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# NUDITY: AGAMBEN AND LIFE<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Taking a cue from a reading of Agamben's essay "Nudity" (2009), the text analyses the most famous concept of his vocabulary, "bare" or "naked life," and attempts to understand the meaning of life's "nakedness" within the whole project begun with *Homo Sacer*. By attempting to disclose and deactivate the theological signature that determines, in our culture, the concept of "nudity" in exclusively privative terms, "Nudity" provides both an instrument for the analysis of life's nudity in the sovereign ban and the model for a philosophical practice structured on a "denudation" of the signatures and apparatuses which determine and imprison our life.

## KEYWORDS

Giorgio Agamben, Bare Life, Nudity, Glorious Body, Negativity.

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1 The present essay was published in Italian under the title "Nudità e vita," *Lo sguardo – rivista di filosofia* 15/2 (2014): 133-147. It reconsiders and corrects (in fact, overturns) the theses put forward in Carlo Salzani, "The Notion of Life in the Work of Agamben," *CLCweb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14/1 (2012): <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1760>>. I want to thank Antonio Lucci for asking me to re-elaborate my ideas, and Stephen Keating for reviewing the English version.

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DESNUDEZ: AGAMBEN Y LA VIDA

RESUMEN

A partir de una lectura del ensayo de Agamben “Desnudez” (2009), se analiza aquí el concepto más famoso del vocabulario del filósofo italiano, “la nuda vita,” y se intenta comprender el significado de la “desnudez” de la vida en todo el proyecto de *Homo sacer*. Tratando de desvelar y desactivar la signatura teológica que determina, en nuestra cultura, el concepto de “desnudez” en términos exclusivamente privativos, “Desnudez” provee al mismo tiempo de una herramienta para analizar la desnudez de la vida en el bando soberano y el modelo de una praxis filosófica articulada sobre un “desnudamiento” de las signaturas y de los dispositivos que determinan y aprisionan nuestras vidas.

PALABRAS CLAVES

Giorgio Agamben, nuda vita, desnudez, cuerpo glorioso, negatividad.

## INTRODUCTION

*La nuda vita*, “bare or naked life,”<sup>3</sup> is certainly the most popular and popularized expression of Agamben’s philosophical vocabulary. Since the publication of *Homo Sacer* in 1995, it is the “protagonist” of the whole project named after this book and has become one of the unavoidable foci of contemporary ethical-political debate, though all too often misinterpreted and reduced to an empty formula. It is also one of the most criticized notions of Agamben’s project, from a number of perspectives (feminist, Foucauldian, Marxist, post-Marxist, etc.). It is precisely the indeterminacy Agamben bestowed on this concept that at times exposes it to violent criticisms. It seemed therefore that, with the publication of the essay “Nudity” in 2009, Agamben wanted somehow to reply to these criticisms and shed some light on that nakedness of life that represents the most ambiguous and unexplored feature of the syntagm “*nuda vita*.” However, as he usually does, in this essay Agamben approaches the subject obliquely and almost declines to provide a “definition” or an “explanation” in the traditional sense, “clear and distinct,” or to reply straight up to criticisms and questions. This way perhaps – and certainly from the perspective of traditional “political theory” – he but confirms the accusations of obscurity and even snobbery leveled at him and somehow prolongs the misunderstanding of his analytical and soteriological project. If, however, we read it, as it were, between the lines, and situate it both within the “economy” of the project begun with *Homo Sacer*, and within Agamben’s whole philosophical career, “Nudity” can shed light not only on the meaning and significance of the syntagm “bare life,” but also on that of his entire philosophical and political project.

## NAKED CORPOREALITY

A punctual and specific event is at the origin of “Nudity”: a performance of the Italian artist Vanessa Beecroft, on April 8, 2005, at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, after which Agamben wrote a brief article that appeared a few days later in the German

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3 Agamben’s phrase *nuda vita* has entered the international politico-philosophical vocabulary as “bare life,” the form given to it by Daniel Heller-Roazen in his translations of Agamben’s works (*Homo Sacer*, *The End of the Poem*, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, *Potentialities*). Before Heller-Roazen’s norm-establishing translations, the syntagm was rendered differently: in their 1991 translation of *Language and Death*, Karen Pinkus and Michael Hardt had rendered it as “naked life”; in his 1993 translation of *The Coming Community*, Michael Hardt had rendered it as “life in all its nakedness”; even after Heller-Roazen’s translations, Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino opted, in their translation of *Means Without End* (2000), for the form “naked life”; David Kishik and Stefan Pradella, in their translation of *Nudities* (2011), were in a sense forced to adopt “naked life” because of the book’s references to corporeal nudity. Since here we are mainly focusing on this last essay, we will tend to use this last translation, but we will at times recur to “bare life” to preserve the existing translations.

newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.<sup>4</sup> This brief article already presents the main theses that “Nudity” will then develop, the first being that, in Beecroft’s performance – one hundred naked women standing motionless, exposed to the gaze of the public – “[s]omething that could have and, perhaps, should have happened did not take place.”<sup>5</sup> This “something” is “simple nudity,”<sup>6</sup> and not because the “exposed” women in reality wore transparent pantyhose (as in the other performances by Beecroft: the women are never completely naked), but because the nudity of the human body is, in Western culture, always already prisoner of a cultural and theological apparatus – a power apparatus – which essentially calls it into question and makes it unthinkable.

