dimensional thought with the shock and awe of Old Testament prophecy. The ancient prophets converted audiences by brutally confronting them with the errors of their ways. Similarly, Agamben employs hyperbolic statements to remind his readers of endangered democratic values. In a second step, I clarify that Agamben's main concern with the pandemic is people's unreflective reliance on biomedical knowledge as a civil religion, a theory he appropriates from Ivan Illich's *Medical Nemesis*. According to Agamben, COVID-19 has fostered a culture of fear in which people have uncritically submitted to the biomedical apparatus as a saviour of last resort.

I criticise Agamben's rhetoric on two levels. In the third section, I argue that Agamben's prophetic strategy backfires under the current conditions of the global public sphere. Agamben thinks a uniform media apparatus pushes public opinion toward carelessly favouring technocracy whereas, in reality, today's digitally networked public sphere is marked by information overload and hyperactive users. Mutually incompatible and ambiguous information circulates non-stop on digital networks. Incendiary provocations like Agamben's are, in this environment, successful in drawing attention to themselves, but they hardly diminish popular confusion in a sea of contradictory information. Agamben's prophecies ultimately become just another exaggerated message in a whirlwind of polarising rhetoric. Secondly, I argue that there is some potential for democratic agonism in science itself that Agamben's one-sided dismissal of biomedical technocracy omits. Democracy and science are not necessarily opposed in a zero-sum game, as Agamben suggests. I employ Ulrich Beck's approach to political deliberation as an alternative gateway to a democratic biopolitics of the COVID-19 crisis. According to Beck, today's risk societies are marked by an inextricable entanglement of scientific and democratic concerns. The COVID-19 crisis is just a more recent example of the same tendency. The aim should thus be to democratise the scientific response to COVID-19, rather than

²All translations from Agamben's original Italian publications are my own.

³Good starting points for these discussions are the essays collected in *Coronavirus, Psychoanalysis, and Philosophy*, edited by Castrillón and Marchevsky (2021), the special issue 'Posts from the Pandemic' published in *Critical Inquiry* in the winter of 2021, and the list of responses collected by Stuart Elden on his blog *Progressive geographies*.

rejecting science-based biopolitics in the name of some phantasmagorical direct democracy.

1. Agamben as a prophet of doom

The brutal tone of Agamben's essays stands out—even by Agamben's own standards. Though one should not be surprised that the philosopher famous for his denunciation of the state of exception criticises governments' use of the state of emergency, Agamben's formulations do not fit his usual philosophical style. In his philosophical books, Agamben already tends toward dramatic statements, but he rarely employs a violent tone or dramatic style. He rather accompanies his grandiose declarations with erudite readings of canonical texts. Agamben's forceful response to the politics of COVID-19 is hence remarkable. The most commonly used rhetorical device in his essays is hyperbole: Agamben presents the world's predicament as if democracy were already finished and society were already completely unravelled. According to Agamben, 'our neighbour has been abolished' (2020a, 23) and 'our society has ceased to believe in anything but bare life [in the name of which] Italians are ready to sacrifice practically anything' (2020a, 25). As his critics have noted, these are manifestly false as factual statements (Mezzadra 2020; Esposito, Christiaens, and De Cauwer 2020; Žižek 2020).

I hypothesise that Agamben distinguishes between his philosophical research and his public performances. Contrary to the text-based erudition of his philosophical treatises, Agamben lavishly employs rhetorical exaggerations and scandalous shock value in op-eds like 'No to Biopolitical Tattooing' (2008) and 'The Latin Empire should strike back' (2013). The pandemic essays were not, after all, originally intended as a book but as blogposts on his publisher's website. They constitute political interventions rather than minute archaeologies of the contemporary condition. There are also differences qua content between Agamben's philosophy and his public statements. In his public interventions, Agamben defends liberal democratic rights, whereas he famously criticises modern human rights regimes as biopolitical apparatuses in *Homo Sacer* (1998, 126–135). It seems paradoxical for a theorist who believes all constitutional orders are grounded in the state of exception to publicly defend constitutional rights. But the argument is probably strategic: given the tendency toward a normalisation of the state of exception, it is still better to have human rights than not to have them. Even if Agamben is sceptical about the valence of human rights in the long run, he can still find them useful in a specific political conjuncture. However, if Agamben really speaks in a different register, his performance ought to be evaluated with different criteria. Simply calling his statements 'exaggerated' does not suffice to discredit Agamben, if the exaggerations are part of the plan.

To elucidate Agamben's rhetorical style, De La Durantaye (2009, 240) compares Agamben's dramatic exaggerations to Adorno's use of strategic hyperboles. According to Adorno (2005, 126–128), people living under monopoly capitalism are so engulfed in the total administration of society that exposing the simple truth no longer suffices to make a change. The collective imagination has been so impoverished that there is no good life imaginable in a false world. Popular consciousness is fully integrated into the capitalist machinery. It lacks the potential to cognitively distance itself from the status quo. According to Adorno, hyperbolic statements can shock people into

reconsidering their predicament. By exaggerating the falsity of the world, Adorno makes his readers question their complacency with the status quo. ‘Essential to [thought] is an element of exaggeration, of over-shooting the object, of self-detachment from the weight of the factual, so that instead of merely reproducing being it can, at once rigorous and free, determine it’ (2005, 126–127). By exaggerating the harms of late-capitalist existence, Adorno hopes to force his audience into a change of heart. Though such statements are *sensu stricto* false, they reveal how much modern society fails to live up to its promises and encourage political opposition. Adorno uses the power of rhetoric to forcibly awaken people from their one-dimensional slumber.

