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Foucault Studies

ARTICLE

Excavating Government: Giorgio Agamben's Archaeological Dig

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ABSTRACT: This paper looks at the development of certain Foucauldian concepts and themes within the work of the Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben. Where Agamben is well-known for his critique of biopower in *Homo Sacer*, his recent work a more complex engagement with Foucault both in terms of his subject matter, governmentality and economy (*oikonomia*), and his critical methodology, most notably, his reaffirmation of the value of Foucault's archaeological method. Focusing on three of Agamben's recent publications, *Signatura Rerum: Sul Metodo, Il regno e la gloria. Per una genealogia teologica dell'economia e del governo* and *What is an Apparatus?*, the article looks first at Agamben's development of Foucault's archaeological method within his own concept of the signature. It then goes on to consider Agamben's identification of an economic theology in contradistinction to Schmitt's political theology and how Agamben's discussion of collateral damage might be related to Foucault's notion of security as developed in *Security, Territory, Population*. Finally, the article considers how Agamben links Foucault's notion of '*dispositif*' [apparatus] to an economic theology of government, calling for the development of counter-apparatuses in a similar way to Foucault's call for 'resistances.' The article concludes by considering both the benefits and the limitations of Agamben's engagement with Foucault.

Keywords: Agamben, Foucault, governmentality, signature, archaeology

Introduction – Agamben and Foucault: Between a Rock and a Hard Place?

Agamben's engagements with Foucault tend to be viewed through the somewhat distorted lens of *Homo Sacer*, Agamben's most famous work to date. Distorted, since the conclusion one tends to draw is that the only possible relationship that can be formulated between the two thinkers is an antagonistic one founded on conflicting notions of the relationship between sovereign and biopower. Agamben appears to be launching a direct attack on Foucault's notions of biopower and the bio-political, arguing that biopower is really only ever a disguised form of sovereign power and

that the transition from one form of power to the other, which Foucault claimed occurred during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, never really took place.[1]

In his powerful evocation of *bare life*, the life that can be taken without committing murder, Agamben rejects the idea that the *right to life* or, more precisely, 'the right to make live' has replaced the *right to take life* as the driving principle behind modern political regimes. The undeniable force of this claim comes from Agamben's reference to Auschwitz as the most striking example of this right not only to take life but to reduce life to bare life by shifting the boundaries of society itself. The concentration camps formed a space at once outside of the law yet at the same time within it.   As such they constituted the definitive topographical embodiment of the *state of exception* whereby the law is seen to achieve its ultimate objective at the very moment when it is suspended.[2] The state of exception forms the means by which a state may, along with other non-legal acts, legitimately deny certain members of its population the rights usually enjoyed by all its citizens, rendering them as bare life and consequently sanctioning their death.   Agamben claims that it is through reference to this state of exception that societies deemed to be based on a bio-political form of power actually reveal the sovereign structure of power underlying their government.

According to Foucault the racist discourses driving the Nazi Regime were founded on a perverted form of bio-power. Racism functions as a strategy that enables a discourse of death to operate within an essentially bio-political society.[3] Taking the biological and future welfare of the German people as its goal, Nazism was able to reach "logical" conclusions about how such welfare could be efficiently managed. Taking one set of lives as its aim, it becomes possible to exclude another set that can be presented in terms of a threat.[4] Agamben dismisses this reading of the Holocaust, arguing that what is at stake is not the survival of a certain group but the possibility of exercising the power to decide the fate of the lives of all who fall within the jurisdiction of the Nazi regime. The concentration camp, where the detainees are both excluded from society and included as part of its political strategy, is not a warped version of biopower, it is the *ultimate* form of biopower.

The inevitable outcome of considering Agamben's discussion of sovereign power and bare life solely in terms of a refutation of Foucault's position regarding biopower seems to demand the choosing of sides. It appears that we are being

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[1]   Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power & Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

[2]   See also Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[3]   Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality - Volume 1: An Introduction,* trans. Robert Hurley (New York, NY: Vintage, 1990), 149-50.

[4]   Michel Foucault, "*Society Must be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France (1975-1976)*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 2003), 255-260.

offered two mutually exclusive possibilities. Our first option is to reject Agamben's claim that sovereign power prevails by identifying biopower with the situation in Western societies today where death is so well managed that it has virtually disappeared as a figure of the "real" even while people continue to die. Alternatively, we can acknowledge, along with Agamben, the persistent operation of the discourses of thanato- or necropolitics that continue to endorse the genocide occurring throughout the world today.[5] Thus presented, it becomes immediately apparent that neither position is without its limitations.