In our culture, Agamben writes, nudity is “inseparable from a theological signature.”<sup>7</sup> “Signature” is a Foucauldian term that has become central to Agamben’s methodology, to which he devoted in particular the essay “Theory of Signatures,”<sup>8</sup> but which *The Kingdom and the Glory* had already thus defined:

something that in a sign or concept marks and exceeds such a sign or concept referring it back to a determinate interpretation or field, without for this reason leaving the semiotic to constitute a new meaning or a new concept. Signatures move and displace concepts and signs from one field to another (...) without redefining them semantically.<sup>9</sup>

It is the signature that makes the sign “effective,” that makes it speak, and nudity, in our culture, “speaks” only the language of the theological apparatus. Its first words are those in *Genesis* 3.7, where Adam and Eve realize they are naked only after their sin; before sinning, they were not naked but covered by a clothing of grace that clung to them as a garment of glory. Therefore, nudity exists only *negatively*, “as a *privation* of the clothing of grace and as a presaging of the resplendent garment of glory that the blessed will receive in heaven.”<sup>10</sup> What the signature of nudity says

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4 See Giorgio Agamben, “Das verlorene paradiesische Kleid. Theologie der Nacktheit: Vanessa Beecroft’s Berliner Performance,” trans. Andreas Hiepko, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 12, 2005, 37. An English translation is available at the website of the European Graduate School: “The Lost Dress of Paradise. A Theology of Nakedness: Vanessa Beecroft’s Performance in Berlin,” trans. Christian Nilsson, accessed September 23, 2015, <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/giorgio-agamben/articles/the-lost-dress-of-paradise/>.

5 Giorgio Agamben, “Nudity,” in *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 55, emphasis in the original.

6 *Ibid.*, 57.

7 *Ibid.*

8 Giorgio Agamben, “Theory of Signatures,” in *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, trans. Luca D’Isanto with Kevin Atell (New York: Zone Books, 2009), 33-80.

9 Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa (with Matteo Mandarini) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 4.

10 Agamben, “Nudity,” 57, emphasis added.

is that in our culture “there is no theology of nudity, only a theology of clothing.”<sup>11</sup> With sin, the human beings lose divine glory and in their nature a body without glory now becomes visible: “the nakedness of pure corporeality, the denudation resulting in pure functionality, a body that lacks all nobility since its ultimate dignity lay in the divine glory now lost.”<sup>12</sup> This means that “naked corporeality” pre-exists the garment of glory and is simply made visible by the denudation of sin. That grace can be added and taken away like a garment means that “human nature is always already constituted as naked; it is always already ‘naked corporeality’”; but, at the same time, it also means that it is the “addition of grace [that] constituted human corporeality, originally, as ‘naked’ and that its removal always returns anew to exhibiting it as such.”<sup>13</sup> Naked corporeality is the *obscure* bearer of divine grace, disappearing under it; naked corporeality is revealed only as *natura lapsa* in the denudation of sin. The theological apparatus, by relating nudity and garment, nature and grace, situates in this relation the possibility of sin; here, Agamben writes, it works precisely like the biopolitical paradigm:

Just as the political mythologeme of *homo sacer* postulates as a presupposition a naked life that is impure, sacred, and thus killable (though this naked life was produced only by means of such presupposition), so the naked corporeality of human nature is only the opaque presupposition of the original and luminous supplement that is the clothing of grace. Though the presupposition is hidden behind the supplement, it comes back to light whenever the caesura of sin once again divides nature and grace, nudity and clothing.<sup>14</sup>

Sin did not introduce evil into the world, but merely revealed it: sin was essentially the removal of a garment. Thus, “[n]udity, ‘naked corporeality’, is the *irreducible* Gnostic residue that implies a constitutive imperfection in creation, which must, at all events, be covered up.”<sup>15</sup> However, exactly like bare life, the corruption of nature revealed in sin did not preexist it, but is rather produced by it. Nudity is therefore, in our culture, “only the *obscure* and *ungraspable* presupposition of clothing.”<sup>16</sup> It is but a *shadow* of clothing, mere privation.

One of the consequences of the indissoluble theological bond which holds together nudity and clothing is that nudity is not a *state* but rather an *event*, which belongs to time and history, not to being and form: “We can therefore only experience nudity as a denudation and a baring, never as a form and a stable possession. At

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11 Ibid., 58.

12 Ibid., 59. This is a quotation from Erik Peterson, “Theology of Clothes,” in *Selection*, vol. 2, ed. C. Hastings and D. Nicholl (London: Sheed and Ward, 1954), 56.

13 Agamben, “Nudity,” 62-63, translation modified.

14 Ibid., 64.

15 Ibid., 64-65, emphasis added.

16 Ibid., 65, emphases added.

any rate, it is difficult to grasp and impossible to hold on.”<sup>17</sup> *Nudity is thus defined by non-nudity, by the clothing from which it has been stripped.* Nudity is therefore *impossible*: only denudation exists, only baring, and the naked body remains obstinately *unattainable*. Here again the analogy with biopolitics is revealing: “Naked corporeality, like naked life, is only the *obscure* and *impalpable* bearer of guilt. In truth, there is only baring, only the infinite gesticulations that remove clothing and grace from the body.”<sup>18</sup>

The semantic sphere of nudity is therefore marked by *negativity*: it exists only as *privation*, as *shadow*; it is *obscure*, *opaque*, *irreducible*, *unattainable*, *unreachable*, *impalpable*, *impossible*, and it is defined only by its opposite, by *non-nudity*.

