

Giorgio Agamben: the Philosophical Risks of the Epidemic

Nora Goleshevska

Nora Goleshevska is an independent researcher, currently a member of a research program of the Institute for Academic Research in Bucharest and the Getty Foundation titled "Periodisation in the History of Art and Its Puzzles. How to deal with them in Eastern and Central Europe" (2019-2021). Ms Goleshevska holds a PhD in Philosophy of Culture: Media and Rhetoric (St. Kliment Okhridski Sofia University). She has specialised in visual semiotics (Aldo Moro University of Bari), anthropological studies of the Mediterranean and the Balkans: Italy-Bulgaria (Joint Master's Programme of Sofia University, La Sapienza University of Rome and BAS) and contemporary art in XX-XXI centuries (Sofia University); her research is in the field of modern rhetoric, cultural theory, methodology of visual analysis, contemporary Italian philosophy and visual arts.

Correspondence address: artes.liberales@gmail.com

On February 26, 2020, a week after the outbreak of the coronavirus epidemic in Italy, the philosopher and cultural theorist Giorgio Agamben published a short piece entitled "Inventing an Epidemic" in his *One Voice* column on the *Quodlibet* website. The text provoked both Italian society and representatives of the international philosophical community.

The central (and predictable) and unequivocal assumption of the essay is that the sanitary emergency imposed by fiat hides severe risks of long-term restriction of human and civil rights as a result of which the social, political and cultural dimension might be stripped away from the human condition. Agamben's argument did not surprise those familiar with his philosophy and its drive to discredit the dominant picture of the world created by the authorities and the mass media in Italy. The notion that emergency management is an instrument of restricting rights through entirely legal ways has been Agamben's trademark on the world philosophical scene for almost three decades.

On March 11, at the height of the epidemic, Agamben added a new feature to his critique entitled "Contagion", focusing on the political and social function of contagion, interpreted through the prism of relevant historical and literary examples from the Italian cultural tradition. Epidemic-related issues topped the public agenda, and his piece unsurprisingly triggered an explosion of comments both in the narrow circles of humanitarians (e.g. Gianni Vattimo, Roberto Esposito, Jean-Luc Nancy, Sahaj Mohan, Divya Dwivedi, etc.) and among the wider audience. Agamben's pieces were translated almost simultaneously into a host of languages, e.g. English, Greek, Spanish, German, Portuguese, Russian, French, etc. In turn, the translations proliferated the discussion across their own national and linguistic contexts.

In the following months, the superstar of Italian philosophy put out weekly explanations in his column, with his conceptual toolkit making sense of various aspects of the emergency triggered by the COVID-19 crisis. Thus, in the period February 26 - May 11, Agamben published a total of eleven pieces in the following order: "Invention of an Epidemic" (February 26 2020), "Contagion" (March 11 2020), "Explanations" (March 17 2020), "Reflections on the Plague" (March 27 2020), "Social Distancing"(April 6 2020), "A Question" (April 14 2020), "Phase 2" (April 20 2020), "New Reflections"(April 22 2020),

"On the Truth and Untruth" (April 24 2020), "Medicine as Religion" (May 2 2020) and "Biosecurity and Politics" (May 11 2020).

Undoubtedly, Agamben's sequels interpreted the epidemic situation from the perspective of his *Homo sacer* research project, ranked among the fundamental works of modern political philosophy, a study that proved a turning point for political thinking with its reconstruction of the intellectual and political history of the concept of "life" and the threats to it lurking in the phenomenon of political sovereignty. This context also aroused my translator's interest in the corpus of short philosophical essays, commentaries and interviews, in which the most translated contemporary Italian philosopher I believe not only applied but further developed his category toolkit. I hope that the texts from my inception translating job would enrich the understanding of the epidemic picture, correlating it with some fundamental concepts of modern political philosophy.

The polemic began with reference to an official medical communiqué of the National Council for Scientific Research in Italy – an institution representing a complex system of power and knowledge. However, Agamben's interest was not so much in medical definitions and statistics, but in the public interventions brought about in their name. The philosopher unsurprisingly deployed his conceptual kit, e.g. the state of emergency and quarantine imposed by fiat, fixed residence and bodies, from which legal mechanism strips any sociality (*forma-di-vita* / βίος), reducing them to naked life (*nuda vita* / ζωή).

At the risk of simplifying the quirkiness of Agamben's argument, I will summarise his entry assumption: infection is a "pretext" for ramping up political control on citizens. Predictably, the philosopher established an analogy between his previous reflections on terrorism and the current coronavirus, comparing not the phenomena per se, but the way the state machine responded to either of the threats. Just like the fight against terrorism, in which the authorities see every citizen as a potential terrorist, the emergency regulations of the epidemic virtually treat every human being as a potential virus spreader, with non-compliant spreaders punished by imprisonment for creating a threat similar to the terrorist one.

