Invoking the West: Giorgio Agamben’s “Romantic Ideology” and the Civilizational Transference

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Abstract
Inspired by Giorgio Agamben’s critique of the “Romantic Ideology” that consciously created a tautological equivalency between language and people, this essay is interested in drawing upon elements of the philosopher’s conceptual kit to explore the ways in which his attempt to trace ontological origins recuperates “Romantic ideology” with regard to civilizational difference. We will take as our point of departure the construction of that ambiguous yet ubiquitous civilizational entity, the “West.” In order to tease apart the status of the “West” in Agamben’s work, we will return to the conceptual distinction and historical narrative deployed in one of the philosopher’s earliest works, Language and Death, which plays a seminal role in the development of the author’s later philosophy. Having thus established the moment when the “Romantic Ideology” criticized by Agamben reappears in the form of civilizational transfer, we proceed by way of asking, once again both with and against Agamben, if the “West” might not be seen as a form of translational apparatus such as the concept is critically taken up in the philosopher’s 2006 essay, “What is an Apparatus?” The essay concludes with a reflection on the relation between translation and species difference in the context of the new biospheric colonization that characterizes contemporary capitalism.

Keywords
translation, subjectivity, civilizational transfer, postcoloniality, biopolitics, zoopolitics
The Romantic Ideology

Early in his career, Giorgio Agamben identified one of the founding obfuscations of modern thought, the presumed equivalence between a people and a language, calling it the “Romantic Ideology”:

Romantic ideology—which consciously created this connection, thereby influencing extensively modern linguistic theory as well as the political theory that is still dominant nowadays—tried to clarify something that was already obscure (the concept of people) with the help of something even more obscure (the concept of language). Thanks to the symbiotic correspondence thus instituted, two contingent and indefinite cultural entities transform themselves into almost natural organisms endowed with their own necessary laws and characteristics. *(Means 66)*

I have already explored elsewhere (Solomon, “Transnational”) the biopolitical “transformation” described by Agamben that turns the “contingent and indefinite” into “organisms” that are “almost natural,” yet governed by “necessary laws” and endowed with “characteristics.” Using tools from the thinkers’ own kit, I would here like to analyze how the “Romantic Ideology” identified by Agamben re-emerges in his work in relation to so-called civilizational difference. My purpose is not to “catch” Agamben “red-handed,” but rather to develop a conversation about some of the presuppositions that go into our understanding of disciplinary divisions and geocultural areas. This work does not pretend to be an exhaustive engagement with Agamben’s complete work-to-date, and it is situated within part of a larger project in the biopolitics of translation whose ultimate aim is a critique of the apparatus of area, which I see as being one of the main channels through which operates the mobilization of affects for the benefit of capitalist accumulation.

Invoking the “West”

Agamben’s writings on sovereignty and metaphysics since the 1990s have attracted considerable critical acclaim because of the theoretical and historical perspective they bring to contemporary issues related to the so-called “War on Terror” like indefinite detention and the suspension of habeas corpus. For Agamben, the camp or detention center is the modern paradigm of the political inasmuch as it
reveals an essential crisis, or displacement, thrusting “life” into the heart of the exceptional logic upon which secular sovereignty is founded. However, as the “war on terror” and its corollary, the supposed “clash of civilizations,” suggests, the stakes of this conjuncture could never be attributed to a single nation or group of nations (even though it might be largely promoted by them), but always returns to the problems inherited from colonialism that beset social relationships.

Curiously, even as Agamben notes that the camp as a political form of population control has its roots in the context of colonial governmentality (the Spanish in Cuba, 1896; the English in South Africa at the start of the 20th century) (Agamben, Homo 166), the historical experience of the non-“West” is noticeably absent from his work. Elided from the main narrative on the development of biopolitics, the non-“West” returns to make a second appearance in Section III of Homo Sacer, the “Camp as Paradigm,” at the end of the crucial, penultimate chapter, titled “The Camp as Nomos.” “[T]oday’s democratically-capitalist project of eliminating the poor classes through development,” writes Agamben, “not only reproduces within itself the people that is excluded but also transforms the entire population of the Third World into bare life” (180). Significantly, the fundamental paradigm of modernity—the camp, was first practiced in a colonial situation; decades later, the progression of this history threatens to overwhelm subsequently decolonized populations in a new biopolitical trap. The implicit teleology within which Agamben situates the Third World does not, however, include consideration of subjective agency. Like the return of the repressed, the “Third World” is cited in a way that amounts to little more than capitalizing upon the moral authority of its role, well-

An important corrective to this debilitating “oversight” in Agamben’s account of the historical development of the logic of the exception can be found in Olivier Le Cour-Grandmaison’s work on the French colonial experience in Algeria, which demonstrates how exceptional juridical and military techniques developed in the colonies were later used to suppress class insurrection in the metropolitan country. Any attempt to understand the “hidden matrix of the political” (Agamben) through the “logic of the exception” codified by sovereignty necessarily needs to account for the “state of exception” seen in colonial—and postcolonial—violence. Cf. Olivier Le Cour-Grandmaison, Coloniser, Exterminer: sur la guerre et l’état colonial (Paris: Fayard, 2005). Another text in a similar vein to which my attention has been drawn by a kind reviewer would be Nasser Hussein, The Jurisprudence of Emergency: Colonialism and the Rule of Law (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 2003).