### NAKED LIFE

The same terminology characterizes the determination of bare or naked life. In Agamben’s oeuvre, the syntagm “*nuda vita*” appears for the first time at the conclusion of *Language and Death* (1982), in an analysis of sacrality and sacrifice, but is inserted – albeit cursorily and ambiguously – into a “political” discourse only in *The Coming Community* (1990).<sup>19</sup> However, the nudity of life is never defined, but rather, as Andrew Norris has noted, naked life is usually presented through examples: in *Homo Sacer*, for example, these are the *Versuchspersonen*, Karen Quinlan, people in a coma, refugees, and the *Muselmann*.<sup>20</sup> It is nonetheless defined as the “protagonist” of *Homo Sacer* (as a book and as a project),<sup>21</sup> whereby its implication in the political sphere, in the form of the inclusive exclusion, constitutes the originary – though *concealed* – core of sovereign power.

The few determinations we encounter never define the nakedness of life. This naked life is defined, at the beginning, precisely as “excluded”: it is “that whose exclusion founds the city of men.”<sup>22</sup> It is then described as *sacred*, that is, as the life of *homo sacer*, that may be killed but not sacrificed: “The protagonist of this book is bare life, that is, the life of *homo sacer* (sacred man), *who may be killed and yet*

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17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 78, emphases added.

19 See Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen Pinkus and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 106; *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 64-65, 86.

20 Andrew Norris, “The Exemplary Exception: Philosophical and Political Decisions in Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*,” in Andrew Norris, ed., *Politics, Metaphysics, and Death: Essays on Giorgio Agamben’s Homo Sacer* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 270.

21 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 8.

22 Ibid., 7.

*not sacrificed*, and whose essential function in modern politics we intend to assert.”<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, it is described as the life in the sovereign ban, in the state of exception, which becomes indistinguishable from, and finally coincides with, law itself; it is the life lived in the village at the foot of the hill upon which rises Kafka’s castle;<sup>24</sup> it is Joseph K.’s life, ultimately indiscernible from the trial that implicates him.<sup>25</sup> Not simply natural life (*zoē*), but a life that is naked because it has been stripped in every context of all the forms of life that constitute a qualified life (*bios*) and that is sacred because it is exposed to death; it is, as such, the originary political element,<sup>26</sup> the “ultimate and opaque bearer of sovereignty.”<sup>27</sup> It is then the “hinge” around which are articulated *domus* and *polis* and the “threshold” through which they communicate by undetermining each other: “Neither political *bios* nor natural *zoē*, sacred life is the zone of indistinction in which *zoē* and *bios* constitute each other in including and excluding each other.”<sup>28</sup> Just like nudity in the theological apparatus, “[b]are life is a product of the machine and not something that preexists it.”<sup>29</sup>

The meaning of the nakedness of “naked life” emerges only in two passages of *Homo Sacer*: it is presented, for the first time and without explanation (as though it were a mere aside), as the translation of Walter Benjamin’s phrase *das bloße Leben*.<sup>30</sup> This notion appears in a series of writings composed by Benjamin around 1920, such as *Schicksal und Charakter (Fate and Character, 1919)*, *Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften (Goethe’s Elective Affinities, 1919-1922)*, and is one of the key concepts of *Zur Kritik der Gewalt (Critique of Violence, 1921)*, which constitutes one of Agamben’s main references.<sup>31</sup> *Nuda*, “naked,” thus translates *bloß*, which in German *can* mean “naked” or “bare,” but – and this is Benjamin’s use – in the sense of “nothing but” or “mere.” Although in German the expression *das bloße Leben* belongs to everyday language (it is still used today in expressions such as “*das bloße* – or, more often,

23 Ibid., 8. Lars Östman can therefore claim that bare life is a “translation” or a “secularized version” of Sextus Pompeius Festus. Lars Östman, “Agamben. Naked Life and Nudity,” *Danish Yearbook of Philosophy* 45 (2009): 73.

24 “[I]n Kafka’s village the empty potentiality of law is so much in force as to become indistinguishable from life.” Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 53.

25 “The existence and the very body of Joseph K. ultimately coincide with the Trial; they *become* the Trial.” Ibidem.

26 “Not simple natural life, but life exposed to death (bare life or sacred life) is the originary political element.” Ibid., 88; “The ultimate subject that needs to be at once turned into the exception and included in the city is always naked life.” Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 6.

27 Ibidem.

28 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 90.

29 Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 87-88.

30 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 64-65.

31 See Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), vol. 1, 201-6, 297-360, 236-52.

*nacktes – Leben retten*”, “to escape with nothing but the clothes on one’s back”), in the context of Benjamin’s oeuvre it belongs to his first Neo-Kantian phase and is to be ascribed to the influence of the so-called Baden School of Neokantianism and in particular of Heinrich Rickert,<sup>32</sup> even though Benjamin will endow it with the traits of the *Naturwesen* (guilt, submission to fate) as defined by Hermann Cohen, main representative of the Marburg School of Neo-Kantianism.<sup>33</sup> In any case, the context is that of a critique of the *Lebensphilosophie* from the Neo-Kantian viewpoint, and therefore *das bloße Leben* here simply means – in the sense of *Lebensphilosophie* – “mere life,” nothing but life.<sup>34</sup> Agamben decontextualizes Benjamin’s concept and inserts it into a discourse that, though “inspired” by Benjamin, combines it with a series of diverse and heterogeneous suggestions that take it far from its original meaning. Moreover, the fact that Agamben never discusses or describes Benjamin’s concept – and its translation<sup>35</sup> – induces the reader to believe that the two notions are identical.<sup>36</sup>

32 See in particular Heinrich Rickert, *Die Philosophie des Lebens. Darstellung und Kritik der philosophischen Modeströmungen unserer Zeit* (Tübingen: Mohr/Paul Siebeck, 1920). Rickert uses the expression *das bloße Leben* in particular in the Forward and in the Conclusion.

