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**Author(s):** Prozorov, Sergei

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Prof. Sergei Prozorov  
Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy  
40014 University of Jyväskylä  
sergei.prozorov@jyu.fi

## THE LIMITS OF SUBTRACTIVE POLITICS: AGAMBEN AND ROUSSEAU'S INHERITANCE

The article critically engages with Giorgio Agamben's reading of Rousseau in order to explore the affinities between the two authors' subtractive approach to political subjectivation. In *The Kingdom and the Glory*. Agamben argues that Rousseau's *Social Contract* reproduces, in a secularized manner, the providential paradigm of government, whose origins Agamben finds in the early Christianity. This paradigm establishes a fictitious articulation between transcendent sovereignty and immanent government, presenting particular acts of government as emanating from general divine laws. We shall demonstrate that Rousseau neither was unaware of the problematic character of this paradigm nor ventured to conceal its problems, but, on the contrary, highlighted them throughout the *Social Contract*, whose key motif was the danger of the contamination of general will by particular acts, identities or interests. The same wariness of particularism characterizes Rousseau's *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, often read as entirely heterogeneous to the political project of the *Social Contract*. By reading these two works together as the affirmation of generic existence against all forms of particularism, we bring Rousseau's analysis closer to Agamben's own attempts to rethink politics as subtracted from all identity predicates and contained in the affirmation of 'whatever being'. The elucidation of affinities between Rousseau and Agamben will permit us to identify the limits of this subtractive approach to politics and outline an alternative to it.

*Key words:* Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Giorgio Agamben, Peter Sloterdijk, sovereignty, government, identity, subtraction

*Author bio:* Sergei Prozorov is Professor of Political Science at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. He is the author of eight monographs, most recently *Democratic Biopolitics* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019). He has also published over 30 articles in *Political Theory*, *Contemporary Political Theory*, *Political Studies*, *Security Dialogue*, *Society and Space*, *Political Geography* and other major international journals. Prozorov's research interests include contemporary political philosophy, biopolitics, totalitarianism and post-truth politics.

Dear Editors,

Please find attached the revised version of my manuscript. I am thankful to the editors and the anonymous reviewer for their comments and suggestions. In this note I sum up the main revisions I have made.

1. Firstly, with regard to the comments of Reviewer 1 about the one-sided character of my account of sovereignty-government and form-of-life in Agamben, I have revised sections 4 and 5 to clarify and elaborate my reading.

1a. Regarding *sovereignty-government*, I certainly agree that Agamben does not simply affirm sovereignty against government but views their articulation as bipolar. I nonetheless argue that Agamben's attempt to halt this bipolar machine in its entirety only radicalizes but does not transcend Rousseau's subtractive project. While Agamben certainly avoids a 'unipolar' affirmation of constituent power of sovereignty, its destitution is still thinkable in terms of the subtractive logic of sovereignty, albeit dissociated from constitution – a point I elaborate in the final section.

1b. Regarding *form-of-life*, I have corrected the passages that might have created an impression that I assert some radical break in Agamben's work with *The Use of Bodies*. At most, I would like to highlight a subtle shift away from a more subtractive understanding of form-of-life in the works of the 1990s-early 2000s, most clearly observable in the final pages of *Homo Sacer*, towards a perspective that is more appreciative of the diversity of actual forms of life, which may all be practiced in the destituent manner. It might well be that this perspective was there in Agamben 'all along' in a less explicit way, but the new emphasis on manner that characterizes *The Use of Bodies* and other later works marks a shift that succeeds better in moving beyond Rousseau.

2. I have paraphrased, shortened and split a number of citations from Agamben, Rousseau and Sloterdijk.
3. I have revised the introduction, excising the more technical discussion (being and praxis) from the first paragraph. I experimented with the idea of starting with a more general discussion of subtractive politics or the example of Tiananmen, but decided to begin with Agamben's diagnosis of the problem of sovereignty-government, moving towards the

elucidation of the logic of subtractive politics in the course of the reading of Rousseau and Agamben rather than introducing it from the outset.

4. The introduction subheading is now removed and the sections renumbered.
5. I have made use of some of the formulations from the resubmission memo in the revisions regarding point 1.

I will look forward to your response,

All the best,

Sergei Prozorov

Professor of Political Science  
Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy  
40014 University of Jyväskylä  
sergei.prozorov@jyu.fi

## THE LIMITS OF SUBTRACTIVE POLITICS: AGAMBEN AND ROUSSEAU'S INHERITANCE

In his 2007 book *The Kingdom and the Glory* Giorgio Agamben presents a genealogy of the 'bipolar machine' of Kingdom-Government in the Western political tradition. While Agamben's earlier work in the *Homo Sacer* series (1998) focused on the Kingdom pole, as exemplified by Carl Schmitt's concept of sovereignty, *The Kingdom and the Glory* is devoted to the second, governmental or 'economic' dimension of Government, which now assumes priority in relation to the Kingdom. Sovereign power, from which governmental power is meant to be derived, only exists, in Agamben's argument, as the presupposition for the effects to be produced by agents of government. The King only reigns because he does not govern, while government can only govern by presupposing a transcendent figure that merely reigns. Agamben concludes his study with the following diagnosis: 'the real problem, the central mystery of politics is not sovereignty, but government; it is not God, but the angel; it is not the king, but ministry; it is not the law but the police - that is to say, the governmental machine that they form and support.' (Ibid.: 276)

This statement echoes Foucault's famous call in the late 1970s for 'cutting off the head of the king' in political theory, which inaugurated his turn towards the study of biopolitics and governmentality (Foucault 1990: 89). In Agamben's view, the privilege granted by political thought to sovereignty, be it monarchical or popular, is not an innocent intellectual choice but rather a fateful decision that resigns us to remaining 'lost in abstractions and vacuous mythologemes such as the Law, the general will and popular sovereignty' (Agamben 2011: 276).

Furthermore, focusing on sovereignty over government conceals the ‘substantial untruth of the primacy of legislative power and the consequent irreducibility of government to mere execution’ (Agamben 2011: 276). The commitment to the primacy of sovereignty not merely leads political thought to engage with far less interesting matters, but also blinds us to what is properly interesting, i.e. the exponential growth and domination of the economy over politics and government over sovereignty.

