

JYU DISSERTATIONS 698

Katarina Sjöblom

Politics as Activity

**Praxis, Poiēsis, and Beyond
in the Work of Giorgio Agamben**



UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND
SOCIAL SCIENCES

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ABSTRACT

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The dissertation investigates what politics is as an activity. The background of this exploration is in the classical Greek distinction between *praxis* and *poiēsis*, action and production, which still influences the Western understanding of politics. More specifically, and with a focus on late modern and contemporary political thought, the study explores whether political action might transcend this classical framework. This situates the thesis in the context of theoretical debates from the last few decades that address the problematic status of Western politics. Politics has been perceived to be threatened, for instance, by economic rationalities or ethical principles; overall, this literature concerns the process of rethinking and reinvigorating politics of 'the political.' This study contributes to these debates by focusing on politics as an activity. In this task, the point of departure is Giorgio Agamben's claim that his politics of *gesture* implies a type of activity that is different from both *praxis* and *poiēsis*. Exploring this claim in more detail, the dissertation comprises engagements with Agamben's key interlocutors, Alexandre Kojève and Hannah Arendt, who are approached as paradigmatic examples of poietic and practical conceptions of politics in this study. The main argument of this study is that Agamben's alternative type of action is best understood as an activity performed on the other two paradigms. Politics is neither *praxis* nor *poiēsis* in their pure forms; rather, both types of activity include their other and depend on this alterity. This finding is further interpreted by addressing Agamben's concept of *gesture* in the context of the theories of performativity developed by J.L. Austin, Jacques Derrida, and Judith Butler. The study concludes with a discussion of how the findings of this study could be applied beyond the action-production framework, such as in analyses of contemporary forms of identity politics.

Keywords: *gesture*, Agamben, Arendt, Kojève, *praxis*, *poiēsis*, political action, political activity

TIIVISTELMÄ (ABSTRACT IN FINNISH)

Sjöblom, Katarina

Politiikka aktiviteettina: Praxis, poiësis ja eleellisyys Giorgio Agambenin ajattelussa

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Tutkimuksessa analysoidaan, mitä politiikka on aktiviteettina. Kysymyksen lähtökohta on antiikin Kreikasta periytyvä ja länsimaisessa poliittisessa ajattelussa edelleen vaikuttava jako kahteen eri aktiviteettiin, toimintaan (*praxis*) ja tuottamiseen (*poiësis*). Väitöskirjassa tarkastellaan näille vaihtohtoisen aktiviteetin mahdollisuutta keskittymällä myöhäismoderniin ja nykyaikaiseen poliittiseen teoriaan. Tämä kysymyksenasettelu asettuu viime vuosikymmeninä käytyyn teoreettiseen keskusteluun politiikan ongelmallisesta tilasta. On esimerkiksi esitetty, että taloudelliset tai eettiset periaatteet uhkaavat politiikkaa ja sille ominaisia toimintatapoja. Kyseisen kirjallisuuden yleisluonteinen tehtävä onkin ollut politiikan tai "poliittisen" uudelleenajattelu ja elävöittäminen. Tutkimus osallistuu tähän keskusteluun rajaamalla tarkastelun politiikkaan aktiviteettina. Analyysi lähtee liikkeelle italialaisfilosofi Giorgio Agambenin muotoilemasta eleen (it. *gesto*, engl. *gesture*) käsitteestä, jolla hän viittaa toiminnasta ja tuottamisesta erilliseen poliittisen toiminnan tyyppiin. Väitteen tarkemmassa tarkastelussa analysoidaan Hannah Arendtin ja Alexandre Kojèven poliittista ajattelua. Arendt ja Kojève ovat Agambenin keskeisiä keskustelukumppaneita ja he toimivat tässä tutkimuksessa tyyppiesimerkkeinä toimintaa ja tuottamista korostavista politiikkakäsityksistä. Väitöskirjan keskeinen väite on, että Agambenin vaihtohtoinen tyyppi on toimintaa, joka kohdistuu kahteen klassiseen aktiviteettiin. Politiikka ei ole puhdasta *praxista* eikä puhdasta *poiësisista*, vaan kummatkin sisältävät oman vastakohtansa ja ovat riippuvaisia tästä toiseudesta. Tätä löydöstä vahvistaa eleellisyyden analysointi suhteessa performatiivisuuden käsitteeseen; tässä yhteydessä verrataan Agambenin eleen politiikkaa J.L. Austinin, Jacques Derridan ja Judith Butlerin performatiivisuuden teorioihin. Lopuksi esitetään, että tutkimuksen löydöksiä voi hyödyntää *praxis-poiësis*-jaosta irrallisena, esimerkiksi identiteettipolitiikan analyysissä.

Avainsanat: gesture, Agamben, Arendt, Kojève, *praxis*, *poiësis*, poliittinen toiminta, poliittinen aktiviteetti, ele, eleellisyys

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ABSTRACT

TIIVISTELMÄ

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 From sector to activity

Any study of politics, whether empirically or theoretically oriented, always presupposes and further contributes to a certain understanding of what politics is and what its study amounts to. If politics is approached as an activity, one of the clearest dividing lines between Western conceptions of politics runs between action and production. That is, at least since antiquity, the Western tradition has known of two different kinds of political activity: politics as a type of *doing*, action with no external end, and politics as a type of *making*, action that produces something in addition to the activity itself. Following the former kind, political action may be pictured in the image of deliberation and persuasion manifesting at various sites, such as parliaments, townhall meetings, public protests, and election debates. Politics is, on this understanding, action at work, the process of politics in its very formation and enactment. According to the latter paradigm, in turn, an emphasis on producing various ends or bringing something into existence is more clearly present. When we envision how to create this or that kind of world, or expect political institutions to produce welfare or other goods, we are moving in this register. What is central to this conception is that politics is treated as a type of production – action that is always instrumental with respect to the product it brings about.

These two types of activity may well be found in one and the same institution. A parliament, for instance, engages in both deliberation and law-making, just as a government produces things like welfare and workplaces, but also administers affairs in a manner that can be devoid of any clear product. It is the contention and starting point of this study that these two distinct kinds of activity still operate in the Western understanding of politics – and thus, any study of politics that adopts a focus on activity must necessarily address and take this classical frame of reference into consideration. Presented in more detail in

the following section, this distinction takes root in the classical Greek distinction between *praxis* (action) and *poiēsis* (production).

The focus on *activity* demarcates this study from investigations that are rooted in an understanding of politics as a particular *sector* or *sphere* in society. A wide range of political research moves within the confines of a sectorial understanding of politics. Policy analyses, studies of electoral behavior and party politics, as well as various schools of structuralist thought, tend to center around the 'traditional' arenas of politics, such as parliaments, governments, and national elections. In such scholarship, the specific nature and kind of political activity has generally remained a superfluous question, and the conception of what politics is as an activity often works as an implicit background assumption that is not brought under analysis as such.

By contrast, the activity-oriented conception is relatively detached from a sectorial understanding of politics in the strict sense. As Kari Palonen (2006) has showed in his conceptual-historical work, the activity-oriented understanding of politics, while remaining rooted in the description of activities of professional politicians, also allows us to understand activities more generally in political terms. As Palonen suggests, activities outside the proper decision-making apparatus may also be qualified as political or understood in political terms: debate, contestation, and judging matters from different perspectives can occur both inside and outside the 'official' sphere of politics. Thus, what is crucial from an activity-oriented perspective is neither the sphere nor the content of politics, but rather the different qualities or aspects that make an activity political.

While this study neither proceeds from nor provides a conceptual history of politics as an activity, we largely share this general outlook on a certain primacy of activity over its precise location or content. As an important clarification, however, our focus on politics as an activity is not intended as a direct opposition to or a critique of a sectorial conception; it is rather a question of extracting the layer of activity that in any case must belong to it. This move allows for a closer examination of its precise nature; as it is argued below, this approach also allows for an analysis of theories and discourses on politics that otherwise do not deal explicitly with the question of activity.

But precisely, why do we need an analysis of politics as an activity? A general disadvantage of a sectorial understanding of politics is that if we focus solely on institutional forms of politics, we risk losing sight of the richer texture of politically meaningful phenomena that occur outside the traditional 'corridors of power.' These phenomena could be anything from concepts and lifestyles to discourses and attitudes, which all may affect or be affected by institutional politics. Expressed in very simple terms, there is evidently more to politics than politicians, calling upon a step beyond the sphere-like understanding of politics. Such reflections are rooted in what is sometimes described as a broad conception of politics. By positioning oneself as an adopter of a 'broad' conception of politics, a political researcher typically implies a move from the center to the margins, going from a narrow view to a wide conception of politics. This may, for example, serve the purpose of justifying investigations of phenomena that are

conventionally seen as marginal or even irrelevant for politics, such as sports, art, or cultural life in general. It may also be a general component in analyzing or arguing for democratic models that emphasize the importance of a large mobilization of citizens – such models often go under names like direct, participatory, or deliberative democracy. In both cases, the underlying argument is that by letting go of a narrow and sector-like conception of politics, we gain a more nuanced understanding of politics.

Although we generally endorse such a broad conception of politics, this study specifically addresses the problematic condition that Western politics finds itself in. This study's focus on activity becomes crucial because it helps us grasp how politics can manifest and persist at all. The explicit concern with the nature of political activity rising within the horizon of late modernity – most notably in Arendt and later in Agamben – is not surprising given that the general diagnosis in modernity is that politics is declining everywhere. If this is the case, reviving, sustaining, or reinventing politics becomes a pertinent task. In more practical terms, and in regard to our current experience, Western liberal democracies find themselves in a predicament in which this sense of urgency is further intensified: the rise of post-truth politics and global challenges, such as climate change and pandemics – and more recently, the full-scale imperial war started by Russia, have all contributed to a sense of a constant weakening and crisis of liberal democratic institutions and politics more generally.

Apart from the broader landscape of instability that can be detected in 20th century political thought, this study contributes to discussions about the problematic status of Western politics that has been continually occurring in the last few decades. For example, the influential 'agonistic' school of democratic and political theory, which gained traction in the 1990s with thinkers like Bonnie Honig and Chantal Mouffe, stresses the importance of conflict and dissensus in political life. What is crucial to both these theorists is a concern for what is properly political – and conversely, what works to undermine the fundamental nature of politics. In Mouffe's (1993; 2013) well-known thesis, all political orders conceal a more original antagonism between a 'we' and a 'they,' or 'friends' and 'enemies' in Schmittian terms. This antagonism can ultimately not be done away with, but can only be channeled into a more moderate form of agonism, transforming the original relation between enemies into that of 'adversaries.' While enemies seek to destroy each other, adversaries engage in a more contained conflict in which both parties accept the agonistic nature of politics.

Any liberal-democratic solution of founding politics in rationally calculating individuals who seek consensus is, for both Mouffe and Honig, at odds with the very nature of politics. It is 'the dimension of power and antagonism,' (Mouffe 1993: 140) not consensus and order, that constitutes politics. On this reading, liberalism is guilty of effacing the political in its attempt to overcome this inherent conflict, and by reinscribing the political in the sphere of ethical consideration that centers around the individual. This is also the general argument of Bonnie Honig (1993), who has criticized thinkers like Rawls and Sandels for displacing politics in their attempts to understand politics in the

image of law and order instead of embracing the conflictual nature of political processes.

More recently, Wendy Brown (2015) has offered a compelling analysis of the intensifying forces of neoliberalism and how these forces have resulted in *homo politicus* being 'vanquished' or 'usurped' by *homo oeconomicus*. In her analysis, infiltrating the economy into politics points not merely to economic policies dominating political decision-making, but to the very mode in which political governing becomes akin to techniques developed and consolidated within neoliberal rationalities. In short, neoliberalism is the conduct of all human activities *as* an economy. Brown's focus is on democratic processes and the way they clash and become subordinated to this type of conduct. Instead of the fundamental markers of democratic rule by the people, such as contestation and unruliness, we have an anemic political life that is being transformed, at an accelerating pace, into an economy to be managed. 'The unruliness of democracy is stifled by a form of governing that is soft and total,' as Brown has it (ibid.: 208).

For Jacques Rancière, politics is also captured by the notion of dissensus rather than consensus. Yet, the debates about the 'declines' and 'returns' of the political are problematic for him because they ultimately attempt to isolate it to a specific sphere, such as the state (Rancière 2010: 43). In Rancière's account, politics is always a rupture that breaks with the 'normal' order. This order, which he terms 'the police,' follows a hierarchical logic; it is divided into those who command and those who obey, to those who are superior and those who are inferior. The political, in turn, is a moment in which this smooth functioning of the societal order is intervened. This is, in Rancière's formulation, 'the count of the uncounted,' the moment in which those with no part partake in politics. Importantly, action that breaks with the logic of 'the police' cannot be assigned to any particular setting, institutional or otherwise, but is completely unpredictable in terms of content and the site of manifestation.

Since this type of politics is, in this sense, always exceptional and somewhat ephemeral, it appears to be in some solidarity with Arendt's open-ended and unpredictable *praxis*. However, Rancière explicitly rejects certain aspects of Arendt's account. Without going into detail, it suffices to note that he is skeptical about any recourse to a classical distinction, such as *praxis-poiēsis*, that could account for his 'eruptive' politics. This is because *praxis* in the Arendtian sense as *arkhē*, the beginning of something new, already tacitly presupposes a distinction between leaders and followers. On this reading, any idea of a 'pure' beginning already belongs to the order of 'the police,' and for politics to occur, one needs to break with this logic (ibid.: 30).

Lois McNay (2014) also views the concern with 'the political' as problematic to the extent that it tends to valorize some exclusively 'pure' realm freed from all 'social' concerns. Her overall critique is that many so-called radical democratic theorists, despite their outspoken aims to speak to and for those who are oppressed and powerless, ultimately end up turning a deaf ear to the lived experiences of the oppressed. It is precisely radical democratic theories, such as those of Mouffe, Brown, and Rancière, that she directs her critique at. Although

McNay's careful analysis is not a facile rejection of all political theorization and abstraction altogether, she considers it crucially important that the step from the concrete to the abstract, from the phenomenological to the theoretical level, is done in a fashion that keeps these two in constant dialogue. In the final instance, McNay argues that to take 'real' forms of suffering into account is a question of understanding the possibilities for political agency. If we simply ignore these social relations in order to 'capture the essence of the political' (McNay 2014: 26), we risk losing sight of how a sense of agency is formed and the type of factors that hinder it from forming at all. Political theory should, in her view, not offer any rigorous 'logic' of politics, but to converse with various forms of struggle and offer critiques that help us gain a better understanding of them.

It is within this larger diagnosis that 'there is something wrong with politics' and the consequential attempt to rethink politics that this study is situated. Within this problematic, we focus specifically on politics as an activity. Of course, the above-mentioned theories address the question of political activity in one form or another. By contrasting it to economic management or ethical reasoning, they obviously strive for qualifying political action in various ways. Even McNay's critique of the search for 'proper' politics is, insofar as it is committed to making political theory more relevant to political struggles, presupposes that there are such struggles that have political relevance in the first place. In contrast to these studies, we are interested in whether there is a type of activity proper to politics, a question that the mentioned theories do not thematize or address separately. The activity-oriented perspective permits us to distance ourselves from questions like 'how can politics avoid being conflated with other domains of human life?' or 'what issues should politics address?'. Instead, we will be in a position to explore the *structure* and *manner* of acting politically, whatever its 'proper' domain may be or whatever issues it addresses.

As is presented later in this chapter, this study interrogates whether there is something additional to the traditional paradigms of action and production. The precise textual and methodological sources used in this task are explained in the last section, but in very general terms, this hunt for a 'third type' is anchored in the general landscape of political instability charted above. That is, the discomfort with politics occasions a re-examination of the legacy that guides our traditional assumptions about what politics is as an activity.

In the following section, we start by introducing the concepts of *praxis* and *poiēsis* as they appear in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, a source that also figures in the background of the thinkers addressed in the coming chapters. We also provide a general overview of how these paradigms of action are at work in later theories and conceptions. This forms the background for the last section, in which the research questions and the structure of analysis are presented in more detail.

1.2 Legacy: *praxis* and *poiēsis*

As mentioned above, and as the title of this study indicates, the present investigation into the nature of political activity proceeds from the distinction between action (*praxis*) and production (*poiēsis*) inherited from classical Greece. While the focus of the coming analyses is on late modern and contemporary thought, we briefly revisit Greek antiquity in this section in order to offer a general background to these discussions. This broad and introductory summary is not a detailed documentation of how the *praxis-poiēsis* framework has functioned, implicitly or explicitly, in different periods of Western political reflection from antiquity to modernity. It is rather intended as the most general background to the precise task set up for this study, which is to explore whether there is something *additional* to action and production, a point that is explained more thoroughly in the following section. Thus, a more detailed and complete ‘history’ of the distinction lies outside the scope of this investigation; and instead, we take the re-emergence of it in modern political thought as a direct indicator of the fact that it still animates our understanding of politics.

As is familiar from Aristotle’s teleological framework, all human activities aspire to attain some end, that is, some good. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle uses the terms *praxis* and *poiēsis* to categorize activities according to how this end is achieved or actualized. In the case of the former, the end coincides with or is embedded in the activity itself, and in the latter, it results from the activity as a separate product. As Aristotle writes in an often-cited passage, ‘while making [*poiēsis*] has an end other than itself, action [*praxis*] cannot; for good action [*eupraxia*] itself is its end’ (*Nicomachean Ethics*, VI. 5, 1140b6–7).

As such, this categorization does not apply to politics alone, but concerns the nature and kind of any activity. As an example of *poiēsis*, Aristotle typically offers the fabrication of various objects, such as houses, shoes, or sculptures. *Poiēsis* is the ‘art’ of producing things, of bringing them to being. However, he also frequently alludes to various activities as art, such as the ‘art of medicine,’ implying that health results as the ‘product’ of adequate healing, correct and moderate nutrition, and so on. Even nature has, in some sense, a poietic function for Aristotle, the seeds ‘producing’ trees, plants, flowers, and the like. What is decisive for this activity is that the end is clearly external to the activity that brings it about: the house is not a house until the building is finished, and one is not healthy until the process of healing has been completed. This stands in contrast to *praxis*, in which case the coherent way to understand the end is to see it as contained in the activity itself. Among Aristotle’s examples of *praxis* are sense activities, such as seeing and the explicitly political activity of engaging in deliberation. While undertaken for the sake of different purposes, these activities are same in kind insofar as their ends cannot be separated in any meaningful sense from the activity itself: the good of vision is to see well, and the good of reasoning is to reason well.

Before discussing how this categorization applies to politics, a brief terminological clarification is necessary at this stage. Throughout this study, we use the Greek term *praxis* and its standard English equivalents 'action' and 'doing' interchangeably. In the same way, we use 'production' and 'making' as equivalents to *poiēsis*. Whenever rendered in adjectival form, *praxis* is either 'practical' or 'praxis-oriented' and *poiēsis* is either 'productive' or 'poietic.'

When addressing politics, Aristotle points to activities that fall both under *praxis* and *poiēsis*. As is well known, he often likens the activity of the legislator to the work of a craftsman, politics being in this sense the 'art of politics' (*politikē tekhnē*). Laws are, as it were, 'works' of the legislator, as he remarks, for example, in book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. More generally, the creation of the *polis* itself is a kind of making. The *Ethics* and the *Politics* form, in a sense, a treatise on how to produce an ideal kind of political association that can secure a good life for its citizens, this task concerning the management of everything from individual behaviors to the size of the *polis* and the number of children. This productive view is also present in Plato's likening of the activity of the legislator to that of weaving, an example that also resurfaces in Aristotle's characterization of politics. To recall Plato's lengthy discussion of weaving in the *Statesman*, the ideal statesman is akin to the skillful weaver who knows how to choose the right kind of threads to make a garment with the right kind of texture. The art of the statesman pertains to the cultivation of the right kinds of virtues and capacities, for instance, through educating the youth; together, these form the fabric of an ideal state.

From another perspective, however, deliberation and practical reasoning – often viewed as the key activity of free men in the *polis* – is evidently subsumed under *praxis*. And life as such, the activity of living through one's life, ideally well and in accordance with virtue if the management of political affairs so permits, is action and not production (see *Politics* I. 4, 1254a1–8). The final good, happiness (*eudaimonia*), is not a 'product' or a state achieved once and for all, but is contained in activity done well, it is about living or faring well. As Jussi Backman notes, it is often expressed by means of a verb (*eudaimonein*), which points to the quality of life as carried out in the ideal sense (Backman 2010: 35). As Backman also remarks in this context, the notion of 'living well' (*eu zēn*) and 'acting well' (*eupraxia*) essentially designate the same thing. In a more restricted and particular sense, to engage in deliberation on public matters is a form of *praxis*, but in a more general sense, to live one's life well also has the nature of *praxis*.

It is not the aim of this study to take a stance on whether action or production was more decisive for the Greek understanding of politics. The brief summary above simply illustrates that both conceptions have their roots in Greek antiquity; among this, Aristotle's political vocabulary still influences Western political thought. That is, to step in the footsteps of Aristotle, and the other ancients insofar as they accepted this basic classification of activities, is to inherit both *praxis* and *poiēsis* when making sense of politics as an activity. On the one hand, the *polis* is like an artifact brought into being, the statesman operating like a craftsman and weaving the *polis* and its laws together. On the other hand, the

polis is the organization in which man dwells in, making use of practical reasoning and living well. It is these two types of activities, action and production – or doing and making – that have remained important for understanding the nature of politics in the Western tradition. It is the distinction that Hannah Arendt famously makes use of in her affirmation of *praxis* as genuine political action, and the one that Giorgio Agamben, as is presented shortly, harkens back to in his attempt to develop an alternative type of political activity.

This is, of course, not to suggest that there is a clear continuity in explicit vocabulary from Aristotle and Plato to modernity. However, it is arguably within this overall framework of *praxis* and *poiēsis* – the end in itself and the end outside itself – that many schools of political thought fall if judged by their underlying assumptions about the nature of political activity. For instance, the utopian tradition in its many ideological shapes is clearly guided by an idea of politics as *poiēsis* insofar as it depicts new worlds that are yet to be created. The term ‘utopia’ itself, no-place (*ou-topos*), a Greek derivation that Thomas More coined as the title of his 1516 book, is perfectly illustrative of the activity implied. As it designates a fictitious and imagined world, it also points to a nonexistent world that ought to be produced and brought into existence.

The Hegelian philosophy of history and dialectical thought also conforms to this poietic conception: history is a process of becoming, of humanity bringing itself to completion. In the conversion of the Hegelian system into Marxist dialectical materialism, a productive view is perhaps even more strongly felt: the activities undertaken for the sake of overcoming the class society are not self-sufficient in any way, but are incorporated into a larger historical process that receives its meaning from the final end it brings about. The new humanity, the communist utopia, is the *product* of the dialectics of history. It is in this productive conception of how to ‘build a better world’ where various ideological projects are anchored, whatever the precise content of their visions may be – religious, feminist, afrofuturist, and the like. The current ethos of green politics is markedly poietic in the same sense, as highlighted in the prevalent discussion and contestation around the process named ‘green transition.’ The guiding idea of this movement is that through replacing our current technologies and modes of production with more sustainable ones, we *create* a greener and better world.

Apart from the ancient sources and the late modern association with Arendt, a practical conception of politics also operates at the heart of the Rousseau voluntarist tradition, at least if we consider the expression of the general will as the moment of properly political activity. Insofar as the general will is not simply a collection of private wills but pertains only to the common interest as subtracted from any particular interest, it can practically never be fully present other than at the moment it expresses itself. In other words, viewed from the perspective of activity, the general will must be contained in the very process of deliberation, expression, and decision.

More generally and in a similar manner, any conception of politics that seeks to ‘guard’ properly political activity from its contamination by executive powers is indebted to the paradigm of *praxis*, the center of attention being on the

very process itself, which is understood as getting lost once incorporated into the acts of government. For example, advocates of participatory democracy and deliberative democracy would commit to the idea that engagement in public life itself, not any particular product or goal, is what matters in politics. The terms used to describe these strands of democracy are indicative of an orientation toward *praxis*, 'participation,' and 'deliberation' being of primary importance. Somewhat more radically, various strands of anarchism center around the idea that politics is always not only outside or against the powers that be, but that it should essentially *stay* that way in order to avoid corruption and contamination. In this sense, anarchism always points to an activity that is sufficient in itself: as an anarchic activity, it should logically destabilize and de-center hegemonic orders without producing or resolving into new ones. In other words, the constant movement, engagement, and evasion of permanence and order that we find in the abovementioned strands of political thought point to politics as *praxis*.

1.3 Research questions and structure of analysis

Taking the above presented inheritance of *praxis* and *poiēsis* as a point of departure, this study further explores whether there is something additional to this classical categorization that the Western tradition has known of at least since antiquity. To this end, we analyze contemporary philosopher Giorgio Agamben's explicit claim of going 'beyond' this distinction with his concept of *gesture*, which he proposes as an alternative paradigm of political activity.

Since the publication of the English translations of his work, *Homo Sacer* (Agamben 1998) and *State of Exception* (Agamben 2005b) in particular, Agamben has become a key political thinker within the Anglo-American sphere of academic influence. In the atmosphere following the 9/11 attacks of 2001, shaded by the tightening security measures and the unveiling of horrific abuses committed by U.S. soldiers as part of the 'war on terror,' Agamben's critique of exceptional control measures quickly gained attention and spread to a variety of disciplines. This critique is rooted in his re-working of Michel Foucault's notion of biopolitics into a general characterization of Western power. In short, Agamben's claim is that *all* of our political institutions and organizations of power rest, beginning at least from antiquity, on an inclusion of biological or unqualified life, 'bare life,' into the political order in an excluded form. Unlike Foucault, who alluded to biopolitics as a set of techniques of power that arose at the threshold of the modern era, Agamben sees this 'inclusive exclusion' as the very structure through which humans are governed politically. Whether it occurs in a democratic, totalitarian, ancient, or modern context, this operation first separates the biological or 'bare life' from the human, and exposes this life to absolute force and control. Western politics is, as it were, always exceptional. It feeds on the production of 'bare life,' which can always – at least potentially – be subjected to unrestrained power. It is this sinister understanding of politics that

has remained his best-known and most applied theory in political science and political theory, whether taken as an object of praise or critique.

However, in parallel to the theory of biopolitics, Agamben has weaved together an affirmative account of politics that is in important ways a response to what he views as a negative foundation of Western politics. Against the biopolitical apparatuses that always capture and objectify life to the point of leaving almost nothing intact, Agamben has envisioned a strategy that liberates human life from these shackles. As we explain in more detail in the following chapter, this affirmative project is outlined in the works preceding his later theorization of the state of exception and biopolitics. On the level of activity, Agamben refers to this 'better' politics with his notion of gesture and performance, and it is precisely Aristotle's *praxis* and *poiēsis* that he contrasts it to in his more politically oriented works starting from the 1990s onwards (Agamben 1993b; 2000; 2018a).

Although we scrutinize Agamben's writings on gesture in more detail in the following chapter, a brief outline of Agamben's claim is in place at this point. Gestural activity is, Agamben contends, an activity that is distinct from both *praxis* and *poiēsis* in the Aristotelian sense. Pointing to the Roman roots of this type of activity, he argues that it is neither *agere* (*praxis*) nor *facere* (*poiēsis*) but *gerere*, whence derives the concept of gesture. Agamben decisively wishes to distance himself from the Aristotelian teleological framework in which all activities, whether practical or productive, are always directed at an end. As Agamben lays out in *Opus Dei* (Agamben 2013) by discussing the Roman offices of power, what was decisive for the Romans was the activity of assuming an office and carrying out a specific function connected to it, an activity that was understood in the image of managing other activities – one's own and those of others – rather than aiming at an 'end' in the Aristotelian sense. Alluding here and elsewhere to Roman grammarian Varro, Agamben notes that the Latin verb *gerere* denotes an activity that 'supports,' 'sustains,' and 'carries out' an activity that is relatively indifferent to any specific 'end.'

The central question of this study is: what is politics as an activity? As it has been hinted above, answering this question takes the form of an inquiry into whether there is something that *exceeds* the classical activities of action and production. That is, by probing the boundaries of *praxis* and *poiēsis*, the expectation is that we gain a clearer understanding of what kind of activity politics pertains to. Since Agamben offers us an example of an attempt to provide an alternative to action and production, we use his approach as a case in this investigation.

This further leads to Agamben's key interlocutors, whom he uses as points of contrast to his paradigm of gesture, namely Hannah Arendt and Alexandre Kojève. Both thinkers stand as important reference points in Agamben's writings on politics, and for the purposes of this study, they offer the main material for testing his claim of going beyond action and production. It goes without saying that Arendt's conception of political activity is an exemplary case of *praxis*: her refutation of the growing tendency to equate politics with productive processes

is, in a central way, a 'revival' of the Aristotelian concept of *praxis*. Kojève's 'end of history' thesis is, in turn, connected to a markedly poetic conception of politics. Recognition, as realized in the universal homogenous state that Kojève envisions, is the product of the historical process, that is, history is *poiēsis*. The main motivation, however, for using Arendt and Kojève as examples of action and production has strictly textual grounds and is directly derived from Agamben. The following three chapters receive their structure and points of reference from the work of Agamben and use these concepts to interrogate whether or how there is a 'beyond' of action and production.

In the next chapter, we first introduce Agamben's key concepts in a roughly chronological order. The purpose of this chapter is not to offer either a general or detailed introduction into Agamben's thought as such, but rather to show that all these concepts, including gesture, denote an activity or operation of a particular kind. Regardless of the apparent discipline and subject matter, from law to religion and aesthetics, these concepts consistently put forward an operation that follows the very same logic. To put it briefly, these concepts designate an activity that deactivates the conventional or utilitarian function of human activities and liberates the possibility of acting otherwise. However, as we further argue, a closer inspection reveals an ambiguity in Agamben's work regarding how one positions gestural activity in relation to action and production. On the one hand, Agamben expresses a wish to go 'beyond' it in a manner that would replace them with a rigorously separate type of action; on the other hand, he also implies that it is not a completely distinct activity but rather something that remains tied to *praxis* and *poiēsis*. We return to this in more detail in Chapter 2.

The precise method of reading Arendt and Kojève that we develop based on Agamben's work is described in more detail in the last section of Chapter 2 (2.7). At this stage, it suffices to state that the guiding idea in chapters 3 and 4 is that Agamben's approach points to an activity that suspends action and production and liberates a potentiality of using them in a non-established way. Thus, these chapters comprise analyses that 'test' this proposition and explore in more detail what Agamben means by positing this activity as something beyond *praxis* and *poiēsis*. Importantly, the purpose of these analyses is not to offer an interpretation of either Arendt or Kojève, but to investigate whether their approaches to politics lend themselves to the kind of destabilization that Agamben practices with his concept of gesture. From this setting, it also follows that the analyzed material does not comprise the entirety of Arendt's and Kojève's works, but rather a selection of key texts that are sufficient for undertaking such an investigation. That is, since this is not a reading of Arendt and Kojève, but a reading of these thinkers as Agamben's key interlocutors and as paradigmatic examples of practical and poetic conceptions of politics, a more selective sample of their work is sufficient.

Having conducted these analyses, Chapter 5 further interprets their findings by focusing on the meaning of this alternative type of activity in the contemporary scene of political thought. Restricting this investigation to discursive activity, this chapter addresses Agamben's understanding of linguistic

performativity in relation to J.L. Austin, Jacques Derrida, and Judith Butler. Agamben's gesture, in its linguistic sense, marks an activity that is markedly different from all of these authors' theories of performativity. Unlike Austin's institutional performatives, Agamben proposes a rigorously 'pure' performative that is detached from any institutional or juridical setting. It is about language as gestures, the immediate efficacy of word and deed in all human discourse. This conception also differs from the citational approach deployed by Derrida and Butler. For these authors, any power held in utterances is connected to their capacity to break from their prior context. However, a closer scrutiny reveals some similarities between these authors' approaches to language. In discussing this resemblance, we focus on the decades-long controversy between Agamben and Derrida. The overall purpose of Chapter 5 is to further interpret and clarify where Agamben's gestural paradigm stands, and how it could be utilized to understand the nature of political activity.

Finally, in the conclusions (Chapter 6), we articulate the findings of this interpretive exercise in more general terms. That is, by leaving these thinkers behind, we return to the central questions that animate this study: what is the activity of politics, and what does it mean to partake in political activity? To this end, we discuss and concretize the particular consequences of our general conclusion by briefly addressing contemporary political movements and phenomena. The concluding chapter is intended as an end discussion that points to further areas of investigation and potential paths to take in exploring the nature of political activity.

2 AGAMBEN'S CONCEPTUAL LOGIC

Although the more specific discussion concerning political action that Agamben undertakes by contrasting his approach to *praxis* and *poiēsis* provides most of the structure and context of this study, any attempt to analyze this approach in more detail necessarily leads to an engagement with other concepts that he has developed during the past five decades. Thus, to provide a sufficient background to the present inquiry, this chapter presents Agamben's key concepts in a chronological order.

As mentioned in the introduction, even though these concepts are derived from different disciplines, they are deployed to articulate the same logic or operation, which goes under such names as 'deactivation,' 'neutralization,' and 'rendering inoperative.' As Agamben himself has suggested, these do not designate inertia or idleness, but an operation that wrests human activities from their canonical use and opens them to a new, free, and alternative use (see, e.g., Agamben 2010: 102). The 'canonical,' as opposed to Agamben's 'non-canonical' and 'free,' should be understood as any kind of being or doing that is regulated and determined through apparatuses of tradition, be they formed in the domains of language, art, law, religion, or our way of understanding humanity as such. If these apparatuses work through ordering our actions so that they are determined toward an end, or at least have an established function, then Agamben's key interest is to find a way to explore the possibilities of doing *otherwise* that these conventions have occluded. It is precisely this dimension of *other* use that this study attempts to grasp, clarifying its meaning and investigating its relation to the established paradigms of *praxis* and *poiēsis*. A more detailed explication of how we incorporate our reading into the engagement with Agamben's interlocutors, Kojève and Arendt, is presented at the very end of this chapter.

As will be familiar to Agamben's readers, his concepts migrate freely across his works; occasionally, a more recently presented concept sheds light on something that was developed in his earlier works. As Catherine Mills has rightly put it, a defining feature of his work is the unfolding of a 'densely interconnected conceptual web' (Mills 2008: 2). For this reason, while each section begins by

indicating the point in time at which a particular concept emerges, they also unavoidably include references to concepts and works from different periods. The roughly chronological order in which we present Agamben's concepts primarily serves the function of facilitating one's navigation in the extremely rich texture of concepts, themes, concerns, and textual references that is emblematic of his work. It is crucial to note that gesture, Agamben's alternative to *praxis* and *poiēsis*, cannot be understood without recourse to this larger conceptual web.

Agamben himself has referred to this strategy of using a large ensemble of items to describe the same thing as the 'paradigmatic method' (Agamben 2009a). A paradigm, for Agamben, is a singular example that shows both itself and the larger set it belongs to. The notion of deactivation is also important in this methodological context: for the example to denote a wider context, its particular and more restricted meaning must be deactivated or suspended, and it must lose some of its specificity. In this way, a connection in the logic or the mode of functioning may be established between seemingly disparate figures, imaginative or real, such as Kafka's characters, *homo sacer*, specters, and porn stars, to name but a few of Agamben's paradigms. In the same way, the conceptual framework discussed in this chapter shows that the logic of his affirmative activity is articulated and repeated by means of different concepts. However, this study does not make use of this method as such; we are simply interested in the nature of the activity formulated through these concepts. Our own method of analysis is explained in Section 2.7.