33 Unlike Rickert, Cohen does not use the expression *das bloße Leben*, but rather *Naturwesen*, “natural being,” which presents though the traits Benjamin will attribute to *das bloße Leben*. See Hermann Cohen, *Ethik des reinen Willens*, vol. 7 of *Werke*, ed. Helmut Holzhey (Hildesheim: Olms 1981), in particular 363-64.

34 Nitzan Lebovic notes that the phrase *bloßes Leben* was actually popularized by Georg Simmel’s book *Lebensanschauung. Vier metaphysische Kapitel* (Munich: Duncker & Humblot, 1918), which is was on the main targets of Rickert’s critique. See Nizan Lebovic, *The Philosophy of Life and Death: Ludwig Klages and the Rise of a Nazi Biopolitics* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2013), 185.

35 The translation of *bloß* as *nuda* require separate consideration, since a more “correct” translation would be “*mera*,” “mere” (and in effect this is how more recent Italian translations of Benjamin’s essays render the term). We must note, though, that Agamben merely derives the (elegant but ambiguous) translation from *Angelus Novus*, the first Italian collection of Benjamin’s writings edited by Renato Solmi and published in 1962, which, as Agamben says in an interview, introduced him to Benjamin (Adriano Sofri, “Un’idea di Giorgio Agamben,” *Reporter*, 9-10 November 1985, 32-33). Ultimately he then developed and transformed the syntagm in such a way that his *nuda vita* is finally something independent from Benjamin’s *bloßes Leben*: Hubert Thüring, the German translator of *Homo Sacer*, after an analysis of the context and of the semantic field, decided not to re-translate “*la nuda vita*” as “*das bloße Leben*,” but render it instead as “*das nackte Leben*.” See Hubert Thüring, “Anmerkungen zur Übersetzung und zur Zitierweise,” in Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer. Die souveräne Macht und das nackte Leben*, trans. Hubert Thüring (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2002), 199.

36 We must note, however, that one of the cornerstones of Agamben’s methodology, on which he insists almost from the very beginning of his career, is that *Bisogna comunque notare che uno dei cardini della metodologia di Agamben, su cui insiste fin quasi da sempre, è che* “the genuine philosophical element in every work, whether it be a work of art, of science, or of thought, is its capacity for elaboration, which Ludwig Feuerbach defined as *Entwicklungsfähigkeit*. It is precisely when one follows such a principle that the difference between what belongs to the author of a work and what is attributable to the interpreter becomes as essential as it is difficult to grasp” (Agamben, *The signature of All Things*, 7-8; see also, for example, Sofri,

The second – and perhaps only – definition of naked life is to be found in the third “Threshold” which concludes *Homo Sacer*:

In the syntagm “bare life,” “bare” corresponds to the Greek *haplōs*, the term by which first philosophy defines pure Being. The isolation of the sphere of pure Being, which constitutes the fundamental activity of Western metaphysics, is not without analogies with the isolation of bare life in the realm of Western politics. What constitutes man as a thinking animal has its exact counterpart in what constitutes him as a political animal. In the first case, the problem is to isolate pure Being (*on haplōs*) from the many meanings of the term “Being” (which, according to Aristotle, “is said in many ways”); in the second, what is at stake is the separation of bare life from the many forms of concrete life. Pure Being, bare life – what is contained in these two concepts, such that both the metaphysics and the politics of the West find their foundation and sense in them and in them alone? What is the link between the two constitutive processes by which metaphysics and politics seem, in isolating their proper element, simultaneously to run up against an unthinkable limit? For bare life is certainly as indeterminate and impenetrable as *haplōs* Being, and one could say that reason cannot think bare life except as it thinks pure being, in stupor and astonishment.<sup>37</sup>

Here Agamben refers to book VI (Epsilon) of the *Metaphysics*, where Aristotle defines “first philosophy” as that science that is “theoretical” but, unlike physics and mathematics (the two other theoretical sciences) is also “universal,” insofar as its object is the supersensible substance, separated and immobile, Being *qua* Being (*on hē on*), Being as “simple” (*on haplōs*) (1026a 31-33).<sup>38</sup> Agamben shows metaphysics and politics to be fundamentally intertwined in the search for a foundation and a meaning that are constitutively linked. Pure Being and bare life, as this foundation and meaning, as the “proper elements” of metaphysics and politics, are construed by Agamben – unlike Aristotle – as the *unthinkable* limits against which both clash; they are “empty” and “indeterminate” concepts but “seem to safeguard the keys to the historico-political destiny of the West” and are simultaneously “both the task and the enigma” of ontology and politics.<sup>39</sup>

Luciano Ferrari Bravo, in one of the first reviews of *Homo Sacer* (1996), noted that in Agamben’s argument what is mostly stressed is the second component of the

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*Un’idea di Giorgio Agamben*, 33; and Federico Ferrari, “Un libro senza patria: intervista a Giorgio Agamben,” *EUtopia* 1 (2001): 45). The originality of a thought, and in particular of that of Agamben, resides in “developing” (*entwickeln*) the philosophical element present in the sources he uses, until this becomes something independent and belonging to the author.