Adorno’s strategy assumes a particular approach to the public sphere common among the early Frankfurt School theorists that influenced Agamben.⁴ According to Adorno, the concentration of capital in the culture industry limits the venues through which people access public information, with the double effect of standardising media messages and reducing the public to passive recipients. The culture industry ‘turns all participants into listeners and authoritatively subjects them to broadcast programmes which are all exactly the same’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997, 122). According to Adorno, this leads to a public sphere where ideological pluralism is an illusion. Since monopoly-capitalist mass media profit by aiming for scale, they must appease an audience as wide as possible. They subsequently cater to the lowest common denominator, preferring to be mildly interesting over truly relevant if the latter risks losing part of the audience (Benkler 2006, 205). Seemingly opposing views in public debates are, in reality, just different positions within the same bad social totality. Public disputes between labour and capital over wage increases, for instance, are just two sides of the same mechanism that keeps the working class appeased with its subordination in exchange for more purchasing power (Adorno 2019, 55). Adorno concludes that,

To be realistic means to recognize the state of actual conditions as a product of manipulated power relations and to hold on to the idea of a better society. [...] The mechanism that reifies consciousness has expanded so far that most people have fallen under the spell of the ruling apparatus and their immediacy has been cut off. The majority of people are mutilated. (Adorno 2019, 124)

If popular consciousness has been entirely integrated within the mass media apparatus of monopoly capitalism, it is so corrupted that it lacks the power to lift itself out of ideological blindness. The people rather need critical theorists, who see the world from a subversive standpoint and speak of a better society as a promise left unrealised. As Adorno ends *Minima Moralia*, ‘perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light’. (2005, 247) Critical theorists occupy a liminal space vis-à-vis totally administered society where they can shed light on the injustice of the status quo and thereby force people to see their predicament in a more critical light.

Agamben starts from similar assumptions, though he more often refers to Guy Debord (1992, 80–82; 1998, 10; 2000, 72–88; 2011, 255–259).⁵ In the 1990s, Agamben first turned to political philosophy in response to Debord’s analogous portrayal of the public sphere (Kotsko 2020, 16). What people consider to be reasonable is, in fact,

⁴Similar views are present in the writings of, among others, Herbert Marcuse (2002) and the early Habermas (1989).

⁵For Agamben’s reception of Debord, see (Barkan 2009; Whyte 2013, 123–157; Abbott 2017; Christiaens 2018).

what capital has instilled in the population as common sense via decades of indoctrination through the mass media. In his critique of the pandemic, Agamben discusses the quality of public debate in dialectical language reminiscent of Adorno and Debord: ‘humanity is entering a phase of its history in which the truth is reduced to a moment in the movement of falsity’ (2020a, 67). Mere objective numbers and statistics cannot penetrate popular consciousness because the latter has been utterly corrupted through decades of exposure to capitalist mass media. Reduced to passive recipients of the media spectacle of a global pandemic, people are allegedly incapable of distinguishing reason from unreason. Alienation is so advanced that populations cannot even imagine an alternative to biopolitical domination. For Agamben, only a radical *détournement* can breach the late-capitalist public sphere. Like Adorno and Debord, Agamben turns to rhetorical exaggerations to overcome the perceived limitations of the current public sphere. By provoking scandal, Agamben attempts to forcibly break down the clichés of the late-capitalist mind. People need to be violently awoken from their dogmatic slumber of biopolitical common sense. In this interpretation, the force of Agamben’s essays should not come from the factual truth of his statements, but from their ability to make people radically question the status quo. In section three, I argue this strategy anachronistically projects assumptions about the public sphere from the 1960s unto today’s digitally networked public sphere. The latter is not subject to the same kind of standardisation effects nor are internet users as passive as television or radio audiences (Benkler 2006, 233–234). For the time being, however, let us grant Agamben this assumption and investigate further the status of his intervention.

Agamben’s method recalls an older mode of discourse: prophetic doomsaying. According to Foucault (2011, 15), prophets do not speak in their own name, but mediate for a future world elsewhere to which the current world is heading. In the Old Testament, prophets regularly predicted that God would violently avenge all transgressions of his will, if people did not immediately change their ways. The dramatic style of these prophecies served a rhetorical purpose: by violently confronting people with their impending doom, the prophet hoped to implement a change of heart. He aimed to convert the population, to renew their faith in God. The world was, however, so suffused with sin that a simple appeal to virtue did not suffice. Sinners’ minds were so corrupted that only dramatic prophecies could break through their complacency. By brutally confronting people with their errors and even exaggerating the effects of their sins, the prophets broke through the shell of indifference to convert people’s fundamental convictions. With such ‘self-defeating prophecies’, the prophets hoped that the calamitous futures they foresaw would not come about (Dupuy 2002). By explicitly and brutally predicting the future, they tried to convince people of not letting it happen. Given that prophets had to break with common sense, they risked ostracisation and ridicule. The audience could easily dismiss them as incoherent rambling madmen. If, however, people chose to listen, they would awaken from their sinful slumber and change their ways.

