Form-of-Life between the Messianic As Not and the Hypothetical As If*

Chien-heng Wu
English Department
National Kaohsiung Normal University, Taiwan

Abstract
This paper takes Agamben’s conceptualization of form-of-life as its point of departure and situates this idea within the larger context of Agamben’s philosophy. Agamben diagnoses our contemporary political crisis and searches for a mode of existence where life would remain inseparable from its form: in this way he offers both a compelling analysis of sovereign power and a redemptive hope. However, it is not clear to what extent his notion of messianic redemption corresponds to that of political emancipation, for the register of change in Agamben’s political philosophy is framed exclusively in ontological terms, leaving the coming politics in a suspended sphere of pure mediality which subordinates questions concerning political contestation and material transformation. My contention is that an ontological politics modeled on potentiality proves a necessary yet insufficient ground for thinking political emancipation. It therefore behooves us to explore ways in which we can build on Agamben’s insight, but take it in a different direction and place it on a different level of analysis. The argument of this paper is that, rather than seeing the condition of possibility of change as being equivalent to change itself, we need to think the ethical exigency (in the form of the messianic as not) and the political dissensus (in the form of the hypothetical as if) together as forming a dialectic—such that ethics and politics are made in service of each other, not in place of each other.

Keywords
Agamben, Rancière, form-of-life, messianism, emancipation, slavery

* I want to thank two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments. I am also grateful to the organizing committee and all the participants of the “Form-of-Life” conference, particularly Chun-yen Chen and Han-yu Huang.
Introduction

At the “Form-of-Life” Conference organized by National Taiwan Normal University in June 2014 in Taipei, paper presenters who explored the conjunction between form and life from non-Agambenian perspectives inexplicably felt a compulsion to apologize for their lack of critical engagement with Agamben’s philosophy. This was a rather curious phenomenon because the conference agenda clearly indicated that this was not a conference dedicated to the work of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, and that different theoretical approaches to the relation between form and life were indeed welcomed. Then why this compulsion to apologize? The fact that Agamben remains a powerful presence, even in his absence, is at once an acknowledgement of the enormous contribution he has made to the idea of form-of-life in its contemporary theoretical articulation and also a sign of warning that too quick an association of Agamben with this idea might give rise to an unintended conceptual monopoly, subordinating other possible avenues of investigation while elevating Agamben into a figure not unlike the primal father in the Freudian myth—more powerful absent than present.

This paper does not attempt to advance a non-Agambenian theoretical framework; rather it takes note of the radical promise inherent in Agamben’s theorization of form-of-life without losing sight of the difficulties this theorization entails, particularly those concerning resistance and praxis that belong to the realm of the actual. These difficulties seem at first glance irresolvable. An organized political resistance appears to be resolutely at odds with Agamben’s coming politics: it seems that once potentiality becomes actualized and loses its generic quality, we are bound to witness a return of being-as-such to particular beings, of singularity to fixed identities, of the messianic form-of-life to a bare life now abandoned to the biopolitical machine.

Agamben’s reluctance to engage with the actual has invited two kinds of critical responses to the question as to whether his conceptualization of a new politics as well as a new form-of-life is adequate to the task it has set itself, the task of redemption. On the one hand, Agamben’s emphasis on potentiality and inoperativity has incurred criticism for being nihilistic and pessimistic. Paolo Virno, for example, recognizes the importance of Agamben’s work yet still dismisses it for its lack of any political vocation.¹ Ernesto Laclau, another prominent political

¹ See Virno, “General Intellect, Exodus, Multitude.”
theorist, echoes this view, arguing that Agamben’s theorization leaves no room for
developing a theory of resistance, and without a space for resistance there is no
possibility of having a politics. “Political nihilism is his ultimate message,” Laclau
concludes (22). Although not as disparaging as Laclau’s assessment, Ewa
Plonowska Ziarek’s analysis of the biopolitical racial and gender configurations
also calls into question the transformative power of Agamben’s critique of
sovereignty, especially the extent to which his ontological critique can transform
bare life into a site of contestation and bring forth new political possibilities (98).
On the other hand, Agamben’s tendency to model politics on a number of
“minimal” figures has led Diane Enns to charge him with romanticizing those
victims whose resistance is “poignant in theory, but utterly useless historically,”
while Nina Power sees in these minimal individuals a turning away from the
collective, and hears in Herman Melville’s “Ah Bartleby! Ah Humanity!” “a sign of
despair rather than radical loss presaging redemption.”

Thus we have the perception that in the absence of a positive account of
resistance, Agamben’s theorization of a new politics as well as a new mode of
living is devoid of the possibility of redemption. More precisely, the question is
whether or not a politics of emancipation that hopes to bring about a redeemed
humanity can be thought entirely in ontological terms—i.e., in the space of an
aporia or in the interval between identity and non-identity opened up by the
negative—without a corresponding theory of praxis carried out by militant subjects,
mobilized at a collective level, and mediated by determinate categories or terms
(e.g., class, gender, race, nation, culture, etc.) in the struggle for freedom.

This is not to say that Agamben’s theory absolutely forecloses the space of
political resistance. After all, potentiality is understood by Agamben as the capacity
both to-do and to-not-do, and this negative is construed in a highly qualified sense,
not as a concept of privation nor a negating force as configured in the conventional
triadic movement of the dialectic, but as a term subtracting itself from existing
relations and affirming itself not in the lack of being but in the being of lack.
Similar paradoxical formulations run through Agamben’s works, from potentiality-
qua-impotentiality to inoperativity, messianic klēsis, and darkness visible; all of
these are either couched in a logic of neither/nor that enables a free use of worldly
situations without falling in line with any one category, or point to some kind of
unassimilable remainder that is part of the system but not entirely so. Herein lies the
aporia: the negative is presented as both the stumbling block and the enabling
condition, an excess that cannot be fully incorporated but also one upon which the
whole system depends. Thus the negative cannot be reduced to a mere force of negation because there is also something affirmative in Agamben’s conception of the negative.

As Eleanor Kaufman puts it, “this insistence on the positive force of the inoperative is central to Agamben’s whole oeuvre, for the inoperative is not simply death but a force of suspension of life that might be said to enhance life by the very proximity it opens to the space of the negative” (44). And yet because Agamben does not encourage us to think beyond the aporia of the negative but rather urges an ethic of letting-go through the exposure of the self to the experience of the negative, we are sometimes given the impression of too rigid a distinction between the potential and the actual, between the negative and the affirmative, as if the latter necessarily tampers with the former.

Some have come to Agamben’s defense, arguing that we should stop applying to him the criteria of the existing political theory because he is attempting a redefinition of politics, and thus is no longer using the traditional framework within which we conceive of politics (Lechte and Newman 115). Be that as it may, the essential question remains unanswered: how is the relationship between the ontological and the phenomenological, between being and existence, to be conceived in order for Agamben’s weak messianism to be adequate to its transformative vocation in the world of appearance? The above criticisms are relevant not necessarily because we need categories such as hegemony (Laclau) or labor (Virno) for a theory of resistance, but because these criticisms prompt us to investigate the nature of resistance and the location of its site in Agamben; they prompt us to look into the relation between the ontological realm of becoming and the phenomenological realm of change, and into such questions as the following: can a statement about being be translated directly into a meta-ontological thesis about appearing? Is our “thinking” of ontology already a “doing” of politics, or does it require something else for these two different domains to bear on one another?