37 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 182.

38 See Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, Vol. 1, Books I–IX, trans. Hugh Tredennick, The Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann/Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933), 297-99.

39 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 182, 188.

syntagm “naked life”: life.<sup>40</sup> The focus of the project begun with *Homo Sacer* is in fact life, and it is precisely the concept of life that constitutes the enigma. In *Means Without End* (1996), which collects preparatory studies for *Homo Sacer*, Agamben insists on the intrinsic *unutterability* and *impenetrability* which characterizes life in its basic forms (biological, naked, corporeal):

Biological life, which is the secularized form of naked life and which shares its unutterability and impenetrability, thus constitutes the real forms of life literally as forms of *survival*: biological life remains inviolate in such forms as that obscure threat that can suddenly actualize itself in violence, in extraneousness, in illness, in accidents.<sup>41</sup>

In every instance, biological or naked life constitutes an *inviolable, obscure, menacing* shadow which threatens to become actual; it is, Agamben states, “the invisible sovereign that stares at us behind the dull-witted masks of the powerful.”<sup>42</sup>

In *The Open: Man and Animal* (2002), Agamben repeats this argument: in our culture, he writes, the concept of “life” never gets defined as such, it remains *indeterminate*, and yet it gets articulated and divided time and again through a series of caesurae and oppositions that “invest it with a decisive strategic function” in the most diverse domains: life is, then, “*what cannot be defined, yet, precisely for this reason, must be ceaselessly articulated and divided.*”<sup>43</sup> Life is always “only played; it is never possessed, never represented, never said,” but precisely because of this, “it is the possible but empty site of an ethics, of a form of life.”<sup>44</sup> It is on this cornerstone that Agamben founds his entire project of a new politics and a new ethics.

But it is precisely this constitutive indeterminacy that has attracted most criticisms towards his project. Already in 1996, Ferrari Bravo drew attention to the ambiguity of a strategy focusing less on life than on its nakedness, more on *negativity* than on the positive potentialities of life; this emphasis on negativity, for Ferrari Bravo, risks passing into an emphasis on the negation of life, that is, on death.<sup>45</sup> The fundamental problem is that, in this way, Agamben confines to inaccessibility life itself and its

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40 See Luciano Ferrari Bravo, “Homo Sacer. Una riflessione sul libro di Agamben” (1996), in *Dal fordismo alla globalizzazione. Cristalli di tempo politico* (Roma: Manifestolibri, 2001), 280.

41 Agamben, *Means Without End*, 8.

42 Ibidem.

43 Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 13, emphasis in the original.

44 Giorgio Agamben, “The Author as Gesture,” in *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 68.

45 Ferrari Bravo, “Homo Sacer. Una riflessione sul libro di Agamben,” 280-81.

materiality, and thus blocks, as Catherine Mills has repeatedly argued, every possible question about the body and its history, gender, race, sexuality or class.<sup>46</sup>

The problem of the “historicity” of life and of its baring has been stressed by various readers, including Philippe Mesnard and Claudine Kahan, Robert Eaglestone, Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg, and Oliver Marchart.<sup>47</sup> There is no life without history, and to construe the supposed originary nudity of life as the unthinkable limit against which political philosophy clashes, as the enigma at the center of Western politics, would mean to assure its unreachability, unutterability and impenetrability. According to these readings, nothing can really be said about naked life, and statements such as “the production of bare life is the originary activity of sovereignty”<sup>48</sup> are ultimately undecidable: nothing can confirm, articulate or invalidate them. From the point of view of “political philosophy,” the *stupor* and *astonishment*, in which both the *on haplōs* and naked life are thought,<sup>49</sup> do not constitute useful perspectives through which to conduct and articulate empirical research or analyze events or phenomena; they do not foster comprehension, enable research, and even less encourage to act. For Antonio Negri, who in a certain sense systematizes these interpretations and can therefore be taken as their champion, naked life is then a form of “ideology,” a “mystification,” because it absolutizes nakedness and equates it to the horrors of Nazi camps, reiterating in this way the act of denudation. Sovereign power *needs* to show us this nakedness in order to frighten us; by taking nakedness as representing life, the ideology of naked life neutralizes the potentialities of life and its capabilities of resistance: it is “the exaltation of humiliation, of pity, it is medieval Christianity.”<sup>50</sup> It ultimately reiterates the denudation performed by sovereign power.

46 Catherine Mills, *The Philosophy of Agamben* (Stocksfiel: Acumen, 2008), 33-37; and also “Linguistic Survival and Ethicality: Biopolitics, Subjectification, and Testimony in *Remnants of Auschwitz*,” in *Politics, Metaphysics, and Death*, ed. Norris, 198-221; and “Biopolitics, Liberal Eugenics, and Nihilism,” in *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*, ed. Mathew Calarco and Steven Decaroli (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 180-202. For other criticisms from a gender perspective, see also Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, “Bare Life on Strike: Notes on the Biopolitics of Race and Gender,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 107, no. 1 (2008): 89-105, and Penelope Deutscher, “The Inversion of Exceptionality: Foucault, Agamben, and ‘Reproductive Rights’,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 107, no. 1 (2008): 55-70.