Agamben seems to acknowledge that his public performances operate in the same register. While Adorno spoke from the ‘standpoint of redemption’, Agamben writes about ‘a time to come’ and warns for ‘the end of the world’ (2020d). He believes that the population is too enthralled with the spectacle of the pandemic to discern biopolitical domination in the future. By explicitly uttering the risks of unreflective obedience, Agamben

seems to hope that his readers will criticise their governments and avert the impending doom. When Agamben warns for the normalisation of the state of exception, he is not stating observable facts, but issuing a self-defeating prophecy. His statements should enact a public change of heart so that the catastrophe does not occur. In what follows, I argue that this prediction is essentially correct, but that Agamben's rhetorical choices and the way of framing the prediction obscure the possible range of solutions. He, firstly, misjudges the public debate about the pandemic as a standardised spectacle under monopoly control, whereas it is better characterised as a confusing chaos of mutually incompatible opinions. The public sphere today is not a one-dimensional flat space but an arena where multiple narratives about COVID-19 confusingly struggle for hegemony. Secondly, rhetorical simplifications like the opposition between democracy and medicalised biopolitics suggest all-or-nothing choices in volatile political terrain where more complex responses are in order. The danger of a permanent suspension of democracy in the name of public health is real, but the solution does not lie in a wholesale acceptance or rejection of the biopolitical notion of 'public health' but in its democratisation. To defend these criticisms, however, it is important to first study the convincing side of Agamben's prophecy.

2. The danger of biomedical technocracy

Agamben (2020a, 69–75) warns against the biomedical sciences transforming into a full-blown civil religion (see *infra*). Once an uncontrollable and invisible virus is said to affect an entire population, while only being visible to professional scientists, the latter have a mandate to acquire full control over people's conducts. Individuals are allegedly unable to understand the risks they face, so they must obey scientists who calculate the risks and formulate new forms of conduct for them. Popular democracy is subsequently reduced to a passive population of ignorant patients put under the care of professional expert surveillance. This fits well with the image of a stultified public sphere Agamben inherits from Debord and the Frankfurt School. From the standpoint of biomedical biopolitics, the best strategy is the technocratic rule of scientists. The mass media are subsequently mobilised to justify this policy. It is this threat of which Agamben's prophecy speaks.

Agamben's critique of biomedical technocracy relies heavily on Ivan Illich's insights from *Limits to Medicine* (2020a, 48). Illich's argument is that medical progress, once it crosses a critical threshold, becomes a net cost to society rather than a gain. Illich does not deny the impressive accomplishments of medicine, but questions institutionalised medicine's aggregate impact on society (Illich 1976, 15–16). Overall, Illich believes the balance to become increasingly negative. This does not just concern the obvious negative side-effects, like medical mistakes, prescribed drug addiction or bacterial resistance to antibiotics. Key to Illich's book is the critique of 'social iatrogenesis', i.e. the negative impact of the biomedical apparatus on social life (1976, 40; David Cayley 2021, 157). The dominance of medical evidence in public policy entails that the population becomes increasingly divided between experts and laypeople at the expense of the latter's democratic voice. Some people have access to the apparatuses and medical jargon that monitor the population, while others do not and must thus blindly trust the experts.

Illich (1976, 202–203) argues that modern medicine is gradually replacing Christianity as the fundamental framework for modernity's narrative identity. According to Illich, the

medieval Church had built institutions of care that fostered popular dependence on priestly services. Priests claimed believers could not trust their individual minds because the devil had imperceptibly manipulated his helpless victims. Believers purportedly had to submit to the priest's authority to refrain from sin. Similarly, according to Illich, modern doctors presume patients are unable to determine their own health or sickness. They allegedly need to submit to the medical gaze in order to render invisible germs, abnormalities and infections detectable. The individual's relation to the self becomes increasingly mediated by medical expertise (Cayley 2021, 162). Invisible viruses and bacteria replace the devil as figures of evil but, in both cases, patients are rendered passive observers to their own suffering. They must purportedly submit their bodies and souls to professional authorities in order to be saved. Ultimately, Illich fears, medicine's elevation to a civil religion erodes democratic agency. It expropriates people from the vocabulary with which they articulate the apprehension of their own bodies:

In many a village in Mexico I have seen what happens when social security arrives. For a generation people continue in their traditional beliefs; they know how to deal with death, dying, and grief. The new nurse and the doctor, thinking they know better, teach them about an evil pantheon of clinical deaths, each one of which can be banned, at a price. Instead of modernizing people's skills for self-care, they preach the ideal of hospital death. By their ministration they urge the peasants to an unending search for the good death of international description, a search that will keep them consumers forever. (Illich 1976, 204–205)

According to Illich, modern medicine encases individuals in a 'plastic womb' (1976, 257). Individuals are transformed into patients of health services without which they can no longer survive. Every time they encounter an obstacle to their personal health, the solution is more medicine, until they live in a medicalised bubble they can no longer leave. People become consumers dependent on the professional's guidance and medical jargon that they do not understand. Doctors label some people as healthy, others as sick, and still others as deviant. They also decide what consequences are attached to each label and can impose treatment against patients' will. The population is, on the other hand, cognitively incapacitated. According to Illich,

Medical procedures turn into *black magic* when, instead of mobilizing his self-healing powers, they transform the sick man into a limp and mystified voyeur of his own treatment. Medical procedures turn into *sick religion* when they are performed as rituals that focus the entire expectation of the sick on science and its functionaries. (Illich 1976, 114)

People are reduced to passive patients dependent on a technocratic secular priesthood.