How did we get to this appalling state of affairs? Agamben’s genealogy takes us back to the early Trinitarian theology, yet the appendix to the book offers a rather more modern figure of the culprit: ‘If today we are witnessing the government and economy’s overwhelming domination of a popular sovereignty emptied of all meaning, this perhaps signifies that Occidental democracies are paying the political price of a theological inheritance that they had unwittingly assumed through Rousseau.’ (Ibid.) In this article we shall critically engage with this striking diagnosis and argue that Agamben’s construction of ‘Rousseau’s inheritance’ does not do justice to Rousseau’s construction of the relation of sovereignty and government in *The Social Contract*. Moreover, it conceals important affinities between the two authors, who share an understanding of political subjectivation in terms of *subtraction* from all particular predicates that produces, respectively, general will and ‘whatever being’. The misrecognition of these affinities entails the perpetuation of the problems Agamben identifies with Rousseau’s thought in his own attempt to render the apparatuses of government inoperative, which does not overcome Rousseau’s logic but at best radicalizes it.

Our argument will unfold in the following four steps. In the first section we shall discuss Agamben's verdict and the evidence he presents for it. In sections two and three we shall revisit the arguments of *The Social Contract* pertaining respectively to the constitution of the sovereign and the institution of government, in order to demonstrate that, *contra* Agamben, Rousseau was clearly aware of the problematic nature of the relationship between them and, rather than ignore, dismiss or conceal it, attempted to resolve it, albeit perhaps unsuccessfully. In the fourth section, we shall explore the parallels between *The Social Contract* and *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker* in order to identify the subtractive logic by which Rousseau constructs both the sovereign people and the subject of reverie. We shall then demonstrate that the same logic is at work, in a radicalized fashion, in Agamben's affirmation of whatever being and destituent power, which continues to live off Rousseau's inheritance while denouncing it. In the concluding section, we shall indicate a more promising path of abandoning Rousseau's subtractive politics that has been developed in Agamben's recent work on style, manner and form-of-life.

#### *The Inheritance: The Doctrine of Emanations*

Why is Rousseau such an important figure for Agamben's argument in *The Kingdom and the Glory*? It is because Rousseau's theory demonstrates most starkly the way modern political thought maintains the gap between being and praxis, which characterizes the relation between Father and Son in the Trinitarian dogma in early Christianity, particularly the doctrine of the Trinity (Agamben 2011: 140).

The secularization of this problematic relation only transfers it from the theological sphere to the worldly domain without transforming its logic. In an appendix to the book entitled 'The Economy of Moderns' Agamben first addresses the reproduction of this logic in Malebranche's theology, in which God's general will is expressed in the form of immutable laws, while his particular wills are expressed in the form of occasional miracles (ibid.: 261-64). He then argues, with reference to Patrick Riley's (1988) genealogy of the concept of the general will that this logic is transferred, 'without reservations', into Rousseau's republican political theory (Agamben 2011: 273). Rousseau's general will is nothing but a secularized version of Malebranche's general will of God and similarly is expressed in the form of law valid for the entire social body. The particular will is in turn restricted to the executive power of government that can obligate particular individuals (ibid.: 274. Cf. Riley 1988: 26-32, 182-184). Recalling Foucault's brief allusion to Rousseau in *Security, Territory, Population* (Foucault 2007: 107), Agamben claims that for Rousseau it is not a matter of deriving government from sovereignty but, on the contrary, conceptualizing sovereignty in the manner that would accord with the art of government.

Pursuing this claim further, Agamben retraces Rousseau's attempt to maintain the two wills in an articulation, whereby government functions as an emanation of sovereignty (Rousseau 1987: 155). In this manner, Rousseau can maintain his insistence on the indivisibility and inalienability of sovereignty, while accepting the multiplicity of partial governmental acts based on particular interests. 'As in Malebranche the occasional causes are nothing but the particular actualizations of God's general will, so in Rousseau the government or executive power claims to coincide with the sovereignty of law from which it nevertheless distinguishes itself as its particular emanation



and actualization.’ (Agamben 2011: 275. Cf. Riley 1988: 212-214, 244-245). The concept of emanation, not very typical for a treatise on politics, was articulated in Neoplatonism and taken up in the Trinitarian theology to refer to the procession of persons in the Trinity. Rather than being divided or decomposed into elements, divinity proceeds from the Father to Son without being diminished. Similarly, in Rousseau’s theory sovereignty and government are ‘articulated through the distinctions sovereign power/government, general will/particular will, legislative power/executive power, which mark within it a series of caesurae that Rousseau tries carefully to minimize.’ (Ibid.: 275) Secularization, which moves a phenomenon to a worldly domain without amending the theological logic in which it was originally articulated, entails the perpetuation of the originally theological problem in modern politics: ‘[The] economico-providential apparatus is passed on as an unquestioned inheritance to modern politics. The most nefarious consequence of this theological apparatus as political legitimation is that it has rendered the democratic tradition incapable of thinking government and its economy.’ (Agamben 2011: 276)

According to Agamben, Rousseau both recognizes government as a problem and tries to minimize its significance, presenting it as mere execution of sovereign authority that emanates from it. Yet, precisely this downplaying entails that the democratic tradition cannot respond to the tendency for government to attain predominance in the modern age, since it has first convinced itself of its derivative status. ‘Through the *Social Contract* the republican tradition inherited without reservation a theological paradigm and a governmental machine of which it is still far from becoming conscious.’ (Ibid.: 273)

This is certainly a stinging critique, not merely of Rousseau himself but even more importantly of the contemporary Rousseauans, such as Alain Badiou who famously interpreted Rousseau as the first to understand politics as distinct and autonomous from government, having its own end in itself: 'Rousseau's genius was to have abstractly circumscribed the nature of politics as generic procedure. Politics is, for itself, its own proper end; in the mode of what is being produced as true statements by the capacity of collective will.' (Badiou 2005: 353). For Badiou, Rousseau's politics is wholly contained in the affirmation of the sheer 'existence of the people' (ibid.: 348), bracketed off from particular identities and interests regulated by acts of government. This approach to politics continues to animate radical democratic and republican thought that seeks to resist depoliticization arising from the reduction of politics to governance (see Critchley 2008). Yet, how plausible is Agamben's critique? While the analogy between the opposition between general will and particular acts of government in Rousseau with the bipolar theological paradigm that Agamben traces back to the Church Fathers is largely convincing, Rousseau's treatment of this opposition is quite distinct from the providential paradigm developed by Agamben. Rather than seek to minimize, erase or bridge the gap between the general and the particular, Rousseau repeatedly highlights this gap and ventures to *widen* it as far as possible. Let us revisit Rousseau's *Social Contract* in order to reevaluate Agamben's claims.