However, the danger of such a reading is that it focuses almost exclusively on the final chapter of *The Will to Knowledge* and assumes that Agamben is doing the same. Yet it is equally possible to read *Homo Sacer* as a text which warns against reductive readings that fail to take into account the important distinctions made by Foucault concerning sovereign and bio power in the lectures he gave throughout the seventies. Already in his 1973 lecture series, *Psychiatric Power*, Foucault identifies elements of disciplinary (anatomo-political) power that came into existence within the mechanisms of sovereign power, as well as provides a detailed account of how the family unit, associated with the exercise of sovereign power in the figure of the father, came to provide the model for the asylum, an essentially disciplinary institution. This evocation of the family as an originary source of psychiatric power is not a leftover or residue from the old discourses of sovereign power but constitutes an increasingly essential element of disciplinary power.[6] Similarly, in *Security, Territory, Population*, a text we shall return to later, Foucault's concept of "security" is introduced as a supplement to sovereign and disciplinary forms of power, thus rendering impossible a straightforward binary opposition between the latter two modes. According to Foucault, the three modes of power do not exist independently of one another: "there is not a series of successive elements, the appearance of the new causing the earlier ones to disappear. There is not the legal age, the disciplinary age, and then the age of security."[7] What is at stake here is rather the development and refinement of the complex relationship between the three modes:

> In reality you have a series of complex edifices in which, of course, the techniques
> themselves change and are perfected, or anyway becomes more complicated, but in
> which what above all changes is the dominant characteristic, or more exactly, the

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[5]   See Achille Mbembe's "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture*, 15, 1 (2003), 11-40, for a useful supplement to Agamben's discussion of thanato-politics.

[6]   Michel Foucault, *Le Pouvoir psychiatrique: Cours au Collège de France 1973-1974* (Paris: Seuil, 2003), 82.

[7]   Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York, NY, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 8.

system of correlation between juridico-legal mechanisms, disciplinary mechanisms, and mechanisms of security.[8]

The possibility that Agamben and Foucault might work better alongside one another rather than in direct opposition is one endorsed not least by Agamben himself and while *Homo Sacer* will essentially always be a critique of Foucault's notion of biopower, his more recent work seems to be moving beyond power along a similar, although by no means identical, trajectory to the one taken by Foucault in his later work. This engagement takes the form of two distinct, yet interrelated aspects. Firstly, it involves a detailed articulation of his methodology which develops various concepts either taken directly from Foucault, such as the *dispositif* [apparatus], or developed with close reference to Foucault, most notably the signature, at the same time as reinstating the value of Foucault's archaeological method as an analytical tool.[9] The second feature involves the elaboration of key themes present in Foucault's later work. Taking the notion of governmentality as a starting point, and more precisely the question "What is a government?" in *Il Regno e la gloria* Agamben develops the concept of an economic-theology in contradistinction to Schmitt's political-theology suggesting that where the latter is taken up with sovereign power, the former provides the basis for modern biopolitics and the extension of government into all forms of social life.[10] The aim of this article is to look at the ways in which Agamben, in these recent texts, provides clarification of some of the questions that preoccupied Foucault throughout his career. It will consider how Agamben both develops and departs from Foucault's own work on governmentality and the critical insight Agamben brings to some of the unresolved tensions and aporias in Foucault's thought and method. At the same time as suggesting ways this engagement might be developed further, we will also highlight some of the difficulties and limitations of Agamben's approach.

I. 'What will have been' – Reloading archaeology

Though Foucault, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, criticises both history founded on a notion of continuity and one based on discontinuity he nevertheless tends to be considered, rightly or wrongly, as focusing his own critical project more on

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8   Ibid.

9   See Giorgio Agamben, *Signatura Rerum: Sul Metodo* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2008), page references are to the French translation *Signatura Rerum: sur la méthode*, trans. Joël Gayraud (Paris: Vrin, 2008). English translations are the author's own. See also Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?* trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

10   Giorgio Agamben, *Il regno e la gloria. Per una genealogia teologica dell'economia e del governo* (Milano: Neri Pozza, 2007). Page references are to the French translation *Le Règne et la gloire: pour une généalogie théologique de l'économie et du gouvernement*, trans. Joël Gayraud and Martin Rueff (Paris : Seuil, 2008). English translations are the author's own.

discontinuity. More precisely, such discontinuity is designated not in terms of fixed periods, eras, styles and categories but rather evokes the ruptures and shifts which occur whereby certain discourses and practices operating at a certain time within a particular society come to assume new roles and embody different truth-values. While the question as to how such shifts occurred does indeed occupy a large part of Foucault's critical enquiry, it only represents one side of the coin. The other side can be explained with reference to the signature.