This outcome is, to an extent, the inevitable price of progress, but 'the technocrats of medicine tend to promote the interests of science rather than the needs of society' (Illich 1976, 254). Doctors see the body as a biological machine they are supposed to fix. The survival of bare life is the overall aim. Illnesses are mechanical defects doctors detect and remove, so that the biological machine can continue to operate. Patients, however, strive toward the good life, not bare survival. Rather than merely amending every ailment in their bodies, they wish to lead a life worth living. These two goals do not necessarily overlap. Not any prolongation of the lifespan is an unambiguous blessing. The capability to determine one's own conduct and the ability to deal with and overcome

suffering are part of the good life emphatically denied in the professionalised search to prolong bare survival. Given that the population is, however, reduced to an ignorant crowd of laypeople, doctors tend to ignore this call for quality over quantity.

Agamben applies Illich's worries about popular autonomy to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Agamben, the benefits of the biopolitics of COVID-19 should be compared to the costs of losing popular autonomy. If biomedical technocracy is transformed into a civil religion, however, the people who suggest to make this comparison are denounced as heretical demagogues (Agamben 2020a, 34). Quasi-religious adherence to biopolitical precepts hinders the critical evaluation of their impact. As civil religion, the biomedical apparatus tolerates no opposition (Agamben 2020a, 69). According to Agamben, this hostility to critical thought is an understandable yet ill-conceived response to the collapse of the world's symbolic order during the pandemic. The chaos and fear of the pandemic has shattered people's symbolic frameworks, leaving them helpless and disoriented (Agamben 2020a, 34). To rekindle their cognitive grip on the world, governments have increasingly turned to biomedicine as a one-dimensional, all-encompassing narrative. But this strategy unwittingly imports religious iconography and habits of thought into science. Today, governments' biomedical discourse designates the Coronavirus as a secular force of evil, and it prescribes a liturgy of cultic practices to exorcise this invisible threat (Agamben 2020a, 72). Agamben interprets practices like wearing masks, social distancing and disinfecting objects not as scientifically informed rational behaviour, but as superstitious rites individuals perform for their own peace of mind. Though these prescriptions have their basis in scientific evidence, they are not always enacted for scientific reasons among the general population. People, for example, wear their masks also when there is no one around to infect, as if it were a talisman. Many people are more concerned with faithfully enacting the proper rituals than with the actual containment of the virus.

Like Illich, Agamben is worried about the mental dependency biomedical civil religion fosters. Because the Coronavirus is only visible to expert medical equipment, people become dependent on the institutionalised medical gaze. They lose the cognitive resources to adequately judge the risks of their conduct (Brubaker 2020, 3), which makes them credulously susceptible to biomedical technocracy. The global vaccination campaign has made this problem painfully visible when people refused AstraZeneca vaccines on the basis of minuscule thrombosis risks, whereas the mortality risk for COVID-19 is much higher. Though information about these probabilities is publicly available, populations lack the cognitive abilities to let this knowledge properly inform their conduct. Instead, they settle for superstitious shortcuts. According to Agamben (2020a, 74), this can lead to a perpetual cult of hygienic practices without the promise of final redemption. If the virus is invisible to ordinary people and necessitates professional detection, the population can presumably never stop performing the liturgies of disinfection.

The public is, in the meantime, reduced to the status of passive patients (Agamben 2020a, 26). While medical experts pursue the goal of sustaining bare survival through their interventions, the question of the good life is eclipsed (Di Cesare 2020, 43; Benhabib 2021, 3). The question what people actually want to sacrifice to the continuous survival of the population is denounced as scandalous. Agamben, however, rightly emphasises the example of elderly people locked up in their homes or elderly care centres (2020c).

They probably would not unanimously have chosen to live an extra few months under the conditions of a full-scale lockdown. By turning the biopolitics of the COVID-19 response into a technocratic matter, however, governments have silenced these critical voices. As Sotiris (2020b, 8) observes, ‘although the evolution of biosciences within a capitalist context has continued to promote increases in life expectancy, at the same time social and ecological factors continue to accumulate a series of comorbidities that reduce healthy years’. Democratic concerns about these circumstantial factors and their role in the good life are surreptitiously displaced by technical questions about how to secure the biological safety of the population as a whole—even if that means sacrificing the quality of life of some of the most vulnerable citizens. Because biomedical discourse reduced these citizens to laypeople presumed to obey professional experts, people loses their democratic right to speak. The goal of sustaining bare life has been fixed as the sole governmental concern.