*The Sovereign: Generality by Subtraction*

Rousseau's *Social Contract* inquires into the conditions of legitimacy of social order. The social compact is famously formed by the '[total] alienation of each associate, together with all of his rights, to the entire community. Since each person gives himself whole and entire, the condition is equal for everyone; and since this condition is equal for everyone, no one has an interest in making it burdensome for the others.' (Rousseau 1987: 148) The association is thus attained and sustained by the reciprocal alienation of all individuals from their 'persons and power' that constitutes the general will: 'each of us places his person and all his power in person under the supreme direction of the general will and as one we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole.' (Ibid.: 148) The 'public person' thus constituted receives the name 'city', 'republic' or 'body politic' and is called 'sovereign' when active, 'state' when passive, and 'power' when compared to others of its kind (ibid.). The associates that form this person are in turn called 'people', who are 'citizens' when participating in the sovereign authority and 'subjects' when subjected to the laws of the state (Ibid.). This conceptual structure sets up the key opposition in Rousseau's political thought: between the sovereignty of the republic and the government of the state, and, correspondingly, between citizens and subjects. In Agamben's argument, Rousseau ventures to articulate the two members of this opposition through his doctrine of emanations that is a secularized version of the providential economy of the Trinity. Let us revisit the way this articulation is produced in Rousseau's text.

For Rousseau, sovereignty is *inalienable* and hence the sovereign cannot be represented by anything but itself (ibid.: 153). Sovereignty is 'merely the exercise of the general will' (ibid.) and, while power can be transferred and delegated elsewhere, this is not the case with the will. It is

impossible for the people simply to will to obey some master in the future – such an act, were it to take place, would only dissolve the body politic as such. Secondly, sovereignty is *indivisible*: ‘it is either a will of the people as a whole or of only a part.’ (Rousseau 1987: 154) A will of the people of the whole is general, while the will of a part is ‘merely a private will or an act of magistracy. At most it is a decree.’ (Ibid.: 154) While it is clear how a will of the part of the people is merely private, it is notable that Rousseau also includes into this category acts of magistracy and decrees, i.e. governmental acts that, while not being strictly acts of the general will, are nonetheless in some relation with it. For Rousseau, confusion regarding the status of acts of magistracy results from the failure to distinguish between sovereign authority and governmental acts that are ‘merely emanations from it’ (ibid.: 155). This confusion leads to the perception of sovereignty as divisible into legislative and executive powers, domestic and foreign policy, etc. In fact, sovereignty is indivisible as the exercise of general will, while all particular acts of government emanate from this exercise even as they lack its generality.

Agamben interprets this passage as Rousseau’s attempt to transform the distinction between sovereignty and government into an articulation: ‘he forcefully denies that it is a case of division and presents it instead as an internal articulation of one indivisible supreme power’ (ibid.: 274). However, the denial of any division or divisibility within sovereignty does not dismantle the distinction between sovereignty and government, but actually highlights the *contrast* between them: there is inalienable and indivisible sovereign power on the one hand and then, on the other hand, there are numerous governmental powers and agencies, endlessly divisible into branches and departments that could never claim to represent the sovereign.

Rousseau fortifies the distinction even further when he discusses the characteristics of the general will that sovereign power consists in. Firstly, the general will can never be reduced to the *will of all*, which is the mere sum of private wills. The general will does not add these private wills up but rather ‘remove[s] from these same wills the pluses and minuses that cancel each other out’: what *remains* is then the general will. (Ibid.: 156) The criterion of generality is then the extent of *subtraction* from particular wills, which is why the will obtained from the large number of small differences that cancel each other out is more general than the will obtained from a small number of ‘partial associations’ (ibid.). In fact, these partial associations are the main adversary in Rousseau’s account of sovereignty, insofar as they perpetually threaten to undermine generality: ‘for the general will to be well articulated, it is therefore important that there should be no partial society in the state and that each citizen make up their own mind. If there are partial societies, their number must be multiplied and inequality among them prevented.’ (Ibid.)

The second specification of the general will is even more important. Rousseau argues that the general will ‘must be general in its object as well as in its essence; that it must derive from all in order to be applied to all, and that it loses its natural rectitude when it tends toward any individual, determinate object.’ (Ibid.: 157) If the will in question is merely applied generally while its object remains particular, we end up in a tyrannical situation of the domination of the particular will, which has nothing to do with Rousseau’s intention in *The Social Contract*, despite the widespread reading of Rousseau as a proto-totalitarian thinker (Talmon 1985. Cf. Cohen

2010: 34—37; Strong 2002: 79-85). The general will cannot refer to a particular object, about which it could and should have no particular opinion, having subtracted itself from all such objects. 'Just as a private will cannot represent the general will, the general will, for its part, alters its nature when it has a particular object, and as general, it is unable to render a decision on either a man or a state of affairs.' (Rousseau 1987: 157) In such a situation, the people no longer functions as sovereign but as magistrate, exercising a particular governmental function that, once again, emanates from the general will but remains decidedly distinct from it.

Since there can be no general will concerning a particular object, the object of *law*, which is sole prerogative of the sovereign for Rousseau, must always be general. To say that the object of the laws is general entails that the law 'considers subjects as a body and actions in the abstract, never a man as an individual or a particular action'. (Ibid.: 161) Thus, while a law can establish a monarchy, it cannot name a king. 'Any function that relates to an individual does not belong to legislative power.' (Ibid.) Law is thus constrained by the requirement of the dual universality of essence and object: what the sovereign declares regarding a particular object is not a law but a decree, and the sovereign is thereby not a sovereign in this very act but only a magistrate. Moreover, while such acts may be legitimate in principle, they cannot be confused with the exercise of general will, whose generality must rather be protected from the 'seduction of private wills' (ibid.: 162): 'the general will is always right but the judgment that guides it is not always enlightened.' (ibid.) At every moment of its exercise, sovereign authority must ceaselessly reflect on whether what it wills is general enough and whether it is indeed acting as a sovereign and has not already become a magistrate. We therefore find it difficult to agree with Agamben when he

argues that Rousseau 'minimizes the problem of [government's] nature and foundation, reducing it to the activity of execution of sovereign authority' (Agamben 2011: 276). On the contrary, execution remains a perpetual problem for sovereign authority, threatening at every point to undermine the generality that distinguishes it from the activity of government.