47 Philippe Mesnard and Claudine Kahn, *Giorgio Agamben à l'épreuve d'Auschwitz* (Paris: Kimé, 2001); Robert Eaglestone, “On Giorgio Agamben’s Holocaust,” *Paragraph: Journal of Modern Critical Theory* 25, no. 2 (2002): 52-67; Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg, “Auschwitz and the Remains of Theory: Towards an Ethics of the Borderland,” *Symploke* 11, no. 1-2 (2004): 23-38; Oliver Marchart, “Zwischen Moses und Messias: Zur politischen Differenz bei Agamben,” in *Die gouvernementale Maschine: Zur politischen Philosophie Giorgio Agambens*, ed. Janine Böckelmann and Frank Meier (Münster: UNRAST, 2007), 10-28.

48 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 83.

49 *Ibid.*, 182.

50 Antonio Negri, “Il mostro politico. Nuda vita e potenza,” in *Desiderio del mostro. Dal circo al laboratorio alla politica*, ed. Antonio Negri, Ubaldo Fadini and Charles T. Wolfe (Roma: Manifestolibri, 2001), 193-95. Negri’s criticism is also voiced in the works he wrote with Michael Hardt; see *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 366,

## DENUDATIO PERFECTA

And yet the goal of Agamben's entire analysis, and in particular of his reading of nudity (and of life), is precisely that of unveiling and deactivating the apparatus which builds the whole Western ontology upon negativity and indeterminacy. The explicit aim of "Nudity" is that of "completely liberat[ing] nudity from the patterns of thought that permit us to conceive of it solely in a privative and instantaneous manner,"<sup>51</sup> not in order to return to an "originary," prelapsarian state, but rather, literally, to "strip" nudity of its negativity. "An investigation that wishes to seriously confront the problem of nudity," Agamben writes,

must first and foremost go back archaeologically to the source of the theological opposition between nudity and clothing, nature and grace. The aim here is not to tap into an original state prior to the separation but to comprehend and neutralize the apparatus that produced this separation.<sup>52</sup>

True, from the perspective of "political philosophy" the path chosen by Agamben is at least peculiar and atypical: the second half of "Nudity," in order to find a way to deactivate and render inoperative the theological apparatus of nudity, considers the theory of representation and image, using the Heideggerian notion of illatency, the Kantian notion of the sublime, and the Benjaminian notion of beauty.

Nudity, Agamben writes, is for Adam and Eve the only content of their knowledge of good and evil: when they eat of the forbidden fruit "the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked" (*Gen.* 3:7). But the knowledge of nudity, as we have seen, is the knowledge of a privation, the knowledge of the fact that something invisible and unsubstantial (the garment of grace) has been lost. However, Agamben claims that this absence of content, this privation, reveals that this is not the knowledge of something, but rather the knowledge of a pure knowability; in knowing nudity, we do not know an object, but only an absence of veils, only a possibility of knowing:

The nudity that the first humans saw in Paradise when their eyes were opened is, then, the opening of truth, of "disclosedness" (*a-letheia*, "un-concealment"), without which knowledge would not be possible. The condition of no longer being covered by the clothing of grace does not reveal the obscurity of flesh and sin but rather the light of knowability. There is nothing behind the presumed clothing of grace, and it is precisely this condition of not having anything behind it, this

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and *Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 57-58. On Negri's (and Hardt's) critique of Agamben, see Brett Neilson, "Potenza Nuda? Sovereignty, Biopolitics, Capitalism," *Contretemps* 5 (2004): 63-78.

51 Agamben, "Nudity," 65.

52 *Ibid.*, 66.

pure visibility and presence, that is nudity. To see a body naked means to perceive its pure knowability beyond every secret, beyond or before its objective predicates.<sup>53</sup>

Agamben is reproducing an old argument of his, which constitutes the third “stanza” of his second book, *Stanzas* (1979): the theory of the phantasm, that is, of knowledge, in the erotic poetry of late Middle Ages. In medieval philosophy and mysticism, the process of knowing is presented as a progressive *denudatio*, in which the phantasm (the form or image that sensible objects imprint into the senses) is stripped of all material accidents, until only the naked form remains in the final act of rational intellection. This process begins in the senses, which however are unable to strip the sensible form *denudatione perfecta* (in perfect denudation); imagination strips it further *denudatione vera* (in true denudation), but is unable to free it from the material accident; then non sensible intentions (goodness, malice, interest, etc.) are unveiled, and only at this point, when the whole process of the internal sense is completed, the rational soul can be informed by the completely denuded phantasm.<sup>54</sup>

In “Nudity,” then, Agamben repeats: “[t]hrough the act of intellection, the image becomes perfectly nude (...). Complete knowledge is contemplation in and about nudity.”<sup>55</sup> The knowledge of the human body is its phantasm, its image, that is, what makes it knowable but must remain, in itself, *ungraspable*. Agamben thus concludes:

the image is not the thing, but the thing’s knowability (its nudity), it neither expresses nor signifies the thing. Nevertheless, inasmuch as it is nothing other than the giving of the thing over to knowledge, nothing other than the stripping off of the clothes that cover it, nudity is not separate from the thing: it is the thing itself.<sup>56</sup>

Again, Agamben is reproducing an argument he put forward for the first time in the 1984 essay entitled precisely “The Thing Itself.” In this essay he analyzed the meaning of the expression *to pragma auto*, the thing itself, and focused in particular on Plato’s and Aristotle’s definitions. To make a long and very complex exposition short, the argument of the essay revolves around the thesis that “the thing itself, while in some way transcending language, is nevertheless possible only in language and by virtue of language: precisely the thing of language.”<sup>57</sup> As such, it is not simply being in its obscurity and as object presupposed by language, but rather “that *by which* the

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53 Ibid., 81.