This paper aims to explore the questions and difficulties listed above. My approach will be to follow the path blazed by Agamben and sometimes steer off its course. That is to say, I hope to think with Agamben and also beyond Agamben. I

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2 Insofar as Agamben’s politics relies on the Jewish messianic tradition, this question becomes of great pertinence. As Tom Frost points out, “Judaism views messianism as a concept of redemption which takes place publicly, ‘on the stage of history and within the community.’ Messianism occurs in the world and cannot be thought apart from its visible appearance” (58).
want to add to his ontological formulation of messianism an emphasis on politics’ necessary involvement with the juridico-political spheres, and to prescribe a “new possible” on the basis of a hypothetical as if, thus taking a step beyond the messianic as not that defines the space of Agamben’s coming politics. The question of why we need to take this additional step will be the main thread of my inquiry, whose significance I hope to progressively unpack in this paper.

The paper takes Agamben’s conceptualization of a form-of-life as its point of departure and situates this idea within the larger context of his philosophy. I will argue that although Agamben has devoted only scant attention to the elaboration of this idea prior to the publication of The Highest Poverty, the contours of a life released from the prison of biopolitical control, and in this sense redeemed, can already be sketched through an analysis of related ideas. That is, while Agamben’s conceptualization of form-of-life may seem to be under-theorized, we can say that this idea already features quite prominently in his oeuvre, if only thinly veiled in other guises.

This paper further argues that Agamben’s diagnosis of the contemporary political crisis, and his search for a mode of existence where life would remain inseparable from its form, offer a compelling analysis of sovereign power and also a redemptive hope, thus making possible what Walter Benjamin calls “a real state of exception” (“History” 392) to counteract the normalized state of exception that sustains itself through an inclusive exclusion of bare life. However, the extent to which messianic redemption corresponds to political emancipation is called into doubt insofar as the register of change in Agamben’s political philosophy is framed predominantly in ontological terms, leaving the coming politics in a suspended sphere of pure mediality—where questions concerning political contestation and material transformation are so subordinated that this sphere renders itself susceptible to charges of pessimism and quietism. My contention then is that an

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3 The translation in the cited source is “the real state of emergency,” but I change emergency to exception to comply with the standard translation of the term in Agamben’s works.

4 Another concern, though not directed specifically at Agamben, has been raised in regard to a possible complicity between capital’s dissolution of social bond and the unbinding power of the common (or the generic) in the ontological politics. As Bruno Bosteels observes: “if it is indeed capitalism itself that reveals all presence to be a mere semblance covering over random multiplicity, then this also means that the categories of a postfoundational ontology not only are not necessarily leftist, they also might turn out to be little more than descriptive, if not complicitous with, the status quo (244).
ontological politics modeled on potentiality is a necessary yet insufficient ground for thinking political emancipation. It therefore behooves us to explore ways through which we can build on Agamben’s insight but take it in a different direction in order to release politics from its ontological moorings that see the condition of possibility for change as equivalent to change itself.

**Agamben, Form-of-Life, and the Power of Thought**

Politics is that which corresponds to the essential inoperability of humankind.

—Giorgio Agamben

*Means without End: Notes on Politics*

In *What Is Called Thinking?*, Martin Heidegger makes the following assertion: “Every thinker thinks one only thought. . . . The limitlessness of the Same is the sharpest limit set to thinking” (50). Whether Heidegger’s claim can be taken as a universal statement is open to discussion, but it seems to me that Agamben’s philosophy serves as a fine example and validates Heidegger’s claim.

Agamben deals with a variety of issues and puts forth a number of key concepts. Underlying his treatment of these concepts we can somehow detect various points of intersection, and even perhaps a sphere of permeability that allows these conceptual categories to mutually inform each other. That is to say, the way these concepts are deployed demonstrates a remarkable consistency in Agamben’s thinking.

Aside from a chapter in *Means without End*, Agamben’s treatment of form-of-life is sporadic at best. And yet references to this idea are embedded in specific theoretical contexts, from which readers can infer what Agamben means by form-of-life—if not the idea in itself, at least a demarcation of this idea in relation to other concepts.

The same can be said of his discussion of the Franciscan form-of-life, especially the Franciscan theorists’ attempts to justify the idea of poor use in juridical terms. Agamben concludes that their endeavor inevitably fails because it remains within the bounds of the law; and not even the radicalism of the claim “the right to have no rights” suffices to suspend poor use from the juridical sphere of
This, however, does not prevent the Franciscan way of life from exemplifying a form-of-life; it only suggests that the attempted juridical justification fails to do justice to what is truly at stake here. In Agamben’s view, the true meaning of Franciscanism is not to be sought at the doctrinal, theological, or juridical level but at the level of living:

[W]hat was in question in the movements was not the *rule*, but the *life*, not the ability to profess this or that article of faith, but the ability to live in a certain way, to practice joyfully and openly a certain form of life. . . . what remained unthought was precisely the originary aspiration that had led the movements to reclaim a *life* and not a *rule*, a *forma vitae* and not a more or less coherent system of ideas and doctrines. (*Poverty* 93; emphasis in original)

The failure of the Franciscan theoreticians to conceive a form of life outside of the law can be salvaged with a reference to the Pauline notion of free use. Agamben writes:

What is lacking in the Franciscan literature is a definition of use in itself and not only in opposition to law. The preoccupation which constructing a justification of use in juridical terms prevented them from collecting the hints of a theory of use present in the Pauline letters . . . in which using the world as not using it or not abusing it . . . defined the Christian’s form of life. (*Poverty* 139)

From this we can infer that the condition of possibility of a form-of-life is already implied in the notion of free use elaborated in Paul’s letters.

The main feature of form-of-life is depicted as follows: “It is not a matter so much of applying a form (or norm) to life, but of *living* according to that form, that is of a life that, in its sequence, makes itself that very form, coincides with it” (99; emphasis in original). In other words, a hyphenated form-of-life differs from non-

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5 The limit of resorting to juridical discourse is twofold: “On the one hand, [Franciscan theoretists] use [law’s] conceptuality and never call into question its validity or foundations, while on the other, they think they can secure with juridical arguments the possibility, through abdicating the law, of pursuing an existence outside the law” (Agamben, *Poverty* 137-38).
hyphenated forms of life in that the former implies living a life where living as such becomes a form, whereas the latter has forms imposed (or stripped off, as in the case of homo sacer) from without.

This elementary definition is in fact already anticipated in many of Agamben’s earlier writings. For instance, the poor use is also linked to the common use or the profane, and the order of the profane is “erected on the idea of happiness” (Means 114), the attainment of which fulfills the common that conjoins life and its form.

All these attempts to theorize a notion of use point to a theory of praxis that will preserve the common and in the very same gesture combat the sovereign division. Thus, the most essential question for Agamben in his thinking of form-of-life is “[h]ow does one use a common?” (Means 117; emphasis in original) and this question bifurcates in two directions: (1) what is the most common to human existence? and (2) the question of use.