### *The Prince: A Dangerous Supplement*

Let us now proceed to the discussion of government in Book III of *The Social Contract*. Rousseau famously distinguishes between legislative and executive power as between two causes of every free action: the will that determines it and the power that executes it. While the will is exercised by the people as a whole and pertains only to general objects, executive power cannot belong to the people as a whole since it consists of 'particular acts that are not within the province of the law' (ibid.: 173). This power is to be exercised entirely in accordance with the general will but should never be confused with it, as it is merely the 'minister' of the latter (ibid.). 'The government is an intermediate body established between the subjects and the sovereign for their mutual communication and charged with the execution of the laws and the preservation of liberty, both civil and political.' (Ibid.) Since Rousseau previously defined the sovereign as the people in its *active* state and subjects as the people in their *passive* state, government is then nothing other than the intermediate between the people as active and the people as passive.

Rousseau labels the governmental body the *prince* and emphasizes that the submission to the prince can never be a matter of the social contract, but is only a *commission*, in which leaders

exercise the power given to them by the sovereign, even if the same sovereign has thereby transformed itself into the subject. The prince remains an emanation of the sovereign even as it rules it like a subject. Moreover, any confusion between the respective functions of the sovereign, the prince and the people inevitably leads the republic into ruin: 'If the sovereign wishes to govern, or if the magistrate wishes to give laws, or if the subjects refuse to obey, disorder replaces rule, force and will no longer act in concert, and thus the state dissolves and falls into despotism or anarchy.' (Ibid.: 174) We must note that while the latter two options are quite self-evident, magistrates giving laws leading to despotism and the people's refusal to obey leading to disorder, the sovereign's wish to govern is a rather more ambiguous case, because it does not seem to necessarily lead to either outcome. Moreover, we have already seen that the sovereign *can* in fact govern, the only difference being that its acts of government do not take the form of law but remain decrees. Indeed, one of the forms of government identified by Rousseau, namely democracy, is based precisely on this *identity* between sovereign and prince (ibid.: 179).

While at first glance democracy appears a sensible way to govern, since 'he who makes the law knows better than anyone else how it should be executed and interpreted' (ibid.: 179), this advantage turns out to be problematic, 'since things that should be distinguished are not' (ibid.). Democracy is problematic insofar as it establishes an excessive proximity between the sovereign and the prince, in which the risk of the contamination of the general will by particular interests is amplified: '[It] is not good for the body of the people to turn its attention away from general perspectives in order to give it particular objects. Nothing is more dangerous than the influence



of private interests on public affairs, and the abuse of the laws by the government is a lesser evil than the corruption of the legislator, which is the inevitable outcome of particular perspectives.’ (Ibid.) The risk of the corruption of the general will is so great that Rousseau is even willing to admit a greater separation of and even a degree of independence of government from the sovereign to avoid this. As we shall see below, a sovereign people can easily depose a corrupt government simply by assembling and manifesting its presence. Yet, if the people itself becomes corrupted by particular interests, there is no longer anyone to depose it and set things right. Since government is inherently problematic, it is better to let it become or remain corrupt than threaten the corruption of the sovereign by its proximity to it.

Thus, the tension between the two principles of sovereignty and government is, contrary to Agamben’s accusation, presented quite explicitly by Rousseau without any attempt to ‘carefully minimize it’. On the contrary, the paradoxical character of the relationship is remarked on repeatedly: the prince emanates from the sovereign but must remain distinct from it; it only executes the will of the sovereign but cannot determine it. What Rousseau wishes to preserve, even at the cost of a corrupt government, is the generality of the sovereign will, which is attained through the subtraction from all particular content. The problem with government is that its agent, being a particular person or group thereof, is always at the risk of contaminating or perverting this generality: ‘As soon as he wants to derive from himself some absolute and independent act, the bond that links everything together begins to come loose.’ (Ibid.: 176)

And yet, it is impossible to do without a prince – a particular self, individual or collective, that would be distinct from the state as a whole, even as it remains subordinate to it. The sovereign, which exercises legislative power by general will, cannot be endowed with the task of governing ‘by means of particular acts’, since this would immediately dissolve its generality: ‘Were it possible for the sovereign considered as such, to have the executive power, right and fact would be so completely confounded that we would no longer know what is law and what is not.’ (Ibid.: 200) Government is something ‘naturally separate’ from the sovereign (ibid.) and yet essential for the state, which would otherwise relapse into the state of nature that it left by virtue of the social contract. In short, government is an essential *supplement* to the popular sovereignty expressed in law.

For the body of the government to have an existence, a real life that distinguishes it from the body of the state, and for all its members to act in concert and to fulfil the purpose for which it is instituted, there must be a particular self, a sensibility common to all its members, a force or will of its own that tends towards its preservation. This particular existence presupposes assemblies, councils, a power to deliberate and decide, rights, titles and privileges that belong exclusively to the prince and that render the condition of the magistrate more honorable in proportion as it is more onerous. (Ibid.: 176)

Yet, as we know from Derrida’s reading of Rousseau (1998: 141-163), all supplements are dangerous. Rather than be a simple and unproblematic emanation of the general will,

government is inherently opposed to the sovereign that authorizes it: 'Just as the private will acts constantly against the general will, so the government makes a continual effort against sovereignty. The more this effort increases, the more the constitution is altered.' (Rousseau 1998: 176)

For Rousseau, there are two ways in which the constitution may be altered in a degenerative way, by *shrinking* and by the *dissolution* of the state. The shrinking of the state refers to the passage from democracy to aristocracy and, finally, to monarchy, in the course of which corporate and private wills acquire greater strength at the expense of the general will. The dissolution of the state can in turn take two forms. Firstly, the prince may *usurp* sovereign power, which entails the dissolution of the social compact, since for the people the government is now a mere tyrant, which they are 'forced but not obliged to obey' (ibid.: 193). Secondly, the state dissolves when the members of the government usurp *individually* the power they should only exercise as a collective prince. While in the former case the corporate will of the prince triumphs over the general will, in the latter case the private will of the persons composing the prince dominates over both the corporate will of the prince and the general will, leading to the dissolution of the state, its degeneration into the negative correlate of its form: ochlocracy, oligarchy or despotism (usurpation of general will) and tyranny (usurpation of princely power) (ibid.: 193-194). In all these cases, states perish because of the domination of the universal and the general by the particular and the private.