In the next section, we begin mapping Agamben's conceptual logic by engaging with the concept of potentiality. Agamben has presented it in his first book, *The Man Without Content* from 1970 (Agamben 1999a), addressing what he calls 'pure potentiality' in the context of his critical examination of the status of art in modernity. Apart from appearing in his earliest work, an important reason for beginning with potentiality is that the rest of the concepts introduced in this chapter are closely intertwined with the discussion of potential and act (*dynamis* and *energeia*) that Agamben undertakes in a series of lectures in the mid 1980s and later in *Homo Sacer* (Agamben 1998). In these texts, which are brought into focus later, Agamben further develops the notion of 'pure potentiality' in the context of a rather complex reading of Aristotle. We highlight two important dimensions of this discussion. Firstly, Agamben's problematization of the differentiation between potentiality and actuality allows him to articulate a vision of humanity as irreducibly potential and void of any essence. Secondly, this restoration to a state of potentiality marks the gateway to the above-mentioned importance of being or doing otherwise. Whatever humans are or do, as held by Agamben, this possibility of experimentation with possibilities is never exhausted in actuality.

The subsequent section focuses on Agamben's early works that deal with language: *Infancy and History* (Agamben 2007a), *Language and Death* (Agamben 1991), and *Idea of Prose* (Agamben 1995). We return to the theme of language in Chapter 5, focusing on Agamben's understanding of performatives. However, it is crucial to introduce it in this chapter as his central argument concerning

language is transported to his 1990s' works that treat politics more explicitly. Thus, after outlining Agamben's key concerns pertaining to language, we devote the subsequent section to a discussion of his connected vision of a political community. As outlined in *The Coming Community* from 1990, the community he has in mind does not presuppose any shared essence or vocation but comprises singular beings that are exposed in their sheer exteriority and their 'being-thus,' as Agamben frequently formulates it. This is integrally connected to a larger commitment that Agamben has expressed as one of the tasks of both his own philosophy and that of a possible 'coming philosophy': to understand being not in terms of any structure of presupposition or negativity.

After the theme of community, we move to Agamben's approach to political action, which he conceptualizes as 'gesture' and 'pure means,' the latter borrowed from Walter Benjamin. The term gesture appears in the essay 'Kommerell, or on Gesture' from 1991 (Agamben 1999b), but its more explicit link to Agamben's understanding of politics is developed in the 1992 essay 'Notes on Gesture' (Agamben 2000). It is in this essay that Agamben presents his understanding of political action as a contrast to both *praxis* and *poiēsis*, defining it as neither one nor the other but rather as something beyond them. The only thinker he explicitly consults here is ancient Roman grammarian Varro, and the discussion is rather brief and fragmentary. However, in *Opus Dei* (Agamben 2013) and in *Karman* (Agamben 2018a), Agamben again returns to the *praxis-poiēsis* debate, focusing specifically on Arendt in the latter. As this is one of the key points of discussion in Chapter 4, the aim is not to go too deep into the assessment of Agamben's critique of Arendt in the present chapter.

For similar reasons, the subsequent section that deals with the concept of inoperativity only briefly touches upon the connection between Agamben and Alexandre Kojève. One of Agamben's reference points for discussing inoperativity is Alexandre Kojève's notion of *désœuvrement*, and we return to some important points of investigation connected to these themes in Chapter 3, including the man-animal distinction and the critique of the Hegelian dialectic. Along with the concept of potentiality, which accompanies the above-mentioned inquiries into being, community, and political action, inoperativity is a crucially important concept in Agamben's work, weaving together many of his investigations.

Finally, by grouping together the concepts of manner and profanation toward the end of this chapter, we aim to show that it is within the framework of these conceptual innovations that the dimension of free and alternative use is presented in a slightly different way than in the preceding works. There is already a brief discussion of style and manner in *The End of the Poem* from 1996 (Agamben 1999c). The examples used in this book, such as Caproni's creative use of the Italian language and Plato's late dialogues, reappear more recently in *The Use of Bodies* (Agamben 2016). In addition, the two essay collections from roughly the same period, *Creation and Anarchy* (Agamben 2019) and *The Fire and the Tale* (Agamben 2017), further develop the theme of style and manner with a focus on art. While style designates a traditional or familiar way of doing art, such as an

epochal style, this is always transformed and played with in a genuinely original artistic expression, which Agamben describes as the artist's manner or mannerism. He alludes once again to his discussion of potentiality, explaining that manner exhibits a liberation of potentiality to do otherwise while engaging with a more recognizable style of doing art. In other words, mannerism is an activity closely bound to the style it modifies. As we discuss shortly, when Agamben uses this concept, his emphasis is not so much on potentiality or pure means as such, but this other use generated within a style.

Similarly, in *Profanations* (Agamben 2007b), Agamben is careful to stress that what is returned from the sphere of the sacred is returned to a free use. The 'sacred' here, although Agamben begins by discussing it in a strictly religious context, generally denotes anything that has been confined to a separate sphere, such that humans cannot gain access to use it freely. To evoke perhaps one of his most concrete examples, children play with abandoned use objects, profaning them from a specific use and restoring them to a state from which new uses can emerge. The objects as such remain the same, but they are used differently.

To recapitulate, this chapter aims to do two things. Firstly, we show that the operation Agamben articulates with his concepts is in every case the same: his intervention is always a deactivation of this or that apparatus that liberates a potentiality to do otherwise. Secondly, we show that despite this unity in logic, two approaches of Agamben can be derived from it: either his alternative type of action is read as liberated potentiality that is exposed and explored as such, or it is a potentiality that works as a non-canonical use *of* something. We return to this question in the context of explaining our method of analysis in Section 2.7.

2.1 Potentiality

One of Agamben's most important concepts is beyond doubt potentiality (*potenza*), which ties together many of his investigations and describes the general outlook of his thought, political and otherwise. Humans are, for Agamben, beings that can never be defined through a specific task, capacity, or destiny. Whatever we engage in never forms an essence or something we, by definition, *have to* be or do. If this were the case, Agamben suggests, then there would be no possibility of a genuinely political or ethical experience, as 'there would be only tasks to be done' (Agamben 2000: 43).

Although Agamben's general emphasis on potentiality rather than actuality is undoubtedly influenced by modern figures, such as Heidegger (see De la Durantaye 2009: 24–25), the single most important reference point for Agamben's discussion of potentiality is Aristotle. To begin with, an important question for Agamben concerns the mode in which potentiality can be said to exist independently from actuality. To illustrate this, he often draws from Aristotle's differentiation between the generic potentiality of a child that can possibly be developed and the existing potentiality of someone who has already acquired a skill. It is the latter, Agamben contends, that Aristotle was interested in; and that

he used as an example in his refutation of the Megarian position, according to which potentiality exists only when actualized and can never have an autonomous existence of its own. Aristotle's counterargument can be summarized in its simplest form through the following examples: when architects are not designing buildings, they nevertheless have the ability to do so; when a sculptor is not sculpting, the ability to sculpt does not vanish into thin air. Human beings are capable of *having* a potentiality even when they do not exercise it.

As Agamben summarizes in the essay 'On Potentiality,' held originally as a lecture in 1986 in Lisbon and later included in the English language collection *Potentialities*, 'potentiality is not simply non-Being, simple privation, but rather the existence of non-Being, the presence of an absence; this is what we call "faculty" or "power". "To have a faculty" means to have a privation' (Agamben 1999b: 179). Once again borrowing from Aristotle, he writes that potentiality has a form or face (*eidos*) (ibid.: 180). Importantly, as Kevin Attell (2009) remarks, Agamben understands potentiality primarily as capacity (acquired, existing) and not merely a logical possibility (in principle possible, not impossible). This is also reflected in his usage of the Italian term '*potenza*,' denoting power, force, capacity.

From this discussion of existing potentiality follows another important point that Agamben brings to the center of attention. Since human potentiality points to capacities, it follows rather logically that each potentiality is always accompanied by a potentiality not-to, an 'impotentiality,' with respect to the same thing: to be able to write entails that one is also able to *not* write. This is one of the great sources of human power that Agamben invites us to explore: humans are not only directed toward putting their capacities to work, but for any of these capacities to be worthy of the name, there must remain the possibility for humans to *not* do (or be) this or that. It is from this position that he criticizes a variety of positions that emphasize *actualizing*, *realizing*, and *willing* as important dimensions of being human. One such position is the doctrine of the will, Christian or otherwise, which he identifies as a persisting feature of the Western tradition – we have been accustomed to think in terms of that which is actualized instead of exploring the depths of our ability to *not* actualize our potentialities.

This impotentiality is indeed something without which human potentiality, the 'I-can,' runs the risk of becoming captured in an infinite number of tasks and projects. Placing his critique specifically on the constant adaptation to the needs of the free-market economy, our present condition that often goes under the name of neoliberalism, Agamben writes in *Nudities*:

The idea that anyone can do or be anything – the suspicion that not only could the doctor who examines me today be a video artist tomorrow, but that even the executioner who kills me is actually, as in Kafka's *The Trial*, also a singer – is nothing but the reflection of the awareness that everyone is simply bending himself or herself according to this flexibility that is today the primary quality that the market demands from each person. (Agamben 2010: 45)

When Agamben thus speaks of humans as beings of potentiality, it is at least in these two above-described senses that we can understand it. Firstly, humans *can* do a great number of things without any of these constituting a specifically human essence or *telos*. Secondly, humans can *not* (or *can not*) put these capacities to work and still remain powerful in their withdrawal from action.

Let us now scrutinize a further dimension of this impotentiality, pointing to perhaps the most complex part of the entire discussion regarding potential and act, *dynamis* and *energeia*, that Agamben takes up repeatedly in his works. As it becomes clear in the remainder of this chapter, this discussion works in the background of a range of other concepts, and more specifically, the liberatory aspect of his political thought. In the 'On Potentiality' essay mentioned above, Agamben evokes for the first time his idiosyncratic reading of a particular fragment in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Having first discussed potentiality in terms of the capacities to and not-to, Agamben ponders what happens to the potentiality not-to at the threshold of actuality: 'The actuality of the potentiality to play the piano is the performance of a piece for the piano; but what is the actuality of the potentiality to not-play?' (Agamben 1999b: 183). Instead of simply vanishing at the threshold of actuality, Agamben argues that impotentiality is *preserved* in the act. Agamben reads Aristotle as having suggested that the potentiality not-to '*does not lag behind actuality but passes fully into it as such*. This does not mean that it disappears in actuality; on the contrary, it *preserves itself* as such in actuality. What is truly potential is thus what has exhausted all its impotentiality in bringing it wholly in to the act as such' (ibid., italics in original). On the basis of this discussion, Agamben suggests that the potentiality not-to ends up preserved and saved *within* an act; while acting or being, humans somehow remain in relation to non-acting and non-being.

Before going into any more detail at this point, a clarification is in place: it is not the aim of this study to provide a detailed assessment of the correctness of Agamben's interpretation of Aristotle regarding the nature of impotentiality (and its precise relation to potentiality and actuality). Agamben's own translation of the *Metaphysics* passage in question has certainly been contested among some Aristotle scholars. And yet, to state that we simply restrict ourselves to Agamben's own interpretation requires a bit more elaboration because, as briefly mentioned above, two different approaches to potentiality are discernible in his thought. This also partly explains the various emphases on how to read this dimension in the commentary pertaining to his thought.

After the mid 1980s lectures on potentiality, the following similar and longer discussion appears in *Homo Sacer*, arguably Agamben's best-known book to date. In this book, Agamben utilizes the double structure of potentiality to account for the way in which the law is in force in the order of sovereignty. It is in this context that Agamben again emphasizes that impotentiality is not destroyed in actuality, but he also further complicates this exposition by evoking the notion of potentiality 'giving itself to itself.' The earlier essay briefly hinted at this with the enigmatic closing sentence: 'Here potentiality, so to speak, survives

actuality and, in this way, *gives itself to itself* (Agamben 1999b: 184, italics in original). Similar formulations appear here and there in Agamben's work, sometimes without any longer explanation. In the third chapter of *Homo Sacer*, Agamben uses this formulation to explicate that the precise alteration that happens at the gate of the act is that potentiality sets aside the corresponding impotentiality in a kind of auto-suspension:

For the sovereign ban, which applies to the exception in no longer applying, corresponds to the structure of potentiality, which maintains itself in relation to actuality precisely through its ability not to be. Potentiality (in its double appearance as potentiality to and as potentiality not to) is that through which Being founds itself *sovereignly*, which is to say, without anything preceding it or determining it (*superiorem non recognoscens*) other than its own ability not to be. And an act is sovereign when it realizes itself by simply taking away its own potentiality not to be, letting itself be, giving itself to itself. (Agamben 1998: 46, italics in original)

Unlike in the 'On Potentiality' essay, where Agamben discusses rather briefly but clearly how impotentiality is preserved within actuality, Agamben further blurs the line between potentiality and actuality in *Homo Sacer*. Being appears here to be simply potentiality that negates or 'takes away' the potentiality not-to. It is a form of *not not-being* (or doing), giving rise to what Agamben terms 'pure potentiality.' Several commentators have paid attention precisely to the way in which Agamben attempts to, as it were, understand actuality in terms of potentiality. Daniel Heller-Roazen, the editor and translator of the *Potentialities* collection, argues that the passing of impotentiality to actuality produces the figure of a potentiality to *not not-be* (or do), from which it follows that actuality is in fact just an alteration within potentiality itself: '[if] all potentiality is originally impotentiality, and if actuality is the conservation of potentiality itself, then it follows that actuality is nothing other than a potentiality to the second degree' (Heller Roazen in Agamben 1999b: 18).

Similarly, and with reference to Heller-Roazen, Catherine Mills explicates that from the perspective of Agamben's complex reconstruction of Aristotle's account of potentiality, actuality 'appears as the potentiality to *not not-be*' (Mills 2008: 31-32). This is precisely what produces the figure of 'pure potentiality,' as Mills contends. In his account of sovereignty, Agamben uses this formulation to explain the double negation that gives rise to the 'pure potentiality' of the law. The sovereign withdraws from the normal legal order without thereby destroying the capacity of the law to be in force. It can *not not-be*, by which we can understand that even as the sovereign 'sets aside' its own impotentiality, it can still remain inexhausted in the (actual) legal order. It can, paradoxically, remain in a state of potentiality in its very actuality. Kevin Attell, framing his detailed discussion of Agamben's potentiality in the context of sovereignty, argues in a similar vein that actuality should be understood as 'the precipitate of the self-suspension of impotentiality' (Attell 2009: 44).

As such readings suggest, one dimension in Agamben's discussion of potentiality is the attempt to grant primacy to potentiality rather than actuality. To borrow from Heller-Roazen, actuality is indeed a 'potentiality to the second degree.' And, as Leland de la Durantaye formulates it: 'This "potentiality to not-be," or "impotence," is not to be understood as a privation, as an actual weakness or incapacity, for the reason that it is not to be understood in the context of actuality *at all*. It denotes the possibility of a thing *not* to pass into existence and thereby remain at the level of mere - or "pure" - potentiality' (De la Durantaye 2009: 5, italics in original). While praised by some readers as an important insight, this passionate affirmation of human potentiality has also been a source of skepticism, especially in regard to its political import. As Mills argues at the end of her book when assessing the promise of Agamben's idea of political liberation: 'To the extent that Agamben's theory of political liberation is ultimately based on the suspension of the passage of potentiality into action or actuality (doing or being), the worry is that his apparent philosophical radicalism passes into its opposite in the realm of politics' (Mills 2008: 137).

However, apart from this affirmation of potentiality as such, there is another approach by Agamben regarding the question of potentiality. As it becomes clear when browsing through Agamben's conceptual field, the operation by which we grant access to 'pure potentiality' also opens another door, namely that of a 'different use' or 'free use' that we mentioned above. When he discusses activities, such as play, profanation, and mannerism, he does not necessarily always rehearse his reading of Aristotle at length, but rather gestures toward it in an elliptical manner by speaking of a 'new use' generated through the restoration of something to a state of pure potentiality. The operation is the same - yet, instead of emphasizing potentiality as such, that is, actual subtraction and withdrawal from action or being, Agamben discusses how this potentiality can be *used* to act non-canonically. In this sense, the passing of impotentiality over into actuality is also a way for him to account for a suspension that halts the complete exhaustion of potentiality in actuality, thus allowing one to do or be otherwise *in actuality*. As Sergei Prozorov reads Agamben, 'play is evidently still a matter of activity and use, yet of a different, non-canonical and non-utilitarian one' (Prozorov 2014: 43).

I have argued elsewhere (Sjöblom 2022) that Agamben's example of Glenn Gould demonstrates, in a somewhat clear manner, this alternate approach to potentiality, one that is not only about 'pure potentiality' but an operation that would more accurately be described as 'potentiality within actuality.' Agamben refers to the Canadian pianist for the first time in *The Coming Community* (Agamben 1993b) and returns to him again in the essay 'What is the Act of Creation?', which has more recently appeared in *Creation and Anarchy* (Agamben 2019). Agamben writes:

Only a power that is capable of both power and impotence, then, is the supreme power. If every power is equally the power to be and the power to not-be, the passage to action can only come about by transporting (Aristotle

says “saving”) in the act its own power to not-be. This means that, even though every pianist necessarily has the potential to play and the potential to not-play, Glenn Gould is, however, the only one who can *not* not-play, and directing his potentiality not only to the act but to his own impotence, he plays, so to speak, with his potential to not-play. While his ability simply negates and abandons his potential to not-play, his mastery conserves and exercises in the act not his potential to play (this is the position of irony that affirms the superiority of the potentiality over the act), but rather his potential to not-play. (Agamben, 1993b: 36, italics in original)

In its original appearance in *The Coming Community*, it is not immediately clear what Agamben means by this enigmatic insistence on Glenn Gould being the only pianist who ‘plays with his potential to not-play.’ The essay in question is a very short meditation, and after referring to Gould, Agamben rather quickly turns to the idea of thought thinking itself, inspired once again by Aristotle. He explains here that the potentiality not-to is what enables us to think not this or that thought, but rather the potentiality for thinking itself: ‘[thanks] to this potentiality to not-think, thought can turn back to itself (to its pure potentiality) and be, at its apex, the thought of thought’ (Agamben 1993b: 37). However, in the more recent texts (Agamben 2017; 2019), Gould appears in a rather different setting. Placing his discussion of potentiality in the context of the concepts of style and manner, Agamben discusses Gould and a range of other artistic practices as manifesting an ability to practice a sort of internal ‘resistance’ within an established way of doing art. As briefly mentioned above, ‘style’ is the convention, ‘manner’ is the idiosyncrasy of the artist that imprints the work of art with an ‘imperfection in the perfect form’ (Agamben 2019: 19).

The notion of *mastery* that Agamben alludes to gains clarity in this context: Gould is a pianist that masters the repertoire he plays to such a degree that he can, so to speak, let go of it. Instead of a perfect execution and complete actualization, there is a masterful experimentation and deviation (a not-to) within a canonical style in every artistic expression worthy of the name. In this sense, it is not that Gould does not actualize anything; on the contrary, Gould plays (in actuality) and while playing, he simultaneously ‘not-plays.’ Simon Marijsse interprets this in a similar manner, accurately describing Gould as exercising ‘a certain playfulness toward his own artistic expression’ (Marijsse 2019: 151). On this reading, the impotentiality is preserved in the act in such a way that it works as an internal force within actuality: ‘The act may realize the potential to-be, but it doesn’t necessarily exhaust potentiality in its entirety, as a potential to not-be’ (ibid.: 145). We return to the concepts of style and manner in more detail later in this chapter.

In summary, Agamben’s approach to potentiality opens into two avenues. One zooms into potentiality as such, underscoring the importance of understanding human capacities as such without any necessity of actualization. The other, in turn, envisions how potentiality or impotentiality affects the actuality of this or that doing or being. Generally speaking, the former is more

accentuated in the earlier works and the latter in the works published in the last twenty years. Most importantly, both approaches underpin Agamben's affirmative idea of liberating potentiality from a variety of apparatuses. That is, Agamben's idea of a 'potentiality that is not exhausted (like individual action or collective action understood as the sum of individual actions) in a *transitus de potentia ad actum*' (Agamben 1998: 62) means for human action: the established and canonical activities that assign us to this or that task is not all there is. The last section of this chapter explicates in more detail how we approach this when delving more deeply into the paradigmatic types of political action, *praxis* and *poiēsis*, which form the framework of this study.

2.2 The taking place of language

The concept of potentiality is also connected to Agamben's understanding of language, to which we turn in this section. We start by discussing the notion of *infancy* that Agamben presents in his 1978 book *Infancy and History*, also touching upon Agamben's additional elaboration of this idea in *Idea of Prose* from 1985. We then move to *Language and Death* from 1982, utilizing it to show how Agamben's ontological considerations are integrally connected to his understanding of language. Although developed with reference to an astounding number of thinkers and examples, the central argument concerning language that Agamben develops in these works can be summarized as follows: *language takes place*. What Agamben gives prominence to is not language in its referential or signifying function, but rather the event and facticity of language as such. Before and beyond referring to this or that content, humans are the creatures that can experience the fact of having language; they can experience the potential for signification. Agamben calls this experience the *experimentum linguae*.

As Agamben lays out in *Infancy and History*, the unique characteristic of humans is not that they are beings endowed with language and thus different from animals who are deprived of this capacity. On the contrary, humans are beings who do not possess language from the beginning; they are beings who have and proceed from a state of *infancy*. Whereas human beings must thus acquire language and 'enter' it, as Agamben writes, animals are always already in language, at least if we understand animals to have immediate access to their genetically prescribed sound production. The chirps of a cricket, to evoke an example that he often uses, are always in an immediate relation to whatever behaviors the cricket conducts in its natural environment. Animals are completely in a dimension of 'pure signs,' which need not be interpreted or understood, only 'registered,' as Agamben puts it. In contrast, man has the experience of a 'split' and a transition from infantile babble to discourse, from nature to history: 'Animals do not enter language, they are already inside it. Man, instead, by having an infancy, by preceding speech, splits this single language and, in order to speak, has to constitute himself as the subject of language – he has to say *I*' (Agamben 2007a: 59).

However, what the figure of infancy captures is not a return to an earlier developmental state or something like a more 'natural' state of humanity: 'It is not a paradise which, at a certain moment, we leave for ever in order to speak; rather, it coexists in its origins with language – indeed is itself constituted through the appropriation of it by language in each instance to produce the individual as a subject' (Agamben 2007a: 55). The experience of infancy is in this sense present each time we speak in meaningful propositions; for a moment, we leave a dimension of pure signs and enter an instant of discourse. Infancy is this difference between sign and discourse, the semiotic and the semantic:

The semantic does not exist except in its momentary emergence from the semiotic in the instance of discourse, whose elements, once uttered, fall back into pure language, which reassembles them in its mute dictionary of signs. Like dolphins, for a mere instant human language lifts its head from the semiotic sea of nature. But the human is nothing other than this very passage from pure language to discourse; and this transition, this instant, is history. (Agamben 2007a: 64)

Discussing potentiality as a capacity or faculty partly clarifies this experience. Despite the acquired capacity for language, humans can simultaneously retain a relation to their infancy (in-fancy, wordless, not-speaking), which always accompanies them. In contrast to actual muteness, however, this infancy points to speaking as detached from this or that referent. At the threshold of discourse, humans can experience the very intention to speak or the potential for signification as such before it is completely exhausted in the actuality of meaningful discourse.

In the later book *Idea of Prose*, Agamben describes this transitional status of man with the example of the axolotl, a Mexican albino salamander. The axolotl displays something like a transitory and immature status throughout its life: even while reaching the capacity to reproduce, it holds on to its juvenile traits. It is this in-between status that Agamben uses to envision the human as a 'neotenic infant' that, even more radically than the axolotl, rejects all specific environments and genetically inscribed functions whatsoever, and experiences nothing but this infantile openness:

This neotenic infant, [...] would find himself in the condition of being able to pay attention precisely to what has not been written, to somatic possibilities that are arbitrary and uncodified; in his infantile totipotency, he would be ecstatically overwhelmed, cast out of himself, not like other living beings into a specific adventure or environment, but for the first time into a *world*. He would truly be listening to being. (Agamben 1995: 96)

The notion of man 'truly listening to his being' should be understood as nothing but the experience and grasping of the openness that man must pass through before any particular task or constation is possible; not this or that tradition,

destiny, or genetic calling, but that which enables the transition to such particulars in the first place. As Agamben notes to be an 'apparently trivial' remark, 'before transmitting something himself, man must first of all transmit language' (Agamben 1995: 97). Thus, between the 'semiotic sea of nature' and actual discourse, we experience and gain access to the very taking place of language, the 'neotenic openness' that is necessarily present in any particular instance of discourse. Evidently, this event cannot be brought to expression as it is precisely the dimension where language simply refers to its own instance of taking place. That is, this experience does not presuppose any state of affairs or a separate reality that could be reported on. As Agamben writes in the 1988-1989 preface added to the English edition of *Infancy and History*, titled 'Experimentum Linguae':

The only content of the *experimentum* is that *there is language*, we cannot represent this, by the dominant model in our culture, as *a language*, as a state or patrimony of names and rules which each people transmit from generation to generation. It is, rather, the unpresupposable non-latency in which men have always dwelt, and in which, speaking, they move and breath. For all the forty millennia of *Homo Sapiens*, man has not yet ventured to assume this non-latency, to have the experience of his speaking being. (Agamben 2007a: 10)

Placing this discussion in an ontological register in *Language and Death* (Agamben 1991), Agamben explores various grammatical categories to point out their function as indicators of the event of language. The pronoun, for example, occupied in Agamben's view as a special status for ancient thinkers and grammarians precisely because it *indicates* or *demonstrates* that language takes place. In this book, Agamben also devotes a rather long passage to a discussion of what Émile Benveniste called shifters, such as 'this,' 'here,' and 'now.' What is at stake in these instances of language, he summarizes as follows: 'Pronouns and the other indicators of the utterance, before they designate real objects, indicate precisely that language takes place. In this way, still prior to the world of meanings, they permit the reference to the very event of language, the only context in which something can only be signified' (ibid.: 25). While this has been grasped as the passage from *langue* to *parole* in Saussure's terms (from 'empty' signs to speech in a particular context), Agamben articulates this as a question of being, or the very condition for even raising questions about being: 'Only because language permits a reference to its own instance through shifters, something like being and the world are open to speculation' (ibid.).

Another way to illustrate this experience is captured in Agamben's discussion of the 'Voice,' which he uses in a capitalized form to designate a voice that is *no longer* simply a physical or 'animal' sound and *not yet* signifying discourse. Between the animal voice and its negation at the gate of meaningful human discourse, there is simply language in its exteriority, the fact of speaking and the potential for signification itself. The problem that he identifies here is that

this experience of the event of language has been veiled, distorted, and somehow not properly understood in the occidental tradition. In *Language and Death*, Agamben focuses on the Western tradition of metaphysics and argues that the 'Voice' has always been presupposed but never grasped as such; it is always understood as 'going to the ground' as meaningful human discourse is produced (Agamben 1991: 35). In this way, the very question of the event of language is always already suppressed and disposed into a negativity that guards and veils this event; 'the Voice discloses the place of language, but in such a way that this place is always already captured in negativity, and above all, always already consigned to temporality' (ibid.). This taking place of language is the proper dwelling place for humans, Agamben contends; yet, it is always understood as a presupposition and a having-been, such as in the Hegelian dialectical scheme to which we return in Chapter 3.

In summary, Agamben's key concern is how to approach the sheer existence of language in a way that does not make any recourse to negation or presupposition; in short, how to say the saying itself. There is, on one hand, this immediate experience of language as such, the potential for communication; on the other hand, the species *Homo Sapiens* has somehow failed to assume or even realize the primary importance of this dimension, while operating in terms of particular languages and their functions of signification and grammar (their 'patrimony of names and rules').

Apart from the works discussed thus far, Agamben has returned to this thematic on numerous occasions, such as in the 1984 essay 'The Idea of Language' (Agamben 1999b). In this text, he again articulates his vision of language as such through first attempting to define the concept of revelation in the Judeo-Christian tradition. What is revealed in the word of God is not a specific truth or knowledge about the divine that could be expressed in meaningful propositions. Rather, what is revealed is simply that there is language, that there is an 'openness to a world and knowledge' (ibid.: 40). What Agamben emphasizes in this context is precisely that the 'problem' at stake here is the one any philosophical discourse worthy of its name should tackle – philosophy should not only raise questions about how the world is represented through language, but also attempt to say this very 'sayability' itself. We need not go into greater detail, as it suffices to note that Agamben makes a similar move here, as in the works discussed above – ever since Plato's inquiries into the difficulties of saying 'the thing itself' (*to pragma auto*), this task has somehow been forgotten or distorted in the occidental tradition of philosophical discourse. To bring back this sayability to language, and to say the thing of language, is what Agamben sets as the central task of politics.

2.3 The coming community

Closely intertwined with his earlier work on the philosophy of language, Agamben's more explicit analysis of politics starts to take form in his early 1990s'

works. It is the 'taking place as such' as detached from any notion of presupposition or negativity that Agamben transports to his vision of a political community in a collection of short essays published almost a decade later, *The Coming Community* in 1990. Like the disclosure of the event of language, his preferred type of community does not presuppose any particular destiny, identity, or essence, but consists of singularities exposed as such: 'Decisive here is the idea of an inessential commonality, a solidarity that in no way concerns an essence. *Taking-place, the communication of singularities in the attribute of extension, does not unite them in essence, but scatters them in existence*' (Agamben 1993b: 18-19, italics in original). Hence, Agamben's usage of the notions 'whatever being' or 'whatever singularities' to denote singularities that are simply exposed to each other in their being-thus. Whatever properties they have, these singularities can never function as a common ground for founding a community; they simply 'enter into a community without presuppositions and subjects' (ibid.: 65) and share only this belonging as such.

As Agamben writes in *Profanations* when discussing being in very similar terms, being does not concern a substance in any way; like the image in the mirror, being consists in nothing but the appearing and becoming generated as such. Tracing the roots of the Latin word *species* in the verb 'to look' or 'to see,' he uses the notion of 'special being' to describe this type of being: 'Special being is absolutely insubstantial. It does not have a proper place, but it occurs in a subject and is in this sense like habitus or mode of being, like the image in the mirror' (Agamben 2007b: 57).

Since the community that remains to be invented in this manner, 'the coming community,' is radically indifferent to any form of belonging to this or that essence or destiny, it will always be in tension with the kind of state organization we are accustomed to, especially in the modern era: 'Whatever singularity, which wants to appropriate belonging itself, its own being-in-language, and thus reject all identity and every condition of belonging, is the principal enemy of the State' (Agamben 1993b: 87). Furthermore, there is a trait that differentiates the late modern 'society of the spectacle' from the earlier projects of building communities on the presupposition of a shared language, ethnicity, culture, and so on. Taking his cue from Guy Debord in the essay 'Shekinah,' Agamben notes that the capitalist spectacle essentially feeds on this very generic essence by using it as an infinite source of accumulating profit. For this very reason, to grasp a belonging that rejects all identity appears as a difficult task: wherever there is human experience 'as such' and for the sake of itself, the market immediately knows how to turn it into a 'product.' The generic experience of human communicability is thus placed in a separate sphere of advertising and consumption, which can be purchased but never freely accessed.

And yet, Agamben sees that precisely because of this development, we are in a position to free human communicability from an autonomous sphere of capitalist alienation. As Agamben writes, 'in the spectacle our own linguistic nature comes back to us inverted' (Agamben 1993b: 80); there remains a possibility for us to claim it back, and to make it available for all. To put it

differently, the emptying of traditions and beliefs that marks the homogenizing force of capitalist production is not *only* a negative condition. Insofar as it makes the emptying of traditions visible, it also points toward 'a positive possibility that can be used against it' (Agamben 1993b: 80).

In 'Notes on Politics,' an essay from roughly the same period (1992), Agamben discusses the idea of a community of whatever-singularities in terms of 'generic being,' also alluding to Jean-Luc Nancy's term 'compearance.' It is directly from this experience of being that Agamben derives his template for political action, which we examine more closely in the following section. A political community grounded in the simple fact of generic being would no longer strive toward a specific end, but would expose human mediality and potentiality as such:

What is in question in political experience is not a higher end but being-into-language itself as pure mediality, being-into-a-mean as an irreducible condition of human beings. Politics is the exhibition of a mediality: it is the act of making a means visible as such. Politics is the sphere neither of an end in itself nor of means subordinated to an end; rather it is the sphere of pure mediality without end intended as the field of human action and thought. (Agamben 2000: 116–117)

So far, we have seen how Agamben summons into view his vision of the irreducibly indeterminate and potential layer that is at work in human life. Beneath our order of signification and grammar, there is the sheer unfolding and taking place of language as such. Beyond our communities that are always organized on the grounds of a common essence or destiny, there lurks the possibility of a community of whatever-singularities that simply dwell in their exteriority. Even as the experiences in question do not have any other content than their sheer taking place, they illuminate something that is definitely different from any conventional or utilitarian conception of language and community. To envision a type of politics that is nothing but the exposure of whatever-being and communicability as such may be a difficult task, but it is nevertheless the one Agamben places at the heart of political and philosophical thought. In the following section, we further examine the implications of this undertaking by engaging with the concepts of gesture and pure means. These are articulated on the plane of action precisely as the kind of exposition of human potential that have been traced so far.

2.4 Gesture and pure means

While Agamben stresses the importance of gestures regarding properly political action, this dimension of his thought has remained relatively difficult to enter and grasp. This is perhaps because the texts in which he discusses gestures typically begin with an engagement with something that appears to be rather far

away from politics, such as involuntary tics, and these texts end with a compact declaration that 'politics is the sphere of gesturality.'

To clarify and further explore this terrain of Agamben's thought, we extract four interrelated aspects that he deems important for a politics of gesturality. From one perspective, the discussion of gestures and pure means opens an avenue for considering political action not in terms of means to attain certain ends, but as the experience of action in and for the sake of itself. In this sense, gestures incorporate an aspect of *non-instrumentality*. Another related aspect is that of a certain *non-voluntariness* involved in political action, which naturally distances Agamben's position from the currents of political thought that praise voluntary public action. However, even as his thought makes little room for a fully conscious subject and agency in general, he suggests that gesturality involves adopting a certain *attitude* toward one's actions, a certain attentiveness and sensitivity to the modality in which one experiences them. And finally, by engaging with the essay 'Salvation and Creation' (Agamben 2010), we show that gestures can be understood as marked by a certain constitutive *ambivalence*. The said text makes no explicit reference to gestures, but remains rooted in a similar discussion and addresses practically the same question. Beyond the apparently contrasting activities of creation and salvation, as well as action and production, Agamben highlights the possibility of an action that somehow incorporates both.

Before discussing the mentioned aspects, it is crucial to speak briefly of the two terms in the title of this section: Agamben's 'gesture' (*gesto*) and 'pure means' (*mezzo puro*) are used interchangeably in his works. The notion of pure means is a term adopted from Walter Benjamin, who has exerted a profound influence on Agamben's thought. To recall Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' essay from 1921, he uses the term to discuss the violence that always inheres in any legal order, either in the form of the revolutionary powers that give rise to it or the executive and administrative powers that aim at preserving it. In contrast to these types of violence, 'lawmaking' and 'law-preserving' in nature, Benjamin evokes the notion of 'divine violence' of pure means toward the end of the text.

While Benjamin's essay is a rather complex text and the precise meaning of divine violence is not explained at length, it is clear that he seeks to escape or to find a neutralizing solution to what he calls the 'the dialectical rising and falling in the lawmaking and law-preserving forms of violence' (Benjamin 1996: 251). While this oscillation between creation and preservation could in principle continue indefinitely, making orders rise and fall, Benjamin's divine violence of pure means points toward the suspension of this very process. As such, it is a 'pure means' since it is no longer committed to any project of building a new order, but orients itself solely toward abolishing the legal order itself. Although it is not immediately clear how this kind of a divine violence is wholly nonviolent, this kind of suspension halts the drive toward a new order that characterizes Agamben's project of pure means as well. For Benjamin, as well as for Agamben, the only 'order' that emerges from this suspension is life as such, as it is beyond any relation to a juridical order. We further discuss Benjamin's influence on Agamben in this regard in Chapter 3.