In Agamben’s view, the common does not refer to some positive properties and attributes that ground a historical community; the common is rather that which designates a form of commonality without presuppositions and prescriptions. But it is not enough to describe the common; the question, more importantly, concerns how to make use of the common. Therefore, in addition to identifying the common, Agamben strives to come up with a corresponding theory of praxis that would conserve the common even at the moment of its consummation. Without this corresponding theory of praxis, the common, which shall take the form of pure mediality, is likely to end up being naturalized (i.e., exhausted or used up), made into a positive entity, a social ontology, or a fact. This theory of praxis receives a sustained treatment through Agamben’s various attempts to conceive of a notion of use (free use, poor use, common use) that is free from the juridical sphere of rights. And Agamben’s reinvention of the idea of use, I argue, is key to an understanding not just of life but also of politics and emancipation.

For Agamben, the common is none other than generic potentiality, and to use the common means to preserve potentiality even in the state of actuality. Contrary to the traditional model, actualization for Agamben does not pass from potentiality to actuality. In Agamben’s view, the traditional understanding underestimates the power of potentiality. In the delicate dynamic of potentiality, the end of potentiality is not its passing into a determinate activity; actualization means rather the bringing-forth of potentiality even in the state of actuality. That is, when potentiality achieves its fullest sense, it “conserves itself and saves itself in actuality” (Potentialities 184) and reveals itself as capable of its own impotentiality.
It is in this precise sense that Bartleby’s disengagement cannot be interpreted as mere inertia or immobility. Quite the contrary, what Bartleby’s “preference” signifies is a perfect image of Agamben’s formula of potentiality: “there is, finally, a complete or perfect potentiality that belongs to the scribe who is in full possession of the art of writing in the moment in which he does not write” (246-47).

If the essential question is “how to use the common?” then Agamben’s theoretical articulation of potentiality and related ideas enables us to delineate a preliminary outline of what he means by the common and its use. First of all, the common denotes a form-of-life or a happy, sufficient life redeemed from the sacred, that is, from the separation of zoē and bios that serves as the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West. This happy life, moreover, is also a life that, to use a Heideggerian expression, takes care of the event of potentiality, a life that has no proper task except that of a constant expropriation of the appropriate and the proper; it is also “a life for which living itself would be at stake in its own living” (Means 9); 6 finally, a form-of-life is the ultimate concern for the coming politics: just as “[p]olitics is the exhibition of a mediality” (Means 116; emphasis in original), life lived in proximity to potentiality is the manifestation of this mediality.

The conceptual permeability on display here is of great importance because it suggests that form-of-life, since it belongs to a larger constellation of related ideas, is not an isolated concept. Although I do not wish to imply that the concepts examined above are identical to each other or can be deployed interchangeably, I want to emphasize that there exists a relationship of analogy between and among these concepts since all of them present Agamben’s reflections on the problem of life as the latter emerges at the intersection of language and power and, taken together, they all contribute to the project of transvaluating all values concerning life. Therefore we cannot fully grasp what is at stake with the concept of form-of-life without at the same time putting into perspective its relation to other ideas.

Thus we may say that all these conceptual categories in Agamben’s work seem to enter into a zone of productive indistinction—so much so that despite the extraordinary range of inter-related issues, there is a remarkable consistency in his philosophy. As Justin Clemens notes, “[d]espite Agamben’s astonishing range of reference, it is also the case that his ’repertoire’ is ’extraordinarily restricted,’ . . .

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6 Compare Heidegger’s characterization of Dasein: “Dasein is an entity which does not just occur among other entities. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an issue for it” (Being 32; emphasis in original).
Agamben’s net is wide, but he catches the same fish time and after time (55). For Clemens, this consistency is by no means a defect in Agamben’s thinking. It points rather to this thinker’s fidelity to his diagnosis of the contemporary political crisis. And yet the extent to which such a diagnosis can be brought to bear on liberatory politics has been the subject of critical debate.

In her introduction to *The Agamen Effect*, Alison Ross notes that Agamben does not draw a distinction between the diagnostic and the promissory registers in his philosophy. She takes issue with this lack of distinction and goes so far as to claim that Agamben’s politics amounts to a kind of quietism (12n12). While this accusation might not be entirely fair, we should bear in mind the difference between these two registers while perhaps not making them separable.

For Agamben, philosophical thinking is also a function of political praxis, and the task of philosophy is to deliver us from the sphere of law and duty, from the faculties of will and intention. By virtue of their ability to think, human beings are endowed with the power to gaze upon the darkness of an epoch, and the act of seeing the darkness of our own age is an active political gesture for it comports us to an originary relation with potentiality through our de-activation of sovereign determination, fixation, prescription.

“The experience of thought,” Agamben maintains, “is always experience of a common power” (*Means* 9). That is, the power of thought resides in bringing forth the common, making it visible and thereby revealing the truth that potentiality is capable of its own impotentiality, and that appropriation is in itself always already expropriation (*Potentialities* 201-02). Given that thought allows us to make use of potentiality, thought for Agamben is “the nexus that constitutes the forms of life in

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7 In Agamben’s view, the coming politics thinks potentiality and does not concern itself with production. He writes dismissively that “[o]ur ethical tradition has often sought to avoid the problem of potentiality by reducing it to the terms of will and necessity. Not what you *can* do, but what you *want* to do or *must* do is its dominant theme” (*Potentialities* 254; emphasis in original). And the task of philosophy “is to think of a politics and an ethics that are freed of the concepts of duty and effectiveness” (“Thought”).

8 “Seeing the darkness” is the metaphor used by Agamben to suggest the setting-to-work of potentiality: “to perceive this darkness is not a form of inertia or of passivity, but rather implies an activity and a singular ability” (*Apparatus* 45).
an inseparable context as form-of-life” (*Means* 9); thought therefore is already and profoundly transformative and political (*Idea* 98).

The question is: how should we measure the transformative force of thought?

In Agamben’s view, form-of-life is outside and beyond law; this outside, however, is not to be construed as another world but as this world other than itself, that is, as this world’s immanent self-differentiation. On this view, transformation is defined as the effectuation of an internal shift of our point of view, a perspectival change regarding our worldly condition. This notion of change also undergirds Agamben’s theorization of whatever being whose “being-such” does not demand the abolition of the predicate—of the “whatness” or “suchness” of being—but calls for a new use of the predicate. That is, being-such uses the predicate as if not using it, such that a Jew’s *factual* existence would be formulated as being a not-not-Jew whereas the *factual* existence of this very same Jew is simply that of being a Jew. In this way, the predicate (being a Jew) “is reclaimed [through the new use] not for another class nor for the simple generic absence of any belonging, but for its being-such, for belonging itself” (*Community* 1-2). Being-such “is in no way a real predicate” (2) but it is *not without* predicate either, only that now the predicate used in the form of the *as not* is made to function in a non-predicative manner. In this way, “being-such” opens up being to pure potentiality, making it a being of infinite possibilities that no identity can exhaust despite its being-such (e.g., being a Jew, a Frenchman, a worker, a gay). Ultimately, human beings do not exist as essences; they become properly *whatever* the moment they exist in potentiality, the moment they are able to make use of the cultural fabric of the world to affirm their singularity. Only then can we say that life has become form-of-life.