For Rousseau, this is a 'natural and inevitable' tendency that cannot be eradicated but can at least be mitigated by giving the state the best possible constitution that maintains its sovereign authority. It is therefore not the laws themselves but the legislative *power* that sustains the state (ibid.: 194). For this reason, to maintain itself, sovereign authority must *manifest* itself in the assembly of the people as a whole. However impractical or outright chimerical this might seem, for Rousseau the manifestation of the sovereign must be regular and periodic. It is not enough for the people to assemble only once to establish a government, which, as we have seen, is inherently driven to overstep its boundaries and usurp sovereign power. Hence Rousseau's general principle that 'the more force a government has, the more frequently the sovereign ought to show itself.' (Ibid.: 196) Contrary to Agamben, the problematic relationship between sovereignty and government is never claimed to be definitively resolved through the doctrine of emanations but remains the source of danger for the state and the prime cause of its degradation. If it was the 'opposition of private interests [that] made necessary the establishment of societies' (ibid.: 153), then the resurgence of these private interests in government threatens the very existence of these societies.

In his interpretation of Rousseau's thought as the precursor to contemporary theories of radical democracy, Kevin Inston (2010) sought to interpret this problematic relationship between sovereignty and government as a fruitful tension, animating democracy as a necessarily imperfect yet infinitely perfectible experiment at reconciling the universality of sovereignty with the particularity of government. In line with Laclau's theory of hegemony (Laclau 2005: 107-165), Inston approaches the universal as non-existent, an *empty* category that is filled with particular

content in the operation of hegemonic articulation (Inston 2010: 125-126). For this reason, the subtractive logic that we have reconstituted in Rousseau's text would make very little sense in Inston's theory: if hegemony is all there is in political life, why worry about protecting the general will from the particular acts that must have necessarily constituted it in the first place? Instead, politics should proceed through the perpetual reactivation of the tension between the universal and the particular, whereby governmental acts emanate from the sovereign people without abolishing the distance between the two.

Yet, as we have shown, Rousseau's own approach is rather different due to his insistence that the general will must be general both in object and in essence, that it must derive *from* all to be applied *to* all. Due to his points of departure in Laclau's theory Inston rejects the possibility of universality 'in object', that arises 'from all' and is not merely applied *to* all as a matter of hegemony. Yet, for Rousseau such a universality clearly exists, whenever the sovereign people assembles and manifests itself. The universal is *not* for him an empty category filled with particular content but a real existential condition attained by the subtraction from such content. This is why it makes perfect sense for Rousseau to envision politics as a defense of this universality against all attempts at its capture by hegemonic particular contents. While, as we shall argue below, such a project may be criticized as naïve, utopian or impractical, it is certainly distinct from the 'radical-democratic' vision of open and pluralistic contestation of the empty space of the universal by rival hegemonic projects.

This brief reprisal of the relation between sovereignty and government in Rousseau's thought demonstrates that, *pace* Agamben's accusation, Rousseau was neither unaware of the problematic relationship between the two nor ventured to conceal this problem through his doctrine of emanation. While for Agamben Rousseau's doctrine of emanation testifies to a fundamental misunderstanding of the operation of government, it is also possible to view it as a purposeful, though not necessarily a successful, strategy to *minimize* the autonomous force of government, which, as Rousseau clearly recognized, remains fundamentally heterogeneous to the sovereignty of the general will insofar as it deals with particular goods and persons and their particular interests. Precisely because government, with its contingent rationalities and actions with no foundation in the universality of the general will, threatens at every point to contaminate and corrupt the republic, it must be simultaneously downgraded in its importance and rendered dependent on sovereign authority. Nonetheless, as we recall, Rousseau also recognized that the relative autonomization of the prince from the sovereign was a better outcome than the corruption of the sovereign by the prince. For this reason, while government was to be subordinated to the sovereign, it could not be kept *too* close to it – hence, for him, the danger of democracy as a form of government in which sovereign and prince become indistinct (ibid.: 179-180). The idea of emanation is then a compromise between the autonomy of government that resigns us to despotism and its complete dissolution in the sovereign that threatens to corrupt the latter. The eventual triumph of executive over legislative power that Agamben quite plausibly diagnoses in late-modern politics may then be not an effect of this compromise solution but a simple indication of its *defeat* that proves that Rousseau's fears of partial societies and particular interests were in fact well-founded.

We have thus far demonstrated that the relation between sovereignty and government that Agamben reconstructs in his genealogy is also already perceived as problematic in Rousseau's argument, bringing the two authors somewhat closer together. The next step in our argument will bring them closer still by engaging with Rousseau's *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. While the autobiographical and personal character of this text entailed its far less frequent discussion in the context of political theory, it is highly significant for understanding Rousseau's ethico-political thought. Moreover, to recall Derrida (1998: 160), it is difficult to separate Rousseau's corpus into literary and philosophical categories, since it is rather exemplifies a singular form of 'philosophical literature' to which theoretical texts like *The Social Contract*, novels like *The New Heloise* or autobiographical reflections like *The Reveries* belong with equal right. The latter text is particularly important for our purposes, as it demonstrates the operation of the subtractive logic in what at first glance appears an entirely different context of individual experience. In the following section we shall contest Peter Sloterdijk's reading of the two texts as offering entirely opposed notions of freedom and instead argue that both texts affirm the same aspect of the human condition, i.e. our generic being, against all particular determinations. We shall then demonstrate that Agamben's own attempt to do away with Rousseau's 'inheritance' is marked by the same affirmation of generic, 'whatever' being and therefore ends up reproducing the same problems that characterize Rousseau's approach.

