

Giorgio Agamben on health scare and the religion of science

Inscriptions

– contemporary thinking on art,
philosophy and psycho-analysis –
<https://inscriptions.tankebanen.no/>

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Received: 15 May 2020.

Accepted: 19 June 2020.

Published: 1 July 2020.

Financial statement: The scholarship
for this article was conducted at the
authors' own expense.

Competing interests: Authors have
declared no competing interests.

How to cite: Giorgio Agamben and In-
scriptions. "Giorgio Agamben on
health scare and the religion of sci-
ence." *Inscriptions* 3, no. 2 (July 2020):
72.

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Abstract

Around the time of the Covid-19 pandemic Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben published a series of incisive, short texts on the conjuncture of biopolitics and the governmentality of the global health scare. While many voiced their opinion on the topic, few ignited such a heated debate as Agamben. Among Agamben's key claims was that it was not as if governments were using the pandemic to stage an artificial state of exception, but that this exceptional state had already been instituted. Against these views Agamben was met with a chorus of dismay. In order to facilitate a more informed view of Agamben's pithy interventions we are now reprinting two of his short texts in translation by Adam Kotsko.

Keywords: Covid-19; Agamben; biopolitics;
governmentality; state of exception

Around the time of the Covid-19 pandemic Giorgio Agamben, the celebrated author of the groundbreaking *Homo sacer* series, published a series of incisive, short texts on the conjuncture of *biopolitics* and the governmentality of the global health scare.

Many scholars of all persuasions and of a wide variety disciplinary backgrounds made their voice heard on this topic; however, few ignited such a heated debate as Agamben, at least in the early stages of the outbreak. Essentially, what served to inflame opinion was the – possibly misconstrued – perception that Agamben claimed governments used Covid-19 to generate a false sense of panic and instigate an artificial state of exception in which rulers could enforce legislation which would otherwise have been out of question.¹

Among Agamben's key claims is that it is not as if governments are using the pandemic to stage an artificial state of exception, but that this exceptional state *has already been instituted*. For example, he writes, would we not have accepted that our dying would be kept away from their families, or that our dead would be buried in secrecy had it not been for the triumphant argument of Covid-19. It is as if, Agamben writes, the Church itself has come to ignore that among its principal duties is to visit and care for the sick. Has the Church forgotten

¹ The initial text in point was first printed in the Italian *Quodlibet* and then translated into English and published by the *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*, generating a wide-ranging and heated debate in the journal and elsewhere. Giorgio Agamben, "The Invention of an Epidemic," *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*, February 26, 2020, <http://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/>.

“that the martyrs teach that we must be prepared to sacrifice our life rather than our faith and that renouncing our neighbor means renouncing faith”?

The reason for this state of affairs is, according to Agamben, that we now live in a time governed by quite a different religion, namely that of *science*, and it is in the furtherance of *this* novel religion that it is possible to say that it is right and rational to abandon the principles of mercy and charity on the altar of an abstract notion of *risk*.

Against these views Agamben was met with a chorus of dismay. Slavoj Žižek, a fellow traveller in the landscape of social theory and cultural psychoanalysis, “respectfully disagreed” with what he perceived to be Agamben’s opinion: it is *not* so, Žižek claimed, that our societies are governed solely by the fact of bare life. Instead, and supposedly against Agamben, what we need today is more charity, more assistance to the suffering, and more work in the service of upholding life.² Unfortunately, Žižek’s Agamben is, as we will show in the following texts, a straw man; his views are quite opposite of what Žižek imagined them to be.

Even his own translator turned on him. In an explanatory note Adam Kotsko wrote his translations had been executed with an ambiguous mind, since, in Kotsko’s view, Agamben’s arguments are “weak in obvious ways and in ways that his work is usually not weak.” Kotsko then added that he had “never viewed myself as an Agamben disciple. [...] In fact a colleague once expressed surprise and concern that Agamben let me translate his work when I’m so critical.”³ How would it be possible to renounce the author of the texts one has translated in clearer terms?

What is certain is that the fear in which we, members of the global, or variously *national* communities, have been so enveloped has put our ability to reason calmly and clearly in peril. To enable our readers to regain a more informed view of Agamben’s pithy interventions we therefore bring you two of his short texts, first published in *Quodlibet* and subsequently translated by Kotsko and published on his blog, *An und für sich*.