The starting point for Agamben's "theory of signatures" is Foucault's account of the signature in *The Order of Things*. Foucault locates the signature within the Renaissance episteme of resemblance and similitude, claiming that "[t]here are no resemblances without signatures. The world of similarity can only be a world of signs."[11] According to the sixteenth-century astrologer and alchemist, Paracelsus, every object bears a number of external signs or marks that, when deciphered, reveal its hidden, interior nature or essence. "Sciences" such as astrology and physiog-nomy are key examples of practices that emerged during the Renaissance and were aimed at decoding such outer signs. A signature is therefore not a sign or mark *per se*, but, rather, a form of reading signs and marks constituting, at the same time, a process of writing. As Agamben points out "the signature is the site where the acts of reading and writing inverse their relation and enter into a zone of undecidability. Here, reading becomes writing and writing fully comes to terms with itself in reading."[12]

In a move that both complicates and clarifies his understanding of signature, Agamben shifts his focus from Foucault's discussion of signs and signatures in *The Order of Things* to the concept of the *énoncé* [statement] found in *Archaeology of Knowledge*. Loosely defined, the *énoncé* is a phrase, proposition or statement or set of statements that can be made within a given socio-historical context. However, it is impossible to identify an *énoncé* as a sign or structure conforming to fixed grammatical and syntactical rules. That which Foucault has referred to as the "*fonction énonciative*" [enunciatory function] is concerned solely with the efficacy of a phrase or statement. Does a particular phrase or statement perform the intended function at a given moment? Moreover, the *énoncé* is not simply a linguistic exercise since it has less to do with grammatical rules and more with discursive practices. It is the social conditions that render a certain statement possible that are of interest more than the linguistic tools employed to make such a statement.

According to Agamben, *énoncés* can be better understood if we situate them in the interstice between semiology and hermeneutics, the place where signatures come into play. Here Agamben draws upon the distinction made by Foucault in *The Order of Things*:

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[11] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 1988), 29.

[12] Agamben, *Signatura rerum*, 63.

> Let us call the totality of the learning and skills that enable one to make the signs speak and to discover their meaning, hermeneutics; let us call the totality of the learning and skills that enable one to distinguish the location of the signs, to define what constitutes them as signs, and to know how and by what laws they are linked, semiology…[13]

In this sense, Foucault's often problematic attempt to define the *énoncé* becomes fundamental to Agamben's understanding of signature since the *énoncé* demonstrates the impossibility of the existence of "unmarked" signs, that is, signs which signify or designate in "a pure, neutral manner once and for all."[14]

> The sign signifies because it carries the signature but the latter necessarily determines in advance its interpretation and conveys its use and efficacy according to the rules, practices and precepts requiring recognition.[15]

Agamben makes it clear that a signature should not be conceived of in terms of a concept. This is because it constitutes a movement rather than a static, fixed identity or term. A signature represents the process whereby a doctrine, discourse or practice is transferred or transposed from one sphere or domain to another through a series of shifts, substitutions and displacements.[16] An example of a signature would be, according to Agamben, the notion of sovereignty which in its displacement from the domain of the sacred to that of the profane identifies a relationship or co-dependency existing between the two spheres.

In many ways, Agamben employs signature to refer to a similar process occurring throughout history to that which Derrida identifies taking place in language. Indeed, Agamben goes as far as to suggest that archaeology and deconstruction are both sciences of the signature.[17] However, where deconstruction leads to the affirmation of difference conceived of in terms of a pure self-referentiality and the endless deferral of meaning, the strategy employed by a Foucauldian archaeology is completely different. It is not a question of celebrating the signature as pure sign, but instead recognising its functioning within specific conditions of possibility and the shifts and displacements which transpose its function onto other contexts.

The signature evokes the play of substitution described by Derrida in "Structure, Sign and Play."[18] It is this play that ensures that the meaning and

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13   Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 33.

14   Agamben, *Signatura rerum*, 73.

15   Ibid.

16   Ibid., 46.

17   Ibid., 73, 90.

18   Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in

definition of a doctrine or discourse appears at once continuous and continuously shifting. It is also this play that prevents access to an origin or starting point in history where a doctrine comes into being. A doctrine or discourse does not simply come into being. A doctrine is not born in an instant, fully formed. Yet we remain obsessed with finding origins and sources. In clarifying his use of an archaeological approach, Agamben makes it clear that what is at stake is very much the idea of history as the way of explaining the present but in terms and according to concepts that only belong in the present. Consequently, we must concede that any access we may have to a source or origin can only ever be via tradition and it is tradition that bars access to the source. Tradition constitutes our way of understanding the past and as such never actually belongs to the past and can never allow us access to the past. Tradition functions in a similar way to the Freudian notion of trauma. It refers to an experience that is always a non-experience existing only in the present, never in the past.[19]

However, it is not in *Archaeology of Knowledge* that Agamben identifies Foucault's most precise articulation of the archaeological method and its strategies, but rather in a much earlier text, the extended preface to Ludwig Binswanger's *Traum und Existenz*.[20] Here, Foucault critiques a psychoanalytical interpretation of dreams that locates their meaning in the past. According to Foucault, the primary interest in the analysis of dreams during Antiquity lay in their ability to indicate possible future events.[21] Dreams are not therefore associated with the repetition or reconstitution of past desires repressed by waking consciousness, but with one's freedom to act in the future. According to Agamben, this *"mouvement de la liberté"* identified by Foucault has much in common with his later archaeological method. Both are concerned with a perpetual calling into question; in the case of dreams this is the questioning of one's very existence; with reference to archaeology, it is the questioning of our understanding of the world. Where the past is evoked, it is done in order to locate the moment at which the self, a particular tradition, discourse or phenomenon emerged in order to move beyond this moment towards a different

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[19]   *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London & Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 278-293.