In the essay 'Notes on Gesture' from 1992 (Agamben 2000: 49–60; Agamben 2007a: 149–156), Agamben refers to ancient Roman scholar Varro's verb '*gerere*' to elucidate what he means by gesture. As Agamben shows in this text, Varro contrasts *gerere* to both acting (*agere*) and making (*facere*), and this distinction is ultimately derived from Aristotle's *praxis* and *poiēsis*. In contrast to acting, which has its end or final good in itself – and making, which aims at an end different from itself – *gerere* holds more the character of supporting and maintaining something in action: 'What characterizes gesture is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported' (Agamben 2000: 57). To shed light on what is maintained and endured in gestures, Agamben once again returns to the question of language and contends that gestures consist in nothing but exposing mediality as such: gesture is the 'communication of a communicability' and it indicates 'the being-in language of human beings' (ibid.: 59). At the very end of 'Notes on Gesture,' Agamben calmly places the maintenance of communicability and mediality as the content of politics: '*Politics is the sphere of pure means, that is, of the absolute and complete gesturality of human beings*' (ibid.: 60, italics in original).

Since gestures consist of nothing but the activity itself, its being-endured and being-experienced, there are certain affinities to Arendt's understanding of politics as the experience of freedom, to which we return in Chapter 4. However, Agamben's further accentuation of the non-voluntary character of this kind of experience is a clear step away from Arendt, for whom willing was an integral part of political action. To briefly recall Agamben's often-cited reading of Herman Melville's *Bartleby*, a crucial point for him is that to use our potentialities and remain beings of potentiality is *not* a question of the will (see Agamben 1999b: 254), as difficult as this might be to imagine. In his famous 'preferring not-to,' *Bartleby* wavers between potentiality and actuality, manifesting the inability of his will to decide on the matter and 'put an end' to the ambiguity of potentiality, as Agamben writes.

It is also in this light that Agamben's reference to Tourette syndrome in the above-mentioned essay on gestures should be understood. He announces that by the 19th century, the European bourgeoisie had 'lost its gestures' and that the sudden proliferation in cases of Tourette syndrome in the 1970s marked the bourgeoisie's effort to hold onto these gestures. Obviously, there is no need for a serious assessment of the accuracy of this approach concerning the underlying mechanisms of Tourettism. It is just one of many ways for Agamben to mark that at the extreme phase of the 20th century 'spectacle,' or however we want to name it, it is as if nothing purely habitual and unpurposive would be left in the human experience. Everything has its instrumental function, and everything calls upon productive individuals who can and *will* do whatever is demanded from them. Hence, it produces the need for re-discovering a domain of human activity that is detached both from a clear function and the determination of the will. This is the point to which Agamben is prepared to take the idea of non-instrumentality and sheer exposition of actions; gestures pertain to a kind of human dwelling in the immediacy of their actions and linguistic experience, so much so that they are

akin to involuntary spasms that happen quite independently of a will that puts them to work.

In the 2018 book *Karman*, Agamben further develops the concept of gesture as an alternative to *praxis* and *poiēsis*. In particular, he draws from the examples of dance and mime to put forward his idea of the mere exhibition of human potential. These practices interest him precisely because they have no intention in the conventional sense of the word. Dance can, of course, have many artistic intentions and meanings, but it is nevertheless not movement from A to B:

[Just] as, even in its absence of intention, dance is the perfect exhibition of the pure potential of the human body, so also one could say that, in gesture, each member, once liberated from its functional relation to an end – organic or social – can for the first time explore, sound out, and show forth all the possibilities of which it is capable, without ever exhausting them. (Agamben 2018a: 82)

In this work, Agamben also approaches gesture as an *attitude* toward actions: ‘The verb *gerere*, which in modern language has been conserved only the term “gesture” and its derivatives, means a manner of behaving and acting that expresses a specific attitude of agents with respect to their actions’ (ibid.: 83). What this attitude amounts to is not immediately explained, but Agamben adds that in the dimension of gestures, one can take distance to the very action itself: ‘Those who *gerunt* are not limited to acting, but in the very act in which they carry out their action, they at the same time stop it, expose it, and hold it at a distance from themselves’ (ibid.: 84). In other words, in the act undertaken by the agent, something additional is also acted or effectuated – an ‘attitude,’ or the injection of a stop that allows for a distancing and a ‘sounding out’ of the act in question, to exercise an expression used by Agamben.

We can perhaps understand this ‘attitude’ as a way for him to stress that even as the functional end has been disposed and forgotten, there remains a close attention to the various possibilities that inhere in the activity. Agamben suggests something like this when discussing a Greek ancestral feast that involved chasing away ‘the hunger of an ox’ (Agamben 2010: 104–112). Rather than explaining this feast as a ritual of driving away hunger, he argues that it should be interpreted as another ‘modality of eating,’ one that is ‘festive’ and ‘more human’ than engorging on food like beasts (ibid.: 107). In this sense, the function of nutrition is naturally still there, but it is experienced in a modality or atmosphere that is in no way determined by the organic function.

Finally, to grasp the certain ambivalence that characterizes gestural action, let us briefly engage with a discussion of the two actions or works of God in the Islamic tradition that Agamben takes up in the essay ‘Creation and Salvation.’ According to Islamic doctrine, Agamben tells us in this essay, the two works of God are creation and salvation: while God and the power of the angels stand for creation, the role of the prophet is to redeem, and to mediate the eschatological salvation that follows from God’s creation. However, the peculiar trait of the

Islamic doctrine is that the latter, the work of salvation, is understood as somehow preceding or being 'nobler' than the work of creation (Agamben 2010: 3). What Agamben implies with this discussion is that these two apparently opposing poles – creation and salvation – are in fact interlaced. Moreover, this close intertwinement of two forces is present not only in the work of a deity, strictly speaking, but in all human actions:

Those who act and produce must also save and redeem their creation. It is not enough to do; one must know how to save that which one has done. In fact, the task for salvation precedes the task of creation; it is almost as if the only legitimization for doing and producing were the capacity to redeem that which has been done and produced. What is truly singular in every human existence is the silent and impervious intertwining of the two works, the extremely close and yet disjoined proceeding of the prophetic word and the creative word, of the power of the angel (with which we never cease producing and looking ahead) and the power of the prophet (that just as tirelessly retrieves and undoes, and arrests the progress of creation and in this way completes it and redeems it). (Agamben 2010: 4)

Despite the apparent difference in vocabulary and thematic context, this is another way in which Agamben formulates the kind of activity that gestures and pure means point to, hence the reference to those who 'act' and 'produce.' Insofar as both 'look ahead,' that is, either embark upon a new action or create something in the sense of attaining an end, there is simultaneously a force that either 'retrieves' (restores, brings back) or 'undoes' (unravels, disintegrates). In this sense, the activity Agamben has in mind is marked by a constitutive ambivalence or something conflicting at work, both in action and production.

As mentioned in the introduction, Agamben also discusses gesture as the exemplary activity of the Roman emperor in *Opus Dei* (Agamben 2013), published after his earlier works on gesture and before the 2018 book *Karman*. Instead of the affirmative tone held in his other works, gestural activity appears as the 'problem' of Western power in this book. The Christian tradition, he argues in *Opus Dei*, is partly responsible for giving birth to an 'ontology of command.' The action of Christ himself, immediately effective and carrying out God's work, can naturally occur only once. Thus, the liturgical action of the church becomes a paradoxical operation that continuously attempts to effectuate this original activity within the sphere of the church. Within his apparatus, being is not treated as simply 'existing.' Being is not simple givenness or presence but rather something effectuated and realized. The 'operator' of this activity is faith: 'Christian faith is a mobilization of ontology in which what is in question is the transformation of being into operativity' (Agamben 2013: 57). In this ontology of command, being and action, potentiality and actuality coincide (ibid.: 47), precisely as in gesture as we have delineated above. Yet, the problem that Agamben identifies here is that this being always takes the form of a 'having-to-

be' (*dovere-essere*), not sufficient in its sheer exteriority but something that has to be effectuated.

As Adam Kotsko, one of Agamben's translators, has noted with reference to *Opus Dei*, concepts that were initially redemptive in Agamben's earlier works suddenly appear as the 'bad guys' in his later works (Kotsko 2014). Apart from gesture, potentiality is also taken up in *Homo Sacer* as a 'negative' concept insofar as the neutralization of the opposition between potentiality and actuality functions as the logic of sovereignty. Yet, it is important to bear in mind that the precise problem that Agamben pins down in these contexts is the process of *separation*, that is, gestural activity becoming confined to a separate sphere. In *Homo Sacer*, the 'redemptive' mode of being and acting, which he explains through a complex discussion of potentiality and potentiality not-to, is confined to the sphere of the sovereign state apparatus. In *Opus Dei*, this experience is mastered in the sphere of liturgical and ritualized activity - it is 'confiscated' by the church, as it were. And in *The Sacrament of Language* (Agamben 2011a), as we see in Chapter 5 when discussing the apparatus of the oath, this activity gradually becomes separated into the juridical sphere instead of being openly available to all. In this sense, there is no discontinuity in Agamben's work; it is just that in some contexts, he speaks of this activity in the 'free' sense, and in others, in a 'separated' sense. We return to this logic of separation in the section that deals with profanation (2.6).

To avoid any misunderstanding, the way in which Agamben presents his concept of gesture bears almost no resemblance to the Brechtian notion of gesture (*Gestus*), even though exploring this route might appear promising given the fact that Agamben draws many of his analogies from theatrical gestures and remains otherwise influenced by Benjamin, one of Brecht's contemporaries and close collaborators. At the heart of Brecht's historical materialist understanding of the theater was the wish to reorient its function. He called for the theater to incite intellectual reflection that could ultimately lead to social transformation instead of merely providing a space for aesthetic enjoyment.

In this context, gesture (or 'gest,' as it is also rendered in English) refers to a specific acting technique that marks various attitudes of the characters towards one another, and importantly, these attitudes are understood as revealing *social* relations (between classes, for example) rather than merely psychological or emotional states of mind. It is perhaps best understood in the context of the technique of 'estrangement' or 'alienation' (*Verfremdung*) that Brecht developed, such as unusual and interruptive lighting, as well as actors addressing the audience directly. His aim was not to create plays in which the audience would be carried away with the story and relate to the characters personally: '[We] cannot invite the audience to fling itself to the story as if it were a river and let itself be carried vaguely hither and thither,' as he eloquently put it in *A Short Organum for the Theatre* (Brecht 1982). Instead, the play act was supposed to wake up the audience to 'reality,' estranging them from the inner world of the characters and focusing on the societal relations revealed in the play. Brecht's 'gesturality,' if one may use such a term, would thus consist in exposing the fact

that the currently existing social relations are not permanent, but alterable through human action.

This kind of a 'revolutionary' function of the theater would be hard to find in the work of Agamben. And yet, it is clear that what Agamben means by gesture is no simple affirmation of idleness or inactivity. On the contrary, he argues that gestures open a space of 'free use' of human potential. Interrogating the exact meaning of this free use is the question that accompanies us throughout this attempt to explicate what it means to go 'beyond' *praxis* and *poiēsis*.

2.5 Inoperativity

As the above discussion of potentiality, whatever-singularity, and gesturality shows, one of the overall tasks of Agamben's thought is to underline the importance of dwelling in human potential and 'mediality.' Humans are not programmed to do or be this or that, but can experience and undergo their existence as undetermined and not fully exhausted in any actual task or operation. Another important and closely interrelated dimension of this is the fundamental workslessness or human beings, captured in the concept of inoperativity (*inoperosità*) to which we turn now.

Once again, Aristotle serves as one of Agamben's sources of inspiration; in this case, a passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics* in which Aristotle ponders whether there is a task or function (*ergon*) that is specifically assigned to human beings. While the task of a shoemaker obviously is to make shoes, the essential task of humans *as* humans is less clear. Aristotle wonders: 'Is it then possible that while a carpenter and a shoemaker have their own proper function and spheres of action, man as man has none, but was left by nature a good-for-nothing without a function [*argōs*]?' (Aristotle cited in Agamben 2000: 141). After a brief speculation, the question is set aside by Aristotle; for Agamben, this is one of the fragments that he takes onboard when depicting his vision of a humanity that is detached from all tasks and vocations: humans are workless, taskless, and essentially undetermined. Without this essential indeterminacy, there would be no possibility of politics, only tasks to undertake in the mode of means to an end. Agamben writes in the last notes included in *Means Without End*:

Politics is that which corresponds to the essential inoperability [*inoperosità*] of humankind, to the radical being-without-work of human communities. There is politics because human beings are *argōs*-beings that cannot be defined by any proper operation – that is, beings of pure potentiality that no identity or vocation can possibly exhaust. (Agamben 2000: 141)

In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben also connects his concept of inoperativity to Alexandre Kojève's usage of the term *désœuvrement*, tracing it both to Kojève's review of a Raymond Queneau novel and his 'end of history' thesis more generally (Agamben 1998: 61). In this context, he acknowledges the apparent link to Jean-

Luc Nancy's and Maurice Blanchot's engagements with the notions of 'inoperative community' and 'unavowable community' respectively (see Nancy 1991; Blanchot 1988). Also highlighted by Sergei Prozorov (2014: 33) and Leland De la Durantaye (2009: 18), Agamben has undoubtedly been influenced by the Autonomous Marxist movements that were prevalent in Italy and elsewhere in the 1970s. What these movements championed was precisely a type of 'worklessness' that was presented not as a call for idleness as such, but as a radical refusal to work under the conditions of capitalist forms of production.

Agamben's engagement with Kojève's 'end of history' thesis further underscores an important dimension of his thought, one that in a certain way contextualizes the entire enterprise of envisioning a political community grounded in the workless and inoperative character of man. This dimension is what ties together a large part of the political thought of the 20th century, namely the event of nihilism and the general discomfort with certain late modern tendencies and developments. As mentioned earlier, Agamben refers to the capitalist spectacle in which the pure communicability of human beings is separated into an autonomous sphere of capital accumulation. Similarly, the concept of bare life marks the modern condition in which there is no longer any meaningful distinction between the public and private, or *zōē* and *bios*, the two Greek terms that designated the unqualified life of man as such and his qualified life in the public life of the *polis*. Agamben writes in a text from the mid 1990s, 'In this Exile (Italian diary 1992-94),' that it is precisely from this experience of everything being alienated, uprooted, and hollowed out that a new type of 'inoperative' and 'gestural' politics can be initiated:

[It] is by starting from this uncertain terrain and from this opaque zone of indistinction that today we must once again find the path of another politics, of another body, of another word. I would not feel up to forgoing this indistinction of public and private, of biological body, of *zōē* and *bios*, for any reason whatsoever. It is here that I must find my space once again – here and nowhere else. Only a politics that starts from such an awareness can interest me. (Agamben 2000: 139)

While Kojève views the apex of modernity as the end of history in the Hegelian sense of a final synthesis, Agamben insists that it is more a matter of seizing this apparent vacuity of all projects and finding a way to formulate a new type of politics on the basis of this groundlessness. In other words, it is the devastating experience of nihilism that calls upon the difficult task of founding a political community that would fall neither into the trap of a new task, nor into that of an intensification of the value of life itself, a vitalism of sorts. Thus, it is precisely the apparent aporias in Kojève's account of what happens to humanity in the condition of late modernity or 'posthistory' that interests Agamben – we explore these in more detail in Chapter 3.

Starting from his works in the 1990s, the term inoperativity will appear in many other contexts in Agamben's work and often in conjunction with familiar

concepts. For example, mediality and gesturality are articulated precisely as an operation of rendering human actions inoperative in *Karman*. Similarly, when Agamben probes the border of the man-animal distinction in *The Open* by addressing a painting displaying the figures of a nymph and a shepherd by Titian, he advances the idea of both man and animal being neutralized (Agamben 2004: 87). This neutralizing operation precisely produces the figure of inoperative life, freed from any specific task or object. The torn-down tree in the painting suggests that the nymph and the shepherd have eaten from the tree of knowledge; this 'fall' does not result in sin, but in the mutual disenchantment and disclosure of life as such: 'the lovers who have lost their mystery contemplate a human nature rendered perfectly inoperative – the inactivity {*inoperosità*} and *désœuvrement* of the human and of the animal as the supreme and unsavable figure of life' (ibid.). As we discuss shortly, Agamben characterizes profanation as an activity that renders human apparatuses inoperative (Agamben 2007b). In addition, as Sergei Prozorov (2014: 42) demonstrates, the logic underpinning inoperativity can just as well be traced even in the earlier works, even though the concept itself is developed later. The event of language, for example, may be understood in terms of rendering language inoperative. Insofar as the suspension of signifying discourse leads to no other content than the potential for signification, this operation can indeed be understood as a 'deactivation' and a 'rendering inoperative' of reference and signification.

2.6 Manner and profanation

Hopefully revealed in the concepts discussed thus far, a conspicuous trait of Agamben's thought is the attempt to neutralize or dissolve apparent oppositions in a manner that exposes human activities in their sheer facticity and immediacy. When working with the opposition between potentiality and actuality, Agamben articulates his vision of a potentiality that survives within actuality. From one perspective, as we saw, this can be taken to mean that actuality and potentiality enter into a 'zone of indistinction,' to use a formulation Agamben often uses. In this sense, there is not a clear rift between potentiality and actuality; rather, potentiality is a constantly available and existing condition of human beings. Similarly, gesturality neutralizes the opposition between means and ends, making visible mediality as such. Immersing themselves in gestures, humans explore and contemplate their potential for action. Inoperativity, in turn, breaks the opposition between work and the simple refusal to do this or that, and exposes the very fact of *being* one's worklessness. In other words, inoperativity is not 'simple' privation, lack, or inertia, but the very manner in which one exists and undergoes one's fundamental lack of work or essence.

However, as we suggested when discussing Agamben's understanding of Aristotle's potentiality, there is another dimension to this operation. That impotentiality is saved within actuality also means, and this Agamben makes clear in several contexts, that it enables a *free use* of a given human activity or

faculty (see, for example, Agamben 2000: 117; Agamben 2005b: 64). Instead of emphasizing this free use as an exploration of potentiality, per se, Agamben sometimes discusses it more in terms of a non-conventional usage and modification of various canonical activities. As we attempt to demonstrate here, this can be detected most clearly when Agamben operates with the concept of manner (*maniera*) and, to some extent, profanation (*profanazione*). We start with the concept of manner, registering its first appearance in *The Coming Community* (Agamben 1993b) and its subsequent elaboration in *The Use of Bodies* (Agamben 2016). We then focus on the concepts of style and manner, which are elaborated for the first time in the context of poetry in *The End of the Poem* (Agamben 1999c) and taken up again in more recent works dealing with artistic practices. Finally, we explore the notion of profanation, one of the central concepts designating a playful and creative activity that liberates a potentiality to do otherwise.

In *The Coming Community*, Agamben devotes a short essay to explain his notion of whatever-singularity, which is discussed above, by help of the term 'manner' or *maneries* in medieval logic. In the same way as he argues that the facticity of language should be made intelligible without any recourse to a presuppositional structure, he also understands being not in terms of a division between being and its modes or qualifications, but *as* those modes as such. There is nothing beneath being, being *is* its modes, and being is 'engendered from one's own manner of being' (Agamben 1993b: 29).

A couple of decades later, the notion of manner stands as one of the key concepts of Agamben's modal ontology developed in *The Use of Bodies* (Agamben 2016). Undertaking what he calls an 'archaeology of ontology' in the second chapter of the book, he asserts that Aristotle's division between the primary and secondary essences is a fundamental framework that has conditioned Western ontology despite the various formulations it has taken during the course of history, such as essence and existence, or being and beings (Agamben 2016: 115). The general argument is the same as in the short text mentioned above, but in this chapter, Agamben devotes a longer discussion to how being has, in the Western tradition, been understood as something that presupposes a subject that is prior to or lies underneath every predication. The generic being of man is always predicated on the basis of a singular and determinate man (whence the term *sub-iectum* in Latin and *hypokeimenon* in Greek, designating something that lies underneath, Agamben reminds us).

Against this apparatus, Agamben proposes his modal ontology, in which modes are not understood as predicates added to a prior subject or substance but constitute being as such: 'Being does not pre-exist the modes but constitutes itself in being modified, is nothing other than its modifications' (ibid.: 170). It is in this sense that he can refer to an 'ontology of the how' (ibid.: 231); what is at stake is not *what* being is but *how* it is, an aspect that also permits him to make a connection to the notion of manner toward the end of the volume. When explicating his enigmatic concept of form-of-life, he has in mind precisely a being that does not *have* but simply *is* its modes. A form-of-life is 'a "manner of rising forth," not a being that has this or that property or quality but a being that is its

mode of being, which is its welling up and is continually generated by its “manner” of being’ (Agamben 2016: 224).

From another perspective, Agamben also accentuates a certain tension that manners display, a tension that he describes as ‘bipolar’ and ‘transformative.’ To this end, he couples manner with the concept of style, and demonstrates how the style-manner relationship can be approached as an experience of a tension between that which is most proper to us but simultaneously ‘inappropriate’ and beyond our reach (ibid.: 80–94). For example, our own body becomes foreign to us at precisely the moment we experience its most elemental activities, such as the need to urinate; in need, the body is experienced as proper, yet strangely external because one remains helplessly trapped in the body part from which the need originates.

Similarly, although our mother tongue appears intimate to us, we do not own it in any meaningful sense; language has been imposed upon us since childhood, remaining an object of common use shared with other speakers. This tension between what is proper and improper is particularly evident in poetic language: despite mastering language, poets also take distance to and play with conventional uses of language to the point of making them unrecognizable. Agamben thus illustrates how style and manner form ‘the two irreducible poles of the poetic gesture: if style marks its most proper trait, manner registers an inverse demand for expropriation and non-belonging’ (ibid.: 86–87). Both are simultaneously present: a sense of being at home and distancing oneself from that very home.

The examples that appear here are, to some extent, derived from Agamben’s 1996 book *The End of the Poem*, in which he also discusses the tension between style and manner. Focusing particularly on Italian poet Giorgio Caproni in the sixth chapter of the book, Agamben explicates how artistic manners presuppose that one has the knowledge and skill of a certain style. What we hail in great artists is the simultaneous mastery of a style and a certain letting go and forgetting of it:

Not only in the old poet but in every great writer (Shakespeare!) there is a manner that distances itself from a style, a style that expropriates itself into manner. At its height, writing even consists in precisely the interval – or, rather, the passage – between the two. Perhaps in every field but most of all in language, use is a polar gesture: on the one hand, appropriation and habit; on the other expropriation and nonidentity. (Agamben 1999c: 98)

This is a trait that Agamben observes in the late work of Caproni in particular. He notes Caproni’s colorful use of the Italian language, such as the use of unusual adjectival compounds and the more extreme move of breaking the dimension of metrical closure in poetry, which Agamben compares to an orchestra player smashing a violin (ibid.: 99). From another perspective, this expropriation and distancing from a style may sometimes come in the paradoxical form of an ‘excessive, mannered adhesion to it’ (ibid.: 98). Through these examples, ‘style’

can be understood either as a poetic style (meter) or a particular natural language (Italian). And ‘perhaps in every field,’ as Agamben suggests, one might detect something similar, a certain habitual know-how with respect to something that allows one to do otherwise and make shortcuts. The more one is familiar with an original text one works with, the more one can actually interpret it instead of merely executing a summary of it; having prepared the same meal enough times in a successful manner, it becomes possible to modify the recipe by perhaps adding unexpected ingredients. It is perhaps this we simply call the ‘art’ of doing this or that – the somewhat effortless ‘forgetting’ of the rule or command that became possible by way of appropriating it and adhering to it in the first place, either through deliberate practice or a more unconscious repetition of a habit.

In the more recent essay ‘What is the Act of Creation?’ (Agamben 2017; 2019), mentioned above in the section concerning potentiality, Agamben returns to the theme of style and manner. In this text, Agamben discusses the piano-playing of Glenn Gould, as well as other examples of artistic creation by placing his interpretation of potentiality at the center of the concepts of style and manner. His examples of poetry, painting, and music further clarify how style and manner form a tension between the impersonal and the personal element of artistic creation. Style is the impersonal, trans-individual, and general element in art that remains independent from the artist’s individual touch. In this sense, it could be understood, for example, as a genre or an epochal style in art. Manner, on the other hand, imprints the work with the artist’s unique mark, with an element that ‘almost enters into conflict’ with the impersonal element (Agamben 2019: 21).

This type of mastery, manifesting the ability to resist the style, is also intrinsically connected with tastefulness and quality. Whenever there is only a formally correct execution of a style, there is no degree of the ability not-to-present in the performance and hence no taste: ‘Those who lack taste cannot refrain from anything; tastelessness is always a not being able not to do something’ (ibid.: 20). Making use of Agamben’s concepts, James Salvo accurately writes that mere imitation of a great figure in art amounts to ‘spiritless impersonation’ (Salvo 2018: 207).

The question of taste also sheds light on the following distinction Agamben makes between ability, talent, and mastery when referring to Glenn Gould. The passage is almost identical to the earlier fragment about Gould in *The Coming Community*, but with a slight edit toward the end: ‘As opposed to ability, which simply negates and abandons its potential not to play, and talent, which can only play, mastery preserves and exercises in action not its potential to play but its potential not to play’ (Agamben 2019: 19). In the case of ability, the difference with respect to mastery is rather clear: someone who has acquired enough skills to read a score can somehow pull off playing a piece without this being an act of distinctive mastery. The differentiation between mastery and talent, on the other hand, is slightly more intricate. We can perhaps understand talent as an unusual kind of ability to, for example, compose works of a specific style. Think of the early works of a child genius like W.A. Mozart: as perfect demonstrations of Viennese Classicism, they manifest the extreme talent of the composer. However,

being a perfect example of a specific style is not enough for something to count as genuinely interesting – we rarely listen to this bulk of Mozart's early compositions today. Instead, it is the later mature works that we appreciate because they demonstrate a sophisticated ability to slightly deviate from the style in question, making it personal and interesting.

As some of Agamben's more extreme examples suggest, mannerism can also occur in a form that is not tied to mastery at all. For example, Kafka's Josephine does not have the slightest idea of how to sing, yet she manages to produce sounds that nobody else is capable of (Agamben 2019: 22). In other words, Josephine has no knowledge of the art of singing – and accordingly, lacks both mastery and taste, but succeeds nevertheless in playing with manner alone. We could therefore understand all three instances of mannerism – tasteful mastery, transgressive use of manner, and pure manner – as expositions, or *paradigms*, of the very same logic. At the very least, style is modified with a tasteful hint of personal mannerism, namely in the case of a composer like Mozart. In the middle, there is a manner so strong that it almost violates the style, like in some aspects of Glenn Gould's idiosyncrasy, or in Caproni's extreme move of breaking the meter of poetry completely. And finally, in yet another example, Josephine has no knowledge of any style but manages to produce a manner like no other.

In summary, mannerism shows how a potentiality to do otherwise consists in using canonical activities, as formed by 'styles,' in alternative and perhaps surprising ways. Made clear especially in the more recent works, style and manner belong together – they manifest as a 'bipolar' tension in human activity. As Agamben puts it in *The End of the Poem*, '[only] in their reciprocal relation do style and manner acquire their true sense beyond the proper and the improper' (Agamben 1999c: 98).

To further analyze this dimension of altering canonical activities, let us explore the idea of profanation, which Agamben discusses most systematically in the chapter 'In Praise of Profanation' from the 2007 book *Profanations*. In Roman antiquity, to be sacred meant to be separated from the free use of men. Sacred things belonged to the gods; they were out of reach of ordinary humans. This is more generally an attribute of all religious systems, he contends: religions always necessarily remove things (objects, animals, whatever they may be) from a common use and place them in a separate sphere (Agamben 2007b: 74). Profanation, in turn, works as a counterforce or inverse operation of this separation: to profane means to return something from the sphere of the sacred to the realm of the free and the common, that is, the profane. Agamben describes it as a kind of 'negligence' and 'distraction' toward the sacred, one that does not abolish the sacred or stand in direct opposition to it, but activates a different use of it: 'To profane means to open the possibility of a special form of negligence, which ignores separation or, rather, puts it to a particular use' (ibid.: 75).

It is worth specifying that, according to Agamben, profanation does not take us to a 'natural' state that was there before the separating consecration, and neither does it consist in abolishing the sacred apparatus altogether. As he shows

by the example of play, most familiar games have their origin in practices that were originally considered religious: chess boards developed from divinatory practices, and ball games from rituals representing the struggle between the gods for possession of the sun (Agamben 2007b: 75-76). Drawing from the work of Émile Benveniste, Agamben notes that the specific trait of these ancient religious rituals was that the myth and the rite, the 'story' to be told and the physical act reproducing it, were tightly conjoined. In their gradual metamorphosis into practices of play, however, a specific alteration happens to this unity. On the one hand, the physical act preserves the rite itself while abandoning the myth that accompanied it; as a linguistic act, on the other hand, the rite is neglected while preserving the mere 'play of words.' The sacred is in this sense not entirely abolished or forgotten; it has been liberated from its canonical and established use. This is more generally, Agamben adds, something we find in contexts that are not religious in any apparent sense. The dimension of profanation is present, for example, when children play with objects that originally belonged to 'serious' spheres, such as economics or law; children 'play with whatever old things fall in their hands' (ibid.: 76).

It is crucial to not conflate profanation with secularization, which merely transfers a thing, activity, or apparatus to another separate sphere while preserving its unattainable status. Thus, 'the political secularization of theological concepts (the transcendence of God as a paradigm of sovereign power) does nothing but displace the heavenly monarchy onto an earthly monarchy, leaving its power intact' (ibid.: 77). Secularization transfers, but profanation effectuates another kind of alteration, another use. At a closer look, there are two different steps or dimensions to what happens when something is profaned: profanation 'neutralizes what it profanes. *Once profaned*, that which is unavailable and separate loses its aura and is returned to use' (ibid.: 77, emphasis added).

This is similar to the move Agamben makes in the above-discussed essay 'Notes on Politics' when describing a community of whatever singularities as one that restores the human experience of language to that of pure communicability and mediality. 'The second consequence' of this experience, he adds immediately, is that this opens the possibility of a free and common use (Agamben 2000: 116-117). In other words, a movement restores something to a 'neutral' space, a space of pure potentiality, *and* from this follows the opening of a gate to a different use.

The concept of profanation also neatly connects with the critique of the capitalist spectacle that we touched upon above. The specific trait of capitalism is, as Agamben explains in *Profanations*, that human activities are separated from their free and common use to such an extreme degree that there is, as it were, nothing left to profane. Literally everything (language, sexuality, art, the body, and so on) can be separated into a separate sphere of consumption and made into an object that produces added monetary value. Yet, the capitalist order is perhaps not entirely 'unprofaneable.' We may have to continue searching for ways to profane that which presents itself as impenetrable; in some sense, it is a question

of *learning* how to deactivate apparatuses and play with them, Agamben suggests (Agamben 2007b: 87). Even in nature, he observes, there is something akin to profanation, such as when cats play with a ball of yarn in a way that mimics predatory activity without the goal of catching an actual prey. To describe this activity that is liberated from its functional end, Agamben draws together concepts that we have by now become familiar with, such as pure means and inoperativity:

The activity that results from this thus becomes a pure means, that is, a praxis that, while firmly maintaining its nature as a means, is emancipated from its relationship to an end; it has joyously forgotten its goal and can now show itself as such, as a means without an end. The creation of a new possible use is possible only by deactivating an old use, rendering it inoperative. (Agamben 2007b: 86)

As the above cited passage shows, both of Agamben's approaches can be discerned here. On one hand, the content of the deactivation that happens in profanation is the act as such, its own taking place and being a 'means without an end,' the potentiality for action. On the other hand, this restoration into a state of pure means and potentiality becomes a way to invent new uses of the activity in question. Children who play with 'whatever falls in their hands' show that any particular use can never exhaust the play, and new uses can be invented *ad infinitum*. As the concept of profanation suggests, there are two dimensions or two steps in Agamben's operation: there is neutralization and deactivation, and then there is the opening into a field of possible uses.

Something similar can be said on the basis of Agamben's discussion of Chloë des Lysses, a French porn star active in the early 1990s, whose performances on film consisted in conducting sexual acts in the most complex and demanding positions while showing a completely inexpressive face. In her negligence of both her partner and the spectator, Agamben sees Chloë des Lysses as revealing a certain liberatory act that profanes erotic behaviors; it 'lets them idle' and reveals them as such without any immediate relation to an end (ibid.: 91). This is the 'promise of a new use' of sexuality, as Agamben also phrases it, a promise that the pornographic industry betrays by immediately capturing it in a separate sphere of 'desperate consumption' (ibid.). What interests us here is precisely this new promise that des Lysses opens into the field, which Agamben calls 'a new collective use of sexuality.' What des Lysses shows is certainly not the *only* new use, but the very fact that there is the possibility of profaning sexuality from apparatuses that govern it in a way that generates different uses. After all, Agamben's works include countless references to perverts and fetishists who, in their own ways, manifest a different use of sexuality.

What is important to all these examples is that they illustrate Agamben's wish to avoid fixing human activities in a separate sphere that only knows of one kind of use and blocks the invention of new ones. This is clearly articulated in the

example of glory that Agamben discusses in *Nudities*. Considering a range of writings mainly by medieval thinkers regarding the nature of the glorious body of the resurrected, he settles on the decisive ambiguity of the glorious body: its reproductive and nutritive organs are still there in the resurrected condition, yet liberated from their particular functions. In this way, the glorious body displays and exhibits the possibility of another use beyond reproduction and nutrition: 'The glorious body is an ostensive body whose functions are not executed but rather displayed' (Agamben 2010: 98). However, even as the established functions of these organs are certainly neutralized, this takes place in a separate and ritualized sphere that can only be glorified but not accessed:

[The] eternally inoperative organs in the bodies of the blessed – even if they exhibit the procreative function that belongs human nature – do not represent another use for those organs. The ostensive body of the elect, no matter how “organic” and real it may be, is outside the sphere of any possible use. There is perhaps nothing more enigmatic than a glorious penis, nothing more spectral than a purely doxological vagina. (Agamben 2010: 99)

Just as it happens in the pornographic industry, neutralization is also shown but immediately snatched onto another plane beyond free use; glory seems to be the only activity left when the profaned, neutralized, and inoperative have been confined to a separate sphere. On the other hand, what *does* illustrate a new use is the rather straightforward example that Agamben takes up immediately after the above paragraph, namely that of a young Neapolitan who somehow managed to make a cream-whipper out of a broken motorcycle engine. Agamben writes: 'In this example the engine continues to spin on some level but from the perspective of entirely new needs and desires. Inoperativity is not left here to its own devices but instead becomes the opening, the “open-sesame,” that leads to a new possible use' (ibid.: 100). Understood in this sense, human potential must not be exhibited and glorified in a separate sphere, but also explored, learned about, and taken up as an object of experimentation. As Sergei Prozorov puts it when delineating the concept of inoperativity, 'inoperativity either becomes a gateway to a new use or is confined in a separate sphere, exposed and glorified in its sheer presence without the possibility of use' (Prozorov 2014: 46).

2.7 A different use of *praxis* and *poiēsis*

As the above discussion suggests, perhaps to the point of repetitiveness, the concepts and thematic investigations that appear in Agamben's thought from the earliest to the latest works reveal a commitment to the same logic. To render something inoperative, to profane the sacred, and to suspend human activities in a state of pure means – all of these designate a similar move of detaching human activities from a particular, canonical, and often instrumental use and restoring

them to a state of potentiality. It is this operation that opens a possibility of using them otherwise.

