

CALL FOR PAPERS
Except Asia: Agamben's Work in Transcultural Perspective
International Conference

June 25-27, 2013

Department of English, National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei, Taiwan

With the participation of
Institut d'Études Transtextuelles et Transculturelles, Université Jean Moulin, Lyon, France

FEATURED SPEAKERS

Simone Bignall (University of New South Wales, Australia)

Joyce C. H. Liu (National Chiao Tung University, Taiwan)

Brett Neilson (University of West Sydney, Australia)

Mark Rifkin (University of North Carolina at Greensboro, USA)

Naoki Sakai (Cornell University, USA)

Marcelo Svirksy (University of Wollongong, Australia)

**Other speakers to be confirmed*

DESCRIPTION

Over the past several decades, Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's work has attracted a growing amount of interest spanning a wide range of disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences, including philosophy, literary theory, political philosophy, migration studies, security studies, geography, social and cultural studies of science and medicine, etc. The increasing recognition accorded to Agamben's *oeuvres* has more recently resulted in the beginning of a serious dialogue about the transcultural aspects of his work, particularly with regard to the epistemological legacy of colonization, state-building, and revolution in the non-Western world. This conference aims to explore the enormous transversal potential of Agamben's work by staging its transdisciplinary and transcultural dimensions. It is open to non-specialists ("specialization" defined here in relation to both Asia and Agamben) from any discipline interested in the mix and mutation of Asia and Agamben as a platform for transcultural investigation.

Too complex to characterize under a single rubric, Agamben's work is probably best known for the *Homo Sacer* series of books and essays that trace out the contours of "the logic of the exception" that operates across discrete domains of modern

experience. *Sovereignty*, as Agamben shows, is the name given to the forms of experience that adhere to an exceptional logic, beginning with the ontological status of the philosophical subject and extending directly through the political one. For Agamben, this is as much a foundational moment of Western civilization as a trajectory of historical development. Sovereignty itself, in its relation to social ontology, is not a modern invention. The specificity of modernity lies in appropriating the distribution of the exception between politics and life in such a way that the format of the exception is no longer invisible and/or concentrated in a single point in the social body, but has rather been generalized throughout the body politic, creating spaces of “permanent exception.”

The conference organizers would like us to reconsider the logic of the exception in relation to Asia. This means, first of all, that we will have to abandon the normativity of the historically-determined notion of social organization that has come to coalesce around the term sovereignty in the modern age. Although sovereignty’s excess of normativity has always been open to wild oscillations induced by the incessant transitions of capitalist development, for that part of the world whose historical experience of modernity has been mediated by colonization, sovereignty has never been something that could be taken for granted. Stimulated by Agamben’s genealogy of sovereignty, an increasing number of postcolonial theorists have begun to question the role of the exception in the constitution of that very particular spatialized form of exception known as “the West and the Rest.”

The conference title—“Except Asia”—thus begins with the *status of the universal* that Agamben has recently done so much to problematize and reinvigorate. The term “Asia,” like that of “the West,” names neither an essential civilization nor a substantial geographical entity but rather something like what Agamben identifies, following Michel Foucault, as an *apparatus*: a network of heterogeneous elements spanning several registers. Throughout the period of colonial/imperial modernity, the apparatus of “Asia” was explicitly used to manage spaces of exception, seen for instance in the frameworks of extraterritoriality that anchored the distinction of an Asian “continent” on the Eurasian landmass stretching from the Bosphorus to the Yellow Sea. It goes today without saying that it can no more be a question of attempting to assimilate Asia to yet another form of a particularism-masquerading-as-a-universalism than an attempt to establish a simple equivalency between the two terms, “Asia” and “exception.” In this sense, the conference title is precisely a *gesture*, which, as Agamben notes, is the “communication of a communicability.” From this perspective, “Asia” and “Agamben” are points of departure for discussions about subjective formation in transcultural practice. Although these two points taken together certainly might open, for instance, discussions about “Asia” as, alternately, civilizational construct, market assemblage, economic player, knowledge archive, translation machine, site of exceptional space or practice, etc., the conference title is definitely not intended to limit discussion to either “Asia” per se or to Agamben’s contributions to political philosophy. It is intended to act rather as a moment of

invitation that points to something manifestly common and multiple in the human being. It might, if we are lucky, even engage the process identified by Agamben as *profanation*: the process whereby an apparatus (of capture), such as the civilizational region in this case, is wrested away from the exception and returned to the common.

How should we respond to the urge to categorize Agamben's work—like that of countless other important theoreticians of modernity—as symptomatic of that asymmetry that maps the universality of theory onto a region—currently called “the West”—that is but a particularity in its own right? What elements in Agamben's work present particularly useful—or disruptive—points of departure for reconsidering the relation between genesis and validity, origin and propagation? What is the cost of ignoring, or cordoning within a single civilizational tradition (if not a historically-determined idea of the human itself), the idea expressed by Agamben in *Homo Sacer* that we must “put the very form of relation into question, and to ask if the political fact is not perhaps thinkable beyond relation and, thus, no longer in the form of a connection”?

In keeping with our bias towards transversal, transcultural approaches, the conference is interested in accommodating a variety of perspectives on Agamben's diverse body of work. Two general trajectories of encounter between Agamben and the non-West suggest themselves from the outset. The first, a comparative approach, would actively pursue a comparativist agenda, matching Agamben's characterization of the Western tradition with what we know about other civilizational traditions. To what extent have other traditions offered contrasting solutions to the problems, and powers, of ontological and political exception? How have other traditions identified and managed the problems of indication and signification that are understood, by Agamben, to lie at the heart of the metaphysical quest? What does Agamben's analysis of sovereign power in the West mask from view in our approach to non-Western societies? The second, an applied-theory approach, would find in Agamben's work an intriguing set of analyses about Western culture that could provide a powerful template for re-examining the understanding of other cultures caught in the multi-faceted processes of modernization. How can Agamben's work be effectively mobilized in contexts far from those of its inception?

Beyond the strategies of application and comparison, can we not also imagine a third trajectory of encounter that would seek to problematize the *political relation* that characterizes the meeting between Agamben and Asia at every point in its formation and development? What kind of work needs to be done to mobilize Agamben's accomplishments in the service of a general economy of politics no longer indebted to the restrained economy of colonial and postcolonial relations? Situated as we are at a point of historical transition affecting the humanities as a whole, we launch this call for papers as an open invitation to invent anew the meaning of theoretical reflection for a fractious global age.

CONFERENCE VENUE

National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei, Taiwan

CONFERENCE LANGUAGE

English

SUBMISSIONS

500-word abstracts in English should be submitted to conference2013@gmail.com before **September 15, 2012**. Abstracts should be accompanied by a list of keywords and a brief curriculum vitae.

Notice of accepted abstracts will be sent out by e-mail before October 10, 2012.

TIMELINE

Full-length conference papers (approximately 4,000-5,000 words) are due a month prior to the conference. Papers may be compiled into a reader for conference participants.

PUBLICATION

Publication projects are planned following the conference. Details will be announced in due course.

CONTACT

For general inquiries, please contact Chun-yen Chen (chunyenchen@hotmail.com or jochen@ntnu.edu.tw).

CONFERENCE WEBSITE

<http://www.concentric-literature.url.tw/AgambenConference>