Agamben does not stop here. With his formula of potentiality, he also lays the foundations of his philosophy of liberation. “*Politics,*” he writes, “*is the exhibition of a mediality: it is the act of making a means visible as such*” (*Means* 116-17; emphasis in original). The distinguishing feature of Agamben’s thinking of

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9 “This authentic recalling of humanity to the infantile soma is called thought—that is, politics” (*Idea* 98).

10 In Agamben’s view, living a life as something “thought” is to live one’s life as a work of art. On the relations between life, politics, and aesthetics, see Agamben, “Life, a Work of Art without an Author.”

In “Agamben: Aesthetics, Potentiality and Life,” Claire Colebrook points out that Agamben’s form-of-life is informed by an aesthetic of *poiesis* rather than *praxis*; whereas the former is non-relational (or a relation of non-relation), the latter is caught in the field of existing relations (117).
liberation is his refusal to posit an end, perhaps for fear of being caught in a web of already-established relations, of reproducing a politics of resistance that will remain in thrall to the sovereign power, either as its reaction (opposition), replacement (revolution), or recruit (assimilation). Therefore we can say that Agamben’s politics is devoid of any kind of utopianism, for its task is not that of founding a new order but that of making apparent being’s potentiality to not be; that is, its task is to demonstrate the non-coincidence of quid and quod, of “what is” and “that it is,” of such a being and being-such.

However, the key problem that I have with Agamben is that he wants to deal with both the ethical question concerning being (living) and the political question about the nature of (socio-political) change, breaking down the distinction between ontological statements about being and political statements about change—as if the “thinking of/about being” were immediately political and could in itself bring about political change. No doubt an awareness of the messianic dimension of life is the prerequisite for a genuine transformation to happen, but it seems to me that it is never completely clear in Agamben whether we are to regard this awareness as a pre-political condition or whether this awareness is simultaneously politics proper. Agamben’s equivocation then invites the following questions: what are the implications of identifying the ethical-metaphysical experience of foregoing the self with the political experience of changing the world? What would be the implications of establishing a relation of equivalence between these two experiences? These questions seem to have received only limited attention in Agamben scholarship.

For example, Sergei Prozorov enlists Alain Badiou as a theorist of subtraction who can help illuminate the political radicalism of Agamben’s concept of inoperativity:

The logic of subtraction, which Agamben draws on and develops in his theory of the coming community, establishes something new that escapes the regime that governs the situation and thus remains impervious to its grasp, being in a strict sense non-existent in its terms. While destruction does nothing but perpetuate [sic] the dialectical process of negating action, subtraction suppresses the movement of the dialectic by virtue of its avoidance of any engagement with what it negates. (534)
Two moves are made by Prozorov in this passage. In the first approach, we have Badiou’s distinction between subtraction and destruction, where subtraction is considered a more radical type of negation while destruction “perpetuates[s] the dialectical process of negating action.” Secondly, we have the argument that the “logic of subtraction” is what Agamben “draws on and develops in his theory of the coming community,” for Agamben’s “inoperativity” also suspends or “suppresses the movement of the dialectic by virtue of its avoidance of any engagement with what it negates” (534).

Prozorov’s analysis illustrates the aforementioned problem that seems to have surfaced in Agamben’s own writings: the problem of the apparent non-distinction between the question of being and that of change. In fact, for Badiou, the gesture of subtraction is pre-political and therefore not politics proper (“Discipline” 658). Moreover, subtraction is not opposed to destruction in Badiou. They are simply two types of negation and Badiou even acknowledges the possibility that destruction can appear “in the form of a protective force, capable of defending something created through a movement of subtraction” (654). However, Prozorov does not really analyze in greater depth this distinction, and the question concerning the precise relationship between subtraction and destruction, between being and appearing, or between the pre-political and the political remains unanswered, if not suppressed.11

With Agamben and beyond Agamben: Between the Messianic As Not and the Hypothetical As If

It is not enough to identify a trace. One must incorporate oneself into what the trace authorizes in terms of consequences.

—Alain Badiou
Logics of Worlds

11 Frost offers a short but more nuanced reading of Agamben and Rancière: “Rancière may be a controversial figure to choose. He is sceptical of Agamben’s diagnosis of modern politics. However, I read the idea of dissensus as pointing a possible path to how a messianic politics and law seeks to exist” (67; emphasis added). Rather than settling for an easy conflation based on a shared suspension of norm and law, Frost is careful to differentiate these two thinkers and points out that Rancière’s politics of dissensus could be “a possible path” that Agamben’s messianic politics can take if it is to exist in the world.
Agamben’s commitment to the analytic of finitude certainly helps us understand what is at stake in thinking emancipation. But his reluctance to engage with politics in the traditional sense—by taking a clear position, stating a clear end, appealing to human rights, subjectivity, will, or desire—has aroused the suspicion of those on the left, and somehow alienated him from those who see politics as a matter of producing actual results rather than making room for unfulfilled possibilities (Negri 123). This reluctance, given his philosophical orientation, is probably inevitable since the classical modes of political action often end up getting caught in the very logic they fight against. And the price is too high in Agamben’s view.

If there is a risk in practicing resistance with classical vocabularies, there is also a risk in looking at politics exclusively from an ontological perspective. Jacques Rancière, for example, has argued that there is no place for the unfolding of actual political contestation in Agamben, primarily due to his focus on potentiality, and to the fact that there is no subject, no political actor in his ontological politics.

Within an ontological framework, Rancière observes, “all political wrong could appear as the consequence of an original wrong, so that only a God or an ontological revolution can save us” (“Thinking” 12). In Rancière’s view, there is no space for the treatment of this or that wrong in Agamben; the wrong is absolutized to such a degree that things are considered evil if they violate being’s fundamental relation to potentiality: “Evil,” Agamben writes, “is the reduction of the taking-place to a fact like others. . . . the good must be defined as a self-grasping of evil, and salvation as the coming of the place to itself” (Community 15). Thus, from an ontological perspective, evil as “the reduction of the taking-place to a fact” signals the foreclosure of potentiality, while the good and salvation denote an understanding of evil and the setting-to-work of potentiality.

Agamben’s absolutizing of the wrong comes at the expense of the determinate differences, relations of power, and different goals and aspirations behind each political project. When the ontological consideration trumps all other considerations,

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12 A similar question about identity and the concrete forms of struggle is posed to Agamben in an interview. In response, he states: “the risk is that one reidentify oneself, that one invest this situation with a new identity, that one produce a new subject, if you like, but one subjected to the State; . . . I don’t believe there is any escape from this problem” (“Sure” 116).

13 One of the ways of understanding Agamben’s missing political actor is to look at his conceptualization of “the people” (see Means without End 29-36). For Rancière’s response, see Dissensus, particularly chapters “Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man” and “The People or the Multitudes.”
we would end up in a world where all political projects and all political struggles become, in Heidegger’s words, “metaphysically the same” (*Introduction* 48). For example, in his reading of Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence,” Robert Sinnerbrink has pointed out that while Benjamin makes a clear distinction between communism and fascism, Agamben’s reading “casts Benjaminian communism and really existing fascism into a pernicious ‘zone of indistinction’” (91). In Agamben’s political ontology, the differences between fascism and communism are of little importance: both commit the same wrong against the power of potentiality and in this sense they are “metaphysically the same.”