54 See Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), in particular 78-80.

55 Agamben, “Nudity,” 83.

56 Ibid., 84.

57 Giorgio Agamben, “The Thing Itself,” in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Daniell Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 31.

object is known, *its own knowability and truth*.”<sup>58</sup> The thing itself is the very medium of its own knowability, its self-manifestation and announcement to consciousness. However, sayability itself remains unsaid in what is said, and knowability itself is lost in what is known: in language we always presuppose, and at the same time forget, the very opening that is in question in language, and the task of philosophical presentation becomes thus “*to come with speech to help speech, so that, in speech, speech itself does not remain presupposed but instead comes to speech*,” or, in other words, “[t]o restore the thing itself to its place in language.”<sup>59</sup>

In order to illustrate further this unveiling as opening of the thing to consciousness, Agamben refers then, in “Nudity,” to the theory of beauty proposed by Benjamin in the third part of his essay on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*. What is essentially beautiful, Benjamin argues, is based on an intrinsic relationship with semblance (*Schein*). In this relationship, beauty does not coincide with semblance, but nonetheless it ceases to be beautiful when semblance disappears from it: thus “beauty appears as such only in what is veiled.”<sup>60</sup> Beauty is not semblance, is not a veil covering something else, but is instead an “essence” (*Wesen*), which, however, “remains essentially identical to itself only when veiled”: “the beautiful is neither the veil nor the veiled object but rather the object in its veil.”<sup>61</sup> From this perspective, the idea of “unveiling” (*Enthüllung*) becomes that of the “impossibility of unveiling” (*Unenthüllbarkeit*), and the relationship between veil and veiled is defined as a “secret” (*Geheimnis*). For Agamben’s argument the following step is fundamental: since it is the unity of veil and veiled, Benjamin writes, “beauty can essentially be valid only where the duality of nakedness and veiling does not yet obtain: in art and in the appearances of mere nature.”<sup>62</sup> Therefore:

In veiless nakedness the essentially beautiful has withdrawn, and in the naked body of the human being are attained a being beyond all beauty – the sublime – and a work beyond all creations – that of the creator.<sup>63</sup>

In the nakedness of the human being the unity of veil and veiled disappears. The possibility of being denuded, Agamben glosses, condemns human beauty to appearance, and this cipher becomes thus the possibility of being unveiled. However, this entire process has a limit: beyond this limit we find neither an essence that can be further unveiled nor the *natura lapsa*, “mere corporeality,” but rather “the veil itself,

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58 Ibid., 32, emphasis in the original.

59 Ibid., 35 and 38, emphasis in the original.

60 Walter Benjamin, “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 350.

61 Ibid., 351.

62 Ibidem.

63 Ibidem.

appearance itself, which is no longer the appearance of anything.”<sup>64</sup> Human nudity is this indelible residue of appearance in which nothing appears. It is what remains when we remove the veil from beauty. And it is *sublime*, Agamben states, because the impossibility of presenting the idea in a sensible way at a certain point turns, in a Kantian fashion, into a presentation of a higher order, in which it is presentation itself that is being presented, in which appearance itself appears, and thus displays itself as infinitely *inapparent*, infinitely free of secret: “The sublime, then, is an appearance that exhibits its own vacuity and, in this exhibition, allows the inapparent to take place.”<sup>65</sup> The theological apparatus of nudity is thus deactivated by showing the unsubstantiality of the negative presupposition and of the mechanism of separation which construes the oppositions nudity-clothing and nature-grace; that is, by freeing nudity and life from their theological signature:

it is precisely the disenchantment of beauty in the experience of nudity, this sublime but also miserable exhibition of appearance beyond all mystery and all meaning, that can somehow defuse the theological apparatus and allow us to see, beyond the prestige of grace and the chimeras of corrupt nature, a simple, inapparent human body.<sup>66</sup>

The language and strategy adopted in the second part of “Nudity” emphasize the substantial continuity in Agamben’s oeuvre. A continuity that can be summarized (reductively, of course) as a critique of “negativity.” His first book, *The Man Without Content* (1970), already undertook a critique of aesthetics precisely because aesthetics conceives art as a “pure potentiality of negation” and its destiny coincides ultimately with that of “nihilism”;<sup>67</sup> here the Kantian aesthetic judgment was defined as a “negative theology,”<sup>68</sup> and the same accusation was repeated in *Infancy and History* (1979) about the transcendental subject.<sup>69</sup> In *Stanzas*, “criticism” too was paired up with art and defined, *à la* Hegel, as a “self-annihilating nothing,” an “absolute and irretrievable negativity,” which does not renounce knowledge, but marks it nonetheless with this absolutely negative character.<sup>70</sup> The topic of negativity can be summarized, in these texts, as the quest for a *foundation* which remains vain and necessarily results in the – *mystical* – positing of an “unknowable” (*The Man Without Content*, *Stanzas*), of an “inexperiential” (*Infancy and History*) or of an “unsayable”

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64 Agamben, “Nudity,” 85.