With all the attention given to Hannah Arendt’s Origins of Totalitarianism in Agamben’s Homo Sacer, it is significant that Agamben draws scant consequence from the implicit significance of Arendt’s essential insight in that work: The argument, convincingly laid out by Arendt, that twentieth-century European fascism must be seen as an importation of imperialist methods into the metropolitan countries of Europe (an argument that is verified by Le Cour-Grandmaison as well), implicitly suggests that the only way to really understand the “logic of the exception” in its biopolitical and historical dimensions is to privilege the historical experience of colonial violence.
described by Gayatri Spivak in her landmark essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” as silent witness.

Although the absence of the non-“West” in Agamben’s historical account is remarkable, it might seem unwarranted to call into question this absence in view of the parameters delineating the object of study. After all, Agamben apparently does not mean to talk about anything other than the “West” (apart from those two instances we just cited, the non-“West” is otherwise never mentioned in Homo Sacer). His narrative begins, in the fashion proper to civilizational history, with the origin—here, the Greeks—developing a genealogical focus on “the tradition” specified by the proper noun, the “West” (a series of constantly-repeated specifications that run the gamut from “Western metaphysics” and the “Western tradition” to the “Western State” and “Western politics,” etc.). This same basic narrative structure is common, in fact, to all of his writings, including the early seminal work, Language and Death: The Place of Negativity (1991), which attracts our special attention in the following sections for its exhaustive treatment of the problems of pronouns and linguistic referentiality.

Doubt is unquestionably warranted, however, when a presumably spatial category, the “West,” gives way to a temporal one—the modern, or what Agamben also calls in Homo Sacer, “the 24 centuries that have gone by since [the foundation of Western politics]” (11)—that enables the transformation of a proper noun into a universal history and a universal grammar. When we read Agamben’s seminal early work, we learn that the oscillation from the empirical to the transcendental is an integral feature of the way pronouns have historically been conceived. In the following section, we will use the word shift to denote the oscillation or transformation enabled by the shifter in order to highlight its connection to Agamben’s discussion of the crucial metaphysical role played by “shifters.” If indeed Agamben could have confined his narrative to a single region that could be tangibly indicated without any further oscillation between the empirical and the transcendental, the particular and the universal, indication and signification, our objections to his work would be left to consider nothing more than a series of technical questions concerning historical archives whose meaning would be socially-irrelevant today. Yet the introduction of a universal element forces us to consider the problem in its metaphysical, as well as political, dimensions. As countless authors in the context of postcolonial studies have shown, the constitution of the “West” itself cannot be

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2 “The substantive concern for the politics of the oppressed which often accounts for Foucault’s appeal can hide a privileging of the intellectual and of the ‘concrete’ subject of oppression that, in fact, compounds the appeal” (Spivak, “Subaltern” 292).
accomplished without reference to a specific history (economic, territorial, political) and a certain hierarchically-organized representation of what constitutes the relation between binary pairs such as outside and inside that typify the social—precisely the essential problem of what Agamben calls “the logic of sovereignty.” Needless to say, this form of reference, like any other form, cannot be separated on the one hand from the problems of referentiality (de Man) that were at the heart of poststructuralism since Jacques Derrida, nor can they be separated on the other hand from a certain discipline of translation that binds various different levels of externality into a single, coherent referent.

**Pronominal Invocation and Shifters**

In *Language and Death*, Agamben shows how the problem of pronominal usage constitutes a hidden matrix, running from thinkers as deeply opposed as Georg W. F. Hegel and Martin Heidegger, for the philosophical negativity that determines the metaphysical effects of linguistic referentiality. The attempt to find an alternative to the philosophical experience of language that rests on negativity is pursued, to no avail, through the historical experience of poetry. Thomas Carl Wall adroitly summarizes Agamben’s conclusion: “neither philosophy nor poetry is able to grasp the taking-place of language” (129-30). What is at stake here is not the communicational content of linguistic exchange, but the very fact, or event, constituted by its occurrence.

*Language and Death* begins by noting a curious parallel between Hegel and Heidegger, two philosophers who otherwise exhibit considerable mutual dissonance. Although we take sense-certainty for granted as the most concrete manifestation of the real, Hegel shows how the demonstrative pronoun *(this)*, in its universal applicability, introduces an element of negation into what was thought to be most positive and certain. By calling something “this,” I have used a name that effaces its singularity; anything at hand could be called “this.” The introduction of this negativity—the universality of signification introduced into the particularity of tangible indication—serves as the point of departure for the crux of Hegel’s philosophical system and dialectical teleology in general. In Heidegger, whose philosophical writings devoted considerable effort to disqualifying Hegelian dialectic without recourse to the reductive “leap of faith” required by positivism (thus setting the stage for “deconstruction”), negativity enters through the demonstrative pronoun “there” (or *Da* in German) which forms an integral part of his non-dialectical replacement for subjectivity—*Dasein*. The demonstrative pronoun (there or this),
occupying a crucial place in the systems of philosophers as deeply opposed as Hegel and Heidegger, sits at the crucial fault line between *signification* and *indication*.