### *The Importance of Being Inoperative*

In the chapter 'Fifth Walk' of his *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* Rousseau describes his experience of rowing out onto Lake Biel and surrendering to a reverie, letting his mind drift for hours without any object or content. 'I let myself float and drift wherever the water took me, often for several hours on end, plunged in a host of vague yet delightful reveries, which though they had no distinct or permanent subject, were still in my eyes infinitely to be preferred to all that I had found most sweet in the so-called pleasures of life.' (Rousseau 2004: 85) Reverie makes it possible for him to contemplate being itself in its pure duration, 'the simple feeling of existence', 'unmixed with any other emotion', in which 'one is self-sufficient like God' (ibid.: 88-89).

In his *Stress and Freedom*, Peter Sloterdijk draws a sharp contrast between Rousseau's theory of the social contract and his meditations in the *Reveries*. While the *Social Contract* valorized active manifestation of the sovereignty of the people, the experience that Rousseau affirms in the *Reveries* consists solely in the individual enjoyment of the sheer facticity of one's existence subtracted from all worldly concerns. For Sloterdijk, the latter approach is infinitely preferable to the former: 'Rousseau should have retracted his doctrine of *volonte generale* in the light of his experience on Lake Biel. His failure to do so was disastrous for the modern world.' (Sloterdijk 2015: 49)

Since he remains committed to the proto-totalitarian interpretation of the *Social Contract*, Sloterdijk views the two texts as diametrically opposed in their intention: while the *Social Contract* is about the subjection of the individual to the collective, the *Reveries* are about the



liberation of the former from the latter. '[Probably] for the first time on European soil, an experience of freedom was expressed in which the subject of freedom refers exclusively to his felt existence, beyond all achievements and obligations, and also beyond possible ambitions to be recognized by others. By experiencing the feeling of pure existence, it believes it has acquired a sovereign title of being.' (Ibid.: 21)

This reference to sovereignty appears to undermine Sloterdijk's attempt to present the arguments of *Social Contract* and the *Reveries* as diametrical opposites. The solitary walker is not simply liberated from the sovereign people but is *itself* sovereign, and its sovereignty is defined in the same terms we have discussed above with reference to the constitution of the sovereignty of the people, i.e. by subtraction from all particular content, be it collective or individual, public or private: '[Freedom] refers to a state of exquisite unusability in which the individual is entirely with themselves, but mostly detached from their everyday identity. In the freedom of reverie, the individual is far removed from 'society' but also detached from their own person as woven into the social fabric. They leave both things behind: the world of collective themes of concern and themselves as part of it.' (Ibid.: 22). Rather than liberate the individual from the collective, the freedom of reverie liberates existence itself from both individual and collective identities, leading one to 'discover a sublime unemployment within themselves, without having to report to an employment agency' (Ibid.).

As we have argued in the previous section, Rousseau's sovereign people is just as 'unemployed' as solitary walkers, since it has been constituted in the act of reciprocal alienation, whereby

individuals disengaged themselves from the 'social fabric' and their own identity as 'woven' into it. We are accustomed to reading *The Social Contract* as the affirmation of popular participation in politics against all forms of representation, delegation and 'serving with one's wallet' (Rousseau 1987: 197). Yet, the obverse of this affirmation is the restriction of this participation to the periodic assembly of the people that manifests its existence (Rousseau 1987: 195-196). Badiou's definition of Rousseau's politics as affirming 'existence of the people' is therefore highly precise, as there is little else that the sovereign can affirm by showing itself without risking to lapse into one of its particularistic emanations. The participatory activity affirmed by Rousseau is thus of a very specific kind that easily translates into the kind of inoperative attunement that characterizes one's pursuit of reverie. By insisting on its pure existence, the people claims for itself a 'sovereign title of being'.

The constitution of the subject of reverie and the constitution of the sovereign people thus appear to follow the same logic of the *subtraction from the particular*, in the first case towards the *singular* and in the second case towards the *universal*. Subtraction is an important methodological tool in Rousseau's thought more generally. His well-known account of the state of nature is produced entirely by the subtraction of all social content from the human being, which makes it possible to conceive of what the natural condition of humanity *would have been* (see Neidleman 2017: 20; Inston 2010: 17-19; Strong 2002: 83-85; Cooper 1999: 37-65). Similarly, subtraction is essential to Rousseau's epistemology, as his idea of truth is attained by subtracting from abstract metaphysical claims, received wisdom and the opinions of others: 'accessing the truth is much more a matter of subtraction than of addition. Rather than add to the repository

of human knowledge, Rousseau tried to uncover truths that have been obscured by the vast accumulation of human cogitation.’ (Neidleman 2017: 66)

Subtraction is also central to those contemporary experiences that, as it were, bring the human being closest to its natural condition: the retreat into reverie and the gathering into community (cf. Cooper 1999: 12-13). In the first case, one withdraws from the societal realm of identities and differences in order to enjoy the sweetness of one’s bare existence. In the second, one withdraws from the *same* realm together with others in order to manifest the existence of the community in general, without these identities and differences dividing it from within. At first glance, the two directions are diametrically opposed, leading to the ‘bipolar’ reading of Rousseau as affirming at once (or in different texts) both solitude and community, or, as in Sloterdijk’s reading, both the individual and the collective (cf. Neidleman 2017: 24-25). Yet, this opposition is only apparent. As Heidegger has famously argued with regard to the concept of being, ‘being is most universal, encountered in every being, and is therefore most common; it has lost every distinction, or never possessed any. At the same time, being is the most singular, whose uniqueness cannot be attained by any being whatever.’ (Heidegger 1991: 192) The alliance of the universal (being) and the singular (*my* being) against the particular is thus neither incoherent nor paradoxical but fully warranted from an ontological perspective. After all, what Rousseau enjoys in the boat on Lake Biel is his *own* existence, not existence as such. What Rousseau’s people affirms when it assembles is similarly its own existence as a singular people: Corsicans, Poles, etc. The godlike self-sufficiency experienced in the reverie is parallel to the self-sufficiency of the general will that is indivisible, inalienable and indestructible. For all their evident differences, the

solitary walker and the sovereign people are constituted in the same manner and manifest themselves in the same way. Contrary to Sloterdijk, there is no need for Rousseau to retract his doctrine of the general will in the light of his experience on Lake Biel, since both this doctrine and his reverie affirm the very same aspect of the human condition, i.e. *generic being* that is subtracted from all particular determinations yet remains irreducible one's own.