3. From the traditional to the networked public sphere

As mentioned, Agamben projects the 1960s notions of the public sphere he learnt from Debord and the Frankfurt School unto the debate about COVID-19. However, only if people truly are subsumed under a biomedical civil religion, is aggressive confrontation with the future demise of democracy a sensible rhetorical strategy. Prophecies of impending doom are meant to disrupt one-dimensional thought. However, most commentaries of the state of public debate during the pandemic agree on a very different evaluation. They criticise not the complacency of the public or the standardisation of public opinion, but the chaotic proliferation of inconsistent communications (Harsin 2020; Di Cesare 2020, 51–57; Illas 2021; Kwok, Singh, and Heimans 2021). Media users today are not passive recipients of their governments’ *pensée unique*, but have to constantly sift through a barrage of contradictory scientific studies, newspaper punditry, blogposts, conspiracy theories and misinformation. Even governments’ own guidelines are often ambiguous and change by the day. This is hardly the uniform civil religion that Agamben observes. While Agamben argues the civil religion of biomedical technocracy deferred the confusion of the global symbolic order caused by the pandemic, confusion and chaos have rather continued. People are still bombarded with information overload on their social media feeds with nothing to sift through the Babylonian confusion of tongues but the algorithms that filter their newsfeeds.

Contemporary theories of the ‘networked public sphere’ explain the volatile fluctuations of public opinion better than the antiquated philosophies of the public sphere that Agamben prefers.⁶ Previously, mass media indeed concentrated power over who curated public opinion among small media elites, leading to a pacified and passive audience (Poster 2008, 691). Digital networks, on the other hand, easily evade the curatorial power of mass media conglomerates and encourage users to directly participate in public discussion. First blogs and today social media have made it significantly cheaper for individual citizens to form and publicise their own opinions online (Benkler 2006, 212). Whenever information is diffused through the networked public sphere, the addressees can immediately respond without adapting their message to the filtering system of news

⁶See, among others, (Benkler 2006; Poster 2008; Dean 2009; Castells 2014; Gerbaudo 2019).

agencies (Poster 2002, 101; 2010, 418). Citizens can and have used online media to engage in self-organising political ventures, independently of mainstream media approval or even institutionalised political parties (Poster 2008, 692; Castells 2014, 6).⁷ This transformation of the public sphere has given rise to a wide array of issue-based social movements, like the Arab Spring uprisings and Occupy Wall Street, but also the Alt-Right and today's QAnon-conspiracies. Overall, the networked public sphere displays a more diverse array of opinions than the traditional public sphere, and it empowers individuals to actively participate in the formation of public opinion.

Digital media thereby foster not an environment of widespread popular submission to majority opinion but allow minority communities to congregate online, where they can institute opinion clusters with like-minded citizens. Classical media cater to the majority of the population because their business model focuses on economies of scale, but online communities are not bound by the same requirements (Benkler 2006, 242; Davies 2021, 92). Online communities can afford to only reach niche audiences passionate about very particular subjects and opinions. Through these forms of independent collective organisation, online communities can subsequently influence mainstream public opinion. They can do so either by moving offline, like the 2011 uprisings did (Castells 2014), or they can 'go viral' online and gradually shift public opinion to their side, a common strategy among the Alt-Right (Nagle 2017; Rosamond 2020; Finlayson 2021). Rather than a top-down model of centralised mass media informing the public about official policies, the networked public sphere consists of a multitude of clustered opinions incessantly battling for hegemony from the bottom up.

A key obstacle to a networked public sphere is what Benkler calls 'the Babel objection': 'the concern that information overload will lead to fragmentation of discourse, polarisation, and the loss of political community' (2006, 214). The volume and complexity of information flows requires networked individuals to establish filtering mechanisms of their own to replace the selection mechanisms of the classical media apparatus. Most often, they rely on the algorithms of social media platforms to curate chaotic information streams on their behalf (Gillespie 2018, 207). An expected side-effect of this trust in algorithms is that the latter impose a filter bubble that generates profitable data streams rather than a qualitatively rich array of political arguments. Platform companies like Google or Meta extract and commodify data about their users, so their algorithms favour quantity over quality in data-production. With regard to politics, this entails that the networked public sphere is skewed toward promoting messages that play on strong affects, because these generate 'clicks' and hence more data. The networked public sphere consists of affective networks that spread feelings of indignation, anger or disgust like a virus (Castells 2014, 13; Dean 2016, 15; Davies 2018, 15). Opinions that cater to these feelings are hence structurally better placed to influence the public at large. It fosters an environment where the opinion that gathers the largest quantity of likes and retweets often 'wins' the argument. There is, secondly, a tendency for the public sphere to splinter into a myriad of

⁷I am not saying that the networked public sphere spells the end of all forms of monopoly capitalism in the public sphere. Platform companies like Meta, Google and Twitter are among the largest corporations in the world. Their concentration of capital, however, weighs less on the formation of public opinion itself thanks to tendency to uphold a hands-off approach to social media content moderation. One of the main criticisms against these platform companies is often that they do not curate or moderate their media enough rather than too much, leaving many harmful or incendiary messages online (Gillespie 2018, 67).

smaller clusters. The latter only receive information flows that confirm the beliefs participants already hold without genuine engagement with contrary opinions (Benkler 2006, 238; Sunstein 2018, 118). Since social media platforms filter information with the aim of generating profits, they tend to please their consumers by predominantly confirming what the latter think they already know. Stuck in such echo chambers, networked individuals pick and choose their experts and overestimate the popular appeal of their own beliefs.