Going back to Aristotle and Greek philosophy, Agamben asserts that the problem of indication “constitutes the original theme of philosophy” (*Language* 16). This retrospective look initiates an historical narrative that traces the mutual imbrication between grammatical studies and metaphysical reflection on being and essence running from Antiquity through the Middles Ages up to the Modern, leading Agamben to conclude that the pronoun—particularly the demonstrative pronoun—has occupied a “privileged status . . . in the history of medieval and modern thought” (20). Agamben describes three “crucial” or “decisive” moments in this history: the first comes with the Aristotelian determination of first substance (*prote ousia*) through reference to demonstrative pronouns. The Aristotelian formation, however, was only implicit in the formula, stated by Aristotle, that “every [first] essence signifies a this that” (16; emphasis in original). A further “decisive event” (20) occurred when Alexandrian and then Latin grammarians in the 2nd–5th centuries A.D. explicitly thematized the connection between the pronoun and the sphere of the first substance. This history, binding grammar to metaphysics, culminates in the “decisive step” (23) taken by modern linguistics to understand the distinction between “signifying” and “showing” (23) operated by a grammatical class of words that Émile Benveniste first described as “indicators of the utterance” and which Jakobson subsequently called *shifters* (23). Crucial to our argument, a lengthy citation is necessary:

In an essay published a year after Benveniste’s study, Jakobson, taking up the French linguist’s definition in part, classified pronouns among the “shifters”: that is, among those special grammatical units that are contained in every *code* and that cannot be defined outside of a relation to the *message* . . . [H]e defines shifter as a special class of signs reuniting the two functions: the *symbol-indices* . . . As symbol-indices, they are capable of replenishing their significance in the code only through the deictic reference to a concrete instance of discourse . . . The proper meaning of pronouns—as shifters and *indicators of the utterance*—is inseparable from a reference to the instance of discourse. The articulation—the shifting—that they effect is not from the nonlinguistic (tangible indication) to the linguistic, but from *langue* to *parole*. . . . Pronouns and the other indicators of the utterance, before they designate real objects, indicate precisely that *language takes*
place. In this way, they permit the reference to the very event of language, the only context in which something can be signified. . . . metaphysics is that experience of language that, in every speech act, grasps the disclosure of that dimension, and in all speech, experiences above all the “marvel” that language exists. Only because language permits a reference to its own instance through shifters, something like being and the world are open to speculation. (Agamben, Language 24-26; emphasis in original)

Agamben asks what it means to indicate the instance of discourse? Modern linguistics leaves this question unanswered, or else implicitly resolves it, according to Agamben, in the metaphysical recuperation of immediacy—what Jakobson calls an “existential relation” between the shifter and the instance of discourse.: “He [Jakobson] writes, ‘I designates the person who utters I’” (31-32). Hence, an implicit distinction is to be made not only between the shifter and its usage, but also the designation and the person. Because this distinction bears an “existential” implication for Jakobson, we might as well conclude that he is in fact talking about nothing other than the “existential I.” In Agamben’s account, Jakobson’s understanding of the shifter finally boils down to intention—one of the classic presuppositions of philology. As Foucault shows in The Order of Things, the philological understanding of language shifts the emphasis from “memory that duplicates representation” to the “product of will and energy” (316). Not only the individual utterance, but individual languages each represent an intention to signify. It is impossible, however, to reconcile this notion of the “existential relation” based upon intention with Benveniste’s demonstration that time is merely an effect of discourse. The temporality of the I that engages an existential relation through language would therefore have to be thought in conjunction with the temporality of the “I of discourse” (35-37). Of course, the “existential I” should be the one that we can most readily point to without the aid of language. Hence, modern linguistics continues to rely upon an essential distinction between indication and signification that represents, in Agamben’s argument, a primary metaphysical decision. Agamben attempts to capture the stakes of this primary decision through the conceptual category of voice.

Since antiquity, voice came to be understood, Agamben argues after excavation, as “a pure intention to signify” (33). In modern linguistics, the voice, the “animal” voice that speaks without meaning anything, is presupposed by the shifters that indicate the instance of discourse (35). Yet it must be removed, says Agamben, in
order for meaningful discourse to occur. This removal or elision of that indicative moment without determinate meaning is what Agamben names Voice (with capitalized V). This is “the voice as a pure indication—within the structure of shifters—of the instance of discourse” (32; emphasis in original). Voice (with a capital V) is no longer voice and not yet meaning, and yet without it meaning and nonsense would be indistinguishable. You will see of course that Voice names the “event of language” with which we began our discussion. Agamben calls Voice the “supreme shifter” that marks the essential negativity that opens up the various foundational binary splits of metaphysics to which both philosophy and poetry—ostensibly opposing forms of expression—fall prey, albeit in conflicting ways.

This amounts to a strong presentation of the metaphysical presupposition, common to all the modern political philosophies of representation, of speaking subjects as the point of departure for social ontology—even in its deconstructive variation. A recent trend in European studies of migration and capitalist development demonstrating that the importance of “exit” or “exodus” often surpasses that of voice in the determination of the political suggests the renewed relevance of rethinking the privilege granted the latter categorization. Agamben attracts our attention precisely because he is one of the few contemporary philosophers overtly committed to the importance of rethinking the metaphysical basis for the determination of the human being exclusively as speaking subject.