For the analyses undertaken in the following chapters, the first important thing to note is that any meaningful description of how Agamben's alternative activity works must have an object of some kind: suspension and deactivation work only if there is something to suspend or deactivate. This object could in principle be anything that functions as an ordering force in human life, an 'apparatus,' as Agamben often calls it with reference to Foucault's term '*dispositif*.' As illustrated in the following excerpt, Agamben describes his definition of '*dispositif*' in the essay 'What is an Apparatus?':

Further expanding the already large class of Foucauldian apparatuses, I shall call an apparatus literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings. Not only, therefore, prisons, madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confession, factories, disciplines, juridical measures, and so forth (whose connection with power is in a certain sense evident), but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones and – why not – language itself, which is perhaps the most ancient of apparatuses – one in which thousands and thousands of years ago a primate inadvertently let himself be captured, probably without realizing the consequences that he was about to face. (Agamben 2009b: 14)

In an attempt to explore in more detail how Agamben's gestural activity works, one option would be to settle for an analysis of a human activity (like smoking) or a concrete object or technology (like mobile phones). The task would, in this case, be to investigate how these apparatuses or the activities ordered by them can be used freely or experimented with. However, in this study, we treat *praxis* and *poiēsis* themselves as objects of analysis: as established and canonical types of acting within the Western tradition, they themselves are apparatuses that orient and determine our political activities, as well as our reflection on them. When analyzing Agamben's wish to go beyond these established types, we take his logic to suggest the following: while *praxis* and *poiēsis* define a particular type or style of acting, there remains a possibility of suspending them in a way that liberates a potentiality to do otherwise. In other words, the 'beyond' is enabled by a suspension that liberates a potentiality to act non-canonically.

Importantly, however, Agamben's approach to this potentiality can be understood in two disparate ways. Either his third is the potentiality to use action and production non-canonically, that is, it is an activity that is still tied to them; alternatively, it can be read as potentiality as such, 'pure potentiality.' The latter is neither *praxis* nor *poiēsis* since it is the suspension in a state of potentiality; it is not action but the exploration of different *possibilities* of action. This is the ambiguity we have identified above, paying specific attention to how it has resulted in divergent interpretations regarding Agamben's discussion of

potentiality. It is our task to resolve this ambiguity by analyzing how his third type differs from and relates to the other two paradigms.

Another important starting point for our analyses is the very elementary observation that can be made based on the concepts discussed above. Since Agamben consistently rejects instrumentality, operativity, and productivity, his preferred type of activity is evidently different from *poiēsis*. On the other hand, the difference between gesture and *praxis* is less clear. As discussed above, gesture is, according to Agamben's definition, action as such, the free use of an activity that has liberated itself from any conventional end. On a very general level, without yet conducting any further detailed scrutiny or analysis, we could conclude that gesture is self-sufficient action devoid of any external end, that is, *praxis*. These are the preliminary remarks that we can make about the relation of Agamben's 'beyond' to action and production: it stands in a rather clear contrast to *poiēsis* but in a somewhat closer proximity to *praxis*. However, since Agamben himself suggests that his alternative type of action is beyond *both* paradigms, the analyses in the following chapters proceed from the assumption that it is also different from *praxis*.

As a first step in analyzing Agamben's 'beyond' more carefully – and the possibility of a third type more generally – we start by delineating his critique of the productive paradigm in Chapter 3. For our present purposes, we are interested in the specifically political reference points that he uses to advance this critique; for this reason, we focus on Agamben's reworking and destabilization of Kojève's 'end of history' thesis. The chapter in question has two main objectives: to chart the nature of Agamben's preferred type of political activity by contrasting it to its apparent opposite, and to prepare the analysis undertaken in Chapter 4. After acquainting ourselves with his deviation from a productive view of politics, we are in a better position to interrogate the difference between his alternative and *praxis* as presented by Arendt.

Focusing on *praxis*, Chapter 4 also considers Agamben's explicit writings on Arendt but practices a method that is different from the one used in Chapter 3. Unlike Chapter 3, which describes Agamben's own critique of *poiēsis* in a somewhat detailed manner, Chapter 4 ventures to *practice* this method of destabilization on a selection of Arendt's texts. There are important reasons for this difference in the mode of analysis and argumentation between Chapter 3 and Chapter 4. As we see in the following chapter, the way in which Agamben engages with Kojève and dialectical thinking generally follows – and rather faithfully – the kind of destabilization that we have sought to map above. That is, his critique of *poiēsis* unfolds in different works as an intricate interruption performed through different but interrelated concepts and themes, patiently pointing out the contradictions and impasses of Kojève's 'end of history' thesis. In his challenge to Arendt, Agamben is contrarily more enigmatic and imprecise. This can be seen particularly in *Karman* (Agamben 2018a), the main – and so far, *only* – work in which Agamben focuses on a critique of Arendt's concept of *praxis*.

Thus, since we argue that Agamben's critique of Arendt's *praxis* is insufficient for an attempt to understand his alternative, we expand this

interrogation by applying his method of destabilization to Arendt's texts, particularly *On Revolution* (Arendt 2006b). In other words, we use Arendt's texts as the material for testing whether her *praxis* allows for the kind of deviation and non-canonical use that is more in line with the method Agamben practices on Kojève. It is through conducting this intervention into Arendt's *praxis* that we will be able to determine whether it generates a new and autonomous type of activity, or whether it is more accurately interpreted as something still connected to the object it works on.

To summarize the overall argument of the present and the following two chapters, let us rehearse the above presented points. Firstly, in order to know how Agamben's alternative works, it needs an object. This has been established in this chapter by showing how his concepts always work on something to render it inoperative. Secondly, from the discussion of these concepts, the following preliminary remarks can be made: his preferred activity is not *poiēsis*, but closer to *praxis*, hence his book titles, such as 'Means Without End.' Thirdly, since Agamben's distance from *poiēsis* is clear, this is a good place to begin to inquire what his 'beyond' is, bearing in mind that this is also the beyond of *praxis*. Lastly, since Agamben's critique of Arendt does not fully clarify the extent his alternative goes beyond her notion of *praxis*, we aim to illuminate it by applying his method to Arendt's texts.

As mentioned in the introduction, the way we engage with Kojève and Arendt in the following two chapters does not follow the conventions of a strictly hermeneutical or exegetical analysis. Such an analysis would encompass an extensive engagement with their body of work, the expectation being that it produces a proper socio-historical and intellectual contextualization of their work, a new angle of interpretation, an elaboration on a theme that has traditionally been less discussed, and so on. Instead, by treating Arendt and Kojève both as Agamben's interlocutors and as exemplary cases of practical and poietic conceptions of politics, it permits us to do two things at once. Firstly, we are in a position to show how Agamben's alternative works on the chosen examples of action and production. This is conducted by first analyzing his own re-working of *poiēsis*, and then by testing this method of intervention on *praxis*. Secondly, since we work with the paradigms of action themselves, this also permits us to interrogate whether Agamben's alternative *is* in fact an alternative. Thus, it is within this tension between faithfully demonstrating how Agamben's alternative works and questioning its autonomy that this reading unfolds.

As we have more opportunity to argue in the subsequent chapters, both approaches – the autonomous and non-autonomous one – can be discerned in Agamben's thought, not always in an explicit way but as a subtle sliding between two different emphases. Thus, at the end of Chapter 4, we address *praxis* and *poiēsis* together and provide a detailed summary of how we interpret Agamben's alternative type on the basis of the analyses undertaken in chapters 3 and 4. This, in turn, helps us specify how his approach could be further explored and interpreted in the light of more recent developments in political thought, a task undertaken in Chapter 5.

3 BEYOND *POI SIS*

In order to provide a background to Agamben's critique of productive politics, we devote the following section to outlining Kojève's conception of politics. To this end, we rely mostly on *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (Kojève 1980), a work comprising the transcripts and notes of his lectures on Hegel, delivered between 1933 and 1939. What is decisive for Kojève is that the negating activity on part of the slave is always *productive*: the slave negates a present condition, and this negation produces something external to itself. That is, negation is never done for the sake of destruction or annihilation as such; rather, it receives its sense from the 'product' or endpoint that it brings about. It is only from the perspective of concluded history that the various steps of dialectical negation can be seen as forming a linear progression that culminates in a final product.

Against this background, the subsequent section (3.2) focuses precisely on the 'end' of the historical process, discussing Agamben's implicit and explicit critiques of Kojève's 'end of history' thesis. At least two important dimensions work in the background of these critiques. Firstly, Agamben discusses the question of posthistory in *The Open* (Agamben 2004) among other works, interrogating Kojève's ambivalent remarks about 'animality' and 'snobbery' as the possible markers of human activity in the posthistorical condition. Secondly, Agamben's engagement with the Hegelian dialectic, a reinterpretation that remains indebted to Walter Benjamin's notion of 'dialectics at a standstill,' problematizes Kojève's vigorous announcement of history's completion and implies a dialectic that never resolves into a higher synthesis.

Section 3.3 discusses, on a more general level, how these critical engagements with Kojève and dialectical thinking function as an intervention into or a problematization of the poietic paradigm. The purpose of this section is also to prepare for Chapter 4, which investigates the difference between Agamben's alternative type of action and Arendt's *praxis*. Thus, before moving onto the next chapter, we also briefly juxtapose Agamben's understanding of history with that of Arendt.

3.1 Productive negativity

Hegel's great contribution to the tradition of Western thought was, in Alexandre Kojève's judgement, to give an account of history, to adequately describe not merely what remains eternally unchangeable – a concern of the first order for much of philosophy before him – but what becomes *other* than it is. Kojève considered Hegel's system to be successful in adequately grasping the fact that humans change the world they inhabit and themselves during the course of time; what is uniquely human is the activity of transforming the present state of being in order to become something else. This historical becoming is in Kojève's framework precisely *productive*, that is, activity that brings into being something that did not exist before.

In this section, we first specify the nature of this productive activity by introducing the concept of negation. Presenting the working slave from Hegel's master-slave dialectic as the central agent of history, Kojève understands the activity of the slave in terms of *negation* of a present and unjust condition. This activity ultimately *produces* a new humanity, in which all individuals are recognized as free and this process in its totality is what constitutes political action. From the perspective of the slave, however, we further specify that there is a dimension of freedom and openness in this process. The slave transforms the world and wants to become other, but to know when this process is completed, we ultimately need the discourse of Hegel, who can account for the historical process and express it in its totality. Hegel is thus a central character in Kojève's framework; what perhaps appeared to be mere destructive negation is in Hegel's discourse accumulated into a chronology that brought us to an end.

As Kojève lays out in *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (Kojève 1980), historical transformation is *negation* of one's present or given state of being. In contrast to other animals, which certainly 'negate' temporary physical shortages like hunger or thirst, humans are unique in their desire to be recognized as equal and autonomous individuals. This is what Kojève also calls 'the desire for another desire.' At the genesis of humanity, this desire sets into motion a fight for recognition, which necessarily results in the figures of the master and the slave. In very simple terms, it is from this point onward that human history is activity that negates the given: the master first negates his given animal life, and the slave subsequently seeks to negate his fixedness in slavery. In both cases, the desired product of the process is *recognition*.

Although the master-slave dialectic is generally considered but a fragment in the overall scheme of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, its role in Kojève's approach is of paramount importance. As Nichols (2007) points out by citing Kojève's letter to Vietnamese philosopher Tran-Duc-Thao, the decision to reinforce the role of the master-slave dialectic in his lectures on Hegel was a conscious move with the intention of 'striking people's minds' and functioning as political propaganda (Kojève cited in Nichols 2007: 82). The mind-baffling effect of Kojève's persona is indeed something one will hardly avoid

experiencing even after a superficial glance at the commentary of his life and work. Even those who disagreed with his reading of Hegel were reportedly mind-struck by the compelling force of his public performances.

The master is the figure that emerges as the victor of the initial fight for recognition due to his willingness to fight even at the risk of death. The slave overcomes his fear of death, and as a reward, ends up enjoying both recognition and the material products he has coerced the slave to prepare for him. However, the master's status is ultimately but a phase in the historical process. The master is, as Kojève at times frames it, a 'catalyst' of the historical process but does not continue to negate anything in the historical sense once the fight is over. He simply consumes without having to work and dwells in a state of idleness that Kojève also characterizes as an 'existential impasse.' While the slave recognizes the master as an autonomous being, a 'Being-for-itself' in Kojève's Hegelian terminology, he does not recognize the slave in turn. This is also what makes the position of the master profoundly unsatisfying and unbalanced, for he is recognized by someone who is not his equal, which of course dilutes the point of the initial enterprise.

It is thus the slave who turns out to be key to the historical progression toward universal recognition and freedom: first transforming the world in order to serve the needs of the master, he eventually becomes conscious of his subservient status and starts transforming himself in order to 'overcome' (*aufheben*) his slavish existence. In other words, it is not the master's activity – fighting – but the activity on part of the slave – working – that ultimately propels history forward:

Only the Slave can transform the World that forms him and fixes him in slavery and create a World that he has formed in which he will be free. And the Slave achieves this only through forced and terrified work carried out in the Master's service. To be sure, this work by itself does not free him. But in transforming the World by this work, the Slave transforms himself, too, and thus creates the new objective conditions that permit him to take up once more the liberating Fight for recognition that he refused in the beginning for fear of death. And thus in the long run, all slavish work realizes not the Master's will, but the will – at first unconscious – of the Slave, who – finally – succeeds where the Master – necessarily – fails. Therefore, it is indeed the originally dependent, serving, and slavish Consciousness that in the end realizes and reveals the ideal of autonomous Self-Consciousness and is thus its "truth". (Kojève 1980: 29–30)

As seen in this framework, step by step, the old world with its moral errors and injustices is disposed of by the slave's negating activity. Of course, some agents will have a greater impact on the historical reality of mankind and some nations will be at the frontline of the process while others lag behind, but ultimately, the totality of human negations will lead to a new humanity. Humans are not free and autonomous in relation to nature simply by virtue of being born and acting

in the first place, but must *become* free by creating themselves as free by means of negation. Politics is in this sense not a separate 'island of freedom,' as Arendt sometimes put it, but this historical becoming as such – politics is wholly contained in the *making* of history.

It follows quite naturally that futurity gains primacy in this framework – whatever the slave negates, he does so with his future freedom in sight. The fully free and conscious subject 'will be its own product: it will be (in the future) what it has become by negation (in the present) of what it was (in the past), this negation being accomplished with a view to what it will become' (Kojève 1980: 5). On the level of ontology, this process is formulated by Kojève as the 'Identity-Negativity-Totality' triad: the working slave does not reproduce himself in constant identity with himself, but also becomes other than he is by negating his givenness through a series of 'successive conversions' (ibid.: 224). Human history is this temporal change – time is negativity, action that transforms the given; human reality is time itself, as opposed to nature that simply inhabits space and constantly reproduces itself. In practice, this change unfolds throughout decades, centuries, and millennia; just like in Hegel's conception, the apparent oppositions in human thought slowly arrive, through different positions within the history of thought, at a higher consciousness and a unifying synthesis.

Despite this productive dimension charted here, it is worth noting that from the slave's viewpoint, history is *free*. That is, since the slave himself does not know the precise steps of the dialectic in advance, he is solely driven by the desire to overcome his present condition. As Kojève writes:

What is involved is not replacing one given by another *given*, but overcoming the given in favor of what does not (yet) *exist*, thus realizing what was never *given*. This is to say that Man does not change himself and transform the World for himself in order to realize a conformity to an "ideal" *given* to him (imposed by God, or simply "innate"). He creates and creates himself because he negates and negates himself "without a preconceived idea": he becomes other solely because he no longer wants to be the same.' (Kojève 1980: 223, italics in original)

This is where the figure of Hegel himself arrives in Kojève's framework: it is by becoming conscious of all the negations occurring in human reality that Hegel can adequately express this process in its totality. He is the 'philosopher-become-Wise-Man,' as Kojève calls him; he can express the various stages of history in his discourse. This is also the kernel of Kojève's idiosyncratic merging of 'idealism' and 'materialism,' put very briefly: the final totality is human reality coherently expressed in the discourse of the wise man – the final 'world spirit' is the seamless correlation between discourse and human reality.

However, even as there is a certain freedom in historical action from the perspective of the slave, not every negation of the present state is equally desirable or rational for Kojève. For something to count as 'truly historical,' as Kojève writes, it must be mediated by past actions that grant the real possibility

of bringing about change that propels the world toward freedom. As he clarifies in footnotes added to the chapter titled 'A Note on Eternity, Time, and the Concept': 'the *present* historical act, *launched* by the idea of the future (by the Project), is *determined* by this past that it creates: if the peace is sure and honorable, the negation that relegates it to the past is the act of a madman or a criminal; if it is humiliating, its negation is an act worthy of a statesman; and so on' (Kojève 1980: 136, italics in original).

Negation itself is thus not necessarily historical in any ideal sense for Kojève. In principle, any 'madman' can decide at any moment to start a war or a revolution, but it will not necessarily contribute to the attainment of freedom in the bigger chain of historical events. In the footnote that follows, he discusses in a similar tone the anecdotal story of Caesar strolling along the banks of the Rubicon River, pondering his coming conquest. This moment, Kojève explains, may be understood as 'historical' because it is Caesar's *own* past actions that make the whole project viable or worth pursuing in the first place. As he explains:

Caesar has the *possibility* (but not the *certainty*, for then there would be no *future* properly so-called, nor a genuine *project*) of realizing his plans. Now, his whole *past*, and only his past, is what assures him of this possibility. The past – the entirety of the actions of fighting and work effected at various present times in terms of the project – that is, in terms of the future. This *past* is what distinguishes the "project" from a simple "dream" or "utopia". Consequently, there is a "historic moment" only when the *present* is ordered in terms of the *future*, on the condition that the future makes its way into the present not in an *immediate* manner (*unmittelbar*; the case of a utopia), but having been *mediated* (*vermittelt*) by the *past* – that is, by an *already accomplished* action. (Kojève 1980: 137, italics in original)

As Nichols (2007) argues based on the footnotes in question, there must be – following the actions or negations accomplished so far – a real possibility that the goal one intends can actually be attained. We also find this line of reasoning in Kojève's later and more strategically oriented papers, such as his *Outline of a Doctrine of French Policy* (Kojève 1945). France is in this sketch depicted as the vanguard state of the ideal 'Latin Empire' because of its unique revolutionary history, which includes the destruction of the feudal world in order to give birth to the nation state. It is by following this trajectory that the nation state will be transformed into an empire, ultimately leading to a new humanity: 'Before being embodied in Humanity, the Hegelian Weltgeist, which has abandoned the Nations, inhabits Empires' (ibid.). In a typically Kojevian matter-of-factly manner, he claims in this text that it was in some ways necessary for Hitler to take on the monstrous project of building a new Germany, for Germany had been constructing an empire for over a century without realizing that one first needs to go through the phase of a nation. Accordingly, Kojève argues that although Hitler's project was some 150 years late, it was made on rational grounds, echoing

his controversial view – genuine or not – that Stalin’s ‘project’ was a necessary step in the historical process toward the universal homogenous state.

At times, it is slightly difficult to differentiate between a somewhat conscious activity of building an empire (such that one knows the end in advance) and the necessary freedom that Kojève assigns to properly historical action. In the ‘Latin Empire,’ for instance, he entertains the thought of the Catholic Church functioning as an ally and counselor of the future empire, equipped with the task of ‘constantly [reminding] the Empire that it is but a stage of historical evolution, destined to be surpassed one day’ (Kojève 1945), implying that it is possible to know the following stage of history. Similarly, Kojève appears to waver between two positions regarding the point of concluded history: at times, he argues that that history ended in 1806 when Hegel accounted for the battle of Jena, and at others, he seems to be writing from the position of history not being completely at its end: ‘The era where all of humanity together will be a political reality still remains in the distant future’ (ibid.).

From the perspective of this study, however, the decisive point is that history must in any case come to its end in Kojève’s scheme; this position, he never truly abandoned. Whether the end already occurred two centuries ago or is just about to happen, the presupposition of an end is still integral to this conception of political activity. The end of history is what logically follows if political action is understood in Kojève’s productive sense. If history is a type of making, then it must come to an end, and only from the perspective of this end can whatever preceding actions gain their meaning.

In the following section, we discuss the meaning of the end of history by first recollecting the brief discussions that Kojève dedicated to the question of posthistory. We then explore how Agamben’s understanding of the man-animal distinction, as well as his critical engagement with the Hegelian dialectic, work in the background of his approach to Kojève. These reflections, in turn, form the background to the subsequent section, in which the attempt is to articulate Agamben’s engagement with Kojève in a clearer connection to the *praxis-poiēsis* debate.

3.2 Agamben and the end of history

The precise content and meaning of human praxis in the post-historical condition is a question that famously remains unanswered in Kojève’s reading of Hegel; perhaps one of the most frequently debated aspects of his thought is contained in two footnotes added to the *Introduction*. In these footnotes, he offers two alternative accounts of what may become of man after the completion of history: either man becomes re-animalized or, as Kojève wrote as the only additional footnote to the second edition of the book, mankind becomes ‘Japanized.’ The latter implies engaging in perfectly formal and ritualized activities that are no longer tied to any historical destiny. We first briefly rehearse the main points Kojève brings up in these footnotes and then explore two main threads in

Agamben's work that are closely connected to these points, either with an explicit reference to Kojève or in a more indirect manner. One concerns the man-animal distinction, which Agamben addresses most clearly and thematically in *The Open* (Agamben 2004), and the other is a consistent critique or reinterpretation of the Hegelian dialectic, which appears in various contexts starting from Agamben's early work *Infancy and History* from 1978 (Agamben 2007a).

In a footnote added to the first edition of his lecture *Interpretation of the Third Part of Chapter III of Phenomenology of Spirit* (Kojève 1980: 158–159), Kojève explains that once history becomes completed, the essential activity of 'Man properly so-called,' i.e., action negating the given, naturally ceases to take place. This is neither a 'cosmic' nor a 'biological' catastrophe according to Kojève, since nature will remain what it always has been, and man will simply continue to live in harmony with it. Apart from negating action, virtually all the rest – he mentions art, love, and play here – could be practiced indefinitely.

In a footnote added to the second edition, however (ibid.: 159–162), he notes that there was an apparent ambiguity in the original statement, for if man as a negating being would be annihilated at the end of history, it would not be reasonable to expect 'the rest' to remain the same. That is, if humans would remain alive as animals of the species *homo sapiens* in harmony with nature, their activities would in fact not be much different from those of the rest of the natural world. Music would be like the humming of birds, human architecture would align itself with animals building their dens, and so forth. Although he had not thought man's return to animality to be an existing condition at the time of writing the first footnote, his trip to the United States a couple of years later had convinced him that 'the American way of life' represented the satisfied animal life of man at the end of history.

On a postwar trip to Japan, however, Kojève further realized that the Japanese had lived in something like a post-historical condition for centuries, engaging in perfectly formal activities with no specific content or teleological purpose, such as tea ceremonies and Noh theater – in Kojève's words, 'pure snobbery.' This called the nature of the post-historical world into question once again, for the Japanese condition pointed to the apparent uncertainty of whether the 'last man' would be an animal or rather a refined snob. In an interview shortly before his death in 1968, he reaffirmed this notion and stated that the Japanese made snobbery available to all (Kojève cited in Nichols 2007: 85).

Obviously, the point is not to give too much weight to the apparent prejudices and stereotypes displayed in these portrayals of Americans as animals and the Japanese as snobs. The point is rather to take note of what Kojève charts as two alternative tendencies that might prevail once humanity no longer strives toward a future project. One option is that human life resembles more and more that of animals, implying, as Agamben puts it in *Means Without End*, that its management is handed over to the state apparatus (Agamben 2000: 111). The other inclination that might become prevalent is an engagement with ritualized and formal cultural activities that are simply enjoyed without any clear commitment to either a common tradition or a destiny.

Before moving to Agamben's engagement with these remarks, it can be noted that, if Kojève can ponder the various images of post-historicity in a somewhat humorous manner or, by borrowing from Agamben, in a way that makes it impossible to tell the difference between 'absolute seriousness' and 'absolute irony' (Agamben 2004: 10), Francis Fukuyama's adaptation of the end of history turns absolutely anxious at this point. Up until the very last chapter, Fukuyama's *The End of History and The Last Man* (Fukuyama 1992) is a celebration of the ultimate superiority of a free-market economy and liberal democracy, further underlined by a pedantic consideration of the insufficiencies of planned economies and authoritarian governments.

And yet, the last chapter paints an overtly ambivalent image of the last man. In his approach, Fukuyama added to the Kojève-Hegelian scheme the desire to be recognized as superior, '*megalothymia*,' which must ultimately give way to '*isothymia*,' the desire to be recognized as equal (in the universal homogenous state). The last chapter addresses the question of whether universal recognition will ultimately satisfy humanity, or whether it simply produces 'men without chests,' a phrase borrowed from Nietzsche. By considering at rather great length whether these 'last men,' having given up on their desire to dominate, will have anything left other than a private concern with material welfare, Fukuyama's writing echoes the bleak accounts of modernity that his work was supposed to contest in the first place. While Nietzsche's open rebellion against liberal democracy is in the end set aside by Fukuyama, he never fully attempts to resolve whether the victory of *isothymia* and thereby man's 'metamorphosis into economic man' (ibid.: 334) will be for the best of mankind. Thus, the uncertainty of the last man persists until the end of his book.

It is the above charted uncertainty regarding posthistory that Agamben picks up and problematizes in various ways in his critique of productive politics. The moment we arrive at the 'end' of productive negation, we immediately face a new set of questions and perplexities regarding what this end truly means for human activity. We scrutinize this ambivalence in more detail in the following two subsections by delineating how Agamben addresses the question of posthistory. As mentioned earlier, his critique of the 'end of history' thesis unfolds in a larger web of direct and indirect problematizations of humanity, animality, and the dialectics of history. This, in turn, enables us to extract a more general strategy for destabilizing the paradigm of production and sort out where this operation leads us.

3.2.1 Animality and snobbery

Agamben notes the 'farcical tone' in Kojève's discussion of the various possibilities of human praxis in the post-historical world (Agamben 2004: 11, see also Agamben 1998: 61), evidently unimpressed by the manner in which Kojève evades the question by addressing it in a couple of footnotes. In fact, the ambiguity of the question of posthistory is an entry point that Agamben finds to bring forth one of the key tenets of his thought, namely the inherently undetermined and potential character of man. The moment that history appears

to be at its end in Kojève's dialectical framework is, for Agamben, the experience of becoming aware of the ultimate vacuity of all historical projects and the uncertainty of distinctions, such as history-nature or man-nature. As he frames it in *Notes on Politics* (Agamben 2000: 111–112), the end of history marks the moment of welcoming the experience of *historicity* itself – the pure dwelling in the world without any grand task or project to be realized. We return to Agamben's notion of historicity in the following sections, but let us first focus on how Agamben problematizes the man-animal distinction.

In *The Open*, Agamben explores man's fundamental lack of essence by showing how the man-animal distinction has been approached in various domains, ranging from the natural and human sciences to religious myths. From one perspective, this work is a finely crafted collection of particular fragments put on display to convey one central message: if there is something inherently human, it is the lack of any inherent content; perhaps more accurately, the very consciousness of this lack. For instance, in the context of engaging with Carl Linnaeus' taxonomy of primates in chapter seven of the book, Agamben claims that before the rise of human sciences in the 19th century, the human-animal border was generally conceived as rather porous and undetermined (Agamben 2004: 24). He then traces this stance in Linnaeus' work in which, before settling on the now established term *homo sapiens* and in a marked contrast to other terms in the taxonomic order, the human species was left without a specific identifier. Linnaeus simply added an imperative, 'know yourself' (*'nosce te ipsum'*), to characterize humanity and saw no other essential difference between humans and other primates than the ability to recognize themselves: 'Homo sapiens, then, is neither a clearly defined species nor a substance; it is, rather, a machine or device for producing the recognition of the human' (ibid.: 26).

This lack of definition is, in Agamben's view, also at issue in Renaissance scholar Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. Man is depicted in this work precisely as the leftover creature that God had no proper place for in the chain of being. Accordingly, Agamben notes that the term 'dignity' (*dignitas*) should be translated literally as 'rank' and not 'dignity.' In this context, the human becomes understood neither as a higher creature ascending toward divinity, nor a form of life descending into a supposedly lower level of animality, but simply the creature that becomes aware of its own lack of essence. This is what Agamben claims that humanism itself has posited, although it might have become interpreted otherwise within various strands of humanist discourse: 'The humanist discovery of man is the discovery that he lacks himself, the discovery of his irremediable lack of *dignitas*' (ibid.: 30).

Based on these elements that Agamben puts together to underline the inherent ambiguity of humans, it is evident that no relapse to animality in the Kojevian sense is plausible. If the distinction between animality and humanity is not stable to begin with, then one obviously cannot go back to an animality that somehow preceded the historical process, nor can this supposed animality be taken in any unproblematic sense as the object of politics. At this point, of course, Agamben's analysis of biopolitics enters the scene. The very question of deciding

on the man-animal distinction, of how to govern 'bare life' is, in Agamben's well-known theory, what conditions Western politics. In Agamben's view, it is precisely this apparatus that should be stopped in one way or another, so that something like bare life could never be separated and made into an object of governance.

From this perspective, Kojève's firm belief in the possibility of rational management of the universal homogenous state is fatally dismissive of this 'dark' power that, taking life itself as its object, rises in modernity. As Agamben notes, Kojève 'seems not to see the process by which [...] man (or the State for him) in modernity begins to care for his own animal life, and by which natural life becomes the stakes in what Foucault called biopower' (Agamben 2004: 12). Especially in light of the horrors of totalitarianism, Kojève holds an inadequate understanding of nations and empires as steps in the dialectics of history, as Agamben sums up toward the end of *The Open*:

Today [...] it is clear to anyone who is not in absolutely bad faith that there are no longer historical tasks that can be taken on by, or even simply assigned to, men. It was in some ways already evident starting with the end of the First World War that the European nation-states were no longer capable of taking on historical tasks and that peoples themselves were bound to disappear. We completely misunderstand the nature of the great totalitarian experiments of the twentieth century if we see them only as a carrying out of the nineteenth-century nation-states' last great tasks: nationalism and imperialism. The stakes are now different and much higher, for it is a question of taking on as a task the very factual existence of peoples, that is, in the last analysis, their bare life. Seen in this light, the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century truly constitute the other face of the Hegelo-Kojevian idea of the end of history: man has now reached his historical *telos* and, for a humanity that has become animal again, there is nothing left but the depoliticization of human societies by means of the unconditioned unfolding of the *oikonomia*, or the taking on of biological life itself as the supreme political (or rather impolitical) task. (Agamben 2004: 76)

In a certain sense, both Kojève and Arendt fail in Agamben's diagnosis to adequately account for how life processes invade the center of politics within modernity, despite their apparent differences on the question. In Arendt's case, Agamben pinpoints the problem on the missing link between her inquiries into totalitarianisms of the 20th century and the rest of her work that seeks to place politics completely outside the domain of the *oikonomia* and labor, that is, life itself (Agamben 1998: 3-4). Although Arendt's notion of the victory of *animal laborans* is a correct diagnosis according to Agamben, the solution of simply bracketing off this dimension from politics proper is not satisfying for him.

Kojève's move, on the other hand, is an even more problematic case through Agamben's eyes, as something like an account of biopolitics is missing in his

work. Of course, it is quite an exaggeration on Agamben's part to say that Kojève is somehow not aware of this tendency in modernity – this is what he implies by equating 'the American way of life' with animality. Nevertheless, Agamben is perhaps right in pointing out that Kojève's ironic remarks about posthistory attest to his failure to take the question seriously enough. For what does posthistory ultimately amount to? The apparent ambivalence here is that history culminates in precisely what it was supposed to overcome or sublimate; rather than overcoming animality, history somewhat disappointingly relapses into it. Alternatively, we can take the product of history to be a society of 'snobs' who are happily engaged in refined and ceremonial activities that nevertheless do not serve any end. This may be decisively different from a condition of animality – as Agamben indeed notes with reference to Kojève, 'no animal can be a snob' (Agamben 2004: 9). But in this case, political activity would be the exact opposite of what it was defined to be: history would be productive, whereas posthistory would be entirely unproductive.

3.2.2 The suspension of the dialectic

Another position from which Agamben approaches Kojève's view of history's completion is his critical reinterpretation of the Hegelian dialectic, which begins to outline already in *Infancy and History*. The chapter titled 'Time and History: Critique of the Instant and the Continuum' starts with an eloquently written call to discover an experience of time that would be adequate to the revolutionary conception of history that originated in early modernity. Alluding to Marx's well-known demand of the need to change the world instead of merely explaining it, Agamben writes: 'The original task of a genuine revolution [...] is never merely to "change the world" but also, and above all, to "change time"'. Modern political thought has concentrated its attention on history, and has not elaborated a corresponding concept of time' (Agamben 2007a: 99). Marx was guilty of this same shortcoming, he adds a bit further on in the text – for all his ingenuity as a theorist of history, Marx never developed a concept of time that would match the grandeur of his concept of history (ibid.: 109).

We shall not rehearse Agamben's genealogy of time in detail, but let us distill the core argument Agamben presents here to better understand the starting point for his critique of the Hegelian dialectic and the concept of time and history that he presents as an alternative. As the title of the chapter suggests, Agamben argues that the human experience of time is in the Western tradition largely conceived as an elusive experience of fleeting instants of time. This holds in his view for the circular concept of time found in Greek Antiquity, as well as the Christian concept of linear time, despite their apparent differences.

The 'now' was in the Greek understanding a fleeting moment or point in an infinite continuum of circular time. It is this notion of a point that migrated even to the otherwise different concept of Christian time, that is, time with a direction and an aim. Although agreeing with the general view that Christianity laid the foundations of an experience of historicity due to its break with circular time, Agamben implies that the Christian notion of divine eternity, which can be

understood as a 'static circle' (Agamben 2007a: 105), internalized and recirculated the Greek notion of man's limited powers of grasping fleeting time. To contextualize this, he refers to Augustine's 'anguished and unresolved interrogation of fleeting time,' for instance (ibid.: 104).

It is in this context that Agamben turns to his first extended discussion of Hegel's idea of negation, a discussion which resurfaces in his coming works and sheds light on his understanding of Kojève. After tracing the notion of the instant in the Greek and Christian concepts of time, Agamben points out that the elusive 'now' is in Hegel's system explained as *negation* of the fleeting instant. Time is for Hegel (and for Kojève) negation of the present: each 'now' eludes our sensory experience by constantly referring to a different state of affairs. Hegel's influential 'solution' was, Agamben contends, to posit that history could never be experienced in the instant, but only insofar as each particular instant was referred back to the historical process as a totality: 'Like time, whose essence is pure negation, history can never be grasped in the instant, but only as total social process' (ibid.: 108).

In *Language and Death* (Agamben 1991), a book published a few years later, Agamben returns to a similar discussion by exploring the negation of sense-certainty, of the 'This' (*diese*) and the 'Now' (*jetzt*), in Hegel. At the very moment we try to grasp the This, it immediately 'crumbles away' (Hegel cited in Agamben 1991: 13) and refers to something else, to something it is *not*. This text that I am writing now will naturally indicate a different act when uttered or read at another instant of time. In this sense, Hegel could posit that the 'This' expressed in language always contains what is given to the senses in a negated form. Language, in attempting to grasp the 'This,' negates all the particular instances that it could refer to and preserves in the concept what is universal in it.

Agamben's diagnosis and point of critique is that well-nigh the entire Western tradition rests on an understanding of time that always posits the experience of the now as an ungraspable and elusive point, which gains intelligibility only insofar as it is understood as part of a larger continuum. The modern version of this concept of time, the one in which the Western culture still finds itself, is perhaps the worst thinkable for him insofar as it is abstracted from any historical or religious meaning and understood simply as a continuum of infinite progress (Agamben 2007a: 105). To offer cues to an alternative to this concept of time, he evokes the examples of Gnosticism and Stoicism, which evidently have failed to exert any profound influence on the Western understanding of time. He mentions that the Gnostics viewed time as 'incoherent and unhomogenous' (ibid.: 111), a momentary disruption in which man grasps his own condition as already resurrected instead of waiting for a coming salvation. Similarly, he refers to the Stoics who understood time 'as something neither objective nor removed from our control, but springing from the actions and decisions of man. Its model is the *cairós*, the abrupt and sudden conjunction where decision grasps opportunity and life is fulfilled in the moment' (ibid.).