Reconnecting this theory of the networked public sphere to Agamben's essays, the philosopher is arguably right to accuse the public sphere of one-dimensional thought, just not in the way he imagines. The public sphere is not dominated by a single biomedical-technocratic discourse backed by the governmental apparatus and professional scientists. It is rather a networked space with multiple publics each stuck in their own echo chamber (Rietdijk 2021). It supports a system of 'distributed centralisation' (Gerbaudo 2019, 17): algorithms divide an active citizenry into opinion clusters and, because of the privilege accorded to opinions rooted in strongly felt affects, most attention is directed to a small number of particularly influential individuals within each separate bubble (Dean 2016, 12–13; Gillespie 2018, 130). In a milieu of multiple publics battling over cultural hegemony online, Agamben's rhetoric of prophetic exaggerations backfires. A style built on hyperbolic statements of impending doom does not encourage individuals to critically reflect on their own assumptions, but mainly confirms the uncritical assumptions of those clusters who were already critical of governmental policies. Agamben's style easily fuels the anger and rage of the disenfranchised, but does little to inspire genuine reflection. Rather than awakening anyone from their dogmatic slumber, Agamben's prophecies tend to *either* confirm the dogmas people already held *or* not register at all because social media filters deny his blogposts access to those who would disagree with him. This description would, at least, explain how Agamben suddenly became an influential thinker among far-right and antivax conspiratorial groups. While his first few essays stirred outrage among the academic left, the later ones do not register anymore. They have probably been filtered out when social media algorithms detected the shift in Agamben's audience. Rather than converting any naive subjects of biomedical technocracy, Agamben is more likely to preach to the choir of Corona-sceptics.

4. How to democratize public debate in the COVID-19 pandemic?

Agamben's prophetic doomsaying about the pandemic demise of democracy has its merits. Popular dependency on the medical apparatus as a civil religion indeed risks fostering an undemocratic biomedical technocracy. Even if we nuance this danger with observations about the networked public sphere, the latter does not seem appealing from a democratic perspective either. It breeds affectively charged echo chambers rather than genuine political debate. The prophecy and our thesis of the networked public sphere hence verbalise worst-case scenarios for those seeking a democratisation of biopolitics (Sotiris 2020a; 2020b; Mbembe 2020). With this term, philosophers mean a biopolitics that does not reduce citizens to passive targets of public policies but includes their voice in the government of themselves as populations. The main question is then what a democratic biopolitics during a pandemic would look like. I would like to address this final question by opposing Agamben's assessment of the role of science in democratic deliberations with Ulrich Beck's.

Agamben engages with the role of science through an Illichian framing that leads him to prescribe the excessively simplistic solutions. Agamben rejects scientific discourse as thinly veiled biomedical authoritarianism. He would rather denounce the biomedical sciences and return to a supposedly ‘pure’ democratic politics aimed at securing the good life. This framing hyperbolically opposes total submission to the biomedical sciences to supposedly untainted democratic self-government and the good life. But the all-or-nothing approach neglects the democratic potentials dormant in the sciences themselves (Sotiris 2020b, 19). Biomedical technocracy and medicalised civil religion are indeed problematic, but through popular struggles different articulations of science are possible. I propose to follow Adam Tooze’s suggestion to re-read Beck’s concept of the risk society for a more promising approach to democratising the COVID-19 response (2020). By considering the COVID-19 pandemic as a global risk management crisis and following Beck’s appraisal of collaborations between science and social movements, one can elaborate a democratic biopolitics that does not dismiss scientific institutions outright. Rejecting biomedical technocracy does not imply a wholesale rejection of scientific institutions as such, like Agamben implies. It is possible to rearticulate scientific debate itself as a forum for democratic agonism. People can reclaim their autonomy not by turning *away from* science, but by finding *a way into* science through close collaborations between social movements and scientists.

On first reading, there are many similarities between Beck and Agamben. Both cultivate a suspicion toward ‘the illusion of experts’ (Beck 2009, 160) and warn that the identification of invisible dangers like viruses or climate change render people dependent on scientific experts. For Beck,

Harmless things, wine, tea, pasta, etc., turn out to be dangerous. Fertilizers become long-term toxins with worldwide consequences. The once highly praised sources of wealth (the atom, chemistry, genetic technology and so on) are transformed into unpredictable sources of danger. [...] The immediacy of personally and socially experienced misery contrasts today with the intangibility of threats from civilization, which only come to consciousness in scientized thought, and cannot be directly related to primary experience [...] A large group of the population faces devastation and destruction today, for which language and the powers of our imagination fail us. (1992, 51–52)

With the emergence of risk society, i.e. modern societies particularly concerned with the management of the potential harms caused by its own activities, such as nuclear threats, climate change or pandemics resulting from zoonotic pathogens, Beck discerns a loss of ‘cognitive sovereignty’ (1992, 53). People’s immediate perception of risks is devalued. They do not directly see or feel their exposure to risks like nuclear radiation, climate change or viral infection. But once political challenges become only visible through a scientific spectrum, the population is left at the mercy of their scientific caretakers. Beck warns for a scientised bureaucratic technocracy that gradually undermines democracy. He (1992, 78; 2009, 78) even repeatedly prophesizes about a permanent state of exception in the name of public health. According to Beck,

This division of the world between experts and non-experts also contains an image of the public sphere. The ‘irrationality’ of ‘deviating’ public risk ‘perception’ lies in the fact that, in the eyes of the technological elite, the majority of the public still behaves like engineering students in their first semester. They are ignorant, of course, but well intentioned; hard-working, but without a clue. In this view, the population is composed of nothing but would-be engineers. (1992, 57–58)

The general public is reduced to a population of voiceless recipients of professional scientific care. They are expected to obey technocratic control with quasi-religious devotion (Beck 1992, 72).