Paradigm Shift

Between Agamben’s discovery of the “supreme shifter” and the historical narrative deployed to facilitate this discovery, an irreconcilable gap appears. The pragmatic function attributed to the proper noun the “West,” which enables all manner of diverse texts in different languages and different historical contexts to be assembled into a unitary frame of pronominal reference, is nowhere placed in proximity to the theoretical attempt to wrest originary difference from the
metaphysical oscillation introduced by the shifters. In the absence of any attempt to explain, question, or problematize the unity and/or construction of “the Western metaphysical tradition,” such pronominal references insert a form of distance that enables the deictic function: they point to what they refer to, as though the “West” were simply “there.” Lacking an explicit definition of the term, the reader would be very tempted to assume that the definition of the “West” is fundamentally spatial, and in that sense constitutes a form of tangible indication. Demonstrative pronouns like “there” perform this linguistic function. Words like West and East indicate directional sense on a spherical globe only in relation to other points of reference. Shanghai is east of Paris, but west of Tokyo. Directional sense guides movement, and cannot be ascribed to fixed positions. It indicates, in other words, a relation. The terms that constitute the relation have no essence. Just as what is today referred to as the “West” differs from that to which the term referred a century ago, similar variation and movement in the future is easily posited. Naoki Sakai’s conclusion, following a brilliant analysis of the “West” as an index of power relations in the global field of social relations opened up by colonialism, is persuasive: “The putative unity of the West is nothing but one result of this operation by which to generate an apparent taxonomic coherence where real coherence is impossible” (“The West” 183). Shifting in this case is thus an operation of taxonomic indexing that establishes the putative unity of tradition upon which geohistorical signification is constructed.

In the context of a discussion about Language and Death, the question to be posed is not whether there are archives of texts bearing within them all manner of material differences as well as a high-degree of intertextual referentiality organized around shared themes and conceptual concerns. The question is rather the relation between those archives and social formation. “Archives” here is a generic term that denotes not just the collection and compilation of textual remains, but the general fascination characteristic of the modern nation-state with appropriating representations of the past as a linear process of accumulation through the establishment of institutions, physical sites, and discursive fields. We have today a very good idea of the way in which the compilation of archives and their organization through national institutions based upon state-promoted standardized language, such as libraries, universities and media, as well as the creation/recognition of a national geography of monuments and historical sites, combined with the representational power of museums, etc., has played a key role in the creation of national aesthetic and epistemological forms. Yet as the volatile history of nation-states (their conflicts and the various resistance to them) shows, archival texts engage and sustain a multiplicity of readings—or mutual, heteronomous translations and temporalities—
open to interpellation by whatever social formation. When those readings are uniformly funneled into an adverb-turned-proper noun, as in the case of the “West,” the function of shifters becomes supremely evident. In the final analysis, the “West” in Agamben’s text performs an indexical function even as it creates its own signification. The metaphysical oscillation between indication and signification, time and space, initiated by the institutionalization of the “West” is, in other words, much like a demonstrative pronoun masquerading as a proper one.

In his discussions of the relation between translation and philosophy, Derrida shows how the oscillation between metaphysical oppositions is generally accomplished by the deployment of metaphor. Derrida radically proposes an understanding of metaphor as nothing other than the metaphor of translation: the inevitable gain and loss of meaning that occurs in every linguistic exchange, even those deemed to occur “within” the same language. Derrida’s explicit rejection of Roman Jakobson’s exclusion of certain forms of address from “translation proper” (Derrida, “Des Tours” 173) reveals an operation essential to the use of shifters. Apparently, the brilliance of Jakobson’s discovery of the shifter blinded him to its relation to translation. Yet once we abandon his categorization of translational practice as secondary and derivative, it becomes impossible to deny that when I say “here” and you say “there,” the shifter operates in the mode of translation within the “same” language. Yet it would be erroneous to conclude that translation is thus an operation that enables transfer between commensurable positions. After all, what the notion of the “shifter” introduces is that words like “here” and “there” are never simply spatial, but also relational and temporal. Although both words refer to an identity, the difference that they introduce cannot be reduced to respective orientations plotted in advance of the linguistic exchange. The shifters instantiate relationships, not identities. Their use suggests that the gain and loss of meaning commonly associated with translational exchange applies to linguistic usage as a whole.

Hence, it is no surprise to find that translation plays a crucial, yet wholly unthematized, role in Language and Death. As we have seen, the salient attribute of the “West” in that text is defined by a series of citations assembled from a very diverse range of texts that form a chronology of questions about grammar and metaphysics. Most, if not all, of these texts would remain unreadable both for contemporary non-specialist readers working without the aid of translation and for contemporaries of the various times and places in which they composed. Indeed, in numerous passages from Greek, Latin and Provençal texts among others, Agamben displays considerable interest in etymology and a talent for translation. Is it thus a coincidence that
Agamben’s illustration of the discovery of the Voice following Aristotle occurs in the translational situation, when Augustine “presents, perhaps for the first time in Western culture, the now-familiar idea of a ‘dead language’” (Agamben, Language 33)? This is a theatrical moment that hides a less dramatic but infinitely more compelling tautology. The scene of “Western culture” actively staged by the text, which enables the apprehension of first-time events, cannot be comprehended without deploying the apparatus of translation as a representational practice of homolingual address (Sakai, Translation 2). This modern understanding of translation, critiqued by Sakai (who shares Derrida’s critique of Jakobson), superimposes over the actual practice of translation—which is essentially hybrid, open, and indeterminate—a representation of an encounter between putatively closed cultural objects. The image of language created through this mechanism superimposes an inert spatial totality (the “West”) over a dynamic hybridity based on indeterminate or problematic individuation. What is really “dead” in this scenario are not those languages that can only be written, but rather those languages that are supposed to correspond to the spatialized representation of subjective interiority. With that retrospective superimposition in hand, it becomes possible to introduce into linguistic usage phonocentric distinctions such as the difference between the “living” and the “dead”5 that support the essential philological assumption that language represents collective volition. The epistemological representation of translation (which ignores its practical side) becomes, in other words, an essential precondition to the phonocentric, philological concept of language—Agamben’s “Romantic Ideology”—in which modern nationalism, and now civilizationism, is rooted.