In the scenario provided through these fragments that lie 'scattered in the folds and shadows of the Western cultural tradition' (Agamben 2007a: 110), time is understood as an experience of a different kind: man does not fall into the irreversible stream of time, but time itself springs from the very grasping of an opportunity for action. Releasing themselves from quantified and chronological time, agents thus open a prism of time in which the grasping of momentum becomes possible. As Agamben sums up in a beautiful passage at the end of the chapter:

For history is not, as the dominant ideology would have it, man's servitude to continuous linear time, but man's liberation from it: the time of history and the *cairós* in which man, by his initiative, grasps favorable opportunity and chooses his own freedom in the moment. (Agamben 2007a: 115)

The model of *kairos* is also central to the concept of messianic time in *The Time that Remains* (Agamben 2005a). In this work on Pauline messianism, Agamben advances his interpretation of messianism, according to which the messianic operation does not consist in ending time. Rather, it points to a *suspension* of time, restoring all particular laws, works, and vocations to a state of potentiality. One dimension of this approach is his examination of the meaning of the Greek verb *katargein*, which he argues is not to annihilate or destroy but to deactivate, to render inoperative.

After pondering the etymology of the verb in detail, Agamben returns to the same discussion of the negation of sense-certainty in Hegel that we mentioned above, and connects the concept of *Aufhebung* to his understanding of the messianic. He notes that the verb *katargein* is rendered *aufheben* by Luther, and takes this to suggest that it is probably from this source that Hegel later picked it up and developed it into one of his central concepts (ibid.: 99). A problem in Agamben's view, Hegel interpreted messianic time in terms of the fulfillment of the historical process and the end of time. As Agamben sees it, like the time of *kairos* that Agamben discusses in *Infancy and History*, messianic time should be understood as the deactivation of all ends and the opening of freedom in the now:

The messianic – the ungraspable quality of the "now" – is the very opening through which we may seize hold of time, achieving our representation of time, making it end. When the Torah is rendered inoperative in messianic *katargēsis*, it is not caught up in a deferment or infinite displacement; rather, the Torah finds its *plērōma* therein. (Agamben 2005a: 101)

This 'conflation' applies equally to Kojève. Rather than seeing the end – the 'Messiah' – as residing in the now, in each instant, he places this culmination at the end of time and history, in this way 'flattening out the messianic onto the eschatological' (ibid.). For Agamben, messianic time is kairological time – negativity that does not accumulate into a chronology. It is a time out of joint, a

stop that creates a space within time, as it were, a space in which new possibilities of action are explored and grasped.

It is this eruptive view of time that quite naturally connects with Benjamin's 'dialectics at a standstill.' In both *Infancy and History* and the essay 'Nymphs' (Agamben 2011b), Agamben discusses Benjamin's dialectic by contrasting it to Theodor Adorno. As will be familiar to the readers of these thinkers, Adorno criticized Benjamin's thought of being insufficiently dialectical. We need not go into greater detail in their debate, but it suffices to note that, in Adorno's view, Benjamin's dialectics lacked a proper mediation between structure (the material base) and superstructure (art, philosophy, or other cultural practices). Whereas Benjamin presents social struggles and forces of the material base as captured in the singularity of certain cultural fragments (e.g., a poem or a visual object), Adorno disapproved of the apparently lacking analysis of how these singular fragments are mediated by what he calls in Hegelian terms the 'total social progress' (see Agamben 2007a: 119–137).

What is important for Agamben in Benjamin's approach is that it provides a model that escapes linear time and the necessity of mediated action that culminates in a final endpoint. The material base structure can very well be grasped and illuminated in the very actions that spring from man without these actions being reduced to bits and pieces of a total social process: 'the dialectic is quite capable of being a historical category without, as a consequence, having to fall into linear time' (ibid.: 137). From this perspective, there is no mediation in the sense Adorno insists on; there is unity and a certain standstill insofar as the structure and superstructure face one another and, to borrow a Benjaminian phrase that Agamben uses at times, form a constellation. Perhaps the clearest exposition of how Agamben reinterprets the dialectic in these terms is found in the essay 'Nymphs' from 2009, in which he once again returns to the difference between Adorno and Benjamin:

Adorno, who is ultimately attempting to bring the dialectic back to its Hegelian matrix, does not seem to understand that for Benjamin the crux is not a movement that by way of mediation leads to the *Aufhebung* of contradiction, but the very moment of standstill—a stalling in which the middle-point is exposed like a zone of indifference between the two opposite terms. As such it is necessarily ambiguous. (Agamben 2011b: 69)

This is the core of Agamben's refutation of the Hegelian model, which is also what Kojève relies on, always presupposing that each negation forms a larger process that produces history in its totality: there can be historical transformation when man grasps favorable opportunity for action; this may well manifest as material struggle, but these ruptures never form a totality. Agamben's 'history' momentarily opens itself to the powers that spring from the initiatives of man but these never resolve into a unifying totality; this is the freedom and the now-time of man. When Kojève's end of history thus appears in Agamben's work, it is this critical reinterpretation of the dialectical model that always lurks in the

background. In 'Notes on Politics,' an essay from the late 1990s that begins with a general diagnosis of the nihilist condition of modernity, disillusioned by ideologies and grand projects, Agamben alludes to Kojève's idea of the universal homogenous state by arguing the following:

Simply because history designates the expropriation itself of human nature through a series of epochs and destinies, it does not follow that the fulfillment and the appropriation of the historical telos in question indicate that the historical process of humanity has now cohered in a definitive order (whose management can be handed over to a universal homogenous state). (Agamben 2000: 111)

Before moving to the next section, let us note that from one perspective, Agamben's grasping of the now may also be understood as an implicit possibility in Kojève's framework. As Sergei Prozorov (2009) shows, Hegel himself, who occupies a unique position in Kojève's work, is a peculiar figure that ultimately steps in only to freeze the dialectic. Hegel's own praxis consists precisely in 'suspending' the dialectic by virtue of making the attained totality intelligible in a coherent discourse. While the work of previous philosophers consisted in carefully reflecting the dialectic of the historical process in the 'superstructure' of their discourse, philosophy itself must naturally come to an end when the dialectic is over. As the last philosopher, Hegel ends up with 'nothing to do,' as Prozorov puts it, except declaring that history has ended and contemplating the fulfilled dialectic as such. It is in this sense that he can describe Hegel as marking the figure of a 'workless slave,' a figure that simply stops negating without thereby rebecoming either a master or a slave.

Such a possibility of 'stopping the train,' as Prozorov notes, is hurriedly dismissed by Kojève. On the one hand, he resolves the question by suggesting that it would simply lead back to the original thetical being that again needs to be overcome. On the other hand, Kojève suggests elsewhere that 'absolute knowledge' may in principle be attained at any given point of the historical process in the domain of theology, although this would have to take place outside the historical dialectic as a purely religious experience - a solution that indeed implies a certain suspension of the dialectic in the pure revelation of God. Both possibilities are however dismissed by Kojève, the former as a simple relapse into animality and the latter as hubris of the 'religious man' who satisfies himself with theological knowledge in isolation from the properly historical world.

In the following section, we reflect on the meaning of this moment of suspension in which history is brought to a standstill. Following Agamben, we can take this to mean that human life is simply revealed *as such*, engaged in a myriad of activities that can no longer be conceived of in terms of a 'project' that culminates in a final product. Like the 'workless' Hegel, humans would simply act and contemplate their actions, whatever their precise nature. But the question that arises is: how is this different from the model of *praxis*?

3.3 Production unraveled

Let us now attempt to gather what Agamben's writings on time and history mean in the context of understanding politics as a productive activity. As we saw above, historical action consists in grasping the now; history is the myriad of initiatives we take to transform the world we dwell in, but these eruptions never resolve into a definitive order. They may well manifest as a material struggle, but this nevertheless does not mean that history will ultimately arrive at a unifying totality. On this reading, politics as *poiēsis* may be interpreted as interrupted by a cessation or delay that allows man to experience the limit of any such enterprise. Each production always already presupposes its own unraveling, taking us 'back' or rather giving rise to something new.

This may be understood as a plausible intervention into *any* poietic exposition beyond the Hegelian, Marxian, or Kojevian frameworks. As Agamben suggests, to understand politics in the image of production and progress toward a determinate goal is a conception that generally reigns in modernity, which we take to include our contemporary condition as well (Agamben 2007a: 39; Agamben 2005a: 100). Indeed, it is perhaps so utterly taken for granted that politics progresses toward a 'better world' that it is hardly necessary for ordinary citizens or perhaps even political theorists to conceptualize political action in the Greek sense as *poiēsis*, even when it is so obvious that we are, as Agamben puts it, 'under the sign of the dialectical *Aufhebung*' (Agamben 2005a: 100). It is practically impossible to find a single political debate that does not evoke, in one form or another, the idea of *what kind of a world we want to create*. Political parties across the ideological spectrum resort to this mode of argumentation in their defense or critique of certain policies, almost habitually. Similarly, various campaigns and initiatives, from MeToo to the so-called incel movement, quickly track with the conception that we are indeed headed toward a world finally freed from this or that grievance.

Agamben's insights may be directly utilized to articulate a critical intervention into this framework that is, in many ways, deeply ingrained in our understanding of politics. Even the most utopian movement or political party with its vision of what will be 'made' must make room for the idea that not everything can be achieved once and for all. Even the most ambitious and detailed plans will at best be able to guarantee a certain direction of any desired type of social development, if only because the next administration or a group of actors can set things on an entirely different course. In a certain sense, it is even surprising that 'progression' is, in Western liberal democracies, so firmly understood as transformation that steadily heads toward a certain goal when it is perfectly clear that any advances of rights, regarding anything from free speech to abortion, can always be drawn to an opposite direction. There is not one but many 'projects' simultaneously at work, and none of them can ultimately control the entire scene of politics.

In other words, whatever is produced always includes its own potential unraveling: to build this or that kind of world always already presupposes that it will have to come to a halt, which in turn generates something new. In contrast to our habitual political vocabulary that continuously refers to worlds that should be created, it is more a matter of grasping our political activities as forming certain forces that either strengthen or weaken certain developments. One never goes backward or forward in history, but history itself is the manifestation of tensions and uncertainties of all works and projects. To borrow from Agamben's view on the dialectic that we cited in the previous section, *poiēsis* is *necessarily ambiguous*. From this perspective, what Agamben's approach suggests is that there is an opposite force at work within *poiēsis*, allowing it to be affected by aspects of contingency and indeterminacy.

It must however be noted that Agamben himself implies, in a somewhat enigmatic manner, that his 'inoperative' historical praxis is yet to be invented. For instance, when noting in the essay 'Notes on Politics' that the end of history does not indicate the arrival at a final order, he adds that his alternative consists in grasping 'historicity as such.' And this must be conceived as detached from any presupposition of a political or juridical order as we know them. This is because, as we discussed in the previous chapter, any such apparatus has always already confined this experience of historicity as such, thus placing it beyond the free use of man. As he puts in the context of discussing Kojève's end of history:

The appropriation of historicity, therefore, cannot still take a state-form, given that the state is nothing other than the presupposition and the representation of the being-hidden of the historical *archē*. This appropriation, rather, must open the field to a *nonstatal* and *nonjuridical* politics and human life – a politics and a life that are yet to be entirely thought.' (Agamben 2000: 112, italics in original)

We return to the question of what this 'coming' politics implies for Agamben's project of going beyond *praxis* and *poiēsis*, but it is at any rate clear that his properly historical-political activity is open-ended and indeterminate. It is not a step-by-step process leading to a product, but rather a collection of initiatives in which man momentarily experiences freedom. It is never bound to this or that political order, but somehow radically exceeds all orders. At this point, and in line with the preliminary observation we made in the previous chapter, the question regarding the difference between Agamben and Arendt inevitably arises. Before we expand our focus on this in the following chapter, let us first recall that Arendt's account of politics is in a central way a critique of the Marxian conception of history as a 'project' to be mastered. One of the most persisting themes in Arendt's thought is her insistence on the implausibility of cramming the haphazard and somewhat rare moments of political action into the framework of a grand process of history that carries the whole of mankind toward a common destiny. Accordingly, the task of the historian – or anyone who judges and spectates politics from the outside – is in Arendt's view to remain sensitive to the contingent nature of political action instead of resorting to causal

or deterministic explanations. As she notes in the essay 'Understanding and Politics':

[Each] event in human history reveals an unexpected landscape of human deeds, sufferings and new possibilities which together transcend the sum total of all willed intentions and the significance of all origins. It is the task of the historian to detect this unexpected new with all its implications in any given period and to bring out the full power of its significance. He must know that, though this story has a beginning and an end, it occurs within a larger frame, history itself. And history is a story which has many beginnings but no end. (Arendt 2005a: 320)

Even at this stage, this short glance at Arendt's thought displays an apparent similarity to Agamben. Much like Agamben's 'historicity as such,' the myriad of human activities and initiatives devoid of a historical task or destiny, Arendt's history is a fragmented collection of 'many beginnings with no end.' And like Agamben's historical activity that must be thought separately from any given order, Arendt's landscape of human deeds ultimately exceeds this or that will, even though the will was certainly more important to Arendt than it is for Agamben. It is this proximity between these two thinkers that we further explore in the following chapter. Thus far, Agamben's alternative activity clearly differs from *poiēsis*, but only after measuring its proximity to *praxis* will it be possible to sort out in what precise manner it goes beyond both paradigms.

4 BEYOND PRAXIS

As we engage with Hannah Arendt's understanding of politics in this chapter, we migrate to a wholly different register from the one that we have dealt with in the preceding chapter. The contrast to Kojève could perhaps not be starker. While Arendt's 'larger frame of history' is a plurality of many stories that never come to a definitive closure, for Kojève, all politically significant actions ultimately form a totality that leads to the production of the 'universal homogenous state.' In other words, politics is for Kojève a means to *produce* freedom; it is moreover an activity undertaken by the working the slave, a figure who is carefully excluded from politics altogether in Arendt's thought. As we discuss further, she obviously had to make room for the fact that slaves or a class of laborers are *capable* of politics, especially in the light of actual revolts initiated by the working classes, but under no condition could their essential activity itself be understood as central to politics.

Before introducing Arendt's *praxis* and testing whether it lends itself to the kind of intervention that Agamben conducts on *poiēsis*, let us provide an overview of how Agamben has addressed Arendt's work. It is generally agreed that Arendt has exerted a significant influence on his thought. In his book on Agamben, Leland de la Durantaye mentions that as early as 1970, around the time the first book *The Man Without Content* was published, the young philosopher sent a letter of admiration to Arendt (de la Durantaye 2009: 41). However, it is not until *Homo Sacer* that Agamben devoted a longer discussion to Arendt by acknowledging that she was one of the first to diagnose the entry of biological life, or 'bare life,' into the heart of modern politics. Nonetheless, Arendt's solution of reviving a republican spirit of public action as an antidote to this development is certainly not one that Agamben finds satisfying. John Grumley goes as far as saying that while Arendt glanced at the past to find suitable models for renewing the politics of the present, for Agamben, '[nothing] can be rescued from the labour of the Western political tradition, nothing has escaped the theological-political net of domination' (Grumley 2017: 106).

Grumley's largely accurate description of the way Agamben sees Arendt's historical examples of proper politics only as various constellations of the age-

old 'inclusive exclusion' of bare life into the political order was written before the publication of *Karman* in 2018, depicting Agamben's more substantial critique of Arendt's concept of *praxis*. As Sergei Prozorov (2022a) has argued, the critique presented in *Karman* should be read as a continuation of Agamben's attempt to offer his own alternative or more affirmative approach to biopolitics, which begins to outline in the *Homo Sacer* series, although Agamben only briefly returned to Arendt after the first volume (see Agamben 2005b). Crucial to Agamben's critique of Arendt in *Karman* is that her concept of action is first and foremost juridical in origin, implying that action is in the Western tradition always attributed to a culpable subject. Connecting the notion of culpability to Aristotle's notion of a 'highest end' toward which all human actions strive, he argues that this line of reasoning ultimately leaves humans in a place of debt, guilt, and responsibility, which constant action seeks to overcome: 'between human beings and their good there is not a coincidence, but a fracture and a gap, which action - which has its privileged place in politics - seeks incessantly to fill' (Agamben 2018a: 63).

Instead, as seen in Chapter 2 when introducing his conceptual logic, Agamben argues that politics should be detached from any such notion of purposiveness. He proposes performative arts as important examples of properly political action since they consist in simply exhibiting and experiencing the pure potential of the body (ibid.: 82). This is essentially what he argued already in the earlier essay 'Notes on Gesture,' which precisely treats the movements of dancers as exhibitions of the pure potential of the body. He also recirculates the discussion of Varro's 'third type of action,' arguing that those who operate in the mode of gesture 'are not limited to acting, but in the very act in which they carry out their action, they at the same time stop it, expose it, and hold it at a distance from themselves' (ibid.: 84).

Yet, as Prozorov argues, the critique of purposiveness that Agamben presents here is more directed at Aristotle than Arendt, for whom the notion *eupraxia*, acting well, rather than *eudaimonia* (understood as an end different from action), is of primary importance. As we discuss further in this chapter, Arendt's understanding of power as potential clearly implies that action is about dwelling in the sheer actuality of power formations rather than forcefully striving toward an end that cannot be attained, an approach that bears a general resemblance to what Agamben proposes as an alternative. In fact, what he appears to be primarily occupied with in *Karman* is, in Prozorov's analysis, to detach his alternative type of action from all juridical connotations, or what he calls 'the imputability to a subject.'

This effort of eliminating any relation to a responsible subject leads him to a completely autonomous sphere of gestures, of which the only thinkable paradigms seem to be the gestures of dance and mime. These are indeed completely innocent, non-responsible, unproductive, and fully immersed in their own potentiality. For Prozorov, however, it remains a mystery how exactly these can serve as meaningful paradigms of political agency, and in his final judgement, Agamben's attempt at 'going beyond' *praxis* eventually amounts to a

parody of Arendt. In place of public appearances in the open-ended horizon of speech and action, we end up with the empty gestures of dancers or commedia dell'arte characters like Pulcinella (see Agamben 2018b).

For our purposes, this apparent clumsiness of Agamben's critique of Arendt provides an opportunity to conduct a more substantiated and better-targeted intervention into Arendt's *praxis*. As Prozorov's analysis also suggests, the one offered in *Karman* is, properly speaking, *not* a critical engagement with Arendt. The chapter in question begins with a correct remark regarding the difference between Arendt's concept of action and Aristotle's *praxis*. As we noted in the introduction, Aristotle counted sense activities and functions of the body among *praxis*, and it can be argued that these are at odds with Arendt's public speech and action. Yet, the remaining part of the chapter quickly turns into a recirculation of Agamben's earlier discussions of pure means and gesture, whose difference to Arendt's action with an end in itself was never entirely clear to begin with. Thus, instead of focusing on this particular work, which is not very instructive insofar as we wish to clarify the difference between gesture and *praxis*, we attempt to destabilize Arendt's *praxis* in a manner that follows the overall logic discerned in Chapter 2.

The following section (4.1) introduces Arendt's general argument about the inherently fragile and unpredictable nature of political action, much like we started the previous chapter by introducing Kojève's understanding of political action. At the end of the section, we also further delineate the structure of analysis in sections 4.2 - 4.6.

4.1 The vulnerability of new beginnings

The most prestigious expression of human capacities in Hannah Arendt's thought, the capacity for political action, is inconceivable without the human ability to start something new, to insert something like a new vector of occurrences to the ever-ongoing processes of life. In very general terms, for Arendt, this capacity stems from the simple fact of being born. Unlike other species and the rest of the natural world, humans arrive in the world as unique and distinct from one another; in this capacity, they introduce at least a potentiality to initiate something that the world has not yet witnessed. As Arendt often repeats in her work by alluding to Augustine: because humans *are* beginnings, they are also able to initiate beginnings. And whenever humans in their unique singularity form an organized plurality that acts in concert, they engage in an experience of freedom, which amounts to nothing less than the meaning of politics in Arendt's conception.

While these new beginnings are articulated as 'the highest' of human activities in Arendt's thought, they are also described as the most prone to dangers that seem to have their origin in human action itself, namely its inherent vulnerability. In Arendt's well-known distinction to both the processes of *labor* that sustain biological life and the activities of *work* that create a world for us to

live in, *action* has no end other than its own manifestation and naturally disappears as soon as it comes to a halt (Arendt 1998). Due to this intangibility, the new processes that agents unleash in the pre-existing web of human affairs always remain 'frail,' 'futile,' and 'unpredictable,' as Arendt often describes them.

Her critique of Western political thought is, in an elementary sense, built upon this insight into the nature of action – it was her contention that the tradition has tended to 'resolve' this inherent futility by either substituting other activities for action or by turning a blind eye to properly political experiences. Historically speaking, and in a somewhat dramatic manner, Arendt dates this 'enmity' of philosophy toward the realm of political affairs to the trial and death of Socrates. She argues that it was this shocking experience that made Plato prejudiced toward the unpredictable realm of political life, and drove him into designing a form of government that would give shelter to the philosopher's way of life (see Arendt 2006a: 107). In a rather lengthy discussion about Plato in 'What is Authority?' (ibid.: 104–115), and in her chapter regarding action in *The Human Condition* (Arendt 1998: 220–228), Arendt argues that when deriving a model for ideal rulership from relations prevailing in the household or between the shepherd and his herd, Plato must have been completely aware of their incompatibility with the life of the Greek *polis*. With his introduction of rulership into the realm of political affairs, the plurality and equality so characteristic of political praxis was eliminated. Plato's doctrine of ideas could also become accommodated within this gesture: the eternal ideas contemplated by the philosopher were formulated specifically in *The Republic* as blueprints for what the philosopher-king could order to be 'made' in the realm of human affairs to bestow order upon it.

It is within the framework of this critique of 'the traditional substitution of making for acting' (Arendt 1998: 220) that Arendt also attacked the Marxian tradition. In very general terms, the problem with Marx boils down to her opposition to the idea of 'making history' and reducing politics to the *production* of a new humanity. Similarly, when she accused the French revolutionaries of 'sending the revolution to its doom,' (Arendt 2006b: 50) it was precisely because in her view, they substituted action as an experience of freedom to a question of managing the necessities of life. On the other hand, she considered the American Revolution successful in founding a new body politic, but the tradition of revolutionary thinking had nevertheless neglected it and 'proceeded as though there never had occurred a revolution in the New World and as though there never had been any American notions and experiences in the realm of politics and government worth thinking about' (ibid.: 208).

In addition to these systematic critiques dealing with both the Western tradition of thinking and concrete political events, a web of somewhat broader remarks about the inherent futility of action are spun into the work of Arendt. Actions of the past, she reminds us, have always risked falling into oblivion without the documenting eye of the historians, poets, artists, and fellow witnesses. In her commentary on the Pentagon papers in *Crises of The Republic*

(Arendt 1972), Arendt also elucidates how past actions are prone to deliberate distortion because, unlike the clearly traceable world of physical objects, the man-made reality of deeds and words could simply have been otherwise. It could also be noted that as much effort as she devoted to emphasizing the capacity of men to initiate new processes and experience freedom in public-political action, her diagnosis was nevertheless that such enterprises have always been quite of a rarity: 'The periods of being free have always been relatively short in the history of mankind' (Arendt 2006a: 167).

Against this background of futility and the risks and dangers that follow, it seems only natural that Arendt was concerned with mechanisms that contribute toward sustaining and regenerating action. On the one hand, she analyzed political experiences that could illuminate how actions may be preserved and protected, the *polis* life of Greek antiquity being one of such experiences. On the other hand, she described ways in which humans can reckon with the unintended and sometimes disastrous consequences of action, for instance, through forgiving, making promises, and starting new processes to change the course of past ones.

The following three sections center precisely around this crucial question: if action always remains frail and transient, how can we sustain it over the course of time without replacing it with something more controllable? The next section (4.2) provides a general outline of how Arendt approached this problematic. It takes note of the difference in emphasis between activities that sustain action while themselves being separate from properly political action, such as building the walls of the city-state, and those better understood as themselves practical in nature, such as forgiving and making promises.

From this general introduction, we move to a closer examination of Arendt's book *On Revolution*, in which one of the guiding themes is precisely the difficulty of balancing between action's evanescence and the possibilities of finding some degree of permanence. The work provides a unique window into the significant influence of Montesquieu on Arendt's political thought, and we argue that it is specifically the way Montesquieu understood the nature of power and principles of action that resonate with Arendt's own understanding of political action. This analysis is divided into two sections, one with a focus on power (4.3) and the other with a focus on principles of action (4.4). In a similar way to forgiving and making promises, for Arendt, the divisibility of power and principles are mechanisms that operate on the plane of action in a manner that shapes and structures action without compromising its transient nature.

As presented in Chapter 1, the method practiced in sections 4.3 and 4.4 differs from the one used in the preceding chapter. Instead of describing how Agamben uses his destabilizing procedure in his *own* work, we attempt to practice this destabilization on Arendt's account of political action. It is in the light of the orienting elements of divided power and principles of action that we demonstrate in Section 4.5 how *praxis* can be arranged in closer proximity to Agamben's idea of a new and alternative use of human activities. And finally,

the last section (4.6) sums up the overall conclusion that can be made based on the analyses undertaken in chapters 3 and 4.

4.2 Stability in the realm of human affairs

We focus here on the question of stability in the following three examples of political experiences that Arendt studied in her works: the Greek *polis*, the Roman concept of authority, and the power of forgiving and making promises. The concept *experience* is often used by Arendt herself and partly expresses her generally critical attitude toward political philosophy that we mentioned above. It was the experiences, not the suspicions and prejudices of the philosophers that she wanted to look at in her way of understanding politics. As she put it in the regularly cited Günther Gaus interview from 1964, she wanted to 'look at politics with eyes unclouded by philosophy' (Arendt 1964). Hence, she insisted on being referred to as a political theorist rather than a philosopher.

In a subsection titled 'The Greek Solution' (Arendt 1998: 192–199) in the chapter on action in *The Human Condition*, Arendt discusses what she views as the two main functions of the Greek *polis*, the public realm in which citizens engaged in the affairs of the city. On the one hand, the *polis* made sure that a space – both as a physical location and as a realm protected by laws – was assigned for action to take place on a regular basis, giving it a degree of permanence and continuity that it lacked in itself. On the other hand, the necessary presence of others in this public space ensured that the futile deeds and words were seen and heard by fellow witnesses; in this sense, the assembly functioned as a ground for remembrance.

In her original manner of reading history, Arendt adds here that it was precisely these two aspects of stability that the men of pre-*polis* Greece lacked. They could first of all experience action mostly when leaving their households at irregular intervals for enterprises like warfare; even when they did great deeds, their remembrance remained dependent on poets and storytellers, such as Homer whom Arendt frequently alludes to:

Homer was not only a shining example of the poet's political function, and therefore 'the educator of all Hellas'; the very fact that so great an enterprise as the Trojan war could have been forgotten without a poet to immortalize it several hundred years later offered only too good an example of what could happen to human greatness if it had nothing but poets to rely on for its permanence. (Arendt 1998: 197)

This passage also illustrates an aspect of the 'political function' of art in Arendt's thought, at least in the context of arts like poetry, play-acting, and sculpting of antiquity. In Arendt's understanding, productive arts hold the function of reifying the futile activities of action and speech, lending to them the kind of worldly 'thing-character' that they do not possess. On the other hand, the arts

that rest on performance share an obvious affinity to action in the sense that they need the presence of an audience to display their virtuosity. In both senses, we are dealing with something like an attempt to save and protect action from its vulnerability.

Although Arendt is famous – or infamous – for her allegedly hollow conception of politics, which in its praise for speech and action neglects all those questions that matter for most people (see, e.g., Pitkin 1998), she was certainly not arguing that dealing with the necessities of life or building a physical world were useless or in no relation to politics. On the contrary, the careful fencing off of private life from public life, as well as the crucial separation of *making* laws and *acting* within the space sustained by those laws, can be read as securing a place not only for action, but for the stabilizing elements without which action cannot be sustained:

The fences inclosing private property and ensuring the limitations of each household, the territorial boundaries which protect and make possible the physical identity of a people, and the laws which protect and make possible its political existence, are of such great importance to the stability of human affairs precisely because no such limiting and protecting principles rise out of the activities going on in the realm of human affairs itself. (Arendt 1998: 191)

Focusing specifically on the activity of work in *The Human Condition*, Patchen Markell (2011) further argues that fabrication processes are not to be understood merely as providers of a tangible world in which speech and action can thrive, a reading that ensures that work and action remain separate, and that action is understood as superior to work. Instead, Markell argues, a closer reading of the chapter on work reveals that the status of work is more complicated than being a means-end process taking place in isolation. Work produces things that *appear* in a common world in which they are judged and evaluated. On this account, action and work are interconnected and equally important activities that are centered around ‘attending to, judging, and caring for the “things of the world” in their appearance’ (ibid.: 32). We return to Markell’s insights at the end of this section.

Apart from the Greek *polis* that Arendt dedicated attention to, particularly in *The Human Condition*, another important source of inspiration in her quest for meaningful political experiences in the history of humanity was the founding of Rome. It animates her study of revolutions (Arendt 2006b) and is also discussed in her ‘exercise’ on the concept of authority in *Between Past and Future* (Arendt 2006a). It is precisely the Roman concept of authority that interests us here for the purposes of highlighting the stabilizing force that Arendt argued it had in the Roman tradition.

Pointing out that the concept of authority holds Roman origins, Arendt elucidates the meaning of the Latin word for those in authority, *auctoritas*, by referring to its etymological root in the verb *augere*, to augment or to increase

(Arendt 2006a: 121–122; Arendt 2006b: 193). In her reading, the original act of founding remained authoritative for the Romans precisely in the sense implied by this verb: whoever exerted power in the succeeding generations and whatever lands and peoples were annexed to the ever-growing empire of Rome, they were always tied back to and *augmented* the original act of foundation. The tradition of an unbroken line of successors who received their authority from the beginning were crucial in preserving the original spirit, and their authority was furthermore sanctified by religion. This is what Arendt refers to as the ‘trinity’ of authority, tradition, and religion, from which Romans in her view drew their strength: ‘The very coincidence of authority, tradition, and religion, all three simultaneously springing from the act of foundation, was the backbone of Roman history from beginning to end’ (Arendt 2006b: 193).

In the essay ‘What is Authority?’, Arendt further clarifies the meaning of being in authority through the distinction between *auctores* and *artifices*, those who are *auctores* in the sense of authors and those who are the builders and makers. The differentiation between those who design a building and those who build it would be one example in this respect (Arendt 2006a: 122). The author is ‘the one who inspired the whole enterprise’ (ibid.) and is in this sense the original founder. It is however important for her to stress that we are not dealing with a relation between the ruler and the ruled, such as in the case of Plato’s philosopher-king whose subjects execute his commands. This is because to be in authority is not identical with being in power. Arendt refers to both Montesquieu’s idea of the judiciary branch of government and the religiously binding force of the Roman gods: the judiciary neither legislates nor executes legislation but exerts a kind of advisory power. In a similar vein, the gods do not command people what to do, but in their approval or disapproval ‘augment’ and ‘confirm’ human actions (ibid.: 122–123). Authority is thus binding in the sense that it functions as a center of gravity for all human affairs, but it is not strictly speaking a position of power.

Before we investigate the act of foundation more closely in the following section, let us briefly look into the faculties of forgiving and making promises that constitute the last two sections of the chapter on action in *The Human Condition*. Arendt describes forgiving and making promises here as ‘remedies’ against two central characteristics of action, namely its *irreversibility* and *unpredictability*. Regardless of what is intended, human action starts irreversible and unpredictable processes precisely because it cannot be mastered in the same sense as we master our productive activities that result in an end. Forgiving and making promises are redemptive of this condition, both with respect to the past and the future. Forgiving attempts to make amends for past actions that have resulted in irreversible harm, and without this capacity, we would remain ‘confined to one single deed from which we could never recover’ (Arendt 1998: 237). Making promises, in turn, creates bonds for the future, which is in Arendt’s words an ‘ocean of uncertainty’ by definition (ibid.).

The fact that contracts, covenants, and treaties are familiar elements from the political realm attests, in Arendt’s view, to the fact that the power of making

promises is closely interconnected with political action (Arendt 1998: 244). Although she is elsewhere rather critical of our tradition of political thinking, she makes a fleeting remark here about a certain sensitivity to making promises that has nevertheless remained at the heart of it: '[The] great variety of contract theories since the Romans attests to the fact that the power of making promises has occupied the center of political thought over the centuries' (ibid.). The same could however not be said of the power of forgiveness - alluding to the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, Arendt contends that this early Christian experience has not been recognized as something of relevance for our tradition of political thought (ibid.: 238-240). And yet, it was precisely the central meaning of forgiveness for human affairs that Arendt credits Jesus with, discovering when he taught his disciples that we should forgive those who in their hearts did not will evil, for they could not know the consequences of their actions.

As Arendt lays out in the beginning of the section concerning forgiveness, the faculties of forgiving and making promises have the conspicuous character of being available within the range of human affairs. That is, they do not derive from a separate or higher faculty outside the realm of action. In this sense, although it was seen in the example of the Greek *polis* that Arendt described action as being devoid of limiting principles of its own and thus in need of external durability like laws and institutions, certain limiting activities seem to be within 'action's own reach,' as Arendt formulates it (ibid.: 246).

In fact, the faculties of forgiving and making promises appear to be important for Arendt because the realm of human action is not only in danger of being subsumed under other categories either by the philosopher or the political agent, but harbors itself a tendency to stagnate and petrify into processes that become automatic. This is highlighted, for instance, in the example of vengeance in the text we have referred to here. While revenge may be the natural reaction to a transgression, it ultimately ends in an endless circle that becomes an automatic process of its own - it is from this automatism that forgiving releases both the doer and the sufferer (ibid.: 241). This tendency is also noted elsewhere by Arendt. When we referred earlier to her view of the periods of freedom being somewhat rare in the history of mankind, she notes this precisely in the context of discussing the tendency of human processes to become automatic, much in the same sense as the processes of necessity they were supposed to interrupt in the first place (Arendt 2006a: 166-167). In this sense, as Markell notes, action seems to be 'perilously similar' (Markell 2011: 23) to the processes of labor that likewise leave no trace behind.

We referred earlier to Markell's understanding of work and action as interrelated and equally important activities for Arendt, and specifically in *The Human Condition*. Toward the end of his article, Markell contrasts this understanding to readings that have sought to save Arendt's concept of action from its alleged emptiness by highlighting the importance of work for providing a durable space where action can thrive, viewing these as 'narrow' in their focus on the stabilizing function of work (ibid.: 35). Insofar as we have envisioned the Greek *polis* precisely as what Markell calls a 'stable setting' for action, this

approach can indeed be argued to efface more nuanced aspects of how work and its products are intricately interwoven with action.

However, the purpose of treating work in this sense is to show that it is but one part of a larger framework of continuity, which ranges from elements that enable and preserve action to those that limit and moderate it in Arendt's thought. At every step of praising the human capacity to interrupt automatic processes with new enterprises, she continuously refers to the paramount importance of 'keeping within bounds' and retaining a sense of moderation – and not only by securing action through durable institutions but by balancing it, as it were, from within.

We have broadly charted Arendt's various perspectives on how action may be sustained given its fragility. As briefly mentioned above, a further differentiation that arises from Arendt's account is one between external and internal elements of continuity. In the Greek case, we saw that building the walls of the city-state and making the laws that sustain the political realm can be understood, at least in a limited sense, as providers of stability insofar as they refer to a stable reality that makes action possible in the first place. In this case, action is secured from the outside, as building and law-making are strictly external to politics or 'pre-political,' as Arendt sometimes calls them. We may also argue that authority in the Roman sense is a source outside action that confirms and authorizes it while remaining separate from the exercise of power itself: 'The most conspicuous characteristic of those in authority is that they do not have power' (Arendt 2006a: 122).

In contrast, as we have sought to show through the role of forgiving and making promises in Arendt's thought, there are certain activities within the realm of action itself that function as a source of stability. Forgiving interrupts action's drive toward stagnation and releases us from the grip of automated processes, and the capacity to make promises makes it possible to orient action toward a future without lapsing into instrumentality and teleological closure. In other words, these gestures are actions *within* action, options that are constantly available when acting in the mode of *praxis*. In the following section, we further explore this inner mechanism of moderation by engaging with Arendt's book *On Revolution*, and argue that Arendt's understanding of Montesquieu's ideas of divided power and principles of action inform and complement her account of the act of foundation.