What Agamben saw behind the epidemic was the perfect storm for collective panic. The contagion imposes a new creed on citizens, a discipline without authority, typical of a country in which the dismantling of checks and balances and the restrictive police measures transmogrify the motifs related to terrorist threats into hygiene-based ones necessitated by the invisible vector threat. In a pandemic, this new form of control finds fertile ground in the fear

of your fellow human being, reduced to a potential carrier. Resorting to one of his main categories, the philosopher will explain: "Bare life – and the fear of losing it – does not unite people, it blinds and divides them" ("Explanations", March 17, 2020). In his subsequent essay, Agamben further develops this idea, reminding us that "only tyranny can be based on the fear of losing one's life, only the monstrous Leviathan with his sword drawn out." ("Reflections on the Plague", March 27, 2020) It is this fear that Agamben recognizes as a powerful agent degenerating the social fabric. Behind the "invisible enemy", (a terrifying term, widely exploited during the epidemic) that can pervade each one of us, the philosopher finds a civil war metaphor, which, according to the most insightful political scientists, has taken the place of conventional world wars. ("Medicine as Religion", 2 May 2020).

Agamben's argument reasonably raises the question of what kind of sacrifice modern society is willing to pay for the sake of its physical salvation. Developing the distinction between "bare life" (biological survival) and *forma-di-vita*, defined in the essays as "the ethical life of a cultural being", Agamben argues that the hysteria around the epidemic motivates unprecedented efforts to avoid physical damage. But these efforts sacrifice another realm – that of friendships, family, religious beliefs and practices, artistic life, professional and political commitments, or in other words – the dimension of culture, the superstructure rising above the biological and purveying meaning to human life.

In short, the risk of degrading human relations (both public and interpersonal) the anti-pandemic measures can produce is much more dangerous than the ordained isolation and freedom restrictions ("Contagion", March 11, 2020).

In early April, Agamben turned his attention to changes in the West's political vocabulary imposed by the crisis. According to his forecast, the concept of "social distancing" will prove more than a temporary solution; it rather is a cornerstone concept that will dictate the trends in the evolution of social and political fabric. To the concern that "... a sanitary emergency can be construed as a laboratory in which the new political and social systems humanity is in for are being concocted", ("Social Distancing", April 6 2020), he added a week later "... the symbolic euphemism, 'social distancing', will be the new principle of public organization" ("Question", April 13 2020), constituting "a society based on social distance" and "unlimited control" ("Phase 2", April 20 2020), by distorting social and interpersonal relations.

The idea of social distancing is linked to the compensatory communication capabilities of digital technologies on the one hand, and a "new phenomenology of the mass", on the other. The changes in the fabric of the modern mass are the result of the impossibility to construct a vital digital community (despite the illusions to that effect) and resting that "community" on fear of the other by dint of an official ban on social interaction of any kind. Thus, unlike the classical interpretations of the phenomenon, the new phenomenology of the mass reveals it not as dense and compact, but as diluted, but no less compact and passive, frozen in anticipation of "a leader who must emerge before it" ("Social distancing", 06.04.2020).

I will emphasize that Agamben's assessment of the epidemic is not medical, but philosophical, whatever the nature of his arguments. It is no coincidence that his essays fall into the genre of a humanistic tradition, at times taking the form of invective, directed not precisely "against the doctor" (which would be too controversial in today's context even for one of the most controversial philosophers of today), but against what could be defined as scientific engineering (developed for governance purposes) based on the abstraction of a mechanical distinction between physical and spiritual existence, "brought about by modern science", which has "turned into the true religion of our time" (Question), 13.04.2020).

In conclusion, let me point out that Agamben's eleven pieces alert that the current contagion marks the ideological end of bourgeois democracies, based on the separation of powers, the rule of law, parliamentarism and publicity, and the embracing of a new model of governance – that of despotism rooted in a new political format defined by the philosopher as a "security state". This regime transforms biopolitics into biosecurity and "the citizen no longer has the right to health (health safety) but becomes legally obliged to be healthy (biosecurity)" ("Biosecurity and Policy", May 11 2020). The new political order empowers "medicine as religion", which in turn subordinates the other two religions that have historically determined the Western worldviews: the religion of Jesus and the religion of Capital.

I will stop here, leaving the reader to the enjoyment of Agamben's intriguing argument. In summary, according to the eleven texts the philosopher penned during the months of isolation, under the influence of irrational panic triggered by the risks of spreading the coronavirus crisis, a structural threat has been generated that social life and culture as a whole be sacrificed and held hostage to a potentially endless series of emergencies (terrorism, epidemics, natural disasters), warranting a continued use of voluntarily adopted restrictive

measures that are slowly, but inexorably becoming permanent. This risk necessitates, as Agamben writes, "to unreservedly demonstrate utter disagreement with the model of society based on social distancing and unrestricted control likely to be imposed on us" ("Phase 2", April 20, 2020).