The texts are reprinted by permission from the author and translator.

²See, e.g., Slavoj Žižek, “Biggest threat Covid-19 epidemic poses is not our regression to survivalist violence, but barbarism with human face,” *Russia Today*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/483528-coronavirus-world-capitalism-barbarism/>.

³See Adam Kotsko, “On doing the thing,” *An und für sich*, April 15, 2020, <https://itself.blog/2020/04/15/on-doing-the-thing/>.

“Clarifications”

Translated by Adam Kotsko, 17 March, 2020.

- Originally published as “Chiarimenti,” in *Quodlibet*, 17 March 2020, accessed 21 April, 2020, from <https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-chiarimenti>.
- First published in English as “Clarifications”, on the blog *An und für sich*, 17 March, 2020, accessed 18 April, 2020, from <https://itself.blog/2020/03/17/giorgio-agamben-clarifications/>.

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Translator’s Note: Giorgio Agamben asked me to translate this brief essay, which serves as an indirect response to the controversy surrounding his article about the response to coronavirus in Italy.

Fear is a poor advisor, but it causes many things to appear that one pretended not to see. The problem is not to give opinions on the gravity of the disease, but to ask about the ethical and political consequences of the epidemic. The first thing that the wave of panic that has paralyzed the country obviously shows is that our society no longer believes in anything but bare life. It is obvious that Italians are disposed to sacrifice practically everything — the normal conditions of life, social relationships, work, even friendships, affections, and religious and political convictions — to the danger of getting sick. Bare life — and the danger of losing it — is not something that unites people, but blinds and separates them. Other human beings, as in the plague described in Alessandro Manzoni’s novel, are now seen solely as possible spreaders of the plague whom one must avoid at all costs and from whom one needs to keep oneself at a distance of at least a meter. The dead — our dead — do not have a right to a funeral and it is not clear what will happen to the bodies of our loved ones. Our neighbor has been cancelled and it is curious that churches remain silent on the subject. What do human relationships become in a country that habituates itself to live in this way for who knows how long? And what is a society that has no value other than survival?

The other thing, no less disquieting than the first, that the epidemic has caused to appear with clarity is that the state of exception, to which governments have habituated us for some time, has truly become the normal condition. There have been more serious epidemics in the past, but no one ever thought for that reason to declare a state of emergency like the current one, which prevents us even from moving. People have been so habituated to live in conditions of perennial crisis and perennial emergency that they don’t seem to notice that their life has been reduced to a purely biological condition and has not only every social and political dimension, but also human and affective. A society that lives in a perennial state of emergency cannot be a free society. We in fact live in a society that has sacrificed freedom to so-called “reasons of security” and has therefore condemned itself to live in a perennial state of fear and insecurity.

It is not surprising that for the virus one speaks of war. The emergency measures obligate us in fact to life in conditions of curfew. But a war with an invisible enemy that can lurk in every other person is the most absurd of wars. It is, in reality, a civil war. The enemy is not outside, it is within us.

What is worrisome is not so much or not only the present, but what comes after. Just as wars have left as a legacy to peace a series of inauspicious technologies, from barbed wire to nuclear power plants, so it is also very likely that one will seek to continue even after the health emergency experiments that governments did not manage to bring to reality before: closing universities and schools and doing lessons only online, putting a stop once and for all to meeting together and speaking for political or cultural reasons and exchanging only digital messages with each other, wherever possible substituting machines for every contact — every contagion — between human beings.

See also

- Giorgio Agamben, “The Invention of an Epidemic,” published 26 February, 2020, in *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*, accessed 18 April, 2020, from <http://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/>.
- Originally published in Italian on *Quodlibet*, 26 February, 2020, accessed 18 April, 2020, from <https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-l-invenzione-di-un-epidemia>.

“A question”

Translated by Adam Kotsko, 15 April, 2020.

- Originally published as “Una domanda,” in *Quodlibet*, 13 April 2020, accessed 18 April, 2020, from <https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-una-domanda>.
- First published in English as “A Question”, on the blog *An und für sich*, 15 April, 2020, accessed 18 April, 2020, from <https://itself.blog/2020/04/15/giorgio-agamben-a-question/>.

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Translator's note: Agamben has again requested that I translate his latest essay on the ethical implications of the coronavirus crisis.