Yet Beck's alternative to the biopolitical state of exception is not a full-blown rejection of the scientific gaze, but 'a struggle among rationality claims' (1992, 59). The networked public sphere can purportedly be harnessed to the public's benefit. Beck diagnoses a global 'unbinding of politics', i.e. a general breakdown of centralised control over political governance and communication (1992, 231). Long before the rise of social media, Beck already observed how citizens group together into 'discourse coalitions' that oppose official government-backed science (Beck 2009, 289). They form global networks that develop their own scientific information and political policy-proposal, which they attempt to popularise across the entire public sphere without the consent of governments or government-backed scientists. In medicine, for instance, patient organisations have gradually eroded the authority of doctors and welfare agencies, according to Beck (1992, 204–212). The sociologist explicitly concurs with Illich that professional medicine tends to silence ordinary citizens (1992, 168), but he adds that this danger is steadily becoming less threatening thanks to social movements and popular activism in autonomously organised public spheres. He thereby voices a similar perspective as the theorists of the digitally networked public sphere, but he is more optimistic about its potential.

Beck describes the role of social movements as influencing governments' risk management priorities. Governments determine their policies by implicitly weighing the risks and benefits of their actions. When, for instance, determining the response to a nuclear disaster or a global pandemic, governments estimate who will bear which costs of specific policies and try to come up with a politically balanced distribution of risks to public health, economic growth, mental well-being, etc. Some social movements find the distribution of risks unjust and try to influence governments with contrary risk rationalities. According to Beck, when the public does nothing, risks are probably transferred to the most vulnerable in society (1992, 35). It sacrifices the least well-off to the biopolitical management of the population in general. A democratic biopolitics, on the other hand, requires procedures to democratically decide upon the redistribution of risk (Butler and Yancy 2020). How much risk is a society willing to tolerate and who is supposed to bear the costs? According to Beck (1992, 24), 'what thus emerges in risk society is the political potential of catastrophes. Averting and managing these can include a reorganisation of power and authority'. It should foster institutions that can influence the public risk agenda and translate popular issues to the chambers of government.

Beck (1992, 156–157) emphasises the role of scientific pluralism and citizen science for that purpose. They allow disgruntled victims of risk to voice their concerns in the language of science. His paradigm for that strategy is the ecological movement (1992, 162–163): before the 1960s, many ecologists were anti-science activists with a nostalgia for premodern, primitivist lifestyles but, during the 1960s and '70s, the movement shifted toward the scientific study of phenomena like deforestation, acid rain and climate change. Political discourse was enriched with measurements of pollution risks. Ecologists rearticulated the scientific gaze to expose the limits of industrialisation rather than to legitimize industrial pollution in the name of economic progress. Thus, for Beck, 'environmental awareness is the exact opposite of a "natural" attitude; it is an extremely scientific view of the world, in which, for example, the abstract models

of climatologists influence everyday behaviour' (2009, 83). Today, ecological activism cultivates its own counter-science to criticise scientific discourses about economic growth and industrial development. The ecological movement did not succeed in politicising environmental protection by rejecting science, but by building new scientific paradigms that rival those championed by governments. The same counts for other social movements like feminism, anti-racism or mental health awareness: they do not reject the scientific gaze, but repurpose it in order to reclaim autonomy for the populations they aim to defend. How exactly the digitally networked public sphere of today is to be reformed in order to encourage this struggle among divergent rationalities lies beyond the scope of this paper. My main point here is that Beck's proposal provides a normative guideline for a good networked public sphere. His focus lies on what kind of institutions the global risk society needs, not on the organisational question of how to establish them.

In sum, Beck does not oppose democracy and the good life to science and technocracy. He believes it possible to democratise the scientific apparatus itself and make it a platform for divergent conceptions of the good life. Scientific discourse is not a monolith prescribing just one policy framework, but a patchwork of agonistically related positions that can inform governmental policies in multiple different ways (Beck 1992, 31). It allows for networks of collaborating activists and scientists to combat official governmental policies. The Illichian dependency effect is thus less dangerous than Agamben suggests. Governmental institutions are not the only institutions that employ the scientific gaze to construct biopolitical policies. The recipients of biopolitical control can collaborate with scientists to construct counter-knowledges that criticise the government's claims and formulates alternative policies. There is hence no need to reject modern science as a secularised religion that robs people of their democratic agency; science can also be a means to elevate democratic debate about the risks of modernisation and how to collectively respond to those risks. 'Behind all the objectifications [of scientific discourse], sooner or later the question of acceptance arises and with it anew the old question: how do we wish to live?' (Beck 1992, 28).