This lack of distinction leads to a major problem with Agamben’s political theory, which “sweeps aside the heterogeneity of political disensus to the benefit of a more radical heterogeneity” (Rancière, *Dissensus* 74). The emphasis on pure potentiality as the original heterogeneity rather than on the treatment of specific wrongs has serious political implications, and has led many to question the extent to which Agamben’s political theory can lend itself to the politics of emancipation. As one critic observes, the limit of Agamben’s thinking about politics is seen in the fact that within his ontology of potentiality he has no conceptual means by which to distinguish transformative praxis from sovereign violence (Ziarek 97).14 Thus, there is no way in Agamben’s theory to distinguish the progressive use of identity (e.g., the treatment of a wrong mobilized around a positive identity) from conservative identity politics because from an ontological point of view, both involve a violation of potentiality (“the reduction of taking-place to a fact”), and hence are evil.

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14 Commentators have suggested that Agamben’s political vision is a regression from Foucault and Benjamin from whom Agamben draws much of his inspiration. Ross claims that “unlike Agamben, Foucault does not take the step of invalidating appeals to human rights as an effective tool, however limited, of political opposition and resistance” (8). Sinnerbrink also criticizes Agamben for exercising “a certain interpretative violence” in his reading of Benjamin (91). According to Sinnerbrink, Agamben deliberately obscures Benjamin’s revolutionary utopianism, thereby renouncing the concrete struggle to fight for the oppressed groups. This sentiment is shared by Slavoj Žižek: “Many Leftists who flirt with Benjamin want to speak of some ‘spectral’ violence that never really happens, or they adopt an attitude like Agamben’s and simply wait for some magical intervention. I’m sorry, but Benjamin is pretty precise. An example he gives of divine violence is a mob lynching a corrupt ruler! That’s pretty concrete.” In fact, Žižek gets some of the finer details wrong because there is no alleged example of a mob lynching a corrupt ruler in Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence.” But this is more a matter of misremembering than a dishonest gesture of making things up because Benjamin does offer a concrete example to the same effect: “Divine violence may manifest itself in a true war exactly as it does in the crowd’s divine judgment on a criminal” (“Critique” 252).
Take for example the following passage from Idea of Prose: “The plurality of nations and the numerous historical languages are the false callings by which man attempts to respond to his intolerable absence of voice; or, if one prefers, they are the attempts, fatally come to nothing, to make graspable the ungraspable, to become—this eternal child—an adult” (98). In this passage, positing an end is likened to the process of growing up and becoming an adult. Here infancy is to history what potentiality is to actuality. The implication is unmistakable: Agamben is making a conscious attempt to suggest that those “false callings” (claims based on particularities, such as national or cultural identities) signal a movement away from infancy and toward history, and the supposed progression toward a discernible identity is being’s falling back into self-concealment.

This is an example of how Agamben’s philosophy of language may be converted into a politics of emancipation, and of how the latter may be seen as actually founded on the former. Within the conceptual framework laid out by Agamben, things like national liberation struggles or slave revolts would become not just unimaginable but simply not worth imagining as they are mere “false callings” obfuscating humanity’s originary vocation, original “unspeakable” language. Thus I would like to ask Agamben: why are most people more ready to answer a false calling than deliver themselves to the true (messianic) calling? Why are false callings so appealing? If this is how things are in the world, shouldn’t this be the point of departure for any theory of liberation? Moreover, it seems that most people remain indifferent to, if they do not consciously reject, messianic callings. Instead of telling us how a return to infancy will liberate humanity from the illusion of particularism, doesn’t it make more sense to ask what is required to make the transition from the existing state of things to the messianic world of redemption?

The fact that potentiality or inoperability is the locus of transformation—the groundless ground that triggers off changes in a historical situation—is not tantamount to the claim that it itself is transformation. When such indistinction is admitted in politics, we are likely to end up with a notion of politics that presupposes an inaugural responsibility to the exigency of the messianic calling in a world where such ethical responsibility is infringed more often than it is enacted.

If redemption, as Agamben suggests, is indeed “an exigency for the messianic” (Time 41), there is no guarantee that this exigency will be answered. Indeed, most of our everyday experiences seem to indicate otherwise—there are a great number of people who have too much vested interest in their everyday lives, their jobs and families, to obey this calling of the messianic. Indeed, they may be too invested, not only in their bank accounts and stock market options and other
forms of earthly wealth but also in their own prejudices—the inferiority of a certain race, the immaturity of students, the immorality of gay people, the incompetence of aboriginal peoples—to heed the calling of the messianic path. What could possibly lure most people, especially the most “privileged” amongst us, to open themselves to the messianic *klēsis*? As Upton Sinclair puts it: “It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding” (109).

In view of such difficulties, I wish to suggest that when redemption is thought either as a matter of depending on the individual’s conscience or something accessible only to a philosophical mind attuned to the murmur of the messianic, we are offered a vision of an emancipated form-of-life both genuine and limited: it is genuine because it touches on the most fundamental nature of being and cobelonging, a question that cannot be put aside for any emancipatory politics to have lasting consequences; it is nevertheless limited because even if thinking the messianic is indispensable for politics, such thinking cannot be equated to politics without yielding some unsavory implications. That is why there is a need to extend the scope of Agamben’s analysis so that we can theorize a politics attentive to the unbinding power of weak messianism without losing sight of the difficulties involved in bringing about not just the immanent shift in the perception of our worldly situations but also the actual political transformation in a domain where the material and juridical consequences can be registered.15

That is to say, even if the messianic vocation is the truth of being, the only issue concerning humanity, the *necessity* of this truth of being does not *necessitate* its effectuation as the truth of being. As René Descartes elegantly puts it, “[e]ven if God has willed that some truths should be necessary, this does not mean that he willed them necessarily” (235). Therefore, the urgent task for us is to think with Agamben and also beyond Agamben. To this end, we need to consider the conjunction of two theoretical perspectives: the messianic *as not* and the hypothetical *as if*. A consideration of the hypothetical *as if* will push us beyond the theoretical purview of Agamben’s messianic politics. This is an important step to take because without it, as Peter Hallward notes, “we cannot say that people make their own history; we can merely contemplate the forms of their constraint. And

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15 It is worth noting that materialism in Agamben is only vaguely articulated and he obviously is not working in the tradition of classical Marxism. He speaks of matter in terms of “pure matter,” “the event of matter,” or “the materialization of potentiality” (*Potentialities* 217; 218).
however radical or indignant such contemplation, by itself it will always fall short of the political as such” (781).16

Perhaps Agamben’s analysis of the Tiananmen Protest already indicates as much. According to Agamben, “The novelty of the coming politics is that it will no longer be a struggle for the conquest or control of the State, but a struggle between the State and the non-State (humanity), an insurmountable disjunction between whatever singularity and the State organization” (Community 85; emphasis in original). The aim of their protest was not the fulfillment of demands; instead the protest brought forth a politics that manifests being-in-common in the absence of positive or representable qualities because what the Tiananmen protestors demonstrated is the presencing of whatever singularity subtracted from the mechanism of Statist politics. In this sense, the Tiananmen Protest exemplifies the coming politics because the students made no (or only a minimum) demand, thus constituting themselves as an inoperative community.