[19]   Agamben, *Signatura rerum*, 115.

[20]   Ibid., 119. See Michel Foucault, «Introduction à Ludwig Binswanger, *Le Rêve et l'existence*» *Dits et écrits. 1954-1988*, vol. 1 (Paris : Gallimard, 2001), 93-147.

[21]   Interestingly, the theme of dreams returns in Foucault's later work in his discussion of Artemidorus's *Oneirocritica* in the opening chapter of the third volume of the *History of Sexuality*, *The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1988). While both texts enact a critique of psychoanalysis, suggesting dreams are projected towards future action, they differ in their discussion of the form such action takes. In *The Care of the Self*, dreams are inextricably bound up with one's social, economic and family situation, whereas in Foucault's earlier discussion, dreams belong to a lexicon of death, suicide and, ultimately, freedom.

mode of being or thinking.[22] Drawing upon Foucault's claim that "the genealogist needs history in order to conjure the chimera of the origin" in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," Agamben elucidates the two-fold meaning of "conjure" as a means of explaining the process at work.[23] In the first instance, "to conjure something up" is to evoke it, call it into existence or even bring it back from the dead. Yet this "conjuring" (especially in the case of spirits) is carried out in order to dispel or expel the thing being conjured. So in this sense the past is "conjured up" in order to dispel the traditions, myths and so-called "truths" it has created.

Agamben thus reasserts the claim made by Foucault that we should cease to concern ourselves with origins and focus on what Nietzsche refers to as *Entstehung* (emergence).[24] Moreover, it is not the content but the modality, the shifts and displacements that should form the basis of an archaeological and genealogical study of history. It is not what counts as true at a particular moment but how it came to count as true at that moment and the (frequently imperceptible) shifts and displacements that have occurred to a discourse or practice that are of interest. Foucault is not like Freud in search of the origin of infinitely repeated trauma but rather recognises that there is no origin, only an endless series of displacements. Archaeology is not about constructing or even re-constructing the past since the object being examined is never "fully and empirically present" but about uncovering the ruins of this past (Agamben uses the term "ruinology") in order to arrive at a better understanding of the present.[25] Conceived thus, archaeology takes the form of a "future anterior," – "what will have been."

While making regular references to Nietzsche and genealogy throughout his study of the signature, Agamben nevertheless insists on a critical framework based on the notion of archaeology rather than genealogy. It is a common misperception that Foucault replaced his archaeology with genealogy following criticisms that the archaeological method was both too theoretical and in perpetual risk of lapsing into the very ahistoricism it was supposed to be attacking. While genealogy offered a more useful critical tool for examining the constitution of individual subjects as a result of power relations operating on and through the body, archaeology had nevertheless paved the way for such an examination. As Dreyfus and Rabinow have pointed out:

> Underlying the longer continuities of cultural practices which the genealogist isolates, the archaeologist still has a purifying role to play. The demonstration of discontinuity and shifts of meaning remains an important task. [...] Archaeology

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[22] Agamben, *Signatura rerum*, 120-121.

[23] Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in Donald F. Bouchard (ed.), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), 137-164.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Agamben, *Signatura rerum*, 95.

still isolates and indicates the arbitrariness of the hermeneutic horizon of meaning. It shows that what seems like the continuous development of a meaning is crossed by discontinuous discursive formations. The continuities, he reminds us, reveal no finalities, no hidden underlying significations, no metaphysical certainties. [26]

Moreover, Foucault himself suggests in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, *The Order of Discourse*, that the critical task of archaeology operates alongside genealogy:

> So there are some projects for the critical side of the task, for the analysis of the instances of discursive control. As for the genealogical aspect, it will concern the effective formation of discourse either within the limits of this control, or outside them, or more often on both sides of the boundary at once. The critical task will be to analyse the processes of rarefaction, but also of regrouping and unification of discourses; genealogy will study their formation, at once dispersed, discontinuous, and regular. In truth these two tasks are never completely separable: there are not, on one side, the forms of rejection, exclusion, regrouping and attribution, and then on the other side, at a deeper level, the spontaneous surging-up of discourses which, immediately before or after their manifestation, are submitted to selection and control. […] The difference between the critical and the genealogical enterprise is not so much a difference of object or domain, but of point of attack, perspective, and delimitation. [27]

Nevertheless, as the question of power assumed an increasingly central role in Foucault's work, archaeology was forced to take a back seat to genealogy within his methodological framework. With Agamben a reversal takes place whereby genealogy is in a certain sense relegated to a secondary status in relation to archaeology. Genealogy now operates as part of the archaeological method rather than superseding it. It is through this modulation of the commonly perceived relationship between archaeology and genealogy that Agamben is able to construct his own critical framework within which to conduct his own study of government that draws on the Foucauldian method but makes it more suited to the study of doctrine than practice.