4.3 The limits of founding: Arendt on Montesquieu and power

If there is an experience that illustrates Arendt's account of action as beginning something new in an exemplary sense, it is probably safe to say it is revolution, the act of founding a new body politic, to which Arendt dedicated her 1963 book *On Revolution* (Arendt 2006b). We first briefly summarize the general conclusion Arendt draws in this work from a comparison between the French and American revolutions. We then explore what Arendt herself refers to in this book as the

'perplexity' that concerns the tension between founding and preserving, and how her reading of Montesquieu is closely connected to this problematic. As we argue, the way Arendt understands the nature of power and the role of principles support a reading of her concept of founding that implies a careful balancing between novelty and permanence, action and order. In a similar way as forgiving and making promises, principles and organizations of power make up a force that sustains and orients action without sacrificing its inherent transience and arbitrariness.

To provide a brief background to Arendt's comparison of the two revolutions, her general account of the difference between the French and the American Revolutions can be grasped through the distinction between *liberty* and *freedom*, which essentially draws from the familiar framework of criticizing the conflation of action with other activities. By liberty, Arendt means a constellation of rights that pertain to the necessities of life, such as the right to be free from material want or infringement on private property. Freedom, in contrast, means the positive right to take active part in public affairs, to participate in the act of governing. Right from the first chapter of the book, it becomes clear that what she found deplorable about the French Revolution was that it eventually missed its opportunity to constitute freedom, and instead became obsessed with the elimination of poverty, that is, with mere liberation. With this elevation of material want to the center of political life, 'the dictate of necessity' (Arendt 2006b: 50) associated with it quite simply followed, no longer making the revolution about constituting freedom but about managing the necessities of life, a task that Arendt simply rejects as being one that could or should be dealt with by political means.

Arendt was nevertheless sensitive to the fact that both liberation and freedom have been central concerns of modern revolutions, not least because the constitution of freedom seems impossible without certain liberties like the freedom of movement (ibid.: 23). In her words, 'it is frequently very difficult to say where the mere desire for liberation, to be free from oppression, ends, and the desire for freedom as the political way of life begins' (ibid.). Indeed, who would not want both personal welfare and political freedom? As a Tunisian woman expressed with respect to the Arab Spring and its ambivalent legacy: 'Can't I have both?' (Safi 2020).

However, Arendt insisted on a decisive difference between the two and held that the American revolutionaries, though somewhat uncertain whether they were dealing with personal welfare or public freedom, were primarily occupied with the latter. That is, they were founders of freedom in the sense of active citizenship and driven by 'the desire to excel,' a phrase borrowed from John Adams. In other words, while the French revolutionaries were driven by compassion and pity toward the poor masses, the Founding Fathers remained faithful to the act of founding a realm of freedom. We return to this question of freedom versus liberty toward the end of this section in the context of principles.

Apart from this difficulty of balancing between freedom and liberty, another dominant theme that Arendt brings to a focus in *On Revolution* is the

problematic or, what Arendt often calls the 'perplexity,' surrounding the act of foundation. This perplexity can be formulated as the following rather obvious question: what will happen after the revolution? The 'revolutionary spirit,' which sets action into motion, does not automatically translate itself into a set of institutional arrangements that could keep this spirit alive. Even in the case of relative success in founding a new government, such as in the American experience, the foundational act would be the privilege of those who happened to be the initial founders.

Arendt shows how this perplexity was present in revolutionary America by referring to the Founding Fathers' dreams of a 'perpetual union' and a 'perpetual state,' both expressions borrowed from James Harrington, noting that 'we find preoccupation with permanence and stability running like a red thread through the constitutional debates' (Arendt 2006b: 223). It was likewise no coincidence that the Americans studied the Romans so carefully since founding and preserving were so closely connected in the Roman experience (ibid.: 194-195). In a certain sense, those who become involved in revolutions are bound to be 'conservative' rather than 'revolutionary' since they obviously want to preserve what they have founded (ibid. 31-32). And in any case, she adds in this context, the big revolutions of the 18th century and most of the preceding revolts were originally intended as *restorations* - they were started by relatively well-off minorities that evoked the idea of revolving back to a time when their rights were intact.

The tension between foundation and permanence is also expressed in Arendt's discussions of the revolutionary councils that flourished during modern revolutions, such as the Parisian Commune and the *soviets* in the early stages of the Russian Revolution. These councils, Arendt argues, were not born out of any theory or a predetermined choice of the revolutionaries, but erupted as spontaneous organs of self-determination during the revolutions. The regrettable fact was, of course, that they were soon either swallowed up by the modern party machinery or eradicated and replaced with a one-party dictatorship. Even in the American context, where townships and public meetings were already a common experience prior to the founding of an independent government, the Founding Fathers eventually failed to preserve the unique spirit of these local organs. Despite having been in this sense short-lived in the history of mankind, the councils seem to offer Arendt something like a sketch of an ideal form of government: a council system is ordered enough to make public action possible, but not too fixed to threaten the constant eruption of new actions and courses started by them. As she concludes in the very last chapter of the book, the councils 'were always organs of order as much as organs of action' (ibid.: 255).

It is the inability of our tradition to think of politics, both in terms of action *and* order that points to our loss: 'Perhaps the very fact that these two elements, the concern with stability and the new, have become opposites in political thought and terminology - the one being identified as conservatism and the other being claimed as the monopoly of progressive liberalism - must be recognized to be among the symptoms of our loss' (ibid.: 215). However, she remained cautious

in expressing any hopes of the realization of a council-state: '[If] you ask me now what prospect [the council-state] has of being realized, then I must say to you: Very slight, if at all. And yet perhaps, after all – in the wake of the next revolution' (Arendt 1972: 233).

This puzzling relation between founding and preserving, action and order, is precisely what Arendt views as something that has proved hard to solve for revolutionaries of the past, as well as our tradition of revolutionary thinking in general, which she summarizes toward the end of *On Revolution* as follows:

The perplexity was very simple and, stated in logical terms, it seemed unsolvable: if foundation was the aim and the end of revolution, then the revolutionary spirit was not merely the spirit of beginning something new but of starting something permanent and enduring; a lasting institution, embodying this spirit and encouraging it to new achievements, would be self-defeating. From which it unfortunately seems to follow that nothing threatens the very achievements of revolution more dangerously and more acutely than the spirit which has brought them about. Should freedom in its most exalted sense as freedom to act be the price to be paid for foundation? This perplexity, namely, that the principle of public freedom and public happiness without which no revolution would ever have come to pass should remain the privilege of the generation of founders, has not only produced Robespierre's bewildered and desperate theories about the distinction between revolutionary and constitutional government [...], but has haunted all revolutionary thinking ever since. (Arendt 2006b: 224)

That a revolution does not result in a community of revolutionaries is hardly a controversial discovery, which Arendt is aware of and thus describes the problem identified here as something like a standard motif in all revolutionary thinking. And yet, this 'simple' perplexity is not entirely absent from her own account of action, which itself seems to be haunted by the problematic relation between founding and preserving.

This is partly what we have sought to trace above under the rubric of stability. The inherent futility of action drives her to examine various historical 'solutions' that could bestow light upon the complex task of preserving the fragile actions started by humans without exhausting their source or perverting them into something else. However, it is somewhat clear that it is always both for Arendt – both founding *and* preserving. As the passage above suggests, if founding would be only about constituting something permanent, it would indeed be 'self-defeating' from the viewpoint of action, since once exhausted in a durable work, we no longer deal with action with an 'end in itself.' In somewhat more practical terms, this would mean that those who come after the initial founders would be left with little or nothing to do. On the other hand, if action lacks all aspects of permanence altogether and fails to found anything that outlasts the moment of action, it becomes fleeting and needs poets and storytellers to memorialize it, driving it toward a produced work.

In this sense, for foundational acts to escape this vicious circle and sustain a source from which new actions may spring, they need to inaugurate some degree of order and, at the same time, allow the newly founded order to be slightly incomplete or *unfounded*, so that the coming generations can enjoy the fruits of the initial enterprise. It was Thomas Jefferson, Arendt argues, that was perhaps more occupied with possibilities of perpetual action than anyone else. He feared that contrary to what was intended, the Constitution would prevent further actions, that it would become 'too sacred to be touched' (Jefferson quoted in Arendt 2006b: 225). Instead, he welcomed revolts and revisions no matter how well or badly motivated, for 'the tree of liberty must be refreshed, from time to time, with the blood of patriots and tyrants' (ibid.).

Arendt's understanding of power offers another cue into delineating how the idea of sustaining action in a manner that both founds and 'unfounds' may be understood. Let us first rehearse Arendt's understanding of power as potential, as outlined in the subsection 'Power and the Space of Appearance' in *The Human Condition*. Referring to the equivalents of the word power in Greek (*dynamis*), Latin (*potentia*), and German (*Macht*, as derived from *mögen* and *möglich*), she states the following:

Power is always, as we would say, a power potential and not an unchangeable, measurable, and reliable entity like force or strength. While strength is the natural quality of an individual seen in isolation, power springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse. Because of this peculiarity, which power shares with all potentialities that can only be actualized but never fully materialized, power is to an astonishing degree independent of material factors, either of numbers or means. (Arendt 1998: 200)

In other words, since power is potential, it cannot be possessed or stored up, but it is only manifested when actualized by a plurality of agents. Power vanishes when agents disperse precisely because this actualization does not mean that potentiality materializes into something outside itself. However, power can be kept 'alive' if humans simply find a way of staying together: 'What keeps people together after the fleeting moment of action has passed (what we today call "organization") and what, at the same time, they keep alive through remaining together is power' (ibid.: 201). This is the reason, Arendt argues here, the city state has remained 'paradigmatic' for Western political organization – it is an example of political organization that keeps a plurality of power potentialities continuously present. In a similar vein, as she contends in *On Revolution*, power was arranged in pre-independent America to be continuously present through mutual promises: 'action had led to the formation of power and [...] power was kept in existence by the then newly discovered means of promise and covenant' (Arendt 2006b: 167). In this sense, power is neither materialized nor exhausted when actualized: it remains alive *as* potentiality, so long as pluralities manage to organize themselves in a manner that keeps it manifest.

That power is only in actuality, and depends on a plurality of agents, brings power close to the central characteristics of action. Arendt indeed argues that 'power, like action, is boundless' (Arendt 1998: 201); due to this boundlessness, it has no 'natural' limitations like that of an individual's strength but can instead be divided without decreasing it. In fact, 'the interplay of powers with their checks and balances is even liable to generate more power, so long, at least, as the interplay is alive and has not resulted in a stalemate' (ibid.).

A bit further into the text, she argues that Montesquieu precisely understood that because tyranny rests on the isolation of the ruler, it is not actually a proper form of government since it contradicts with plurality. It 'prevents the development of power, not only in a particular segment of the public realm but in its entirety; it generates, in other words, impotence as naturally as other bodies politic generate power' (ibid.: 202). In *On Revolution*, Arendt scrutinizes more closely Montesquieu's idea of divided power and its connection to the founding of a new government in America. She contends that the Americans adopted from Montesquieu the idea that government must be organized in a way that keeps power alive as potentiality:

It was precisely because Montesquieu – unique in this respect among the sources from which the founders drew their political wisdom – had maintained that power and freedom belonged together; that, conceptually speaking, political freedom did not reside in the I-will but in the I-can, and that therefore the political realm must be construed and constituted in a way in which power and freedom would be combined, that we find his name invoked in practically all debates on constitution. (Arendt 2006b: 141)

It is for this reason that Montesquieu's theory of the distribution of power between the legislative, executive, and judiciary branches of government was so influential in the practical task of constituting a new government. Importantly, the distribution of power was understood precisely as division in a positive, generative sense. Arendt clarifies this by providing an original reading of Montesquieu's phrase 'power arrests power.' She first contends that to be quite accurate, as Montesquieu discovered that laws are incapable of checking power; what is checked in lawful governments is in fact the use of violence, the 'multiplied strength of the one who has monopolized the power of the many' (ibid.: 142). In contrast to violence, Arendt argues that power can be limited only by power itself; by something that she calls elsewhere, also with reference to Montesquieu, 'factors that arise out of and belong to the political realm proper' (Arendt 2006a: 236). Although we are accustomed to understanding the division of power as the *limitation* of the power in each of the three branches of government, Montesquieu touched upon something deeper about the nature of power:

Power can be stopped *and* still be kept intact only by power, so that the principle of the separation of power not only provides a guarantee against

the monopolization of power by one part of the government, but actually provides a kind of mechanism, built into the very heart of government, through which new power is constantly generated, without, however, being able to overgrow and expand to the detriment of other centres or sources of power. (Arendt 2006b: 142–143, italics in original)

Importantly and in line with the divisibility of power discussed above, this ‘mechanism’ means precisely that power is limited in a way that does not decrease it but *increases* it. Arendt further emphasizes this by referring to what she calls Montesquieu’s ‘famous insight’ that even virtue needs to be limited: ‘Certainly it was not because he wanted less virtue and less reason that Montesquieu demanded their limitation’ (ibid.: 143). In this sense, the real danger of power is not that one party or another seizes too much power, but that power is limited in a way that starts to ‘breed impotence.’ The Founding Fathers of America understood, in Arendt’s view, precisely this when they turned about the question of the balance of powers between the independent republics and the federal union: ‘Clearly, the true objective of the American Constitution was not to limit power but to create more power, actually to establish and duly constitute an entirely new power centre’ (ibid.: 145).

In short, limited power means more power. Since Arendt suggests that Montesquieu was correct in realizing that ‘power and freedom belong together,’ it follows that action – which is precisely the experience of freedom – is sustained by this inner division and limitation. Limited power prevents power sources from drying up, and this constant generation of new power feeds into the ‘space of appearance’ of agents and provides it with new possibilities of action. With respect to the foundation of a new body politic in the American context, we saw that founding was, in Arendt’s view, centered around precisely this type of power-generating limitation. Her discussion of the complexities and difficulties involved in the design of a new constitution and the search of a proper balance of powers suggests that those who are occupied with the task of founding are almost immediately also drawn into a process of limiting and re-organizing whatever they have founded, so that others will also have something to do in the newly constituted realm of freedom.

More generally, since action is plural by definition for Arendt, it can be argued to be always already divided and limited – each of the individual agents are power sources that equally limit each other and *thus* generate more power. Indeed, ‘human power corresponds to the condition of plurality to begin with’ (Arendt 1998: 201). Thus, whether the division of power is understood in the more general sense of referring to a plurality of agents, or in a more historically particular setting as in the founding of the American Constitution, political agents simply cannot betray this basic condition of politics and must find a way to strengthen a regenerative play between a multiplicity of powers.

4.4 Principles of action

Let us now attempt to trace the presence of a type of un-founding or regulating force internal to politics in Arendt's account through the concept of principle. As recent literature suggests (Cane 2015; Muldoon 2016; Näsström 2014; Sirczuk 2018), principles have remained an insufficiently explored dimension of Arendt's thought. This is perhaps partly because her references to principles are scattered across her works and never presented as a fully coherent framework. In line with these studies, we seek to demonstrate how principles, mainly derived by Arendt from the work of Montesquieu, function as an important source of balance for action in general and may be discerned in her reading of the American Revolution in particular.

In 'Montesquieu's Revision of the Tradition,' an essay manuscript published after Arendt's death in *The Promise of Politics* (Arendt 2005b), Arendt credits Montesquieu with discovering that there is more to politics than simply the relation between the rulers and the ruled and the laws that govern that relation; that whatever the nature of government and its laws, it is the constant actions of men that sustain both. Apart from the three principles that inspire action identified by Montesquieu – virtue in republics, honor in monarchies, and fear in tyrannies – Arendt notes that there is no particular reason to restrict the number of principles to three. She mentions, for instance, fame, freedom, and justice as additional principles (ibid.: 195). In a footnote in *The Human Condition*, she suggests that Montesquieu was in fact primarily interested in the principles that inspire action rather than the forms of government as such (Arendt 1998: 191).

In 'What is Freedom?,' Arendt explicates in a rather dense paragraph how the idea of principles, explicitly borrowed from Montesquieu, allow a certain orientation of action in a manner compatible with her own account of action. Principles inspire and set action into motion, but cannot be reduced to personal motives, which would perhaps bring material needs and the necessity they entail too close to action. In addition, principles make possible the orientation toward common aims, but do not function as fixed goals or prescriptions of what should be *made*: 'Principles do not operate from within the self as motives do – "mine own deformity" or my "fair proportion" – but inspire, as it were, from without; and they are much too general to prescribe particular goals, although every particular aim can be judged in the light of its principle once the act has been started' (Arendt 2006a: 150–151). Like power, principles are manifest only in actuality – 'the inspiring principle becomes fully manifest only in the performing act itself' (ibid.: 151). However, this does not mean that a principle becomes exhausted once the act has come to an end; instead, a principle 'can be repeated time and again' (ibid.).

In very general terms, since principles do not tell us exactly what to do, they can inspire action continuously without losing anything of their applicability – as Lucy Cane (2015: 63) points out, being inspired by the principle of virtue does

not entail that one produces or brings about virtue but that one acts *virtuously*. By drawing from Arendt's example of the American Revolution, both Cane and James Muldoon (2016) specify that this repeatability also allows a certain experimentation with novelty. The Founding Fathers derived principles like 'public happiness' and 'public freedom' from antiquity to conceptualize and animate their unique experiences of founding something new. In this sense, they picked up and 'rejuvenated' (Muldoon 2016: 131, 133) dormant and nearly forgotten principles and used them in novel and creative ways.

In *On Revolution*, principles appear throughout the book, though mostly without any explicit reference to Montesquieu. Apart from the principles drawn from antiquity that we just mentioned, Arendt describes the Founding Fathers as being inspired by principles like 'mutual confidence,' 'mutual promise,' and 'self-selection.' In the passage referring to Montesquieu's idea of 'power arrests power' that we analyzed above, the divisibility of power is in fact also presented as a principle. Having discussed the Americans' successful conception of the separation of powers as something generative of freedom, Arendt contrasts the American Constitution to the short-lived European postwar constitutions, 'whose inspiring principle had been distrust of power in general and fear of revolutionary power of the people in particular' (Arendt 2006b: 145). Noting this apparent difference between positive and negative principles, Cane (2015) proposes that the principles Arendt mentions in *On Revolution* can be roughly divided to what she calls '(re)generative' and 'degenerative' principles: those that contribute toward sustaining political action, and those that are bound to deteriorate it and prevent it from flourishing.

When discussing the detrimental effects of 'the social question' on the course of the French Revolution in the second chapter of the book, Arendt differentiates between passions, sentiments, and principles in a manner that gives a somewhat more nuanced picture of how principles operate. She argues here that the French revolutionaries were driven by compassion toward the miserable masses and that compassion is 'irrelevant' from the viewpoint of the political since it concerns man in the singular. Compassion is by definition something we feel toward another singular person; and as such, it is incompatible with the political realm, which always concerns a plurality of men and the world between them (Arendt 2006b: 76-77). She further argues that compassion emerged in the perverted form of a sentiment in the French Revolution, and 'the sentiment which corresponds to the passion of compassion is, of course, pity' (ibid.: 78). In contrast to passion, which pertains to man in the singular, pity can be directed toward a multitude but only by conceiving it as *one*, that is, as one single mass of sufferers. This provides the decisive point of contrast to principles: 'It is out of pity that men are 'attracted toward *les hommes faibles*', but it is out of solidarity that they establish deliberately and, as it were, dispassionately a community of interest with the oppressed and exploited' (ibid.: 78-79).

In the above sense, solidarity as a principle seems to be something a bit distanced from the immediate suffering of a particular group. As Arendt puts it, a principle 'may appear cold and abstract, for it remains committed to 'ideas' –

to greatness, or honour, or dignity – rather than to any ‘love’ of men’ (Arendt 2006b: 79). As Cane argues, Arendt’s discussion of solidarity suggests that while pity reduces an exploited group of people to a single mass of sufferers, solidarity views them as potential allies in constituting a political community of equals (Cane 2015: 65). In line with her analysis, we could argue that material deprivation *can* be brought to the political scene if it is addressed through the principle of solidarity, and if it is brought forth for the sake of constituting freedom.

Apart from the paradox of founding and preserving that we have introduced earlier as one of the dominant themes in *On Revolution*, Arendt brings up an additional problem that seems to haunt all beginnings. The problem could be described as concerning the legitimacy of new beginnings – where is the newly constituted order to derive its legitimacy from? The order seems legitimate once in place, but the beginning itself seems to be somewhat arbitrary and comes, as Arendt often puts it, ‘from nowhere.’ This, she argues, is chiefly the reason the revolutionaries on both sides of the Atlantic appealed to natural, universal, and divine rights in their attempts to find a valid justification for their cause, to find what Arendt calls an ‘absolute’ from which to derive the legitimacy of their enterprise. However, the solution that she proposes is that foundation derives its legitimacy simply from the beginning itself and the principle it brings to a disclosure:

What saves the act of beginning from its own arbitrariness is that it carries its own principle within itself, or, to be more precise, that beginning and principle, *principium* and principle, are not only related to each other, but are coeval. The absolute from which the beginning is to derive its own validity and which must save it, as it were, from its inherent arbitrariness is the principles which, together with it, makes its appearance in the world. (Arendt 2006b: 205)

In this sense, much in the same sense as Arendt argues that the Romans and Greeks understood it, the foundation of a political order is not a question of implementing either divine or natural rights of man, but a deliberate act made by humans in order to create a space for freedom that otherwise would not exist. And the principles that come to light with this act of foundation continue to be manifest as long as they are kept alive in the political realm: ‘the principle inspires the deeds that are to follow and remains apparent as long as the action lasts’ (ibid.). Adding to the principles of ‘public freedom’ and ‘public happiness,’ Arendt mentions that the principles that came to light in the wake of the American Revolution were ‘the interconnected principle of mutual promise and common deliberation’ (ibid.: 206). Elsewhere, she refers to the covenants and agreements that existed in pre-revolutionary America and suggests that ‘the federal principle, the principle of league and alliance among separate units, arises out of the elementary conditions of action itself’ (ibid.: 259).

Nevertheless, for all this praise of the American Revolution and its guiding principles, Arendt concludes in the last chapter of the book that quite obviously, the original spirit inspired by these principles were not preserved very well and what has remained of them is a rather unpolitical occupation with private welfare. And '[this] transformation corresponds with great precision to the invasion of the public realm by society; it is as though the originally political principles were translated into social values' (Arendt 2006b: 213).

In light of the discussions thus far, the concept of principle is one of the most important concepts in *On Revolution* from beginning to end. To Arendt's concern about our tradition's inability to conceive action both in terms of action and order, founding and preserving, and novelty and permanence, principles offer a balancing in-between solution. Principles bestow a commonly accepted direction and orientation upon action that limits its inherent boundlessness and arbitrariness while simultaneously preventing it from becoming too permanent and durable. Importantly, principles are not derived from a divine origin or a universal law, but arise as coeval with action and remain an inexhaustible source of continuous action so long as the principle is allowed to flourish in any given political order.

For Montesquieu, of course, the withering away of trust in the guiding principle of a government meant the end of that form of government, as Arendt also notes in *The Promise of Politics* (Arendt 2005b: 65). Although the American government obviously did not come to an end, it did deteriorate in Arendt's view to idle consumerism guided by 'social values,' which in her analysis marks the victory of *animal laborans* and the eclipse of politics in late modernity. Precisely because of this development, she argues that those who followed the legacy of the French Revolution – which had also been inspired by the principle of public freedom at its early stages – came to see the once guiding principles simply as 'a heap of rubbish' (Arendt 2006b: 213.).

Recalling the notion of external and internal stabilizers of action that we sketched in the previous section, Arendt's understanding of principles and divided power, both inspired by Montesquieu, may be understood as forming an internal source that sustains action. By borrowing Arendt's own formulations, principles and limited power are factors that are 'within reach of action' or 'arise out of and belong to the political realm proper.' More precisely, this internal source functions by virtue of division and limitation, without which action ultimately collapses. When power is not divided, it starts to breed impotence instead of generating more power. On the other hand, where principles no longer inspire the actions of men, action turns either utterly arbitrary or is driven toward a produced work. It is in this sense that we can, by borrowing from Muldoon (2016), say that principles function as a 'self-limitation' of action.

Seen from the viewpoint of divided power and principles, which both manifest in action, the act of founding may be approached not as the mysterious privilege of a generation of founders but something available to all. While the act of foundation itself is a particular act that concerns a particular group of founders, the principles that inspire and set it into motion cannot be exhausted

but may be picked up and further spun out by others. Patchen Markell makes a similar argument regarding the continuity of action in his interpretation of Arendt's concept of beginning, which he connects more closely to Arendt's critical engagement with the concept of ruling.

Arendt's critique of rule is rather well-known and, as mentioned in the very beginning of this chapter, one of the key complaints she put forward when criticizing Plato was that he imposed the concept of rulership on politics. Originally, in Arendt's interpretation, the Greek verbs *arkhein* (covering both beginning and ruling in classical Greek, she reminds us) and *prattein* (acting) were closely connected. Those who initiate a beginning are not simply leaders who command others to execute their orders, but initiators that need others to carry out the act (Arendt 2006a: 164). In a similar manner as she criticized our inability to understand the close tie between novelty and permanence in *On Revolution*, she argues in this context that the close relation between leaders and followers has been gradually more and more misinterpreted ever since antiquity, leading to an understanding of leading and following as two separate units rather than interconnected activities.

Elaborating on this dimension of Arendt's thought, Markell argues that Arendt was not so much against rulership (and for unruliness), but offered a rather idiosyncratic re-interpretation of ruling as such: ruling is beginning and hence leading, yet no one can lead without the support of others, making all 'ruling' plural from the outset. This is in part what informs Markell's more specific interpretation of Arendt's concept of beginning, according to which a beginning should not be understood as a spontaneous and momentary disruption, but rather an 'occasion for response' (Markell 2006: 10). It is a moment that allows an 'attunement' to an event as something that should be taken as a point of departure and that calls for further responses. Beginning is in this sense about 'how to sustain, intensify, and democratize the beginnings with which we are already confronted' (ibid.: 12).

What we have attempted to show so far is that a tension between two poles - to begin and found while also perpetuating and upholding action - is continuously present in Arendt's discussions of the nature of politics. To divide and limit the power that arises when humans act is a matter of organizing power in a way that keeps multiple power sources alive, such as exemplified by the 'complicated and delicate system' of checks and balances present in the American Constitution (Arendt 2006b: 145). On the other hand, the way principles are picked up and set in motion demonstrates how action may regenerate itself without lapsing into a means-end activity. Or at least, this means that even when we *are* reasoning in the mode of means and ends, as one cannot perhaps avoid doing when engaging in politics, each particular end can be judged in the light of its inspiring principle.

4.5 The contamination of *praxis*

Taken together, the faculties of forgiving and making promises and principles, among which the principle of power division can be counted, make up a rich and nuanced specification of how politics is sustained by capacities and forces that may be picked up amid political action understood in the sense of *praxis*. Of course, some of these mechanisms are, as Arendt was well aware of, something that would in the modern mindset often be shrugged off as meaningless. Regarding the capacity to forgive, we mentioned earlier that Arendt explicitly remarked that this has largely been dismissed as something irrelevant for politics due to forgiveness gaining prominence in an apparently religious context. Similarly, in her wry diagnosis of America, within the rise of a liberal consumer society, it became appealing to laugh off ideas like public freedom or public happiness as something outdated or hypocritical; indeed, as a ‘heap of rubbish,’ as she put it.

Yet, if we pause for a moment to relate this to the present moment in which the Ukrainian people’s aspirations toward freedom are met with the brute force of a desperate tyrant, isn’t it somewhat obvious that what we call Western societies have at last been startled into remembering that, as abstract and vacuous as these principles may sound, they actually have some relevance in living a politically meaningful life? To the often-circulated remark that the liberal democratic order has its own faults and that its ‘freedoms’ are not in any straightforward sense something worth yearning for, Arendt’s simple phrase ‘freedom is freedom’ strikes one as a sober response:

It has to do with what kind of state one wants to have, what kind of constitution, what kind of legislation, what sorts of safeguards for the spoken and the printed word; that is, it has to do with what our innocent children in the West call “bourgeois freedom”. There is no such thing; freedom is freedom whether guaranteed by the laws of a “bourgeois” government or a “communist” state. (Arendt 1972: 220–221)

This is merely to highlight the apparent relevance of Arendt’s understanding of principles, also to our present political predicament. The European powers are now forced to critically examine their sliding into the grip of economic values that tied their economies to the East, a process formally similar to the one Arendt diagnosed in America, involving the degeneration of the initially inspiring principles of freedom into ‘social values’ that lack the strength to guide a properly political life.

Let us now describe in more formal terms what our discussion thus far implies. Although Arendt insists that political action is to be understood as *praxis*, that is, as transient speech acts and initiated processes that cannot be thought of as a means to an end, this affirmation is slightly unstable if we take into consideration the various ordering aspects that we have addressed above. In

other words, in order to sustain the inherently transient nature of action, without which freedom cannot be experienced, *praxis* must allow itself to be *contaminated* by what it appears to exclude. What our analysis shows is that *praxis* is not only about beginning, founding, and interrupting, but about structuring, organizing, and finding at least a minimal degree of permanence. It is precisely the difficulty of this task that Arendt lamented in *On Revolution*. For the sake of safeguarding the open-ended nature of action and preventing it from vanishing without a trace, *praxis* must allow certain aspects of permanence and continuity to be attached to itself. Importantly, it must do so *without* thereby becoming a mode of productive activity with a clear instrumental logic.

Agamben's approach may, on this reading, be interpreted not as an alternative to Arendt's *praxis*, but as a method that detects a force at work within *praxis* – a force that suspends or deactivates the 'normal' or conventional operation of this established model of political action. The above discussion of the various aspects of continuity and orientation in Arendt's conception supports such an interpretation: to act in the mode of *praxis* is to affirm and establish political action as an open-ended and foundational act; at the same time, this conventional use must be allowed to be slightly deactivated. From this perspective, *praxis* is not 'pure' in any radically exclusive sense, a notion frequently attached to Arendt's conception of politics, but allows for a certain impurity to pass into it. For both Arendt and Agamben, it is ultimately a question of sustaining action, of augmenting the possibilities for action not despite but *by virtue of* an apparent limitation or oppositional force. Arendt credited Montesquieu precisely with realizing that the apparent limitation of power and virtue increases them, just as for Agamben, the apparent impotentiality that is welcomed to the act does not paralyze action but generates more possibilities for action.

After all, despite Agamben's repeated claims in *Karman* that gesture is an act of immersing oneself in the immediate experience of acting ('the art in art,' 'the speech in speech,' and so on), he clearly implies that this should not be understood as a mere cessation of all acts or a nothingness. Gesture is, precisely as outlined in Chapter 2, not only the deactivation but the alternative use that it generates; it is 'an activity or a potential that consists in deactivating human works and rendering them inoperative, and in this way, it *opens them to a new, possible use*' (Agamben 2018a: 84, italics added). At first glance, this seems to be articulated at quite a distance from what Arendt has in mind when praising public appearances and revolutionary enterprises. However, Agamben's 'deactivation' and 'rendering inoperative' can in fact be interpreted as a plausible description of how Arendt makes room for order and permanence in her otherwise unconditional affirmation of *praxis*. The deactivation of *praxis* does not imply that it becomes something wholly other than itself (production, permanence, closure), nor that it simply ends. Rather, it means that by detaching to itself aspects that appear to be its opposite, thereby implying a certain deactivation of its basic dimensions, *praxis* retains its inherent open-endedness and allows for new actions and beginnings to materialize. This is the 'new,

possible use' of *praxis* – the possibility to mobilize new enterprises by virtue of an apparent impurity that passes into it.

This reading has two apparent benefits. On the one hand, Agamben's more enigmatic claims about dwelling in gestures that exhibit human potentiality may be placed in the context of more established discourses and theories of politics, contesting in this way some interpreters that have found his work advocating inactivity and quietism in political matters. On the other hand, in the light of this 'deactivation,' the paradoxical task of reconciling founding and preserving appears less problematic than Arendt presents it. Rather than mourning the difficulty of reconciling founding and novelty with a group of seemingly oppositional concepts, such as conservation or permanence, Agamben's approach allows us to see this paradox in a more positive light. The tension between opposite forces is part of the concept of *praxis* as such: the slight deactivation and contamination of *praxis* simply means that political action can regenerate itself and continue to thrive.

4.6 Within *praxis* and *poiēsis*

Since our above analysis shows that Agamben's alternative works as a deactivation of *praxis*, a contamination that sustains transient action, we are now in a position to take a fresh look at the status of this alternative in relation to *poiēsis*. As seen in the previous chapter, Agamben's reworking of the 'end of history' thesis shows a certain limit that the poietic paradigm must necessarily confront. All makings eventually give rise to something else; they must include their own unraveling. Apart from simply registering that this is different from a productive understanding of politics, we may now specify this difference in more detail. If we juxtapose these two examples of engaging with *poiēsis* and *praxis*, it is clear that this activity, this gesture, if you will, is in both cases the same. Agamben's destabilization is an activity practiced *on* action and production, an operation that shows their limit and permits both paradigms to incorporate aspects that appear oppositional.

This suggests that the ambivalence we noted in Chapter 2, that is, the unclarity regarding the autonomy of Agamben's alternative, can now be dissolved. What the above conclusion suggests is that Agamben's 'third' is, in fact, not a rigorous third but an operation conducted on the other two paradigms. Let us however substantiate this claim in a bit more detailed manner. Firstly, it needs to be acknowledged that Agamben does not directly claim that his gesture is a completely separate activity besides action and production. To be sure, he formulates it as neither one nor the other, a 'beyond;' but this beyond can, depending on the context, be interpreted as either autonomous or non-autonomous, as discussed in Chapter 2. Thus, we first delineate more carefully what it is that gives the impression that he is offering his gesture as a rigorous 'third.' Secondly, we will discuss what makes this attempt problematic.

When delineating his vision of an alternative type of action, Agamben continuously refers to a 'sphere of gesturality' (Agamben 1999b: 85; Agamben 2000: 117; Agamben 2018a: 82). This particular formulation appears to be fairly innocent and has not attracted any wider discussion. Yet, for our present purposes, it merits a bit closer attention. Firstly, by evoking in several contexts the notion of 'sphere,' Agamben appears to assign his political action to its own demarcated area. Gestures consist in nothing but exposing actions as such, but Agamben nevertheless deems it necessary to assign them to their own sphere. Secondly, by using the term 'gesturality,' it appears that gestures as such are elevated into a fundamental term that explains properly human activity – not simply gestures but *gesturality*. To cite once again a passage that we referred to in Chapter 2: '*Politics is the sphere of pure means, that is, of the absolute and complete gesturality of human beings*' (Agamben 2000: 60, italics in original). It is through such formulations that the implications of a paradigmatic activity that stands on its own start to become discernible.

The signs of a separate activity can also be found in one of the most iconic and best-known strategies in Agamben's thought, that is, the usage of the notion of a *threshold*. For instance, as we also saw in Chapter 2, the concept of 'pure potentiality' points to inhabiting a space between potentiality and actuality. In the context of language, in turn, this space is sometimes discussed by Agamben through focusing on the barrier '/' between the signifier and signified, the space between the semiotic and the semantic. This in-between zone can, of course, be understood in various ways. If we momentarily imagine this with the help of two circles, then a third circle can be placed in the middle such that it intersects and partly overlaps with the other two. But in the context of the examples briefly evoked here, potentiality-actuality and sign-signified, Agamben underscores in many works that he has in mind a *suspension* in this middle space. It is a *stalling*, as we saw in the chapter on *poiēsis*, one that exposes this middle zone as such. In this sense, his preferred activity appears to be not one nor the other, but the limit as such.