Despite the radical novelty of the coming politics, it is worth noting that Agamben’s concluding words are menacing and dark: the tank (or some other form of police violence) is due to appear every time there is a confrontation between the State and humanity (Community 87). There is something ambiguous about this description. Given that the protestors virtually made no demand, Agamben seems to suggest that the struggle is between the State and whatever singularity from the outset without the mediation of particularity. But we are also told that although whatever singularity is not a real predicate, it is also not without a predicate. On this view, Agamben seems to suggest that the coming politics does admit the mediation of representable attributes even in the struggle between the State and the generic. Then how does the coming politics unfold itself between and among the State, the particular, and the common? Here the difficulty lies in the fact that in Agamben there are only intimations but no conceptualization.

16 The idea of the as if as a form of the regulative principle belongs to a philosophical tradition starting from Kant. My use of this term, however, is primarily inspired by the recent resurgence of the idea of communism, particularly the communist hypothesis proposed by Badiou. Badiou’s formulation of the communist hypothesis contains the regulative and prescriptive function but it does not work simply as a heuristic device because the regulative idea is not the rule guiding us in our inquiry but the rule that comes into being in its very enactment. In this formulation, Badiou is indebted to Rancière who, he acknowledges, is the first to propose the idea of equality as the presupposition to be enacted rather than a principle to be appealed to.
In Rancière’s view, this need not be the case. In the process of dissensus, what is given can disagree with the frame within which it is given. For example, in the discourse of the Rights of Man,

Women could make a twofold demonstration. They could demonstrate that they were deprived of the rights that they had, thanks to the Declaration of Rights. And they could demonstrate, through their public action, that they had the rights that the constitution denied to them, that they could enact those rights. . . . They acted as subjects that did not have the rights that they had and had the rights that they had not. (“Who” 304; emphasis added)

Rancière’s example demonstrates the possibility of a progressive use of identity in which the given (the identity of woman as an oppressed group) can outgrow its cause (the non-egalitarian social arrangement). In the progressive use of identity, women fight because this identity is the result of a situation of having-no-rights. They engage in resistance on account of this particular identity given to them in a particular historical situation, but they do not engage in resistance to win a particular right for women; their resistance is directed at changing the whole configuration of the given that makes them invisible in the first place, and the legitimacy of their struggle derives from the presupposition of the generic equality of humanity. In other words, while women fight with a particular identity, this identity is able to render inoperative the sphere of juridic-political inscription and institutionalized difference. In this scenario, the identity of woman is at once a fact produced within a set of determinate relations but also a transformative force suspending the existing power structure and thus suspending the identity (i.e., that of women) produced by this structure.

This brings us to Rancière’s second claim concerning the question of political agency. Agamben's deep suspicions about the subject and the juridical sphere of rights is at once relevant and misplaced. It is relevant to the extent that the subject and its rights are criticized as categories belonging to the metaphysical and juridical traditions; it is misplaced when we consider that not all conceptions of the subject and its rights are entrapped in these traditions. According to Rancière, the political actors “are surplus subjects that inscribe the count of the uncounted as a supplement” (Dissensus 70; emphasis in original). Rancière’s subject also has the critical function of disidentification and declassification. But unlike Agamben’s
messianic being who “loses himself in what cannot be saved” (*Time* 42), Rancière’s subject strives to save what is most common in man, namely, man’s generic equality. In Rancière’s view, generic equality is not a right among other positive rights, it is a fundamental right presupposed by the subject and enacted in the dispute *as if* the people of the disputing party already have the right they do not have in reality. By treating the discrepancy made visible in the dispute, the political subjects are able to change the parameters of what Rancière calls the regime of the sensible, according to which degrees of visibility and forms of belonging in a given historical situation are decided.

The political subjects Rancière has in mind are not a pre-existing group of people. These subjects come into being by engaging themselves in the staging of dissensus and its process of verification. Dissensus or disagreement, according to Rancière, operates through a logic of superimposition:

> Politics is the practice whereby the logic . . . characteristic of equality takes the form of the processing of a wrong. . . . Politics occurs through specific subjects or mechanisms of subjectification. These measure the incommensurables, the logic of the mark of equality or that of the police order. They do this by uniting in the name of whatever social group the pure empty quality of equality between anyone and everyone, and by superimposing over the police order that structures the community another community that only exists through and for the conflict, a community based on the conflict over the very existence of something in common between those who have a part and those who have none. (*Disagreement* 35)

This logic of superimposition combines a world where the right of generic equality or the right of the common is valid and one where it is not. Through the treatment of a specific wrong that initiates the dispute, the world in which the inegalitarian situation exists can be forced to fall in line with the egalitarian axiom. This egalitarian axiom, Rancière stresses, is not a right which the disenfranchised people appeal to; it is rather a presupposition to be enacted and verified through the logic

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17 For example, in 1955 when Rosa Park defied the bus driver’s order to move back from the front rows and make room for white passengers, her defiance presupposed a right she has but was not granted by the policy of racial segregation. When a growing number of the black started to act in a like manner in support of Park, it constitutes the beginning of a political dissensus.
of superimposition. Rancière logic of superimposition thus provides an account of force missing in Agamben’s politics.

Also noteworthy is that this right of the common is not one of the positive rights. It is instead similar to what Hannah Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, calls the “right to have rights” (296). Werner Hamacher explains the uniqueness of “the right to have rights” and it is worth quoting the passage in length:

[T]he right to have rights is a pr*ivi-legium* in the strictest sense, a prelegal premise, a protoright, in which it is left open, *what* a human may be, *who* a human may be, and which rights may be granted to him aside from this unique one of belonging to humanity and of formulating his rights correspondingly. . . . Every *given* determination of man breaks with his right of belonging to humanity, because only the humanity and humaneness that are *not yet given* would be able to determine what or who a human is. . . . The right to have rights therefore suspends all given, all posited rights that claim to define the substance of man. . . . “The right to have rights” is a right that gives right their possibility. . . . The only reality that is laid down in this right is that of this very possibility—of having rights, of using, transforming, and expanding them. It is the possibility offered to the existence of each and everyone, whoever or whatever he, she, or it may be. (353-54; emphasis in original)

Political dissensus mobilized for “the right to have rights” means that those who are deprived of it (the part of those who have no part) enact the right as if it will have been theirs. In this regard, the hypothetical *as if* functions both as a regulative principle and a polemical construction—a regulative principle because it is on account of the presupposition of the right to have rights that a process of political contestation is enacted; a polemical construction because the process of dissensus constitutes a liberated zone where the sequence of emancipatory politics can unfold itself in hopes of creating enabling conditions for the transformation and expansion of the juridical field of rights. Most importantly, these two dimensions are mutually constitutive: on the one hand, there has to be a hypothetical presupposition for the polemical construction to initiate and legitimize itself; on the other, the hypothetical
presupposition comes to exist only retroactively in the wake of political dissensus and only as its consequences.