II. Towards an economic-theology of government

As we mentioned briefly in the previous section, one of the key examples Agamben uses to explain his theory of signature is the process of secularisation. Secularisation, he points out, should not be conceived as a concept but as a

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26   Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Herme-neutics* (Brighton: Harvester, 1982), 105-106.

27   Michel Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," in Robert Young (ed.), *Untying the Text: A Poststructuralist Reader* (London: Routledge, 1981), 48-78.

signature. It is the process not, as Max Weber claimed, whereby society becomes disillusioned with theology and religion and abandons it outright but, in fact, as Carl Schmitt suggests, the means by which religion remains ever present in modern society. Through secularisation, the theological leaves its mark on the political whilst avoiding a direct correlation between political and theological identities.[28]

However, unlike Schmitt, Agamben locates *oikonomia* [economy] and not the political as the founding principle of modern forms of government. Furthermore, using his theory of signature, he traces the use of the term back to first century Graeco-Roman society and also the messianic communities which made up the early Christian Church. The consequences of his analysis of *oikonomia* in relation to modern, secular forms of government is not simply that it calls for a revised understanding of how Western societies govern but at the same time demands a radical revision of how we conceive of the theological principles underpinning these secular modes of government.[29] Taking as our starting point, Foucault's explanation of *oikos* in *The Use of Pleasure*, we will then proceed to look at how Agamben develops his "genealogy" of the term in relation and contrast to Foucault before considering how this revised understanding of *oikonomia* might serve to bring the two thinkers yet closer together.

In The Use of Pleasure, Foucault identifies *oikos* (the household) as requiring an art of government comparable to that found in political and military spheres since all involve the government of others. In Antiquity, the fidelity of free males to their spouses was not required by law, yet it was something prescribed in certain philosophical texts as being fundamental to the successful management and continued prosperity of a household. Foucault's enquiry into *oikonomia* begins with the problematisation of marital relations in a society where free male citizens were apparently exempt from the rules that later came to govern marriage as Christianity took hold on the Western world. Yet he is quick to acknowledge that sexual relations between husband and wife constituted just one aspect of a complex art of economy, the management of the household.[30]

It is this domain of the private, the administration of the family and household that also forms the starting point for Agamben's study of government but his line of enquiry takes a different direction from Foucault. Whereas Foucault identifies an art of government operating within different domains: the political, the military and the economic, Agamben emphasises a sharp opposition between politics and economy. Politics is posited in terms of the legal and judicial where economy constitutes management and administration.[31] Agamben stresses this

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28   Agamben, *Le Règne et la gloire*, 20-21.

29   Ibid., 52.

30   Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality*, *Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 154 ff.

31   Agamben, *Le Règne et la gloire*, 17.

opposition in order to bring these two spheres together under the notion of government and it is via the paradigm of the trinity that emerged during the second and third centuries that he achieves this.

As Agamben points out, the term economy can already be found in Paul's epistles.[32] *Oikonomia* is the term used by Paul to explain the task that God has given him, the duty that God has conferred upon him to preach the message about Jesus Christ.

> I am entrusted with a commission [*oikonomia*] (1 Corinthians 9:17)

> I became its servant according to God's commission [*oikonomia*] that was given to
> me for you, to make the word of God fully known (Colossians 1:25)

In both of the above passages Paul defines his role as being commissioned or administered to him by God. Moreover, the use of the term *oikonomia* in Ephesians 3 makes it clear that what is being administered is precisely God's mystery.

> for surely you have already heard of the commission [*oikonomia*] of God's grace
> that was given to me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by
> revelation (Ephesians 3.2-3)

However, while the Pauline epistles refer to the economy, the administration or commission of God's mystery, with the doctrine of the trinity this is reversed to become the mystery of economy, the mystery of God's rule and government of the world.[33] The trinity functions as the means of explaining God's ability to govern on Earth whilst remaining transcendent.   It embodies the notion of unity, thus maintaining the idea of monotheism whilst resisting the threat of polytheism.   It clarifies how God administers and manages his creation. Initially, this functioned as a duality of God-Christ based on a model of household relations, master-slave, father-son, husband-wife, with the third dimension, the Holy Spirit, being added later on. Yet Christ does not exist in a subordinate relationship to God, as a son does to a father, but represents the means by which God, as a unity, governs in the world. Just as an army requires both order and strategy to function effectively, God's rule on earth requires that he is at once transcendent and present in the world. It is not a question of different being or even modes of being but, rather, the distinction

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[32]   The term *oikonomia* appears nine times in the New Testament: in Luke 16:2, 16:3, 16:4, 1 Corinthians 9:17, Ephesians 1:10, Ephesians 3:2, Ephesians 3:9, Colossians 1:25, 1 Timothy 1:4. See Agamben, *Le Règne et la gloire*, 47 ff.