In the context of COVID-19, Beck's proposal entails that those who are harmed by the negative side-effects of biomedical technocracy should not reject the hold of science over their lives, but should articulate their concerns as counter-scientific discourses. They can combat the hegemony of biomedicine with alternative data. Just like the activist battle against the public response to the HIV epidemic or the struggle against climate change would have never succeeded to garner democratic support without the aid of scientific abstractions, the public debate for a more just COVID-19 response needs a scientific gaze (Sotiris 2020a; 2020b, 27). Democratising biopolitics means strengthening these counter-knowledges and counter-conducts. Trade-unions provide an interesting case of the Beckian strategy. From the beginning of the pandemic, scandals have appeared concerning the lack of workplace safety provisions or the misuse of these provisions to undermine workers' rights. In Amazon's fulfilment centres, for instance, workers faced increased work pressures with limited protections, leading to worker protests (Rajendra 2020; Delfanti 2021, 12). At issue was the just distribution of risks of infection and overexertion, with essential yet replaceable workers often disproportionately more likely to suffer grave consequences from illness or overwork (Christiaens and De Cauwer 2020).

In a networked public sphere without democratised sciences, workers' demands could only have been communicated through viral media content that addresses digital media users' affects of anger and indignation. Workers would have had to appeal directly to online crowds without organised institutions to support them. There was, for instance, a media uproar around Amazon worker Chris Smalls, who had been fired from a New York fulfilment centre in 2020 due to his on- and offline activism (Rajendra 2020, 242). In the short run, this generated some temporary buzz, but hardly changed Amazon's workplace policies. Activism that stays at the level of online viral content encounters difficulties in achieving long-term effects. Amazon estimated that this would simply be a minor social media uproar, after which business would quickly return to normal. The protest would have drowned in a Babylonian sea of online opinions if such disconnected workers' actions would have exhausted the overall labour response. There would have been no argument to justify the urgency of workplace safety apart from the momentary quantity of likes and retweets, which most likely recedes after a short period. Institutions are required to keep the call for workers' protection on the agenda and to translate this appeal to decision-making agencies.

A purely biomedical technocracy, of which Agamben prophesizes, would not even have bothered with assessing public opinion about workplace safety. It unilaterally imposes its own assessment of the proper distribution of risks in society. Though Agamben accuses the Italian government specifically of such unresponsiveness, the reality is more nuanced. Governments could have chosen a thanatopolitical policy of subordinating the health of essential workers entirely to the overall vitality of the population. In certain countries, this has also been the case, but not without opposition. If the public sphere had really been a one-dimensional apparatus for the diffusion of technocratic pre-established decisions, as Agamben argues, there would hardly have been a possibility of opposing governments' choices about workplace safety during the pandemic. This does not reflect actual reality and, in fact, union activism in particular has softened the blow on workers of governmental policies during the years of the pandemic. In many cases, unions have articulated workers' demands for protection and have successfully altered governmental policies and the tenets of public discourse.

Unions have played an important role in translating workers' demands into a more general framework of risk distribution and workers' safety that moves beyond the temporary buzz generated with online viral messages. They align a network of virologists, labour lawyers and activists to articulate a discourse about workplace safety and how COVID-19 has affected workers. They use scientific discourse to construct a set of policy-proposals, such as the installation of CO₂-meters, paid vaccination leave days or free masks, to enhance workplace safety. From a Beckian perspective, unions take part in discourse coalitions that influence governments' risk agendas in favour of workers' protections. In Belgium, for instance, when the government unilaterally imposed vaccination mandates on care workers, unions have emphasised alternative perspectives (Vanschoubroek 2021). They successfully argued that the reduced infection risk for vulnerable patients should be compared to the risks of understaffed medical facilities. Firing care workers in the midst of a pandemic might be understandable as an enforcement strategy to boost voluntary vaccinations, but the collateral damage from actually having to fire the non-vaccinated might be even greater, also for vulnerable patients. Unions have stressed the potential fallout from increased work pressure once non-vaccinated care workers would be fired. In a first instance, activism led to a

change in government policy, which allowed workers to suspend their contracts without being fired from their jobs. Ultimately, obligatory vaccination was entirely dropped.

5. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has resurfaced the question of what a democratic biopolitics should look like. Agamben has, in this debate, taken on the controversial role of a prophetic doomsayer. He warns that people's religious devotion to biomedical science and their ritualistic obedience of its guidelines undermine the democratic quest for the good life. Though Agamben is right in warning of this danger, his solution is defective. He believes the public sphere is troubled by excessive standardisation of opinions, whereas it is actually more burdened by the chaotic streams of online incendiary content. The networked public sphere is not characterised by one-dimensional complacency, but by a proliferation of affectively charged echo chambers. Agamben's strategy of rhetorical exaggeration fails at responding to this problem. Agamben also calls for people to outright reject the biomedical sciences as a false religion, but this is unnecessarily simplistic. In effect, those fortunate to privately protect themselves from infection would be saved, whereas at-risk groups would be left to die from viral infection. I put forward Beck's proposal of intra-scientific democratic debate as a viable alternative. Instead of outright rejecting the scientific gaze, the modern risk society has condemned political movements to articulate their claims in the discourse of scientific research. Modern development has resigned the global population to a world of risks only visible to the scientific gaze. Democratic agonism concerning the contents of the good life reappear in debates about the just distribution of risks in society. By cultivating citizen science and counter-knowledges, people can combat the technocratic interventions of biopolitical governments.

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