At the core of Rancière’s polemics, then, is an essential distinction between the ethics of potentiality and the politics of dissensus. For an ethics, thinking human existence in terms of potentiality has its obvious advantage, as it allows us to conceive of an ethical relation of being in common in a non-exploitative manner and outside the purveyance of any biopolitical regime. But in Rancière’s view, Agamben’s theory “rules out any dream of ‘human emancipation’” (Dissensus 74) and is therefore lacking in political efficacy. Rancière’s emphasis on the treatment of specific wrongs and the necessary involvement of politics in the police order is very different from Agamben’s emphasis on disengagement and his call for a form-of-life outside of law. We thus find ourselves with two very different orientations with regard to “thinking politics.” Perhaps what is urgent today is not to privilege one over the other but to find a way to bring these two orientations into productive encounter.

The question for us remains: to what extent can the experience of an ethical form-of-life be translated into the experience of political emancipation?

Now let me turn to the Pauline notion of free use which, according to Agamben, reveals a mode of existence in which the form is not added onto life but inscribed into the very structure of life. As we have seen, there is a tendency in Agamben to conflate the ethical form-of-life with political emancipation. Here I want to further underscore both the promissory thrust of Agamben’s theory of use and its potential limitations as a theory of emancipation, this time with a concrete example. My contention will be that we need to think the ethical exigency (in the form of the messianic as not) and the political dissensus (in the form of the hypothetical as if) together as forming a dialectic—such that ethics and politics are made in service of each other, not in place of each other.18

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18 Concerning the use of the term dialectic in the context of Agamben’s philosophy, I am aware that Agamben is often thought of as a non-dialectical thinker. However, this label is somehow misleading. The dialectical model he shuns away is the conventional one with a triadic structure that holds together (in the third term) what is divided, but this does not mean that the concept of the dialectic cannot be thought otherwise. Jacques Derrida, another critic of the Hegelian dialectic, offers a different way of thinking the dialectic as “an infinite dialectic that is the movement of synthesizing without synthesis” and this new concept of the dialectic is “in principle an anti-dialectical concept; but it can always be interpreted as the nec plus ultra of the dialectical” (Derrida 33).
In *The Time That Remains*, Agamben explains the messianic vocation and the idea of free use. The logical operator of free use is known as *hōs mē* or *as not*. The idea of the free use of one’s concrete factical vocation in the form of the *as not* hinges on a reflexive logic, one which effects an internal displacement where a concrete vocation is at the same time its own revocation or nullification. “The messianic vocation,” Agamben writes, “is the revocation of every vocation” (*Time* 23; emphasis in original). From the perspective of messianic redemption, every worldly vocation adds onto itself a reflexive twist and renders itself inoperative or “constitutively ‘not all’” (50). In other words, while previously it is the givenness of a worldly vocation that assumed or captured *being*, now—under the auspices of the messianic vocation—it is *being* which actively assumes a factical givenness in the form of the *as not*.

The messianic *as not* thus constitutes an outside, but this outside is neither the transgression of the law nor the overturning of the existing law; an inoperative form-of-life is outside law insofar as it is not defined in relation to law, insofar as it is not entrapped as a mere reaction to or provocation of law’s initiation. What Agamben has in mind with the constitutive “not all” or the Pauline *as not* is an immanent negation on account of which an identity is suspended in the very gesture of retaining it. Thus, he describes the messianic life as “the repetition of those same factical and juridical conditions”—this repetition nevertheless “revokes a condition and radically puts it into question in the very act of adhering to it” (*Time* 23; emphasis added).

This is a rather paradoxical way to formulate the idea of transformation, for it suggests the simultaneous coexistence of the (ontological) undoing of a substantive vocation and (phenomenological) continuation of the very same vocation. The idea of change in the form of the *as not* then suggests no change in the material conditions or institutional framework. Rather, we have a small yet crucial internal displacement by virtue of which worldly properties and historical determinations remain unchanged while their essence, previously unquestionably affirmed in substantive terms, is now called into question and perceived *as not*. Thus no identity remains closed in upon itself; no action unambiguously results from a goal-driven intention; every worldly determination harbors a paradoxical relation to itself—hence, “weeping as not weeping”; Jew as the “non-non-Jew”; law as “not-not the law” (*Time* 24; 51).

In an emancipated life, then, to be free is no longer understood simply as freedom to do *this* or *that* thing, to be *this* or *that* identity; it is a different kind of
freedom through which one is not just capable of doing/being this or that but also of not doing/being this or that. “To be free is,” as Agamben puts it, “to be capable of one’s own impotentiality” (Potentialities 183; emphasis in original). Thus considered, a life freed from sovereign decision is a form-of-life in which one expropriates what, in a worldly situation, appears to be appropriate, proper, and self-same, without substituting a new identity for what is factically given to the self. Transformation in this sense “does not entail substituting a less authentic vocation with a truer vocation” (Time 23); it is an immanent operation that takes a given worldly condition and “hollows it out, nullifying it in the very gesture of maintaining and dwelling in it” (24). On this view, we cannot say that form-of-life is endowed with inherent attributes or innate properties; nor can we say that form-of-life is a return to pure ontological becoming without any existential content. Rather, form-of-life is a new way of living that is singular, neither universal nor particular; it is living as such, not living a life subject to the statist prescription nor living a life devoid of historical grounding and cultural memory; it is the unity between being and ways of being, between the generic and the historical, or the meeting place between Sein and Da (Homo 153).

Given that the experience of the messianic delegitimates the constraints of the historical givenness, it is no doubt a liberating experience. However, when the logic of the as not comes to define the space of the coming politics, it becomes problematic and unsettling, as is evident in Agamben’s decision to deal with the question of slavery in the same messianic breath:

What does it actually mean to remain a slave in the form of the as not? Here, the juridical-factual condition invested by the messianic vocation is not negated with regard to juridical consequences that would in turn validate a different or even opposite legal effect in its place, as does the fiction legis. Rather, in the as not, the juridical-factual condition is taken up again and is transposed, while remaining juridically unchanged, to a zone that is neither factual nor juridical, but is subtracted from the law and remains as a place of pure praxis, of simple “use” (“use it rather!”). Factual klēsis, set in relation to itself via the messianic vocation, is not replaced by something else, but is rendered inoperative. . . . In this fashion, klēsis is laid open to its true use. This is the reason that the slave, as defined by Paul, is invested with a messianic vocation through the
extraordinary hapax: *hyper doulos*, “super-slave, slave to the second degree.” (*Time* 28-29)

Granted that the gesture of “rendering inoperative” points to a more fundamental transformation at the level of being, Agamben’s treatment of slavery still strikes me as being both rash and one-sided.

Responding to a question from the audience at the aforementioned conference, Steven DeCaroli cited the example of slavery (though he did not specifically refer to the above passage) to illustrate the relevance of the messianic *as not* for the discourse of emancipation. What DeCaroli ended up achieving was not just an illustration of the relevance of Agamben’s *as not* to emancipation; it also represented an advance over Agamben’s thinking on this point. In brief, DeCaroli’s point is that the abolition of the institution of slavery must also accompany a corresponding awareness of the messianic *as not*, in the absence of which we cannot say that we have really achieved emancipation. Two things are of paramount interest to us here:

1. The premise of DeCaroli’s account was the abolition of the institution of slavery. But change taking place at the juridico-political level is of little concern to Agamben, for what is at issue in the *as not* is “the zone that is neither factual or juridical” (*Time* 28).
2. For DeCaroli, the awareness of the *as not* as the truth of human existence is a responsibility to be assumed by everyone (especially the slave owner and the general public), and not exclusively by, as Agamben’s passage seems to suggest, the oppressed themselves.