This is the aspect of Rousseau's thought that resonates most strongly with Agamben's political philosophy. Starting from his first explicitly political works of the early 1990s, such as *The Coming Community* and *Means without End* (Agamben 2000: 11; 1993: 1-3, 93-96), Agamben affirmed the same idea of a generic and inoperative 'whatever being' as a resolution of the dualism of universalism and particularism that paves the way for a new kind of political community: '[Politics] is that which corresponds to the essential inoperability of humankind, to the radical being-without-work of human communities. Politics might be nothing other than the exposition of humankind's absence of work as well as the exposition of humankind's creative semi-indifference to any task, and might only in this sense remain integrally assigned to happiness.' (Agamben 2000: 141-142) While Agamben never discusses Rousseau's *Reveries* aside from a brief gloss on the experience of the loss of consciousness in *Infancy and History* (2007: 45-47), the solitary walker, who, to recall Sloterdijk's description, is characterized by 'exquisite unusability' and 'sublime unemployment', appears to be a perfect paradigm of this inoperative politics. After all, Agamben's coming community of 'whatever singularities', subtracted from every particular identitarian predicate, similarly manifests itself precisely in the affirmation of its sheer existence, just as the general will of the sovereign people or the carefree freedom of the daydreamer.

Finally, the elliptical notion of a 'form of life that is exhausted in bare life and a *bios* that is only its own *zoe*' (Agamben 1998: 188) that concludes the first volume of the *Homo Sacer* series becomes more intelligible when read alongside Rousseau's account of reverie as the enjoyment of the feeling of existence itself, 'unmixed with any other emotion', which in turn is structurally analogous to the manifestation of the sovereign people in its pure presence, which renders void its particular emanations.

From this perspective, even the evident differences between the two authors begin to appear in a different light. For example, Rousseau's valorization of voluntarism is at first glance clearly contradicted by Agamben's rejection of the very idea of will (see Agamben 2018: 43-58). Yet, it is important to bear in mind that Rousseau's will remains under the injunction of willing only the general while subtracting all particular content, so that Rousseau is able to say that the entire content of general will 'boils down to the two principal objects, liberty and equality' (Rousseau 1987: 170). Conversely, references to willing or wanting abound in Agamben's texts despite his emphatic rejection of the idea of will. In fact, the very notion of whatever being contains a 'reference to the will (*libet*)' (Agamben 1993: 1) in its Latin version (*quodlibet ens*) and Agamben's explication of this notion through the example of love repeatedly makes use of this reference: '[The] singularity exposed as such is whatever you *want*, that is, lovable. The lover *wants* the loved one with all of its predicates, its being such as it is' (Agamben 1993: 2. Emphasis added.). Similarly to Rousseau, this wanting or willing is restricted to a subtractive mode of existence in which particular predicates are not eliminated, but, precisely by virtue of being taken up *all at once* without discrimination, 'cancel each other out', leaving us with a being that is truly

whatever. It is therefore hardly surprising that Agamben concludes *The Coming Community* with the example of Tiananmen protests, a paradigmatically Rousseauan assembly of whatever singularities that '*wants to appropriate belonging itself, [and] thus rejects all identity and every condition of belonging, peacefully demonstrating their being in common*' (Agamben 1993: 87. Emphasis added.).

We must therefore conclude that rather than overcome Rousseau Agamben continues and radicalizes his approach. Having learned the lesson from the failure of Rousseau's doctrine of emanations to contain the growth and extension of government, Agamben tries to avoid this risk by going *one step further* in the process of subtraction. While Rousseau vainly sought to oppose the *constituent* power of the general will to the *constituted* power of government, Agamben insists that the constituent power of the new sovereign remains inseparable from the constituted power of government that appears to emanate from it despite its best intentions. In the 'bipolar machine of sovereignty-government the first pole cannot but ceaselessly generate the second and every attempt at a revolutionary, emancipatory and egalitarian politics of constituent power inevitably ended up corrupted by its particularistic emanations in the constituted power of government: 'Politics has suffered a lasting eclipse because it has been contaminated by law, seeing itself, at best, as constituent power (that is, violence that makes law), when it is not reduced to merely the power to negotiate with the law. The only truly political action, however, is that, which severs the nexus between violence and law.' (Agamben 2005: 88)

This is why in the final volume of his *Homo Sacer* series Agamben develops an alternative concept of *destituent* power, a power that unworks itself in every constitution and renders itself inoperative in its every operation (Agamben 2016: 263-279). While Rousseau's project was plagued by the corruption of sovereignty by its emanations, Agamben's intention is to formulate something like a concept of sovereignty that would be able to *hold off* its own emanations, resist its own exhaustion in the constituted orders of government, law, economy or police. Of course, as the example of Tiananmen suggests, such a concept can only be formulated by dissociating sovereignty from constitution altogether, so that the being in common of whatever singularities remains 'radically devoid of any representable identity' and hence 'absolutely irrelevant to the state' (Agamben 1993: 86). While Rousseau's affirmation of sovereignty over government maintained the bipolar machine in force, Agamben's destituent sovereignty would bring it to a halt, without at the same time constituting any 'unipolar' machine in its stead. While we may debate whether this destituent power still merits the name of sovereignty or, as Agamben might prefer, is entirely outside its concept, this passage *beyond* Rousseau nonetheless advances in the same *direction* of subtraction, living off Rousseau's legacy even as it chooses to take distance from the author himself.

Approaching Agamben's political thought as a radicalization of Rousseau's project permits us to understand and appreciate the vehemence of his opposition to the late-modern tendency of the expansion and intensification of government, and particularly biopolitical government that seeks to manage the very existence of the people as an object reduced to its vital processes. What was the very site of freedom in Rousseau's *Reveries* turns into the prime site of subjection. Where the

solitary walker could enjoy the sweetness of its existence subtracted from worldly cares and concerns, it is now this existence itself that is at the risk of being subjected to particular governmental rationalities. Furthermore, this subjection is never merely a matter of domination but also a result of temptation, since our existence is at every moment incited to give itself a particular form, to suspend its reverie and engage in the cultivation of a specific form of life, whatever this might be: entrepreneurship, dance, yoga, gardening, science, karate, poetry, etc. With these particular forms of life come particular identities and interests, which wrest the subject away from its generic existence as individual or part of the body politic. The wilful dispersion of our existence into a plurality of particular forms of life is thus unwittingly in collusion with the governmental domination which operates through these very forms. Given the intensification of power over life and the veritable explosion in particular forms of life in late-modern society, the stakes are even higher today than in Rousseau's lifetime, which explains the urgency and intensity of the critique of government in Agamben's thought that could otherwise be easily mistaken for an overly agitated libertarianism.