In addition, the idea of a 'coming' politics further contributes to an understanding of gesture as a rigorously distinct activity. We saw in the chapter on *poiēsis* that Agamben wants to free his gestural activity from any thinkable political or juridical order. It is not yet in the here and now, but remains to be invented. This is a similar move to the one Agamben does when confronting the model of *praxis*. In *Pulcinella* (2018b), published directly after the critique of Arendt in *Karman*, he develops the model of gesture by drawing on theatre and mime, suggesting that Pulcinella, a commedia dell'arte character, '*announces and requires another politics which no longer has its place in action but shows what a body can do when every action has become impossible*' (ibid.: 65, italics in original).

What is it that makes this autonomous gesture problematic? The first thing that should be noted is that from the perspective of Agamben's vision of free use of human activities, that is, *any* use, the idea of a separate *sphere* of gestures cannot avoid raising suspicions. While such an autonomous in-between zone can be logically posited, the more serious problem that rises with this framing is that it comes perilously close to what Agamben himself criticizes and warns against.

As we noted when discussing profanation in Chapter 2, the decisive trait of the sacred is that it is confined and isolated to a specific sphere. Thus, for profaning activities to fulfill their liberatory promise, they should precisely avoid forming another separate sphere, instead becoming the 'open-sesame' key that unlocks action from the sphere of the sacred and opens it to a new use. From this perspective, Agamben's 'sphere of gesturality' risks becoming exactly what was posited as problematic in the first place, especially since this formulation appears in several places instead of being merely a single fragment. If politics is its own sphere consisting of the experience of human activities as such, it risks becoming a somewhat estranged activity that withdraws from the world and simply takes note of its own activities, whatever they may be.

Another, and perhaps more general, problem is connected to the idea of a politics that remains yet to be invented. As we saw both in the case of Agamben's critical engagement with *poiēsis* and *praxis*, his alternative politics must ultimately be freed from these apparatuses, just as it can take place only after all juridical and statal apparatuses are finally abandoned and *when every action has become impossible*. As we have discussed earlier, these apparatuses capture life and there is a justifiable wish on part of Agamben to liberate life from these apparatuses. Yet, what does one do with an operation that liberates a potentiality to do otherwise in a condition completely devoid of traditional political apparatuses such as we know them? What could such politics take as its object or what could it arise from? And even if we did manage to invent this type of politics, what would secure it from relapsing into a set of new apparatuses? In the former condition, we at least had the possibility of destabilizing the apparatuses that govern us, precisely as Agamben suggests we do; but in this post-apparatus political life, we would neither be able to destabilize anything, nor perhaps even know how to do so.

This is the problematic place where Agamben arrives: rather than following his own logic of liberating a potential to do otherwise within existing conventions, he presents his 'third model' as distinct from these and has to resort to somewhat esoteric formulations of a politics to come and action 'as such.' These create very little room for imagining what sort of liberation can come out of this operation, not only in practical but ultimately also in theoretical terms.

From another perspective, the manner in which Agamben criticizes the drive toward a certain goal that occludes our experience of events themselves, an alienation of sorts, is a perfectly legitimate critique of wider cultural tendencies. This is what Agamben does, for example, in the second chapter of *Infancy and History*, which also bears the title of the book, with great clarity. In a way that probably everyone can relate to in the age of social media, he scorns the modern tendency to distance oneself from the immediate experience of life. When we go to museums or on a holiday abroad, we prefer to take pictures and videos of these activities instead of experiencing them as such. To offer another perspective to this tendency to 'destroy experience,' Agamben also argues that contrary to the habitual conception that modern science praises experience as the basis of knowledge, it extracts it from the individual and places it in the sphere of the

experiment, that is, where it can be controlled and expected to produce certainty in the form of axioms (Agamben 2007a: 19–20). In other words, that man's experience of life and being in the world as such, his *infancy*, is distorted, alienated, or placed beyond his own reach can certainly be criticized from various directions.

Yet, when this notion of immediacy of experience is placed in the context of his political theory, it is not immediately clear what to make out of it, at least not if this experience alone is the sole content of political action. And this is what Agamben suggests: the experience of historicity itself and gesturality as such simply points to the taking place of the activity itself. Thus, our attempt at finding a different, oppositional use of *praxis* and *poiēsis* leads, in a somewhat circular fashion, to the affirmation of the activity as such. If this self-reference is in every case the alternative to the canonical activity, then it appears unnecessary to make any distinction between *praxis* and *poiēsis*, let alone speak of a variety of different and possible uses. Beyond any such distinctions, Agamben's preferred type of action would simply be the separate dimension where any activity whatsoever refers to and exposes itself.

On the other hand, however, it is clear that Agamben underscores that the activity he has in mind should not be understood as a completely distinct activity that either replaces a canonical one or restores it to a more original or 'natural' state. The sacred, whether we understand it as a concrete object or as a convention of human action, is not destroyed when profaned, it is simply engaged with and put to use in an alternative way. Similarly, an artistic mannerism is best grasped as the creation of tensions within an established style of doing art. Understood in this sense, the decisive characteristic of gesture is not that it constitutes a sphere of its own, but that it exerts a force of alteration and modification on and within a canonical activity. In other words, it destabilizes, interrupts, and injects a displacement within another action, 'almost entering in conflict with it,' as Agamben puts it when writing about mannerism.

Thus, if we instead emphasize the dynamic that Agamben develops under the concept of manner, as well as profanation, we are in a better position to understand what this restoration to a state of pure potentiality *enables*, namely a different and alternative use. Importantly, this different use can be understood in more plausible and tangible ways than mere self-reference, and it is clear that we are not dealing with a completely autonomous gesture of artistic creation in the sense that Agamben appears to imply in *Karman*. On the contrary, manner can be understood only as a force *within* style and remains completely unintelligible in separation from it. Similarly, it would make scarcely any sense to speak of something like 'pure profanation'; any thinkable profaning activity must necessarily confront and engage with an apparatus of some kind, liberating it while also staying in some relation to it. What is crucial here is that these activities do not merely expose themselves as such, but show how a convention (a 'style' or something that is 'sacred') is altered and used in a substantially different way.

What our analyses thus far suggest is that the emphasis on displacement and modification is more promising for the purposes of analyzing the relation of Agamben's additional type of action to the more established paradigms of *praxis* and *poiēsis*. This means that Agamben's alternative type is not a 'third' and separate type, but is rather characterized by how it works on and within *praxis* and *poiēsis*. On this reading, we are not leaving the established types behind in search for a wholly different image of politics. Rather, we are in a position to understand *praxis* and *poiēsis* as including aspects that are in the conventional sense not easily subsumed under them. *Praxis* is not only about fragile beginnings, but also about orientation and order; *poiēsis* is not only about bringing things to an end, but about coming to terms with the ultimate instability of such undertakings. This is the internal displacement and the possibility to do otherwise that Agamben's logic helps us discern.

As an activity that is distinguished from action and production by effectuating a different use or deactivation of them, we are evidently speaking of a particular kind of act that is performed on them. The term 'gesture' is itself indicative of an activity that rests on human performance. Indeed, in the section pertaining to gesture in Chapter 2, we mainly discussed Agamben's examples that are drawn from the field of performative arts. These form Agamben's main repertoire for characterizing gestural action: like the gestures and movements undertaken by dancers and commedia dell'arte characters, Agamben's preferred type of political action also consists in performing actions that consist in nothing but experiencing them as detached from any conventional function or purpose. However, gestures are also intimately tied to Agamben's understanding of discursive action, and the purpose of the following chapter is to further interrogate how gesture, as a linguistic operation, relates to other theories of performance and performativity.

While the preceding chapters have focused on analyzing the nature of Agamben's 'third type' by addressing the theories he himself engages with, the main objective of the following chapter is to further interpret its meaning in the contemporary theoretical context. To this end, we compare Agamben's gesture to the approaches of J.L. Austin, Judith Butler, and Jacques Derrida, who have also addressed performance and performativity. We also return to some of the questions taken up in Chapter 2, where we briefly introduced Agamben's philosophy of language. This discussion leads, in turn, to the conclusions in which we wish to discuss the consequences of Agamben's approach for understanding political activity in a more general sense.

5 GESTURES AND PERFORMATIVES

As briefly mentioned in Chapter 2, Agamben's concept of gesture is intimately tied to the idea of communicability as such and the taking place of language. As he notes toward the end of the short essay 'Notes on Gesture,' which otherwise does not focus on language, gesture shows 'the being-in-language of human beings as pure mediality' (Agamben 2000: 59). As Catherine Mills puts it, gesture is 'a name for the sheer communicability of language' (Mills 2008: 48). However, even though the clear linguistic implications of Agamben's gesture have generally been acknowledged, a substantial part of the scholarship on it unfolds in the context of theater, cinema, or other artistic practices (see, e.g., Cermatori 2020; Harbord 2019; Ruprecht 2017; Väliäho 2015). There are good textual grounds for this, as Agamben's writings that are thematized around the concept of gesture draw their main body of examples from performative arts, cinema, as well as involuntary tics and spasms (Agamben 2000; 2018a; 2018b). Accordingly, the question of language and communicability is usually mentioned only in a brief and elliptical manner in these works, such as in the essay mentioned above. However, gesture also designates a verbal performance of a particular kind, and the purpose of this chapter is to further interpret the nature of Agamben's 'beyond' of *praxis* and *poēsis* insofar as it is understood as an act performed in and through language.

Apart from the sources cited above, Agamben offers a clear reference to gesture as a discursive activity in the 1991 essay 'Kommerell, or On Gesture' (Agamben 1999b). He alludes here to German art critic Max Kommerell's characterization of speech as 'originary gesture' and poetry as more mimic than conceptual in nature – what Agamben suggests here is that poetry is gestural in nature. We return to the question of poetry later in this chapter, but let us take note of the way in which Agamben connects gesture to the idea of pure communicability of language. He writes that gesture is 'the other side of language, the muteness inherent in humankind's very capacity for language, the *speechless* dwelling in language' (ibid.: 78, italics in original). As already discussed in the section regarding language in Chapter 2, this speechlessness designates the

experience of the taking place of speech beyond this or that content. Drawing from an essay by Kommerell, Agamben discusses gesture in terms of three 'levels' here:

[This] state of speechlessness in language appears on three levels: the enigma (*Rätsel*), in which the more the speaker tries to express himself in words, the more he makes himself incomprehensible [...]; the secret (*Geheimnis*), which remains unsaid in the enigma and is nothing other than the Being of human beings insofar as they live in the truth of language; and the mystery (*Mysterium*), which is the mimed performance of the secret. (Agamben 1999b: 78)

In other words, the event of language always appears as an excess over that which is expressed in conceptual language. Hence the difficulty of expressing it in words – the 'secret' is simply the fact that language takes place, and we cannot bring this to expression. And gesture is the 'mimed performance of the secret,' a dimension that Agamben further describes by evoking examples of actors who improvise gestural content in the absence of a script or storyline. As he writes, the actor's improvised performance '[makes] up for an impossibility of speaking,' further adding that 'there is a gesture that felicitously establishes itself in this emptiness of language and, without filling it, makes it into humankind's most proper dwelling. Confusion turns to dance, and "gag" to mystery' (ibid.: 78–79). In a similar manner, Agamben describes the magi as creatures who 'speak in gestures alone' in *Profanations* (Agamben 2007b: 22). One could thus simply take this to mean that since the event of language and communicability itself cannot be said or expressed, it evidently needs to be *performed* in one way or another. What actors, dancers, and magi would thus designate is simply an act of performing the unsayable of language through gestures.

However, even though Agamben writes about actual corporeal gestures (of dancers, actors, magicians, and so on), there is a specifically linguistic-discursive dimension in the operation that happens when humans experience the taking place of language. As expressed in the above-cited passage, gesture is the place where humans 'live in the truth of language,' a theme that Agamben further develops both in *The Time that Remains* (Agamben 2005a) and *The Sacrament of Language* (Agamben 2011a). In both these works, he also explicitly engages with J.L. Austin's theory of performative speech acts, and focuses on how humans become subjects by putting themselves at stake in language and binding themselves and their actions to their words. What Agamben envisions in both these works is a particular kind of linguistic act in which humans speak 'with lips close to their hearts' and live 'in nearness of the word,' as Agamben eloquently puts it in *The Time that Remains*.

In an attempt to scrutinize gesturality as a specifically discursive activity, we start from the above-mentioned works in which Agamben reinterprets one of the best-known theories of linguistic performance and performativity, namely J.L. Austin's theory of speech acts. Restricting ourselves first to Agamben's

explicit engagement with Austin in these works, the expectation is to gain a clearer picture of how Agamben understands gesture insofar as it designates a linguistic performance of a particular kind. After the comparison between Austin and Agamben, we explore how Agamben's approach relates to Jacques Derrida's interpretation of Austin in the 'Signature Event Context' essay (Derrida 1982). Both thinkers wish to detach the performative from Austin's strict conditions of felicity, juridical or otherwise, but Agamben's performative is also different from Derrida's insofar as he has in mind a linguistic performance that is, as we call it, pure in nature. While Derrida understands the force of an utterance to consist in its capacity to break with any prior context, what is crucial for Agamben is that the performative is an experience of an immediate correspondence between word and reality – this is an 'originary experience' that is as old as human language itself.

This conception is also clearly different from Judith Butler, who adopts Derrida's model of citationality in her interpretation of performative discursivity in *Excitable Speech* (Butler 1997). What is specifically pronounced in Butler's approach is that citationality marks the potentially *political* force of utterances: parodic and unconventional citations have the power to derail speech from its original intentions and commitments, this way subverting hegemonic power structures. This stands in grand contrast to Agamben's serious commitment to the correspondence between word and deed. For Agamben, the politics implied in language is the experience of the word itself and a parodic citation would amount to a crime against this experience, which he sees as absolutely fundamental for humans.

As these comparisons show, Agamben's approach to linguistic performativity is decidedly different from all three authors. However, as is argued toward the end of this chapter, we ultimately encounter the same ambiguity that we identified in the previous chapters. Briefly revisiting the decades-long debate between Agamben and Derrida in the last section, we contend that the status of Agamben's pure and self-referential experience of the word is less clear than the initial comparisons suggest. On the one hand, some of Agamben's own characterizations imply that his linguistic gesture could be subsumed under Derrida's model of iterability. On the other hand, when he discusses language through his concept of mannerism, he is operating with an approach that is in crucial ways similar to deconstruction. To highlight the latter, we briefly discuss Agamben's notion of mannerism in the context of language, such as presented in the 1995 book *The End of the Poem*, as well as *The Use of Bodies* from 2015. Crucial here is that Agamben does not focus merely on the experience of language as such, but discusses how particular languages or poetic styles are transformed and played with. As delineated in Chapter 2, mannerism is always generated *on* and *within* something and cannot really be affirmed 'as such.'

Upon closer scrutiny, then, language may in Agamben's view perform two distinct kinds of actions: a performance in which nothing is experienced except utterances themselves, and a performance in which language undergoes a more substantial transformation. In other words, the engagement with Agamben's

gesture as a linguistic performance ends up identifying the same ambiguity that we noted already in Chapter 2 and further discussed in the subsequent chapters: there is both a performative consisting of nothing else than the activity itself, and one that is performed *on* another act. We further argue that if the latter is taken into consideration, Agamben stands in closer proximity to Derrida and Butler. If we opt for this 'second approach,' as discussed under the notion of mannerism, two things follow: Agamben's approach loses some of its radical novelty, but we are then in a better position to understand its relevance for understanding politics.

5.1 From institutional performatives to faith in the word: J.L. Austin and Agamben

As a background to the comparison between Agamben and J.L. Austin, let us briefly summarize the latter's discussion of speech acts in his influential book *How to Do Things with Words* (Austin 1976), a work compiled of a series of lectures given at Harvard in the 1950s. Austin's original contribution to the philosophy of language was to point out that language is used not merely to *describe* but also to *perform* certain actions. That is, language does not only describe or report on a world external to itself, but is capable of performing actions in the very act of saying them. This discovery was, as Austin himself remarked, not a specifically 'contentious' one since philosophers, grammarians, and philologists had naturally always been aware that there are other types of utterances than those that state something about the world. For some reason however, these other types of utterances had tended to remain beyond systematic study and attention. It is this tendency to examine the language of description and overlook other modes of language use that Austin called the 'prejudice' of philosophy, perhaps specifically the tradition he himself emerged from.

The 'preliminary isolation' of the performative that Austin puts forward in the very first lecture, which would be the standard way to account for performatives in a very general sense, is the differentiation between the *constative* and the *performative* utterance. The constative utterance is typically a statement that reports on external occurrences; for example, 'It rains.' The conventional criteria for assessing such statements would be to judge them as either true or false, depending on whether they fail or succeed to describe a given state of affairs. In contrast, the performative utterance cannot be understood as stating or asserting something about external circumstances. Instead, in the very saying of the performative utterance, something is done or effectuated, for example, when we say, 'I promise.' That is, when we say we promise something, this utterance itself is the deed, not a report or description of us saying so. Rather than assessing such utterances with the help of the truth/falsity distinction, Austin argues that they would more plausibly be deemed as either *happy* or *unhappy* (*felicitous* or *infelicitous*).

During the course of the lectures, Austin wanders through a set of tests and explorations that are aimed at clarifying both how the performative may be identified and what type of conditions its success or 'felicity' might depend on. For example, the performative is typically connected to certain verbs that are used to indicate intentions, expectation, or declarations, such as to promise, urge, warn, declare, order, command, and so on. However, one can certainly report on such activities in a 'normal' statement ('He said "I order you to go"'). Austin thus specifies that the typical tense of the performative is often the first-person singular indicative present; one can report on someone else's promise, but in one's own promise, nothing beyond the promise itself is effectuated. In addition, Austin notes that beyond such explicit performative utterances, language often works through other 'performative devices' that are more implicit, such as adverbial phrases ('I will probably go there tomorrow') or connecting particles ('hereby,' 'moreover'). Or we might insult someone through speech even when we do not necessarily make it explicit by saying 'I insult you.' Even winks, shrugs, and other bodily gestures can sometimes perform certain actions in the same sense as explicit performatives, such as when we nod or bow.

Although performative utterances cannot be judged as true or false, they are, as Austin formulates it, liable to certain ills – they may go wrong in certain ways that are specific to performatives. For example, if the person who pronounces a couple husband and wife is not in reality authorized to do so, the performative was of course uttered but *void*. Alternatively, if I promise something but do not have the slightest intention of keeping my word, the promise was uttered but *insincerely*. Austin calls the former type of illness 'misfires' (the utterance is carried through incorrectly), and the latter 'abuses' (the utterance does not correspond to a sincere intention or emotional state). It is these various factors that he grasps through the idea of the 'total speech situation' and argues that the performative utterance usually must be uttered in the 'appropriate circumstances.' The one who pronounces the judgement in court must actually be a judge, the one who marries must not be already married, the ship that is named cannot already be named, and the apology that is issued must involve the appropriate mental attitude. This dimension is also captured by Austin's notion of conventionality – the type of utterances of which we can most surely say that they perform rather than describe something take place in the context of established conventions or 'highly developed affairs,' as Austin also puts it (Austin 1976: 32). That is, the typical examples of successful performatives would occur in juridical or religious contexts where the words spoken immediately take effect.

Despite this crucial importance of 'appropriate circumstances' as conditions of felicity, which often presuppose certain institutional settings, Austin also charts the more general senses in which saying something might be a kind of doing. Toward the end of the lectures, after having scrutinized the performative utterance, Austin returns to the statement, or the constative utterance, in order to shed light on the uncertainties involved in our usual assumptions about it. For instance, statements seem to be prone to similar kinds of dangers as

performatives, such as pertaining to insincerity. To state that 'The cat is on the mat' (an example employed by Austin) also implies a certain *belief* or *attitude* that the cat is in fact on the mat. Thus, if we would say 'The cat is on the mat, but I do not believe it,' it would make little sense to describe such an utterance as false – it would, instead, be perhaps *contradictory* or even *outrageous*. In this sense, statements, much like performatives, would appear to depend on the context in which they are uttered. I cannot state how many people are in the next room if it is not presupposed that I am actually in the situation where I can gain such knowledge.

As Austin thus summarizes: 'Once we realize that what we have to study is *not* the sentence but the issuing of an utterance in a speech situation, there can hardly be any longer a possibility of not seeing that stating is performing an act' (Austin 1976: 139). And, in a more general sense, Austin suggests that descriptions and all other kinds of sayings are perhaps always actions of a certain kind: 'Certainly the ways in which we talk about 'action' are liable here, as elsewhere, to be confusing. For example, we may contrast men of words with men of action, we may say they *did* nothing, only talked or *said* things: yet again, we may contrast *only* thinking something with *actually* saying it (out loud), in which context saying it *is* doing something' (ibid.: 92). As Austin implies in this context and elsewhere in the lectures, when we *say* things, we most often also *do* things.

The insightful view that Austin provided to the study and our understanding of language was, beyond isolating and defining the performative in an exhaustive manner, to account for the different *forces* that are at play when we use language: 'I want to distinguish *force* and meaning in the sense in which meaning is equivalent to sense and reference, just as it has become essential to distinguish sense and reference' (ibid.: 100). Among the best-known and most applied 'forces' that Austin presents in his Harvard lectures can be found in what he named an *illocutionary* speech act. An illocutionary speech act has precisely the *force* to effectuate a deed in and through the utterance itself. For example, to utter 'I hereby confirm' indicates that the act takes effect immediately, it does so *in* saying what it says it does.

When taking up Austin in *The Time that Remains* and *The Sacrament of Language*, Agamben suggests firstly that the performative should be understood as an operation that *deactivates* and *suspends* the constative dictum (Agamben 2005a: 131; Agamben 2011a: 55). For example, the dictum 'I will do my homework today' ceases to function as a constation when it is coupled with a performative verb, such as 'I swear' or 'I promise.' And conversely, the performative element has no force in itself unless it acts upon another dictum: '*I swear* does not have any force if it is not followed – or preceded – by a dictum that fills it in' (Agamben 2011a: 55).

In this sense, Agamben first draws attention away from the broader senses of the performative that Austin discussed by alluding to various kinds of implicit performatives, instead taking the explicit performative as a starting point for his discussion. This is why, in *The Time that Remains*, he notes that Émile Benveniste

'took care to distinguish what he took to be the performative, in the true sense of the term, from other linguistic categories with which [Austin] had muddied it with (such as the imperative "Open the door!" or the sign "Dog" on a fence' (Agamben 2005a: 132). Benveniste also showed, according to Agamben, that there is a close connection between the performative and the juridical sphere – only within the sphere of the law do utterances tend to acquire a performative force (ibid.).

However, even though alluding to Benveniste's remark about performatives being tied to the sphere of the law (which Austin was in any case aware of), what Agamben has in mind is not the performative in the modern juridical sense. Instead, he wishes to detach the performative from any such rigorous conditions of felicity or conventional procedures that we would find in Austin. As we delineate in more detail below, Agamben sees performative speech acts as relics of a stage upon which humans came to experience the fact and pure force of language. He traces this experience to a pre-modern setting in which law, religion, and politics are not yet separated into their own branches; the paradigm of the oath is in this regard central to his exploration.

In *The Time that Remains*, Agamben focuses on Paul's understanding of a messianic community to highlight this very same experience. As in the case of the oath, what is important for him in the messianic experience is a certain serious commitment to the word. He writes of a performative connected to faith (*performativum fidei*) and 'speaking from the heart.' Contrasting this to the *performativum sacramenti*, which designates a sphere of formal procedures and rituals, he clearly distances himself from the Austinian framework. He also carefully detaches the *performativum fidei* from a 'vain use' of words, and laments the contemporary condition of words having lost their efficacy.

As Agamben shows by analyzing both the Greek and Roman experiences of the oath in *The Sacrament of Language*, an important aspect of the oath is that it entails an experience of *faith* in the word (*fides*, Latin, *pistis*, Greek). What is at stake in the oath is the mode in which humans tie their words to their actions; in the oath, reality and words correspond to each other. It is in this serious tone that Agamben also discusses the function of the curse that usually accompanied the oath: 'What the curse sanctions is the loosening of the correspondence between words and things that is in question in the oath' (Agamben 2011a: 42). To further indicate the relevance of the oath to our political experience, he argues that faith was in the classical age not merely a phenomenon between individuals, but worked as a central force in conquests of foreign peoples. Putting one's faith in the enemy was a way, for the conquered, of securing a more benevolent form of control: 'The *fides* is, then, a verbal act, as a rule accompanied by an oath, with which one abandons oneself completely to the "trust" of someone else and obtains, in exchange, that one's protection' (ibid.: 27).

Even though Agamben briefly speaks of the oath as belonging to a 'pre-judicial' sphere in *The Time that Remains* (Agamben 2005a: 114), this notion of 'prelaw' should be understood more specifically as a type of conduct that knows no strict boundaries between law and religion. It is in this sense that he contests

in the later book, *The Sacrament of Language*, the view that the oath belongs to a pre-judicial sphere of 'religious' practice in ancient societies. Instead, he argues that the divinity called upon in the oath points to the event of naming itself beyond any strictly religious function in the sense we usually understand it in modern contexts. As he exemplifies by alluding to the work the philologist Herman Usener, the names of gods in agricultural societies usually named seasonal activities themselves, such as plowing, harvesting, or harrowing, instead of representing them. What is evident for Agamben is that this type of divinity does not *witness* a particular event but 'is the very event of language in which words and things are indissolubly linked' (Agamben 2011a: 46). In the case of monotheistic religions, he further argues, the power of naming is essentially understood as the immediate effectuation of the utterance – God reveals himself in the word, God is whatever is uttered in the word. Thus, Agamben can argue that the name of God, sworn on in the oath, implies the existence of language itself: 'Every oath swears on the name par excellence, that is on the name of God, because the oath is the experience of language that treats all of language as a proper name' (ibid., 53).

It is in the above sense that Agamben also speaks of a 'reciprocal implication between God and the oath,' (ibid.: 21) between the divine and language: in both cases, the faith in the word and the word-deed correspondence is absolutely central. Approaching this through Paul's understanding of faith in *The Time that Remains*, Agamben argues that faith is in the Pauline sense first and foremost faith in the *word*, that is, faith in language itself. To live in the Messiah is to live 'in the nearness of the word.' When Paul continuously refers to 'Jesus Messiah,' he does not constate that 'Jesus is Messiah' but expresses the very experience of living in or within the messianic (Agamben 2005a: 127–131). From the perspective of language, this experience does not concern the relation between words and things, but is above all an experience of language itself; having one's mouth in the nearness of the heart is precisely the event of constituting a presence in language as such. Agamben thus specifies, 'in Paul, the correspondence is not between different words, or between words and deeds; rather this correspondence is internal to the word itself, between mouth and heart' (ibid.: 130).

At the end of this same chapter, he also refers to Paul's conception of the law (*nomos*) and faith (*pistis*) as two closely intertwined elements in an experience where law and religion are not yet separated into their own institutions. In language, *nomos* shows itself as an attempt to codify language in terms of fixed semantic contents, and the element of *pistis*, in turn, points to an experience that stays open and resists determinate significations (ibid.: 134–135). According to Agamben, the centerpiece of Paul's understanding of the faith in the word is that *nomos* and *pistis* are put in tension with each other in the messianic experience. Like the zone between potentiality and actuality, or constituent and constituted power, the messianic is the experience of the word itself that establishes itself between the two tensions in language. And this is ultimately not confined to an

obscure sphere of prelaw, but remains something constantly available for the speaking being:

[The messianic] points, beyond prelaw, toward and experience of the word, which – without tying itself denotatively to things, or taking itself as a thing, without being infinitely suspended in its openness or fastening itself up in dogma – manifests itself as a pure and common potentiality of saying, open to a free and gratuitous use of time and the world. (Agamben 2005a: 135–136)

It is the central experience implied in the oath and the messianic word – committing oneself to the ‘truth’ of language itself – that Agamben claims has been lost or in a decline during the course of time. Instead, we have become accustomed to operating with language in the mode of assertion, in which assessing the truth of an utterance concerns how well words and things coincide according to logical and objective criteria, precisely as Austin noted when characterizing the constative utterance. For Agamben, too, something else is at stake in the performative, which he also discusses by borrowing Foucault’s term ‘veridiction.’ The ‘truth’ of the performative utterance coincides with its very performance; it is not a question of deciding afterwards whether a subject spoke truth about a certain state of affairs since the subject itself is what is linked to the utterance only at the moment of its performance. As we saw above when summarizing Austin’s criteria for assessing performatives, when a promise is broken, we do not usually conclude that the utterer of the promise misreported or lied. Instead, we would more accurately say that the promise was done insincerely or ‘*in bad faith*’ (Austin 1976: 11, emphasis original). This is in part what Agamben covers through his discussion of *malediction* and *benediction*: an oath is in itself neither true nor false, but it can be ‘badly said,’ a malediction and thus sanctioned by a curse when broken or uttered in vain. Conversely, the oath can be a benediction – a blessing – when the tie between word and deed holds.

In a move characteristic for Agamben, a specific theory and its apparent subject matter is extended to cover an ‘originary experience’ that presumably took place thousands of years ago, in this case, before performative utterances were incorporated into the technical and ritualized procedures that we habitually associate them with today. It is against this background that Agamben contends that while speech act theory was presented as a radically new perspective on language, ‘as if philosophers and linguists were coming up against a magical stage of language’ (Agamben 2011a: 54), what is and in fact always has been at stake in ‘performatives’ is the experience of the very event of man’s entering into language, the event of putting oneself at stake in language.

The loss of this experience for our present condition has rather sinister implications in Agamben’s diagnosis. Staying true to one’s words gradually became a juridical and religious concern in a technical sense, ‘an obsessive and scrupulous concern with appropriate formulas and ceremonies, that is, *religio* and *ius*’ (ibid.: 70). As the human responsibility and fidelity to the word was thus

delegated to formal institutions, we now find ourselves in a condition where words can only be uttered in vain and have lost all their efficacy. Connecting this to his concept of bare life, he sums up in a bleak tone that what is left in modernity is a humanity reduced to biological life and a set of empty rituals and vain speech that can no longer grant us access to a properly political or ethical experience:

On the one hand, there is a living being, more and more reduced to a biological reality and to bare life. On the other hand, there is the speaking being, artificially divided from the former, through a multiplicity of technico-mediatic apparatuses, in an experience of the word that grows ever more vain, for which it is impossible to be responsible and in which anything like a political experience becomes more and more precarious. (Agamben 2011a: 70)

This happens precisely if the oath becomes *only* a technical concern with the 'right use' of language, monitored by religious or juridical institutions. As Agamben writes in *The Time that Remains*, this points to a condition where the oath itself degenerates into a ritualized procedure, a *performativum sacramenti* that takes over the *performativum fidei*: 'If, as it inevitably happens today, the [*pistis*] falls to the wayside leaving only *nomos* in absolute force, and if the *performativum fidei* is completely covered by the *performativum sacramenti*, then the law itself stiffens and atrophies and relations between men lose all sense of grace and vitality' (Agamben 2005a: 135). Precisely as we noted in Chapter 2, if the experience at stake in the oath becomes sacralized, that is, confined to a separate sphere, human life endures a serious loss – one that is so serious that it amounts to nothing less than the loss of 'all grace and vitality.'

The above discussion on the *performativum fidei*, which finds its paradigms both in the oath and the messianic experience, shows that the performative dimension of language is not merely a linguistic question for Agamben, but the very place and basis for his articulation of a 'proper' political experience. What is performed here is a suspension of the 'law' of sense and reference that gives rise to another experience of language. Austin's theory is ultimately not of central importance to this argument; Agamben merely uses his notion of the performative as an occasion to speak of the self-referentiality of language, the *experimentum linguae* that he already put forward in his earlier works. What the explorations of the oath and the messianic faith in the word suggest is that this experience can take on the quality of a certain profoundness. To speak from the heart, and to put oneself at stake in language, are indeed a serious and devout business for Agamben. At any rate, what is central here is simply the experience of the word itself, and it is in this sense that Agamben's performative can be characterized as pure – it has no other content than the experience of the word as such.

In the following section, we juxtapose this pure performative to Jacques Derrida's understanding of speech acts, focusing on the essay 'Signature Event Context' (Derrida 1982). In connection to this, we also briefly compare

Agamben's understanding of performativity to that of Judith Butler, who follows Derrida's notion of iterability or citationality in *Excitable Speech* (Butler 1997). As becomes clear, Agamben's performative is decidedly different from both Derrida and Butler. These engagements also unavoidably lead to a further discussion of the relation between Agamben and Derrida regarding their understandings of language and their methodological approaches more generally.

5.2 Iterability vs. pure performatives: Derrida, Butler, and Agamben

Like Agamben, Jacques Derrida took a clear distance to Austin's rigorous conditions of felicity in his 1972 essay 'Signature Event Context,' originally given as a lecture and later included in *Margins of Philosophy* (Derrida 1982). We return to the exchange between Derrida and Agamben in the last section, but for the present purposes, we briefly focus on the way in which Derrida uses Austin's notion of the performative to argue for what he sees as the general structure of all communication. In the first part of the essay, Derrida first introduces his understanding of all signs – written, spoken, or otherwise propagated – as conditioned by the possibility of breaking from their original context or intention. That is, not only the written sign, but all human communication has the capacity to function in the absence of a particular addressee, which grants all signs the force to break with their context: 'Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, can be *cited*, put between quotation marks; thereby it can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion' (ibid.: 320, italics in original).

He conceptualizes this as *citationality* or *iterability* (*iter* as derived from *itara*, Sanskrit for *other*). As the etymology of Derrida's concept of iterability points to, all speech (as subsumed under the graphematic in general) must be repeatable, and this repetition is bound to introduce an impurity or alterity that makes it impossible to trace an 'original' or 'proper' context. As Derrida specifies, '[this] does not suppose that the mark is valid outside its context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center of absolute anchoring' (ibid.). This ability to migrate from one context to another is an approach that becomes absolutely central to Judith Butler's understanding of performativity and specifically its political potential, as we see in the following section.

Thus, what Austin called ills or infelicities that may affect the performative are not, in Derrida's understanding, unfortunate anomalies or accidents in human communication. Instead, these negativities are part of the very structure of every mark: there is always the possibility of 'failure' in the case of the performative, as with any other utterance. That Austin tends to delegate these to the sphere of abuses and the abnormal is one of Derrida's main points of critique in the essay in question. He alludes, for instance, to the second lecture in *How to Do Things with Words* where Austin notes that some performatives are void or

hollow 'if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy' (Austin 1976: 22; Austin cited in Derrida 1982: 324). As Derrida argues, these are ultimately what grant the possibility of a successful performative: only in relation to a 'non-serious' use of an utterance, such as by an actor, can we establish something like a real efficacy and 'serious use' of the performative in particular contexts. There is always, in Derrida's words, a 'structural parasitism' in language that does not point to a failure or malfunction in any negative sense but to a 'positive condition of possibility' (Derrida 1982: 325).

Some utterances may of course have more of an illocutionary force than others; there is a 'relative purity' and a 'relative specificity' of what Austin named the performative, as Derrida contends. However, 'these effects do not exclude what is generally opposed to them term by term, but on the contrary presuppose it in dissymmetrical fashion, as the general space of their possibility' (ibid. 327). The possibility of a non-serious or improper performative is what opens the space of different possibilities, including that of the relatively serious one. In this sense, Austin's successful performative would be '[a] determined modification of a general citationality' for Derrida (ibid.: 325).

Since any 'serious' communication is thus ultimately dependent upon a 'non-serious' use of language, Derrida's model of iterability is evidently different from Agamben. As we saw above, Agamben is concerned with the phenomenon of 'vain speech' particularly in *The Sacrament of Language*, the careless and void uttering of words that (no longer) ties humans to the truth of language. In this sense, even though both authors use Austin's performative as an occasion to advance a more general approach to language and communication, these encounters with Austin yield fundamentally different conceptions of what the performative efficacy of language amounts to. Whatever force language can assume, in Derrida's view, will depend on its capacity to break from any prior context, and from this perspective, Agamben's radically pure performative would be an impossibility. For Agamben, in turn, the non-serious citation would designate a problematic form of vain speech and a loss of the originary human experience of putting oneself at stake in language. However, as we discuss in more detail in the last section, Agamben's philosophical project also bears important resemblances to Derrida's approach.