[33]   Agamben refers specifically to Tertullian, Hippolytus and Irenaeus as active proponents of the trinity, *Le Règne et la gloire*, 67. See also Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?* 9.

between being and praxis. The paradigm of the trinity facilitates this relationship between the immanent and transcendent.[34]

It is this duality, composed of the transcendent and the immanent, reign and government, that forms what Agamben refers to as a bi-polar machine.[35] Modern government is founded upon this bi-polarity. Hence, for Agamben sovereign power and bio-power are both always present to a greater or lesser degree. Power is necessarily separate from its execution. God's absolute power is distinguished from his administrative power. This distinction effectively solves the problem of how it is possible for man to sin. If God is both all-powerful and all-present, why does he allow the existence of sin in the world? The concept of economy evokes the idea that God, like the master of any successful household, does not need to occupy himself with minor details. Elsewhere, Agamben explains this with recourse to the analogy of the master of the house who while aware that rats and spiders both live within his household and are sustained and fed by the household does not need deem it necessary to actively deal with these vermin.[36]

Subsequently, we arrive at a paradox whereby God governs in the world yet the world always remains other.[37] As a result, the relationship between sovereignty and governmentality is always vicarious. Moreover, it is impossible to access ultimate power since it is always deferred from one realm to the other. This is why, Agamben claims, in modern forms of government, there can never be one person held accountable or absolutely responsible.[38] There is no substance to power. It is pure economy, the art of management.

In a short essay entitled "What is an Apparatus," Agamben elucidates this idea of pure economy further with reference to Foucault's notion of the *dispositif* [apparatus]. Identifying *dispositio* as the Latin translation of the Greek term *oikonomia*, Agamben suggests Foucault's use of the term *dispositif* might somehow be rooted in this "theological legacy." According to Agamben, a *dispositif* functions as a kind of "universal" in Foucault's thought. A *dispositif* is not a specific technique, strategy or exercise of power but the complex network which links different strategies and techniques together. Conceived as a network or relation, *dispositif* is

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34   Agamben, *Le Règne et la gloire*, 75.

35   Ibid., 180.

36   Giorgio Agamben, Lecture series entitled "Oikonomia, Gloire, Désoeuvrement" given at the Collège International de Philosophie, January 2008. Lecture given 21 January 2008.

37   Agamben evokes the idea of the pilgrim or his modern day counterpart, the tourist, to clarify this paradox. A pilgrim or tourist travels the world, yet in doing so emphasises his or her otherness to the societies and cultures he or she encounters. Whether, in assuming the role of a tourist, you choose to embrace the lifestyle and customs of the country you are visiting or not is irrelevant. Moreover, it is precisely your ability to make this choice that differentiates you and marks you as a tourist. Op. cit., lecture given on 21 January 2008.

38   Ibid.

pure praxis with no substance, "a pure activity of governance devoid of any foundation in being."[39]

All this calls for a revised understanding of divine power, not in terms of absolute domination but rather as a power that manages and administers. Yet it is nevertheless as a power of domination that divine power provides the model and justification for the sovereign power Foucault identifies in operation during the Middle Ages. What is interesting here is that despite identifying two very different discourses of divine power both Agamben and Foucault make reference to Kantorowicz's famous study of medieval political theology, *The King's Two Bodies*, in order to elucidate their arguments. I would like to suggest therefore that it is via Kantorowicz's discussion of kingly power that we can bring these two discourses together.

The theory that a king was in possession of two bodies, the body-natural and the body-politic, offered the means by which a sovereign could present his power over his subjects as absolute and incontestable. Moreover, as Foucault points out, such power tended to manifest itself most notably in the form of physical domination over subjects, the king's right to take life or let live.[40] Yet emphasizing the body-politic as the site of such absolute power, the divine soul that passed from one king to another, also made it possible to challenge the king's power. While the evocation of the body-politic set the king apart from his subjects, it also separated his physical presence, the body-natural, from the power he was supposed to enjoy spiritually. Thus, while the king can evoke the divine power that enables his executive power, this power is always deferred and he is never really in possession of it nor can he guarantee it. This is why it was possible for parliament to depose Charles I. By separating body-politic from body-natural, parliament was able to challenge the executive powers of Charles I while continuing to evoke allegiance towards the king as spiritual entity.[41]

The consequence of this perpetual deferral of power is that which Agamben refers to as collateral damage. Collateral damage refers to those whose lives are lost, whether as casualties of war or victims of natural disasters or epidemics. According to Agamben, the paradigm of collateral damage constitutes the paradigm of all acts of government and as such represents the dominant paradigm today. Collateral damage is not the by-product of an oppressive and violent political regime but is rather fundamental to democratic modes of government.[42] As such it does not represent the negligence or incompetence of a country or state to assure the safety of

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[39]   Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?* 11.