We can now summarize a couple of preliminary conclusions: 1) the paradigm of the “West” deployed by Language and Death is nothing other than that of the shifter in its metaphysical aspect; and 2) the representation of translation as a form of homolingual address is the operation that enables this shift. Situated precisely at the point of indecision between indication and signification, the “West” functions in Language and Death in the manner of a supreme shifter, enabling the historical narrative to spawn a virtual subject that serves as the agent and source of the work’s metaphysical discoveries.

5 Sakai subverts the opposition between “dead” and “living” languages, and the national/civilizational history built upon that opposition, through the use of the category “still-born,” which is how he describes the formation of modern Japanese language and culture. Cf. Naoki Sakai, Shisan sareru Nihongo/Nihonjin 死産される日本語・日本人 (The Stillborn Japanese Language and People), (Tokyo: Shin-yo-sha, 1996).
Agamben’s Apparatus

Having thus established the moment when the “Romantic Ideology” criticized by Agamben reappears in a *civilizational* form, we would like to proceed by way of asking, once again both with and against Agamben, if the “West” might not be seen as a form of “apparatus” such as the concept is critically taken up in the philosopher’s 2006 essay, “What Is an Apparatus?”

Agamben begins his essay with a brief summary of the definition of apparatus. The core points are: 1) it is composed of heterogeneous elements that include the linguistic and non-linguistic; 2) it has a concrete function that responds to a certain urgency in social relations; 3) it lies at the nexus between knowledge and power. Having established this basic definition, Agamben traces a genealogy of the concept through an historical itinerary.

Skipping over the Hegelian part of this itinerary, I will move quickly to what Agamben chooses to call a “theological genealogy of economy” (“Apparatus” 8) This covers an historical period of roughly five centuries from the 2nd to the 6th century C.E. during which time the Greek word *oikonomia* takes on a “decisive theological function,” known in theology as “divine economy,” that is crucial to understand, Agamben argues, the peculiar philosophical position of the apparatus in modern societies. Early Church fathers resorted to the term in order to quell the potential for polytheism, still an urgent problem in the societies of that age, to infiltrate its way back into the Church through the dogma of the Trinity. The philosophical implications of this expedient move are profound. Being, or essence, is torn away from praxis, or historical action. This leads to “nothing less than a general and massive partitioning of beings into two large groups or classes: on the one hand, living beings (or substances), and on the other, apparatuses in which living beings are incessantly captured” (“Apparatus” 13). On account of the fact of this division, apparatuses must produce a subject, who will fill the void left by the absence of being. Subjects are, insists Agamben, the third “class” that mediates the “relentless fight” (“Apparatus” 14) between the other two.

The equivalence between living beings and substance is a classical one, yet Agamben is hardly constrained to use it. I suspect that the reason Agamben adopts this approach is the expression not of a philosophical choice but of an historical decision. In historical terms, the Trinitarian dogma is nothing more than the injunction, upheld by sovereign fiat, to abide by the template of hylomorphism. The Church fathers could have simply avoided the problem of polytheism by removing the dogma altogether (as was the case in Islam), but this would have denied
Christianity the singularly appropriative force that resides in the assignation of numerical unity, “three persons, one being.” This gesture, a paradigmatic form of speculative superimposition, lays the ground for an expansionary—dare we say colonizing—universalism.

Yet what does it mean to say that philosophical thought “lays the ground”? Undoubtedly, it makes for dramatic reading to follow the path whereby the “theological genealogy of economy” (“Apparatus” 8) ends up tracing the “legacy,” as Agamben calls it, this template has left to “Western culture” (“Apparatus” 10). The sense of narrative drama is derived, of course, not from the particularity of the “West,” but its supposed universalism, evident in the remainder of Agamben’s historical narrative, which surreptitiously substitutes “capitalism” and “modernity” for a term, the “West,” that harbors too much residual particularity. Evidently, it would not resolve the problem of universalism either to simply revise the narrative along the lines of the “alternative modernities” school, so that terms such as “modernity” and “capitalism,” cited above, would be always modified by geocultural shifters such as “Western” or “Eastern.” In that very precise sense, the “theological genealogy of economy” is another apparatus, inasmuch as it is, again in Agamben’s words, a “body of knowledge” that “orient[s]—in a way that purports to be useful—the behaviors, gestures, and thoughts of human beings” (“Apparatus” 12; emphasis added).

At issue here is not a critique of crude philosophical occidentalism. It is rather a case of “praxis and being,” to stay within the classical terms used by Agamben, “conceived and lived as inseparable” (Zartaloudis 133). The proposition of “inseparability” is hardly as simple as it may sound, yet it may serve temporarily as a clue, or as a place-holder waiting for a more appropriate concept. In Agamben’s apparatus essay, this inseparability runs astray exactly around the point of linguistic communicability.