Although it is not difficult to appreciate the liberating power of the messianic vocation and the idea of free use, it is rather confusing to see Agamben indiscriminately addressing the question of slavery without a proper concern for the nature of oppression and the debilitating effect it has on those who are oppressed. After all, what could a “super-slave” or “slave to the second degree” possibly mean in the context of political emancipation?

Agamben, then, is quite vague about how we are to negotiate the field of forces, how to intervene in a world where the sensible is distributed, differences
inscribed, and power exercised. Unlike DeCaroli, Agamben does not push far enough; he does not tell us what is required to bring about transformation in a world already structured according to a web of unequal relations. If Agamben tells us that a messianic politics can deactivate our fixed relations and deliver humanity back to its innermost freedom, he does not give an adequate account of how the two parties in an already established relationship (e.g., sovereign/homo sacer, master/slave, colonizer/colonized) can both agree to withdraw from it. What would become of the slaves if they simply refused to work while the juridico-political conditions remained unchanged and their masters persisted in taking advantage of this unequal relationship? What then would messianic redemption amount to? Very little in fact. We are given a kind of mute resistance that looks like the ironic version of law “in force without significance.” It is resistance without significance and also without force—without significance because it is indeterminate with regard to its content; without force because it does not result in any change in the governing law of appearance, but only a changed perception of the world at the level of individual conscience. If the world in the wake of the messianic redemption is a world where “[e]verything will be as it is now, just a little different” (*Community* 52), then this is a world where super-slaves would be ontologically redeemed yet still bear the burden of an enslaved existence.

Here it is important to recognize that the institution of slavery involves a negative differentiation different from the being-there of Heidegger’s *Dasein* or the Franciscan form-of-life, because slavery is first and foremost a material institution of oppression and domination, and it involves a prior dehumanizing process of constitution and subjugation through which a factical existence (or “being-such”) is reduced to a slave. To believe that using the condition of slavery as if not using it can bring about a happy life is to believe that super-slaves can wish away material exploitations through the power of thought. Yet the fact remains that the juridical conditions which permit the institution of slavery do not cease to function simply because super-slaves become aware that every worldly vocation is its own nullification. The same can be said of Bartleby’s refusal. Bartleby no doubt serves as a perfect image of potentiality but his refusal in itself defines no real politics. As Hardt and Negri have suggested, “This refusal certainly is the beginning of a liberatory politics, but it is only a beginning. The refusal in itself is empty. . . . What we need is to create a new social body, which is a project that goes well beyond refusal” (204; emphasis in original).

There are, of course, myriads of questions that need to be answered lest the said project turn history into teleology, a messianic politics into an eschatological
prophecy, or a social body into some substantive essence. These are questions worth looking into but they are beyond the scope of this paper. What I am suggesting here is merely that without a theory of force that can account for the initiation of political contestation, a contestation aimed at redefining the factual and juridical parameters that make the institution of slavery possible in the first place, it is difficult to imagine how super-slaves can achieve an emancipated form-of-life while the physical constraints to which their factual existence is tethered remain intact.  

In the context of psychoanalysis, Ed Pluth and Dominiek Hoens have made the following insightful remark:

[T]o remain faithful to the negative qua negative would be to betray the negative. Only by elaborating on the negative is one actually being faithful to it. . . . Without this elaboration there would be nothing, but inhibition or anxiety. Indeed, the real without name is simply anxiety, and not an act. (187)

What Pluth and Hoens say here of negativity in psychoanalysis is probably also true of the as not in Agamben. When left to stand on its own, the use of the condition of slavery as if not using it might steep too much into the realm of mental victory à la infamous Ah-Q.

This is not to say that Agamben offers nothing substantial with his politics of emancipation, but rather that in certain cases his vision of redemption might not be up to the task it sets itself. Again, we need to think the ethical exigency (in the form of the messianic as not) and the political dissensus (in the form of the hypothetical as if) together as forming a dialectic, one in which ethics and politics serve each other but do not replace each other. It therefore behooves us to explore ways in which we can build on Agamben’s insight, taking it in a different direction and to a different level of analysis. There are things Agamben does not spell out, prefers not to spell out, or cannot but resist spelling out. Our task then is to pick up what is left unsaid, take it from there, and develop consequences and implications authorized by

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19 Jessica Whyte is right to suggest that Agamben’s notion of use “offer little consolation to those whose possibilities in life are thoroughly constrained within them. This means that he turns our attention too far from the extent to which identities continue to be caught up in more or less reactionary or emancipatory political projects.”
what Agamben has already said. Or, as Badiou puts it (with minor modification), “it is not enough to identify pure potentiality. One must incorporate oneself into what potentiality authorizes in terms of consequences.”

**Conclusion**

While writing this paper, I was introduced to a book about a small village called Marinadela in Andalusia. The book is entitled *The Village against the World*, and the author Dan Hancox recounts the extraordinary changes that have taken place in Marinadela during the last three decades. The situation facing the inhabitants before they embarked on their utopian project was dire. Hancox tells us: “when their struggle to create utopia began, in the late 1970s, it was from a position of abject poverty. The village was suffering over 60 per cent unemployment; it was a farming community with no land, its people frequently forced to go without food for days at a time.” During the next thirty-some years under the leadership of their mayor Sánchez Gordillo, the villagers have tried to create a living utopia; they have practiced living a life beyond the capitalist mode of production and exploitation as if such a material change is indeed possible. What they expropriated is not just their own worldly vocation; nor did they simply wish to expropriate things for their private use. Rather, they expropriated the land for those who wanted employment and for the benefit of the collective; eventually they succeeded in changing the material conditions that make possible the thriving of a different form-of-life. Gordillo, the man responsible for this revolutionary change, told a newspaper:

We have learned that it is not enough to define utopia, nor is it enough to fight against the reactionary forces. One must build it here and now, brick by brick, patiently but steadily, until we can make the old dreams a reality: that there will be bread for all, freedom among citizens, and culture; and to be able to read with respect the word “peace.” We sincerely believe that there is no future that is not built in the present. (qtd. in Hancox)

There are still more challenges ahead, but the image of Marinadela offers the disenfranchised a redemptive hope: the hope not just of conceiving of their worldly

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20 For the quotation in its original, see *Logics of Worlds* 508.
vocation as not but of prescribing a form-of-life as if it could exist here and now in this world.

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**About the Author**

Chien-heng Wu is Assistant Professor of English at National Kaohsiung Normal University in Kaohsiung. He is the author of “That Obscure Object (a) of Drive: The Politics of Negativity in Derrida and Žižek,” also published in *Concentric.* His most recent publication is “Tiger’s Leap into the Past: Comparative Temporalities and the Politics of Redemption” in *Comparatizing Taiwan* (Routledge 2014).

[Received 9 July 2014; accepted 7 November 2014]