[40]   Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1977), 48.

[41]   Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 20.

[42]   Agamben, *Le Règne et la gloire*, 187.

its inhabitants, but instead forms part of the effective management and administration of those inhabitants. Understanding government in terms of collateral damage can be compared to Foucault's notion of security. Where sovereign power involved coercion and violence and disciplinary power techniques of regulation and normalisation, security operates according to a principle of "circulation." Unlike disciplinary power that seeks to contain and limit, security is concerned with growth and production, and the increase of its mechanisms. Whereas disciplinary power is centripetal, security is a centrifugal force operating within and beyond society.[43] Security can be linked to the emergence of capitalism and provides the possibility for economic growth by simultaneously encouraging and restricting circulation of goods, opening up borders and delineating new boundaries.

Where sovereign power conceived the scope of its authority in terms of a territory, security concentrates on the notion of population. The population is what is at stake in the management and control of various "events." A key example of such an event is the famine or widespread food shortage. Where previously famine was something to be avoided at all costs not least because of its association with moral judgment, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries food shortages become something that could be managed and used to control the economic market. Subsequently, famine as an "event" is eliminated from society despite the continued existence of food shortages and starvation.[44]

What has occurred is a dissociation between the individual and the collective. The collective no longer corresponds to the number of individuals of which it is composed. Moreover, the elimination of famine requires the prevalence of hunger and starvation. "The scarcity-scourge disappears, but scarcity that causes the death of individuals not only does not disappear, it must not disappear."[45] Individual starvation and death is the condition that makes it possible to eliminate hunger and starvation from the population at large. The population is always the final objective of security's operation. But, Foucault points out, this concept of population is not to be understood as composed of groups of individuals.

In identifying his analysis of government with Foucault's notion of security, Agamben is reopening the dialogue on biopower but from an entirely new perspective. Aligning his recent work with Foucault's discussion of security is perhaps the most effective way to move beyond the well-worn debate over sovereign and bio power. Both security and the notion of collateral damage provide the means of explaining the persistence of death within a biopolitical society without reverting to sovereign discourses of racism. Moreover, they are able to re-appropriate such death into what is ultimately a reaffirmation of life. While

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[43] Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 44-45.

[44] Ibid., 30 ff.

[45] Ibid., 42.

sovereign power still remains ever-present (yet increasingly absent), in Agamben's bi-polar government machine it has ceased to represent a discourse of death and now exists in contradistinction to executive power, caught up in an endless game in which each form of power refers back to the other. The idea that sovereign power is powerless to intervene and that executive power is only a form of administration or economy echoes Foucault's claim that power is never in the possession of one individual or group but exists as a series of relations and as such is always in constant flux. Consequently, what is at stake is not the question of who possesses power but how the absence of any definitive power can itself be used by governments and government agents to deny or abdicate responsibility for certain actions.[46]

Developing the notion of *dispositif* beyond the use attributed to Foucault so as to include within its scope "literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings," Agamben suggests rethinking the term in a new context.[47] Evoking once more the theological underpinnings of the term, Agamben explains how a *dispositif* functions by a process of capture and separation. Thinking in theological terms it is possible to link this process of separation to the notion of the sacred and sacrifice. It then becomes evident that the way to counter such a process, the way to fight against the apparatuses that govern us, is through profanation, that is, by restoring such practices to "common use."[48] Just as Foucault adamantly refused to prescribe Graeco-Roman technologies and ethics of the self as pertinent to our own ways of living and redefining ourselves in relation to power, Agamben offers little concrete suggestion as to how one should set about carrying out such a profanation. His recognition that profanation seems increasingly impossible in relation to modern apparatuses renders the need for counter-apparatuses all the more urgent, yet at the same time makes the situation seem all the more hopeless. In this sense, his call to profanation is little more, or perhaps less, than a reiteration of Foucault's call to carry out a care of the self and like Foucault fails to deal with the problem of the inevitable re-absorption or recapture of such practices into dominant power structures.

Conclusion

Where Agamben may appear to be repositioning himself in relation to Foucault, it is important to note, nevertheless, that there are a number of difficulties or limitations to his critical project. Firstly, there is the possibility that in reactivating and refining Foucault's archaeological method, he is risking the very over-theorizing that

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46   Agamben develops this further in his subsequent discussion of glory, the empty throne and deactivation (*inoperosità*) in the later chapters of *Le Règne et la gloire*.

47   Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?* 13-14.