So what is the role of language in this essay about the apparatus? Among the three roles that I discern in the essay, I would like, predictably, to draw attention to translation. The role played by translation in the construction of the “theological genealogy of economy” is predominantly etymological and articulatory. The Greek term oikonomia is mapped onto the Latin word Dispositio, enabling the latter to “take on the complex semantic sphere” of the former (“Apparatus” 11). Translation in the guise of etymology is an operation that enables a spatialized representation of cultural

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6 The philosophical decision to reject hylomorphism and to distinguish the Singular/Common from the Individual/Universal (cf. Virno) lies behind the arguments in this paper yet could not be included for considerations of space. Ultimately, our understanding of translation is as ontological as it is political (and ontology is political). As Ray Brassier comments, “what the indeterminacy of translation really boils down to is an indeterminacy of individuation” (65).
spheres and a process of transfer between the two. Agamben’s narrative thus constitutes an example of the classic modern representation of translation as a form of translatio (transfer) between discrete linguistico-cultural spheres. That which I would dispute is not the etymological filiation brilliantly traced by Agamben per se, but rather the way in which it is mapped onto a representational image of cultural continuity. Michael Herzfeld, an anthropologist of Greece and Thailand, summarizes: “Etymology not only legitimizes a connection that does not necessarily subsist, but also deflects attention away from the ephemerality of that connection—indeed, materializes it—by the device of proclaiming the cognate signifiers as though they were a single signified, collapsing all temporal shifts in meaning into a single, indivisible, timeless truth” (910). The collapse of temporality of which Herzfeld speaks, inevitably a reduction to spatiality, is also an assimilation of indication to signification. According to Leibniz’s famous ontological claim according to which, “That which is not one being is not a being” (cited in Badiou 40, emphasis in original), to “proclaim” something as a single thing is tantamount to indicating its existence.

In a postcolonial context, the significance of cultural translation via etymology could not be more pronounced. Historical contact among populations prior to colonial encounter is invariably encoded in etymology, forming a memory of prior historical contact often associated with conquest and territorial annexation. The specificity of the colonial encounter, however, lies precisely in the fact that populations without the sort of historical memory encoded in etymology come into mutual contact. Hence, to rely on etymology to explain the historicity of modern philosophemes is to exclude from view colonialism as a form of both cause and effect for those very same philosophemes. This is precisely what happens in Agamben’s concept of sovereignty, where the “logic of exception” both contains and effaces the colonial encounter through which modern sovereignty historically developed.

At the end of his essay on apparatuses, Agamben returns to “profanation,” one of the recurring themes in his work, proposing it as a template for liberation from them. His argument is based on the juridico-religious status the term enjoyed in ancient Rome. Whereas the sacred takes things out of the common world shared by all, instituting a form of separation that is at the heart of all relations of power, profanation restores things to common usage. Profanation is not the destruction or elimination of apparatuses, but rather a practice of “restoring” or “restituting” them to “common usage” (“Apparatus” 18). The difference between the sacred and the profane thus becomes a question of what Agamben calls two different “spheres” (sacred and profane) and the “removal” of things between them, from one to the other.

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7 For a discussion of this theme in Agamben’s work, see La Durantaye.
I would like to seize on the significance of this spatialized imagery to suggest that what we have here is, once again, an operation of *translatio* (transfer). But let us first begin with a practical observation. In the current global context, characterized by the lingering-on of the indexical function of the “West” inherited from the colonial/imperial modernity, nobody speaking from a postimperial context is going to get very far in the postcolonial world by advancing a project of *global* liberation articulated through concepts associated, rightly or wrongly, with a specific civilizational tradition. If “an absolutely profane life” is, as Agamben writes, one “that has attained the perfection of its own potential and its own communicability” (*Means* 114-15), it is impossible to see how the term *profanation* could possibly serve today as a vehicle for that communicability in the face of appropriation by the “clash of civilizations” discourse. Agamben might have chosen to explain this term through a consideration of the problem of affect in its relation to “objective power relations,” but this choice would have required an adjustment in the list of qualifications attributed to the “West” that we briefly detailed in the previous section, “Invoking the ‘West’.” In dispute would be, to begin with, the qualification of the modern state as “Western” (Agamben, *Homo* 11). Much like the non-“West” that appears only twice in the text, the “Western state” is used only once, attributed to Michel Foucault, while the “modern state” or simply “the state” appears in Agamben’s own voice with innumerable frequency. The assimilation of “Western” to “modern,” or simply to nominal unification under the guise of the definite article (which contains a kernel of indication), is a problem that calls for investigation. Needless to say, an investigation of this sort would extend to the commodity and capital, because, as Mezzadra points out, “the movement of subsumption of heterogeneous temporalities and living experiences under a homogeneous and linear code nicely captures essential features of both concepts and structures [the state and capital]” (“How Many”). What is at stake here is an account of the multiplicity of labor power (“life in its potential shape” *ibid.*) that is different from the plurality of capital’s modes of subsumption (or, the “translation” of use value into exchange value). This is what is missing in Agamben’s otherwise powerful attempt to wrest us out of the archaeological presupposition of the human being as the animal that is a speaking subject which is given new force by the laws of the “Romantic ideology.”

It is obviously not a question of nominalism. Even with a “relevant translation” to replace “profanation”—were such a series to exist—we would still be faced with the problems presented by the assumption of geocultural areas and the supposition of transfer (origin, travel, influence) as the primary model of communication. As Sakai has shown, the representation of translational practice as a form of “transfer” is
Area as a Paradigmatic Site of Rational Accumulation

To make things easier, we should just say: the “West” is the subjective effect of a regime of translation. What is particularly “successful,” with regard to subjectivity, about the “West,” i.e., what enables the constitution of the “West” as a subject, is its ability to capitalize upon translation. This is not simply a “textual” operation, unless one includes the “text” of political economy. While Mezzadra (“Living”) has already alerted us to the way in which the modern understanding of translational practice parallels the logic of exchange, Derrida (Eyes) has shown us that the modern regime of translation is intimately connected to the creation of minority and majority peoples amidst universal humanity—a hylomorphism of individual, genus, and species—through the territorial expropriation of the modern state. It is no surprise thus to find that translational representation has functioned as a technology for localizing the site of accumulation. As a quintessentially modern form of area, the “West” serves as the “location” in which the accumulation of value posited by the logic of equivalence, and legitimized in translation, is identified. Once the effects of such translation are projected onto the image of a direction, the shift that occurs in moving from the “West” as an index of geographical orientation to the identity of a proper noun and a subject of history is engaged.