65 *Ibid.*, 86.

66 *Ibid.*, 90.

67 Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 56-57 and *passim*.

68 *Ibid.*, 45.

69 Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1996), 31-32.

70 Agamben, *Stanzas*, xvi.

(*Stanzas, Infancy and History*). These investigations are developed and elaborated in *Language and Death* (1982), which postulates the necessity of an overcoming of the radical negativity of Western metaphysics,<sup>71</sup> but also implicitly constitutes the starting point of *Idea of Prose* (1985), which looks for a word freed from the “unsayable” as negative presupposition of Western language.<sup>72</sup>

The following investigations focused on the question of the “political,” already begun with *The Coming Community* (1990), are also based on a critique of *presuppositions*, that is, of the intrinsically *privative* form of community, founded on what it is not, and therefore on exclusion. The two-decades-long project begun with *Homo Sacer* has as its starting point precisely the *separation* between *zoē* and *bios*, the *exclusion* and at the same time *production*, in the form of the sovereign exception, of bare life from the life of the community. This project also rests therefore on a critique of negative presuppositions and on the elimination of the unknowable / inexperiencible / unsayable: the form-of-life, the hinge around which revolves the *pars construens* of Agamben’s project, is a life without negativity, without distinction between *zoē* and *bios*, without the mystique of inappropriability, freed from the mortal privation which renders it naked and thus *produces* naked life.<sup>73</sup>

This critique of negativity proceeds in every instance – and not only thanks to the eventual adoption of Foucault’s archaeological method – through a progressive *denudatio*, an “unveiling” of the supporting structures of Western metaphysics and power, to the point that William Robert has called Agamben essentially a “thinker of nudity” and has defined the whole *Homo Sacer* project as a “a thinking of and through nudity”: methodologically, nudity “for him serves as a paradigm, tied to a signature, which designates an apparatus and effects a production.”<sup>74</sup> The essay “Nudity” constitutes therefore, in a certain sense, a paradigmatic case and an emblematic epitome of the methodological *denudatio* in fact present and operative from the very beginning in Agamben’s oeuvre.

## THE GLORIOUS BODY

This *denudatio* and the consequent deactivation of the theological signature though still leave a question unanswered: what could “simple nudity,” the “simple, inapparent human body” really be? What would a body freed from the theological signature amount to? And a life released from its reduction to mere nakedness?

71 See Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*.

72 See Giorgio Agamben, *Idea of Prose*, trans. Sam Whitsitt and Michael Sullivan (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995).

73 On form-of-life see Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 188; “Form-of-Life,” in *Means Without End*, 3-12; *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013); and the final volume of the project *Homo Sacer, L’uso dei corpi* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2014).

74 William Robert, “Nude, Glorious, Living,” *Political Theology* 14.1 (2013), 117.

Agamben is certainly not seduced by easy answers, but, at least since *The Coming Community*,<sup>75</sup> there is a recurrent image which marks his exemplar repertoire and that perhaps can be borrowed here in order to sketch, as a conclusion, the attempt of an answer: the glorious body – and it is perhaps not an accident that the essay that follows “Nudity” in the volume of the same title is precisely entitled “The Glorious Body.” Using the theological problem of the body of the resurrected in Paradise as a paradigm, Agamben attempts to think the figure of a body freed from its biological destiny and from the theological signature that inexorably determines it. If the essential principle of power apparatuses is separation<sup>76</sup> (in the case we have examined, that between body and clothing, nature and grace, *zoē* and *bios*, form and life), then the glorious body (and the form-of-life) is a body (a life) wrested away from separation, and in which the separated elements are made to coincide.<sup>77</sup>

The naked, simple human body is not displaced here into a higher and nobler reality; instead, liberated from the witchcraft that once separated it from itself, it is as if this body were now able to gain access to its own truth for the first time. (...) [T]he body that contemplates and exhibits its potentiality through its gestures enters a second, final nature (which is nothing other than the truth of its former nature). The glorious body is not some other body, more agile and beautiful, more luminous and spiritual; it is the body itself, at the moment when inoperativity removes the spell from it and opens it up to a new possible common use.<sup>78</sup>

The brief 2005 article on Vanessa Beecroft’s performance ended with an image, which I will also use here as a conclusion: according to a Gnostic parable, the saved, on the very last day, will tear off their bodies also the garment of glory given to them by God on the last day, and will show themselves to each other in a nudity that knows neither sin nor glory: “The human body that will be seen that day will be like the body of that girl in the Neue Nationalgalerie that I, in passing, looked at from behind, only to immediately again lose sight of her: fragile, simple, nameless, yet without doubt naked, and unproblematically thinkable.”<sup>79</sup>

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75 See Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 39-40.

76 On separation as supporting structure of religion and power see Giorgio Agamben, “In Praise of Profanation,” *Profanations*, 73-92.

77 For this reason Eva Geulen argues that Agamben’s project, and in particular the notion of form-of-life, rests on a sort of romantic longing for a lost “unity.” See Eva Geulen, *Giorgio Agamben zu Einführung*, second edition (Hamburg: Junius, 2009), 119-22.

78 Agamben, “The Glorious Body,” in *Nudity*, 102-3.

79 Giorgio Agamben, “The Lost Dress of Paradise,” available at <<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/giorgio-agamben/articles/the-lost-dress-of-paradise/>>.

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