48   Ibid., 19.

Foucault was so anxious to avoid. This is particularly evident in Agamben's desire to define and heavily conceptualize methods and terms, such as *dispositif*, that Foucault himself left undefined. The theory of signature, most notably, has a tendency to universalise certain themes, thus emptying them of any real historical significance.[49]

Second, it is important to note that his interest in governmentality stems from influences and motivations very different from those which drove Foucault. Most notably, Foucault dedicates more time to discussion of the practices that make up the art of government, whereas Agamben concentrates on unpacking the etymology of various terms associated with government, particularly *oikonomia*, and charting their semantic shifts. Furthermore, it is important to remember that Agamben's study of government appeals to a notion of political theology that is heavily inspired by the work of Jewish philosopher Jacob Taubes and the legal theorist Carl Schmitt, even when it calls for a revised understanding of the legacy of theology on modern government.

With the possible exception of his discussion of pastoral power in *Sécurité, territoire, population*, Foucault's work on governmentality never really developed along the lines of a political theology. In both the *Hermeneutic of the Subject* and *Le Gouvernement de soi et des autres*, what is at stake is the shift from a form of governmentality reserved for an elite few – the idea that in order to govern others one needs first to govern oneself – to a form of self-government disassociated with the government of others and consequently accessible to all. Consequently, practices such as *parrêsia*, the act of speaking freely despite the potential risk involved, along with maintaining one's silence for a certain period of time, constituted a way in which the individual carried out a certain care or ethics of the self. As such these practices can be seen to differ enormously from the corresponding acts of confession and silence that came to assume central roles within Christianity. Rather than constituting a form of care of the self, a means of forming a relationship with oneself, these practices became associated with a renunciation of the self. Confession and silence, as described by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, became the means by which the institutional power of the Church, and more recently its secular counterparts, operated on and through individuals within a wider process of normalisation.

Much of Foucault's work is based on the question of how practices produce certain truths about the self, either in relation to discourses of normality or in

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[49]   This criticism has been made elsewhere with reference to Agamben's discussion of the exception. See Andrew W. Neal, "Foucault in Guantánamo: Towards an Archaeology of the Exception," *Security Dialogue* 37, 1 (March 2006), 31-46. Neal suggests that Agamben's development of Schmitt's theory of the exception glosses over temporally specific events from Auschwitz to Guantánamo, thus endorsing as universal rather than questioning the practices carried out in each instance.

opposition to such discourses. Yet his interest in practices should not be considered as one belonging to that of a detached observer. Foucault is not an anthropologist who simply watches and records the practices engaged in by others. Rather, he implicates himself in these practices not least when he posits the question of what it means to be a philosopher. In his discussion of the role and responsibility of the philosopher during Antiquity and the negotiation that a philosopher must carry out between *logos* and *ergon*, Foucault is carrying out his own negotiation of these two terms, calling for a renewed appreciation of philosophy in terms of a practice or exercise where the philosopher constitutes the one who both partakes in such exercises and also guides others in their care or ethics of the self.

Foucault's discussion of the role of the philosopher in Antiquity draws heavily upon Plato. The mere fact that nothing attributed to Plato was actually authored by Plato himself does much to emphasize the importance of philosophy as a practice, an oral exercise that does not simply entail the philosopher passing his knowledge, unmediated, on to others. Philosophy is an active dialogue and as such is not something that can simply be committed to paper for use by future generations. This is because, according to Plato, philosophy is not just something concerned solely with *logos* defined as a specific form of knowledge. Among various types of philosophical knowledge, Plato identifies *to on*. The process of acquiring such knowledge is translated by Foucault as "le frottement."[50] It is knowledge conceived of as a practice that calls into question and modulates other forms of knowledge. Considered thus, philosophy cannot be isolated from its practice, just as logos cannot be isolated from the process whereby different forms of knowledge confront one another and undergo certain modulations or modifications as a consequence.

Thus, in carrying out different philosophical practices and exercises, the philosopher is responsible for making alterations to such practices, yet does so with the very intention of changing himself in the process. This process can be explained using the analogy of a lamp that is lit when it comes into contact with the fire – it is the oil in the lamp that enables the lamp to burn, not just the fire.[51] It is easy to see how this analogy might be applied to Agamben's work as a philosopher. He is not simply continuing the relationship between politics and theology inspired by Taubes and Schmitt, but rather developing an understanding of government based on the relationship between economy and theology. Moreover, in their evocation of the "resistances" and counter-technologies demanded by Foucault, the counter-apparatuses Agamben suggests might equally be developed in new and different ways that act in response to the shifts and modifications to the *dispositifs* of power

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[50]   Michel Foucault, *Le Gouvernement de soi et des autres. Cours au Collège de France 1982-1983* (Paris : Seuil, 2008), 232.

[51]   Ibid.

occurring since Foucault's death, although it remains to be seen how exactly this could be achieved.