The task before us is to think the geolocalization of translational accumulation in tandem with other forms of accumulation, notably in terms of the way in which capital produces an abstract separation of mental and physical capacities from their supposed bearer or container (Mezzadra, “How Many”). This abstraction is not only at the heart of the capitalist accumulation produced by the laboring body, but also at the heart of the erudite accumulation produced by the intellect (seen in normalized bodies of disciplinary knowledge). Translation once again provides a key point of intervention. If translation is fundamentally understood as an operation that reveals the indeterminacy of the relation between signification and indication, then the appropriation of translation into a regime of equivalence, can be described as a technology for instituting and managing the ratio between socially-shared meaning.
and the world. This valence or ratio is at the heart of what is commonly referred to as rationality. The capitalization of translation through which the “West” offers itself as the paradigm of area in the modern world is not simply due to the condensatory nominalization, “in clichéd and shorthand forms” (Chakrabarty 4), that articulatory equivalence allows, but is also because of an epistemological apparatus essential to the modern regime of translation that pursues the ideal of fixing with utmost precision the ratio between word and object (one thinks of Carl Linnaeus’s Systema Naturae which inaugurated natural science through rational taxonomy). Clearly, this understanding of the “West” constitutes a radical departure from the culturalist notion of a civilization composed of various common traits such as religion, language, customs and so forth. Instead, what we have is a template for area in general as the means of articulation. The “universality” of the “West” therefore lies not in culture, nor even in the cultural practices that supposedly promoted “science,” “technology,” and “reason,” but in the means of articulating the regime of accumulation to species difference.

In order better to understand this articulatory practice, it would be helpful to reflect on the contrast that we have been drawing, explicitly and implicitly, throughout this essay between Agamben and Sakai. A comparison of the two thinkers is clearly warranted. The metaphysical phenomenon described by Agamben under the rubric of “Voice” is seen in the practice of translation analyzed by Sakai. Here, the position of the translator, a subject who speaks but does not mean, is analyzed to reveal a difference between “communication” (the exchange of meaning) and “address” (the transductive instantiation of relationship through language). Address, in Sakai’s lexicon, is precisely the “event of language” discussed by Agamben which opens up the metaphysical distinction between signification and indication. At this point, the philosophical analysis of Voice and that of translation converge. A parting of the ways occurs, however, when each form of analysis is seen as a point of entry into the field of social relations. The difference between a linguistic genealogy of ontological origins (the “history” of Voice) and a linguistic genealogy of the essential hybridity of the translator (the “history” of translation) could not be greater with regard to the inscription of species difference. And the inscription of species difference, as we shall discuss in a moment, has extremely important subjective and affective effects.

In a fine analysis of Sakai, Tobias Warner writes: “only in translating can one

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actually claim to deal with two distinct languages. What we commonly conceive of as ‘translation,’ then, is a strategy for defining and managing the difference between languages” (295). Translation is thus a privileged site in the composition of the social for observing an ontological process of individuation situated in specific historical contexts whose limits are indeterminate. This idea of translation recalls the Simondonian idea of transduction mobilized by Muriel Combes and Bernard Aspe in their sympathetic critique of the first volume of Agamben’s Homo Sacer series: “[By the term transduction,] Simondon understands a relational operation in which the terms do not preexist its undertaking, but emerge through the very process itself” (Aspe and Combes). Connection (rapport) names, according to Combes and Aspe’s reading of Simondon, an encounter between two terms that pre-exist their encounter; relation (relation) refers to the process that brings forth two terms. Here we have a conceptual tool for thinking about culture in the wake of colonial encounter.

By following this distinction between relation and connection, Combes and Aspe hone in on a crucial point in Homo Sacer at which a misleading equivalence is established between the two: “attempting to think the ontological difference no longer as a relation, and Being and being beyond every form of a connection” (Agamben, Homo 39). Although Combes, who previously published a monograph on the philosophy of transindividuality in Simondon (Simondon), and Aspe obviously are not satisfied with the synonymous equivalence implied by Agamben, it would not do justice to their reading of Agamben to leave unmentioned the rigorous defense they mount of the principal innovations in Homo Sacer against criticisms from various perspectives of materialist history, contemporary philosophy and Foucaultian readings of biopolitics. Of particular concern to them is Agamben’s elucidation of the point at which subjectivity is articulated to objective power relations. This, they stress, is the place where “technologies of the self” meet “governmental technologies” in an encounter whose significance, they agree with Agamben, escaped Foucault. The critique of biopolitical capitalism that motivates their reply to Homo Sacer signals a fundamental threshold for further discussion that could be vastly expanded to map the histories of the encounter between life (living labor in the first instance, but also animal life, too) and the capital-state, which uses an abstract measure of equivalence to translate everything into the language of value. With that encounter in mind, the exchangeability between “relation” and “connection” in Homo Sacer is truly surprising, and carries with it the significance of a philosophical decision—something that cannot be judged by truth criteria, but understood only on the basis of the effects that it produces. In Agamben’s case, the philosophical decision amounts to what Combes and Aspe call, “the method of going back to the originary” (Aspe
and Combes). This “method,” undoubtedly archealogical and which they defend as a legitimate philosophical operation, nevertheless leads, they claim, directly to Agamben’s admittedly avowed Messianism. Rather than judging these claims on their own merit (a project for which we do not have the time here as we approach a conclusion), let us consider the alternative philosophical decision—“the road not taken [by Agamben],” proposed by Combes and Aspe. “This road begins with a ‘primary indistinction,’ from which the authors conclude that, “it is thus not necessary to take as the basis of political thought the pair zoé/bios, but rather to understand on what basis a collective subjectivation is constructed” (Aspe and Combes). In the Simondonian conceptual vocabulary utilized by Combes and Aspe, collective subjectivation refers to a “transindividual” relation—the process by which the terms of a dyadic social relation, such as that between individual and society, humans and animals, zoé and bios, are brought forth. What Combes and Aspe are pointing to with the idea of charting out the encounter between subjective formation and objective power is a way to gain an understanding of how capitalism promotes—dare we say breeds—species difference at the same time that it attempts to capture all difference and translate it into exchange value.