The plague marked for the city the beginning of corruption... No one was any longer disposed to persevere in what he had previously judged to be the good, because he believed that perhaps he would die before achieving it.

Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*,
II.53)

I would like to share with whoever wants it a question on which for over a month now I have never stopped reflecting. How could it happen that an entire country has, without noticing it, politically and ethically collapsed in the face of an illness? The words that I have used to formulate this question have been carefully weighed one by one. The measure of the abdication of our own ethical and political principles is, in fact, very simple: it is a matter of asking ourselves what is the limit beyond which we are not prepared to renounce them. I believe that the reader who takes the trouble to consider the points that follow will not be able not to agree that — without noticing it or by pretending not to notice it — the threshold that separates humanity from barbarism has been crossed.

1. The first point, perhaps the most serious, concerns the bodies of dead persons. How could we have accepted, solely in the name of a *risk* that it was not possible to specify, that persons who are dear to us and human beings in general should not only die alone, but — something that had never happened before in history, from Antigone to today — that their cadavers should be burned without a funeral?
2. We then accepted without too many problems, solely in the name of a *risk* that it was not possible to specify, limiting, to an extent that had never happened before in the history of the country, not even during the Second World War (the curfew during the war was limited to certain hours), our freedom of movement. We consequently accepted, solely in the name of a risk that it was not possible to specify, de facto suspending our relationships of friendship and love, because our proximity had become a *possible* source of contagion.
3. This was able to happen — and here we hit on the root of the phenomenon — because we have split the unity of our vital experience, which is always inseparably bodily and spiritual, into a purely biological entity on one hand and an affective and cultural life on the other. Ivan Illich demonstrated, and David Cayley has recalled it here recently, the responsibility of modern medicine in this split, which is taken for granted but is actually the greatest of abstractions. I know very well that this abstraction was actualized in modern science through apparatuses of reanimation, which can maintain a body in a state of pure vegetative life. But if this condition is extended beyond the spatial and temporal confines that are proper to it, as we are today seeking to do, and it becomes a sort of principle of social behavior, we fall into contradictions from which there is no way out.

I know that someone will hasten to respond that we are dealing with a condition that is limited in time, after which everything will return to how it was. It is truly strange that we could repeat this other than in bad faith, since the same authorities that proclaimed the emergency never stop reminding us that when the emergency has been overcome, we will have to continue to observe the same directives and that “social distancing,” as it has been called with a significant euphemism, will be society’s new organizing principle. And, in every case, what we have accepted submitting to, in good or bad faith, cannot be cancelled.

At this point, because I have declared the responsibilities of each of us, I cannot fail to mention the even more serious responsibility of those who had the duty to keep watch over human dignity. The Church above all, which, in making itself the handmaid of science, which has now become the true religion of our time, has radically repudiated its most essential principles. The Church, under a Pope who calls himself Francis, has forgotten that Francis embraced lepers. It has forgotten that one of the works of mercy is that of visiting the

sick. It has forgotten that the martyrs teach that we must be prepared to sacrifice our life rather than our faith and that renouncing our neighbor means renouncing faith.

Another category that has failed in their duties is that of jurists. For some time we have been habituated to the rash use of emergency decrees by means of which the executive power is de facto substituted for that the legislative, abolishing that principle of the separation of powers that defines democracy. But in this case, every limit has been surpassed, and one has the impression that the words of the prime minister and of the head of civil defense, as was said of those of the *Führer*, immediately have the force of law. And we do not see how, going beyond the temporal limits of validity of the emergency decrees, the limitations of freedom could, as is foretold, be maintained. With what juridical apparatuses? With a permanent state of exception? It is the duty of jurists to verify that the rules of the constitution are respected, but the jurists are silent. *Quare silete iuristae in munere vestro?* (Why are jurists silent on what concerns them?)

I know that there will inevitably be someone who will respond that the sacrifice, which is of course serious, has been made in the name of moral principles. To them I would recall that a norm that affirms that we must renounce the good to save the good is just as false and contradictory as that which, to protect freedom, orders us to renounce freedom.

Authors' contributions

Giorgio Agamben first wrote and published the two shorts texts in the Italian. They were then translated into English and published by Adam Kotsko. The Inscriptions Editorial Team wrote the introductory note.

fiction,
scholarship,
poetry

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an imprint of tankebanen forlag

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