The reading of Agamben's politics as a radicalization of Rousseau also permits us to identify the limits of this solution. Having consistently subtracted every particular predicate from both individual and collective existence, Rousseau and Agamben both end up with the notion of the subject that is only authentically itself as long as it is wholly exhausted in the manifestation and enjoyment of its existence. The more this subject *engages* with the world, including the resistance to its partial and particularistic forces, the more the risk of particularism creeping in and perverting the universal. One can only be truly sovereign by reclaiming and manifesting one's



generic essence by *dis-engaging* from the plural and particular apparatuses of government. Yet, this means that the only act that is legitimate in this scheme is the subtractive move that may take the form of a humble refusal, a grand exodus or a general strike, but must not go further than that, if it is to avoid its conversion into a new form of order at the very moment of the subtraction from the old one. The only way to be consistently radical is to be entirely inoperative.

### *Conclusion*

We have argued that rather than merely undertake a thoughtless or purposefully occlusive secularization of the providential economy, Rousseau's thought inaugurates a critique of government that affirms a subtractive mode of subjectivity, exemplified by the sovereign people of the *Social Contract* and the solitary walker of the *Reveries*. This subtractive subject, devoid of identitarian determinations, is also a key figure in Agamben's own attempt to theorize political community in destituent and inoperative terms. The purpose of this reading is neither to rehabilitate Rousseau nor to criticize Agamben but to trace the implication of critical discourse in the very logic that it criticizes and thereby illuminate the complexity of the problem that remains even more urgent today than it was in Rousseau's time.

If neither Rousseau nor Agamben manages to resolve the problem of government through the logic of subtraction, then any search for an alternative resolution must begin by critically reevaluating this logic itself. In his discussion of Rousseau's cosmopolitanism, Jason Neidleman interprets this withdrawal as temporary, a retreat from the debased society, which allows one to

once again appreciate simple and universal truths: 'Reverie accesses universal truths not through the study of particularity but directly, as it were, through the contemplation of what is universal' (Neidleman 2012: 91-92). In much the same way, the valorization of the people in the *Social Contract* seeks to access the universality of the general will directly, through the subtraction from all things particular and the manifestation of the people in their freedom and equality. Neidleman concludes the discussion on a sceptical if still hopeful note: '[It] is possible that, in reverie, Rousseau so abstracted away from actually existing human beings that the ones he came to love existed only in his imagination. It may be that reverie is too detached, too apolitical, too cosmopolitan to permit a return to civic life. However, if we are able to return, we will do so accompanied by a deeply felt set of moral convictions.' (Ibid., 92)

By the same token, contemporary Rousseauism, whether explicit as Badiou's or implicit as Agamben's, continues to oppose a generic and inoperative mode of existence to a plurality of trivial and inauthentic forms of life, thereby risking becoming so separated from these forms of life as to be entirely irrelevant for them. It is difficult to imagine how this subtractive subject could possibly return to 'civic life' and what it offer it, other than disdainful condemnation of the trivialities it would observe there: Agamben's infamous tirade against mobile phones and their users is a case in point (Agamben 2009: 16-17). The machine of the government of the living thereby ends up paradoxically sustained by the invocation of the new sovereign in the form of the faithful generic subject or inoperative singularities, which reign, if only in their reveries, strictly on the condition that they abandon the terrain of government. Bringing this machine to a halt would require the very opposite of subtraction, i.e. the supplementation of the particular

by the universal, which would bring genericity and inoperativity *within* particular forms of life themselves.

In Agamben's late work, particularly *The Use of Bodies*, we may observe a subtle shift from subtraction towards supplementation. In this book Agamben clarifies the relation of his concept of form-of-life to the myriad of particular forms of life all around us, emphasizing that it is not a matter of offering some specific, new, hitherto unheard of practice as an *alternative* to the existing or predominant forms: '[It] is not a matter of thinking a better or more authentic form of life, a superior principle, or an elsewhere that suddenly arrives at forms of life and factual vocations to revoke them and render them inoperative.' (Agamben 2016: 277) It is instead a matter of adopting a different perspective on something entirely familiar and banal - quite simply, our habits, hobbies, tastes, manners, quirks, which Agamben's earlier works often tended to dismiss as senseless, vain and inauthentic (Agamben 1993: 63-65; 2009a: 71). Agamben suggests, following Kafka, that 'it is not justice or beauty that moves us but the mode that each one has of being just or beautiful, of being affected by her beauty or her justice. For this reason, even abjection can be innocent, even 'something slightly disgusting' can move us' (Agamben 2016: 232). To constitute a form-of-life out of a form of life we need not abandon any of our current forms of life for something generic and inoperative, 'a *bios* that is only its own *zoe*' (Agamben 1998: 188), but can rather live these very familiar forms *otherwise* than we have tended to.

What is affirmed is thus not any specific form but only the *manner* in which any form whatsoever could be lived. In *The Fire and The Tale* Agamben contrasts manner and style in the following way: 'in any good writer, in any artist, there is always a manner that takes its distance from the style, a style that disappropriates itself as manner.' (Agamben 2017: 9) Similarly, in the *Use of Bodies* style marks the 'most proper trait' of a poetic gesture and manner 'registers an inverse demand for expropriation and non-belonging' (Agamben 2016: 86-87). Whereas style designates a consistent model that defines a form of life in its recognizable and repeatable identity, manner refers to the failure or refusal to fully appropriate or identify with this model, a slight deviation from identity that introduces an element of destitution into what constitutes a style.

Understanding genericity or inoperativity as manner rather than style ensures that it does not consolidate into an identity subtracted from and opposed to others but rather remains in play within these identities and forms. It is not then a matter of a withdrawal from society in the hope of a purified return in the future, but rather of bringing the destituent aspect of reverie into social praxis itself. Rather than venture to keep the sovereign community of solitary walkers safe from contamination by the acts of government undertaken in their name, one must risk the destitution of government itself and the myriad forms of life it authorizes and regulates by the inoperativity that defines the sovereign. Only in this manner will sovereignty and government become truly indistinct and the legacy of Rousseau's subtractive politics could be finally laid to rest.

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