Returning to Language and Death, we indeed find that a speciesist form of social relation lies at the heart of the distinction, fundamental to the work’s argument, between an “animal voice,” said to be a “mere sound” (35), “empty” (44) and devoid of meaning, and an implicitly human one. This is the same speciesist assumption that returns in Agamben’s ontological genealogy of biopolitics excavated through the zoé/bios pair—exactly that which leads Nicole Shukin, in a work devoted to charting out the relation between capitalism and the technologies of speciation, to conclude: “In Agamben’s influential theorization of ‘bare life,’ for instance, animals’ relation to capitalist biopower is occluded by species-specific conflation of zoé with a socially-stripped-down figure of Homo sacer that he traces back to antiquity” (Shukin 10).

The difference between Sakai and Agamben amounts to a philosophical decision that occurs in the field of speciation. If the key to opening up the transindividual relation beyond and before the rigid distribution of social relations into binary pairs such as the “West” and the non-“West” lies, as Combes and Aspe assert, in the category of affect, we can now better appreciate the difference between the genealogy of “Voice” and the genealogy of translation. Ultimately, the difference is affective. Precisely because of the historical event that created national languages through a technology of translation, thereby instituting the separation that “translation” is supposed to “bridge” (but which it actually creates in its reductive, representational
form), it is impossible today to talk of species difference without implicitly referencing anthropological difference in general. In the wake of the capital-state’s appropriation of language, the “grid” of species difference imposes itself on linguistic expression as such. This is exactly the point about which Agamben first alerted us in his analysis of the “Romantic ideology.” Under the influence of this ideology, to speak is always already a form of national aesthetics.

Agamben’s refusal of this aesthetics could not be clearer when he pronounces at the end of *Language and Death*: “As you now speak, that is ethics” (108). Yet in view of the discussion above, this fundamental insight requires modification: as you now translate/transduce/transform, that is ethics. The ethics at stake might be equally vexing to savants as it is to translators. Just as translators are often compelled by the markets in which they work to efface indeterminacy and fix meaning through rational equivalence, savants are continually pressed to invest in the affective forms of area that make every utterance into a performative gesture of zoo-anthropological indexing destined to promote the ideological history of accumulation. Against these compulsions, the ethics of translation-as-transduction has an unmistakable air of superficial heresy—superficial precisely in the sense that it constitutes a refusal of the deeply interiorized, hylomorphic “body” of accumulation (capitalist, translational and erudite) promoted by the apparatus of area.

To my mind, the question of a truly non-Western application and critique of Agamben’s work invites us first to make a decision about what “non-Western” means. The answer to this question can only be arrived at through a militant adherence to translation as a form of transduction. While many parts of Agamben’s oeuvre under consideration in this essay provide useful, sometimes even irreplaceable, tools and points for reflection, it is easy now to see how the ontological genealogy of language all-too-often effaces transduction by turning translation into a moment of what Sakai calls “homolinguual address” (which relies, as Sakai is quick to point out, on a plurality of languages). The imperial-colonial modernity through which distinctions between the “West” and its others became intelligible only envisaged, even in its most avant-garde radical formulations, decoding the cipher of translation. Inherited from the imperial-colonial modernity and now fully mobilized by postfordist immaterial production, today’s regime of translation has been extended from its previous historical form of anthropological colonialism to a more radical contemporary form of biospheric colonialism. With the convergence between information technology and biotechnology, the translation of “life” into code is well-established, and code is the bearer of exchange value. In the face of this unprecedented form of biospheric colonization, we need now to ask if the translation-function could not in fact be re-
programmed rather than deciphered—to see if translation, that is, could be viewed not as an objective terrain but as an immanent technology of zoo-bio-political transformation?

Works Cited


About the Author

Born in the United States and trained at Cornell University, Jon Solomon has lived in East Asia for 25 years and is competent in Chinese, Japanese, French and English. His current project is to develop a discussion of “area” as an essential operation for the governing capacity of the state in parallel to the question of “population,” a form of the investment of state power within life, what can be called, after Foucault, “biopower.” These parallel operations of articulation called “area” and “population” are required by the state in order to give to itself an image of community called “nation,” an image that folds back into itself in order to naturalize the modern form of belonging to the nation-state (which is essentially a form of racism), and to create heuristic measuring devices for “normal” and “exceptional” positionalities within it. Within this project, an examination of the biopolitics of translation occupies a privileged place for understanding the relations among anthropological difference, geocultural area, and primitive accumulation.

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