The distance between Agamben's faithful performative and iterability is perhaps even clearer if we consider Judith Butler's emphasis on iterability as *parody*. Following Derrida, Butler understands language to be citational, and what is specifically important for her is that this points to the possibility of subverting and contesting originally injurious language (Butler 1997). Because language has the capacity to break from its original context, it remains open to future resignifications and alternative uses that the 'original' utterer can never control in any absolute sense. Racist or homophobic slurs can be parodied in a manner that neutralizes the originally negative connotation, such as has happened with the term 'queer,' to use one of Butler's examples. This stands in sharp contrast to Austin, who would have scarcely been interested in parody and subversion; but Butler also distances herself from Derrida, suggesting that

Derrida's 'structural' approach to linguistic performativity does not explain why certain speech acts break more easily from their contexts and others do not:

If the break from context that a performative can or, in Derridean terms, *must* perform is something that every "mark" performs by virtue of its graphematic structure, then all marks and utterances are equally afflicted by such failure, and it makes no sense to ask how it is that certain utterances break from prior contexts with more ease than others or why certain utterances come to carry the force to wound that they do, whereas others fail to exercise such force at all. (Butler 1997: 150, italics in original)

As a deviation from Derrida's 'structural iterability,' Butler thus calls for an account of 'social iterability' (ibid.). Sorting out the exact criteria for which type of utterances succeed in being truly wounding and which utterances can become truly subversive is ultimately not answered by Butler, but this possibility of parody and subversion nevertheless constitutes 'the political promise' for her (ibid.: 145). The non-serious use of the word that Agamben laments is thus placed at the very center of Butler's approach as the positive condition of politics: non-serious uses can turn even hateful speech into a joke that emancipates the addressee. Conversely, the direct correspondence of word and deed is problematic for her. What she criticizes in *Excitable Speech* are precisely portrayals that assume language to exert direct force, such as Mari Matsuda's argument that hate speech does not merely reflect social domination of one group over another but actively produces and enacts it. From the perspective of Butler's account, Agamben's lamentation over the loss of an experience of the power to tie discourse to action would fall under what she calls a 'nostalgia' for sovereign power. Butler notes that the dissolution of a clear single source of power within modernity has perhaps brought with it a kind of mourning and nostalgia for it. In the absence of clear power structures that one might understand more easily, we look at times of sovereignty with a nostalgic hope of their return:

[The] historical loss of the sovereign organization of power appears to occasion the fantasy of its return – a return, I want to argue, that takes place in language, in the figure of the performative. The emphasis on the performative phantasmatically resurrects the performative in language, establishing language as a displaced site of politics and specifying that displacement as driven by a wish to return to a simpler and more reassuring map of power, one in which the assumption of sovereignty remains secure. (Butler 1997: 78)

On the basis of what we have outlined so far, we have two very different understandings of what grants the force of an utterance. For Agamben, the power of language lies in the possibility of binding oneself to one's words, in 'entering language' and constituting a subject responsible for its words. For Derrida and Butler, the force of an utterance is always dependent on the break with any prior

context, the loosening of the word from the deed. But what does it ultimately mean to dwell in language as such and use it in a free and 'gratuitous' manner? Why is this so important for Agamben? In what follows, we attempt to demonstrate that Agamben by no means provides us with a straightforward answer to these questions. Moreover, these are the very same and puzzling questions that arise when this mode of immediacy reappears in Agamben's discussion of gesture as a model for political action, precisely as suggested in the previous chapters.

5.3 The Shadow of Derrida

As the above juxtapositions with Austin, Derrida, and Butler show, Agamben's conception of linguistic performance and performativity is decidedly different from all three authors. In place of Austin's 'highly developed affairs' that guarantee the success of the performative, we have Agamben's authentic experience of the word that has been lost precisely in these specialized institutional arrangements. Against Derrida's citational approach, Agamben would argue that a non-serious citation amounts to 'vain speech' and 'malediction,' which likewise betrays a fundamentally important human experience. This is all the more pronounced when comparing Agamben to Butler, for whom parodic citations display a properly political force in subverting hegemonic uses of language. In a certain sense, Butler's parodic subversion is the furthest possible approach from Agamben's speech from the heart.

However, to simply conclude that Agamben's understanding of discursive performativity is radically different requires a bit more scrutiny, especially because interpreting his approach has important consequences for how we understand his attempt to offer an alternative to *praxis* and *poiēsis*. To further shed light on this question, we revisit Derrida in this section. As is well known, Derrida's deconstructive approach is one of the major philosophical positions that Agamben has, since the earliest stages of his philosophical career, criticized and used as a contrast for his own affirmative theses (see, e.g., Attell 2014; Thurschwell 2005). Instead of providing an in-depth analysis of this discussion here – or going into great detail in presenting Derrida's thought – we draw here the broadest outlines of Agamben's critical stance toward Derrida in order to shed further light on where Agamben's gestural paradigm stands. Does it constitute its own model or is it, as we have argued based on the analyses in the preceding two chapters, a second-level operation that is practiced on and within *praxis* and *poiēsis*?

Agamben's critiques of Derrida follow largely the same pattern, regardless of the specific thematic under which they appear. To start with the question of language, which has been our focus in this chapter, and to put this critique very briefly at first: deconstruction identifies a problem but does not solve it or go beyond it. What is this problem? As we saw in Chapter 2, Agamben has since the beginning of his work argued for an understanding of language that succeeds in

grasping the existence of language as such without any recourse to negativity and presupposition. This is what he sees as a problematic legacy of the occidental tradition: in order for meaning to be produced, the pure potentiality for signification must be negated; in the passage from sign to signified, the very movement between them has always already sunken into a having-been.

The problem with deconstruction, according to Agamben, is that while it succeeds in accounting for this fracture or the presuppositional structure that guides Western reflection, it does not 'solve' it or 'surpass' it. As Attell (2014) also shows in his detailed mapping of the explicit and implicit critiques against Derrida and deconstruction in Agamben's work, this polemic against Derrida's understanding of language starts to unfold already in *Stanzas*, published originally in 1977. In his reading of Saussure in the essay 'The Barrier and the Fold,' Agamben characterizes deconstruction and grammatology as a 'salutary critique' of the Western metaphysical inheritance, but a project that ultimately does not 'transcend' it (Agamben 1993a: 156).

In a later essay on language, 'The Thing Itself' from 1984, he in turn discusses Plato's late dialogues and the notion of 'the thing itself' in order to, once again, criticize the presuppositional structure of our conception of language and the limitations of deconstruction to find a 'solution' to it. In an obviously provocative gesture, the essay in question is dedicated to Derrida without his name being mentioned a single time in the text. We need not rehearse this essay at length, as it simply rearticulates the experience of language that we have by now become familiar with. In short, 'the thing itself' points to this very sayability, the fact of language and deconstruction fails, in Agamben's verdict, to offer us a full understanding of this fact. As he will imply later in a similar manner, albeit under the thematic of law and sovereignty, Derrida's approach assigns us to an 'infinite deconstruction' of the law from which we cannot escape (Agamben 2005b: 64). Thus, for Agamben, Derrida's 'play of differences' and the endless chains of signifiers that cannot bring the signified into full presence, is insufficient insofar as it *brings to light* the negativity that is at work in our production of meaning but does not free us from its anchors.

In *Language and Death*, he goes even further and questions Derrida's claim that spoken language, the *phōnē*, enjoys a privileged status in Western metaphysical and ontological reflection, which is always concerned with presence. As Agamben argues here, the voice, the uttered word, is the 'origin' of metaphysics but always already removed; and as such, the *gramma* has, in fact, always been primordial. The *gramma* is, as Agamben puts here with reference to Aristotle, the 'fourth interpreter' that makes sense of voices, mental experiences, and things – it is only through removing and presupposing this very fact and experience of language that meanings are produced. In this even more critical sense, he argues that Derrida's elevation of writing, the *gramma*, fails to 'overcome' or 'surpass' the central problem of Western metaphysics because it misinterprets the relation between the order of the *gramma* and the *phōnē*:

To identify the horizon of metaphysics simply in that supremacy of the phone and then to believe in one's power to overcome this horizon through the gramma, is to conceive of metaphysics without its coexistent negativity. Metaphysics is always already grammatology and this is fundamentology in the sense that the gramma (or the Voice) functions as the negative ontological foundation. (Agamben 1991: 39, italics in original)

These critiques are largely in line with the difference between Derrida's and Agamben's approaches to language that we noted already in the previous section. In contrast to deconstruction, which captures the movements between sign and signified, Agamben calls for an exposure of the taking place of language as such. We might thus conclude that the destabilization of referential language that Agamben practices with his concept of gesture simply leads to a thoroughly different experience and understanding of language than Derrida's deconstructive method.

However, at this point, it is instructive to take a glance at how Agamben approaches linguistic operations through his concept of mannerism. As we delineated in Chapter 2, manners designate the idiosyncratic modifications and engagements with something familiar, the tension between the two being simultaneously present. In a chapter titled 'Expropriated Manner' in his 1996 book *The End of the Poem* (Agamben 1999c), Agamben discusses poetic language in terms of this operation. The examples Agamben takes up here, such as Caproni's idiosyncratic usage of the Italian language (ibid.: 99) and the modifications observable in the late works of painters and philosophers (ibid.: 97), point to a movement that is somewhat different from an immersion in 'the taking place of language' or 'pure communicability.' The way a great artist transforms a style while engaging with it is described by Agamben as a 'perpetual oscillation between a homeland and an exile' (ibid.: 98), a type of dwelling, to be sure, but one that seems to be so vested with a bipolar tension that Agamben refers to it as a 'dialectical' one in the preface to the book (ibid.: xii).

The theme of style and manner reappears in *The Use of Bodies* (Agamben 2016). The emphasis on pure communicability and the event of language is clearly less accentuated here. Instead, Agamben writes, in very similar terms as in the passages cited above, that poets must master the language they operate with in a manner that takes a distance from its familiar conventions: 'The appropriation of language that they pursue [...] is to the same extent an expropriation, in such a way that the poetic act appears as a bipolar gesture, which each time renders external what it must unfailingly appropriate' (ibid.: 86). What is relevant for our present purposes is that this bipolar tension between a style and a manner cannot in any way be conceived without the presumption that there is, in a general sense, a language in which this tension is observable and, in a more particular sense, a specific tradition of writing that the manner deviates from. The examples Agamben mentions are illuminative in this respect:

Appropriation and disappropriation are to be taken literally here, as a process that invests and transforms language in all its aspects. And not only in literature, as in the last dialogues of Plato, in the late Goethe, and the final Caproni, but also in the arts (the exemplary case is Titian) one witnesses this tension of the field of language, which elaborates and transforms it to the point of rendering it new and almost unrecognizable. (Agamben 2016: 87)

In other words, manner does not simply reveal language as pure communicability, but articulates first and foremost something practiced on a particular style of language, a performance that transforms and deviates from it to the point of making it unrecognizable yet retaining a connection to it. Thus, rather than simply indicating the event of language, the oscillation between style and manner grasps a more fundamental transformation or alteration of a certain convention of language.

In the light of this modification practiced on language, one may on good grounds ask whether there is ultimately such a great distance between Agamben and Derrida. For what is an oscillation between homeland and exile, the movement from one pole to another, and the dialectical fluctuation between style and manner, if not the kind of operation that deconstruction is equipped to grasp? The kernel of deconstruction is precisely that it does not work outside the concepts it undoes and rearranges. It always works *within* those systems, precisely as mannerism generates new uses only within a style, linguistic or otherwise. As Derrida puts it in *Of Grammatology*, '[the] movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures' (Derrida 1976: 24). Somewhat fittingly for our present purposes, Jean-Luc Nancy briefly points out in his 2016 book *Doing* that Derrida's iconic formulation of *différance* as 'neither a word nor a concept' points precisely to a *gesture*: not a type of action in its own right, but a gesture that creates 'tension in action' (Nancy 2020: 67).

From the perspective of mannerism, Agamben's approach also appears less conflicting with Butler's model of subversion. As we discussed above, parody consists in re-deploying utterances, appropriating them but also letting go of them. This is largely the same logic that Butler's well-known theory of gender performativity also follows. To subvert, experiment, and play with gender identities is always to act *on* them: 'lesbian femmes may recall the heterosexual scene, as it were, but also displace it at the same time' (Butler 1999: 157), as Butler has it. In this sense, although articulated in a completely different thematic context, Butler's approach entertains a similar movement that is central to Agamben's understanding of the interplay between style and manner. If 'the heteronormative matrix' is the apparatus that defines the style in this case, then the re-deployment and re-circulation of these styles in gay, lesbian, and queer cultures demonstrate the manner of using them in a way that takes a distance to them.

Thus, we encounter the same ambiguity that we identified in the second chapter and further explored in the preceding chapters. Either Agamben's gesture is read as a performance that exposes and indicates language, a performance that has no content or object insofar as it simply reveals language in its sheer presence. Or his approach is understood as an argument for redeploying and experimenting with particular uses of language. This ambiguity is perhaps also what explains the peculiar similarity between Agamben's 'pure potentiality' approach and what he has accused Derrida of, namely 'paralyzed messianism.' Before moving onto the concluding chapter, let us briefly discuss this accusation in order to finally sort out where Agamben's gesture stands insofar as we wish to practice it as a method of understanding political action.

In Agamben's texts on messianism, including *The Time that Remains* and the essay 'The Messiah and the Sovereign,' Derrida also appears as a key interlocutor and point of contrast. As discussed in the previous chapter, Agamben criticizes the Hegelian conception of *Aufhebung* of conflating the messianic with the eschatological, or the messianic with posthistory. For Agamben, the messianic is not the arrival at an end of chronological time, but a break within *khronos* in which we both experience a now-time and receive our representation of time. In both the above-mentioned texts, Agamben suggests that Derrida's model of 'infinite deferral' and 'infinite displacement' of signification is likewise a misunderstanding, or at least a problematic conception of the messianic. He accuses deconstruction of being a 'thwarted messianism' (Agamben 2005a: 103), a 'petrified' or 'paralyzed' messianism (Agamben 1999b: 171). This is the very same movement he also brings up in a passage we cited in the section of Austin and Agamben, where he places the Pauline experience of the word between a 'fastening up in dogma' and 'infinite openness,' although in this chapter of the book, he makes no explicit reference to Derrida. It is precisely this 'infinite openness' that Agamben sees as 'thwarted' or 'paralyzed' messianism. Wandering in an endless web of differences and polarities, deconstruction remains incapable of grasping the messianic 'now.'

And yet, one cannot avoid detecting a resemblance in Agamben's own attempt to 'solve' or 'surpass' this problem of 'paralysis.' It will perhaps be of aid to first bring the discussion back to the central perspective of this study, namely operation and activity. As delineated above, when discussing Agamben's understanding of the performative, he has in mind an operation that suspends denotation – it is this operation that establishes another experience of language. This, as we saw in Chapter 2, is also what Agamben suggests could be the sole task of a properly political action: politics is an activity that exposes nothing except that there is language. In a certain sense, then, the messianic suspension of denotation, the moment of standstill and absolute indistinction between sign and signified, is precisely a certain moment of *paralysis*: language as gesture consists in momentarily freezing or 'thwarting' referential discourse and exposing language as such. For a speaker to deactivate constative dictums, he or she must, in a certain sense, 'cite' a dictum outside its 'normal' denotational context, such that it can be exposed, marveled at and 'sounded out' as such, to

use one of Agamben's phrasings. If this is the case, then Agamben's gesture would be subsumed under Derrida's citationality. It would be a 'determined modification of citationality' in Derrida's words, perhaps relatively pure but nevertheless dependent on and practiced on its other.

In other words, the attributes with which Agamben describes his vision of language - pure exposition, suspension, and emptiness - are in fact equally applicable to what he in the above-mentioned texts accuses deconstruction of, that is, of 'paralyzed' or 'thwarted' messianism. On the other hand, in the essay 'Pardes,' in which Agamben discusses Derrida perhaps most favorably (Attell 2014), he characterizes deconstruction as an example of the kind of suspension he himself favors: 'Deconstruction suspends the terminological character of philosophical vocabulary; rendered inde-terminate, terms seem to float interminably in the ocean of sense' (Agamben 1999b: 209). This is merely to note the difficulties and ambiguities involved in Agamben's tension with Derrida: on the one hand, he accuses him of something that is not far away from his own affirmative view and, on the other hand, presents deconstruction as an example of his own vision of language.

From a certain perspective, of course, Agamben's interest in grasping the meaning of the apparently trivial words 'I speak' is not problematic or erroneous as such. Insofar as this task concerns the existence of language, its 'matter' and taking place, it cannot strictly speaking be contested. If the event of language is there each time we leave the world of signs and enter discourse, in language in its very formation, then one cannot really deny this event. As soon as we speak, language takes place. But since we are interested in the specific nature of politics in this study, we must ask what happens to this event when it is transferred to the plane of action, and elevated to an activity that is considered 'properly' political: how can affirming language 'as such' or action 'as such' be politically meaningful?

We must, of course, recall the specific argument that Agamben makes about gestures regarding politics in the present condition, which is that humans have *lost* their gestures. This loss shows itself as an impossibility of grasping experiences without the distance that the capitalist spectacle introduces to our lives. Similarly, the discussion of the decline of the oath points to an experience of words having lost their efficacy. In this sense, the taking place of language is somehow distorted and placed beyond the reach of our actions, even if we continue to act and speak. If we take this as a correct diagnosis, how can humans revitalize or gain new access to this experience? One option seems to be that we simply start taking pleasure in whatever hollow words we have left, enunciating them 'as such' much in the same way as animals produce sounds without any concern for their efficacy. This is what Sergei Prozorov (2022b) suggests when reading of Agamben's radical diagnosis of the decline of the oath in the context of post-truth politics. Since, according to Agamben, one cannot reclaim this lost experience by returning to an origin or by propping up the remaining apparatuses where it is still somehow confined (the court, the church), this might mean we simply start treating language as the mere production of sounds:

'Rather than return to the origin, we arrive at a place *before* the origin, before any scission and any articulation between the living and the speaking. The reversal of the anthropogenetic apparatus of language leaves us with a language that is strictly equivalent to that of the cicada or the donkey' (Prozorov 2022b: 86).

On the other hand, if we assume that words and discourses still have a sense and refer to something, then gaining access to a different experience would still be a matter of performing an operation that exposes this dimension. But since one cannot really bring the event of language itself into expression, one can – on the level of discursive action – only 'simulate' it by repeating or 'citing' any utterance whatsoever outside its conventional context. Thus, Agamben's characterization of gesture as a 'mimed performance of the secret,' as we noted in the beginning of this chapter, is ultimately perfectly illustrative of what gestures do as linguistic operations.

It is the contention of this study that such a performance, one that simply rehearses itself and takes note of itself, makes it extremely hard to imagine what one can do with such a politics. If there is any promise in political activity, it must be the possibility of altering one's life and the world in a multitude of ways that cannot simply be reduced to an experience of action in its sheer presence. This also affirms the view we presented in the previous two chapters: the method that Agamben typically practices with his concept of mannerism and profanation is more promising when delineating the nature of political activity. It enables us to think of politics as an action that takes another action as its object, an activity that liberates some particular apparatuses for some particular purposes.

As is clear, with this interpretation necessarily comes the acknowledgment that Agamben's method remains close and indebted to Derridean deconstruction. Like deconstruction, gestural destabilization needs to operate on and within one apparatus or another, and remains a futile enterprise if it lacks such an object. This means that Agamben's 'third' type of action is not an operation that forms a third type in addition to *praxis* and *poiēsis*. Rather, it is an operation that performs a displacement within action and production, one that contaminates them with their own other. This is gestural politics insofar as we wish to understand its nature as an activity: it is an activity that destabilizes and interrupts pure forms of doing and making.

From this perspective, the kind of distinctions that have become customary in Western political thought and vocabulary, such as that between law-making and deliberation or historical materialism and voluntary public action, should not be taken as rigorous oppositions. On the contrary, the displacement performed on action and production ensures that these types are not opposed to each other, but rather imply and remain dependent on one another. And as we further illustrate in the following chapter, it is this displacement that enables political activity to persist. Only in their contaminated forms can *praxis* and *poiēsis* give rise to a myriad of new doings and makings.

6 CONCLUSIONS: ACTION UPON ACTION

We set out to explore how Agamben's alternative type of action relates to *praxis* and *poiēsis*, the two paradigmatic types of action that still exert their power on the Western political experience. As we have demonstrated in the preceding chapters, it is best understood as a force that works *on* and *within praxis* and *poiēsis*, one that captures an alteration that cannot easily be subsumed under the established or 'normal' expositions of these types. *Praxis* does not simply point to spontaneous, transient, and unruly action that makes its appearance in the world before withering away again. On the contrary, precisely because of this inherent fragility, it also attaches to itself aspects of order and continuity that have the capability of generating new actions. This also explains Arendt's intuition regarding the close relatedness of concepts that appear conflicting or oppositional: action-order, leading-following, founding-preserving, and so on.

Similarly, if we follow the model of *poiēsis*, we will have to accept that politics does not derive its meaning from its final product – the communist utopia, the universal liberal state, a healthy population, a particular piece of legislation, or whatever is posited as the product of politics. Politics cannot be understood exclusively as a productive activity simply because there is neither a general human destiny, nor a particular outcome that could be expected to stay in place once accomplished. Any accomplishment can always be revised or taken into another direction, either relatively fast by the next government or, in a more slow-moving and subtle manner, as an effect of the changing currents of thought and action in a given community. The 'ends' of politics are not products in the sense of final closure, but point to the unraveling and expiration of various kinds of projects that in turn give rise to new ones. Like Kojève's working slave who finds himself in a state of animality once having brought history to completion, the end ultimately takes us back to the beginning. Yet, this is precisely what enables political action to persist: only if all human makings must come to a halt can the various political projects of building this or that kind of world remain a viable alternative, a new path worth taking and exploring.

Thus, both *praxis* and *poiēsis* are intervened by conflicting aspects, that is, action and production always appear in a contaminated form. As we have suggested in the preceding chapter, any attempt to go beyond acting and producing risks falling in the same trap of construing yet another 'pure' type that is bound to encounter the same paradoxes and difficulties. In this way, since politics coincides with neither *praxis* nor *poiēsis* and cannot consist in something like pure performativity alone, it is more accurately described as an action that acts *on* other actions. Political activity takes another action as its object; as such, it is essentially *transitive* in nature, acting on its object in a manner that introduces an alteration to it. Where purity reigns, political action consists in intervening and performing an act of contamination, one that orders *praxis*, unravels *poiēsis* and sets performativity in relation to some pre-existing ordering of human activity.

This is what grants the possibility of generating new actions: only in its modified forms can we speak of a politics in which potential new courses of action may materialize. Otherwise, there would only be sporadic appearances and speech acts that vanish without a trace. Alternatively, if politics would be able to arrive at a final product that is accomplished once and for all, we would be in a condition in which politics is no longer needed or possible. In this sense, politics is the constant movement that gives form to nascent and frail initiatives, and unforms those ends and outcomes that perhaps seemed permanent and enduring.

In the remainder of this chapter, we chart two lines of discussion that emerge from the above summarized conclusion that *praxis* and *poiēsis* necessarily include their other. The first one further concretizes what this alteration amounts to by discussing particular examples of both types of political activity, addressing *praxis* in the context of revolutionary and social movements of the recent decades and *poiēsis* in the context of utopian world-building projects. The purpose of this section (6.1) is to articulate the general logic of contamination, which may be expressed as a certain undoing in every doing and an unmaking in every making. In the following and last section (6.2), we discuss how this study could open some avenues for exploring politics beyond the action-production framework that this study has operated within. To this end, we discuss a currently prevalent form of identity politics and point out how the general argument of this study could be applied to the navigation of a political scene in which identity occupies a central place. These brief reflections are not intended to be exhaustive or detailed; instead, they spotlight some particular consequences that follow from the general conclusion and gesture toward further possible areas of application.

6.1 Undoing the doing, unmaking the making

Let us start with reflecting on the practical implications of a modified form of *praxis*. In our engagement with Arendt in Chapter 4, we already suggested that the modification in question amounts to a certain amplification or intensification

of action: public appearances give rise to further acts, leaders and beginners are followed, agents form pluralities, and so on. On a very general level, we expressed this as the necessity of finding some degree of order and orientation within *praxis*. We may now concretize this further: to act politically in such a context involves acting upon another set of actions in a manner that transfers and relocates them to different milieus and audiences, quite literally in the sense of taking them to new places and handing them over to new layers of the constituency. This is what grants the formation of new alliances, including unexpected ones – a key strategy of any political movement.

Notions like social and political ‘movement’ and ‘mobilization’ are naturally indicative of this dimension, without which a movement risks becoming a form of ‘hollow theatrics,’ to borrow an expression from Lucy Cane’s (2015) text on Arendt. As an extreme example of this tendency, we can imagine a public action that momentarily occupies the streets but is immediately forgotten and unable to attract any broader interest. It is this hollow and ‘pure’ activity that political action must transform into a source of new initiatives and enterprises.

It is something like this that Srdja Popovic, one of the leading members of Serbia’s successful resistance movement Otpor! in the 1990s, suggested when commenting on the 2014 Occupy movement in Hong Kong. He noted that one of its main problems was its tendency to just replay the same act in the same location day after day, making it easy for the Chinese government to repress them and easy for nearby shopkeepers to get frustrated and annoyed instead of joining the movement. Reflecting in this context on the difficulties of Otpor! at its initial stages, Popovic stated the following:

In 1992, we were in our Occupy phase. We occupied all four university campuses in Serbia – it’s a small country – and we were super-liberal, super-educated, super-cool and super-isolated. Meanwhile Milosevic was sending his tanks to Croatia. We had to go out and listen. Get the real people, the rural people, not so clever-clever people, behind us. Build a movement. We did, but it took us five years. (Henley 2015)

The way in which a movement succeeds in building a ‘proper’ movement, instead of remaining an isolated instance of occupying this or that space, can be understood in various ways. On the one hand, it can be approached as a successful mobilization of different groups of people: Otpor! precisely succeeded in attracting groups that had tended to be politically dormant or passive, such as farmers. On the other hand, this can be understood in somewhat more concrete terms: when the protesters were repeatedly beaten and jailed, the organizers came up with a way of immediately recruiting a new group of protesters in a nearby area, effectively tying the resources of the law enforcement and making it practically impossible to arrest everyone.

Another example of practices that are refined and re-structured over time is given by Olga Shparaga, a Belarusian philosopher and activist currently living in exile in Austria. In a lecture held at the University of Jyväskylä, which was

based on her book on the role of women in the Belarusian resistance movement that burst out in 2020 (Shparaga 2021), Shparaga argued that certain practices of mutual caring constitute a form of solidarity with important political implications. Recounting her own and other women's experiences both in prison and as a participant in the 'women's marches' of the Belarusian movement, she described how an atmosphere of caring, empathy, and friendliness surfaced and intensified during the protests. These practices included a variety of 'simple' activities, such as forming a group around someone captured by the security forces during a march, writing letters to someone imprisoned, sharing everything from personal stories to hygiene products in jail, and communicating daily with complete strangers in the streets, if only to share a few comforting words. New forms of supporting practices were invented along the way while old ones were abandoned. Like in the case of the Serbian movement, these practices ranged from concrete tactics of avoiding capture by the police at protests to creating a more general atmosphere of caring solidarity that supports revolutionary action even in horrid circumstances of oppression and violence.

Shparaga pointed out that such practices, some of them commonly regarded as taking place in 'private' contexts, should not be understood as merely symptomatic of an oppressed society but reveal a wider and more general political potential:

Practices of caring for one another became a bridge toward solidarity in Belarus not only because they compensated for the shortcomings of formal (for example, in the form of trade unions) and informal social ties. Moreover, they were important because of discovering their transformational potential and the introduction of new qualities into solidarity relations, which are important both for strengthening solidarity and for it taking new forms. (Shparaga 2022)

Finally, drawing from the general feminist critique of the public-private distinction, Shparaga argued that caring practices should be taken out from 'the darkness of the so-called private sphere' and their meaning to political life more generally acknowledged. What is relevant for our present discussion is that these forms of emphatic solidarity form, in Shparaga's words, a 'horizontal' network of different and continuous practices that together accumulate into a politically meaningful movement. Whether this is framed as a mobilization that has particular affective qualities moving across the 'private' and 'public' spheres, or as a movement that expands from a young student 'elite' to the 'ordinary masses' (as in the case of Otpor!), it is in any case crucial that a movement succeeds in branching out and evolving over time. From the perspective of the structure of the activity, this means that political activity is never a 'pure' moment of *praxis* but rather the ordering force that gives form to it and makes it persist. Ultimately, as a care-ethical perspective like Shparaga's suggests, it is not of primary importance from what supposed domain these sustaining activities emerge from. To sustain action may well be done in what is almost habitually seen as a separate

realm of 'the social' or 'the private,' just as it may take the form of more apparently 'public' action.

Such orderings of action have also been approached through the concept of *choreography* in studies that draw insights from the field of dance. Inspired by Rancière's distinction between the police and politics that we mentioned in the introduction, André Lepecki (2013) envisions an interplay between what he refers to as 'choreopolice' and 'choreopolitics.' Although the context of this discussion is choreographic practices in dance, Lepecki suggests that the way dancers find freedom within choreographic arrangements is instructive for understanding political action more generally. Following Rancière, choreopolitics is, for Lepecki, a break with the unifying command of the choreography, but he also sees the latter as absolutely important for any kind of free movement to be meaningful. Choreopolitics 'redistributes' and 'reinvents' bodies, doing so by experimenting and playing with choreographic structures. Choreography itself thus becomes a 'technology for inventing movements of freedom,' as the author puts it.

Public protests have also been analyzed as certain types of choreographies. Oliver Marchart (2013) notes that protests often follow a 'larger protest choreography' in the sense of following carefully planned routes. In another sense, there is a kind of protesting 'dance' happening during the protests in the forms of individual bodies reacting to and evading police intervention. Similarly, Jaana Parviainen (2010) studies three different public protests as choreographies, arguing that certain deliberately designed bodily gestures can have a great effect on the interactions between the protesters, witnesses, the media, and other actors. Like Shparaga, she partly focuses on the specific affective states that such choreographies raise in participants and onlookers alike. One case explored by Parviainen is the so-called crawling protest organized in the context of the 2007 nurse strikes in Finland, involving protesters who were silently crawling in the streets of central Helsinki. This eventually prompted some onlookers to either join the march or help the protesters in various ways, such as providing them with extra clothing. Terms like political 'movement' and 'mobilization' acquire here a specifically tangible meaning, pointing to the way in which an unusual kind of kinesthetic organization intervenes the conventional rhythms and movements of a particular space, urban or otherwise.

In other words, what we have called an orientation and ordering that happens within *praxis* could and has been approached from a variety of perspectives. Overall, what the above-mentioned examples bring forth in different ways is that politics of this type involves finding the resources to adjust movements over the course of time. It is crucial to find new avenues for manifestation that do not end up repressed or ignored by other forces, and to mobilize groups that would not immediately be recognized as allies. This structuring and re-structuring of doing into new forms and patterns is a type of *undoing* – not in terms of undoing a particular deed but insofar as it undoes *praxis* in its pure form. And this is precisely what generates more possibilities of action;

without this undoing force, we would not witness or experience political movements worthy of the name.

Whether such movements ultimately succeed in their specific goals is of course another matter – Serbia did not transform into a prosperous democracy after the toppling of Milošević, and Belarusians still live in an oppressive society. However, the precise point offered here concerns the success of the activity as such: in order to become a source of new possibilities of action, politics must act on and respond to other acts in a manner that does not fall for the illness of simply repeating them or remaining tied to a specific space or group of people. Rather, to act politically is to orient and re-orient these seemingly frail and vulnerable initiatives into a network of actions that continue to give rise to other actions. As Shparaga argued in her lecture, even though a change of regime may seem a distant possibility in Belarus, the solidarity practices that continuously take new forms still merit attention and help us understand how such factors explain political relations elsewhere, also in more stable societal contexts.

Let us then illustrate what it means for *poiēsis* to unravel itself by briefly concentrating on ideologically shaped world-building projects. As already mentioned in previous chapters, more or less strictly detailed programs for how to ‘build a better world’ can be found at a variety of ideological sites, from loosely formed movements to political parties and heads of states. We mentioned earlier that all such projects must anticipate and presuppose their own cessation, which will again give rise to new projects. From the perspective of a democratic organization of power, this condition must be accepted almost by definition. Insofar as a democracy cannot dictate which world is to gain primacy but must allow for a plurality of visions to coexist and compete with one another, democracies are always contaminated projects in a certain sense, that is, projects that continuously take us ‘back’ and allow for something else to be created. However, the contamination of *poiēsis*, a certain unmaking of all makings, applies to totalitarian orders as well, perhaps even more explicitly than to democracies.

It is known that Hitler was a great admirer of architecture. As Gastón Gordillo (2014a) notes in his eloquently written analysis of the strategic importance of monumental architecture for Nazi Germany, Hitler was outright obsessed with large-scale buildings. He believed they would incite awe and fear both among German citizens and rival empires. Basing his analysis to a great extent on the memoirs of Albert Speer, ‘the chief architect of the Third Reich,’ Gordillo describes how Hitler envisioned a People’s Hall (*Volkshalle*) in Berlin that was inspired by and destined to outshine the grandeur of the Roman Pantheon. The hall was to accommodate no less than 180,000 people, and similar buildings were to be constructed in other German cities. He also expressed a wish to destroy the skyscrapers of New York City and the Palace of the Soviets, the latter a project commenced by Stalin but ultimately never finished.

As Speer’s writings from those times attest to, in Gordillo’s analysis, Hitler envisioned monuments that would be immortal and everlasting. And yet, he was equally preoccupied with how the ruins of the new German capital would look like in the distant future. Like the ruins of the once flourishing imperial Rome,

the ruins of the Third Reich would also be admirable and imposing. Gordillo cites Speer as follows: 'Hitler liked to say that the purpose of his building was to transmit its time and its spirit to posterity. Ultimately, all that remained to remind men of the great epochs of history was their monumental architecture, he would philosophize' (Gordillo 2014a).

In the book *Rubble: The Afterlife of Destruction* from the same year, Gordillo notes that the very concept of 'ruin' is, in fact, not neutral insofar as it points to a civilization that *came to an end* (Gordillo 2014b). We have an entire 'heritage industry,' as Gordillo calls it, that treats various heaps of rubble as items belonging to the past, 'fetishizing' them as some sort of magical objects. But the remnants of, for example, colonial expansion in South America, continue to shape local lives and practices, hence the conceptual shift from *ruins* to *rubble*. For instance, a church built in Northern Argentina by a Spanish Jesuit order in the 1700s, now shrouded by vines, has been used by locals as a site of festivities (ibid.: 3). We mention this here because Gordillo's analysis enables us to view the idea of unraveling from a slightly different perspective: that production must always include its own unraveling does not necessarily mean that this cessation is a clear-cut end, but that various remnants of past projects may continue to haunt and shape politics of the present.

As is plain, then, even a totalitarian leader like Hitler with the most monstrous and megalomaniac vision of a world to be built could not escape the fundamental price one must pay if one conceives of politics as production. Even though we probably cannot find anything like Speer's explicit 'theory of ruins' among present-day authoritarian leaders, it is certainly typical for them to display an obsession with their own demise. Shortly before the Turkish elections of 2018, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was characterized as 'someone at the height of his power who is nevertheless obsessed with the idea of losing it' (Popp 2018). Similarly, Russian President Vladimir Putin has allegedly been caught desperately replaying the video footage from Libya's dictator Muammar al-Gaddafi's assassination in 2011 (Ghattas 2022).

Since we have mainly moved in the realm of Western politics in this study, we must certainly not forget the overall ideological project that this tradition has forcefully tied itself to since the end of the Cold War. As has been suggested, although the enthusiasm with Fukuyama's revival and 'popularization' of Kojève waned in the years after the publication of his book, this should not be taken as a refutation of the 'end of history' thesis but rather as an uncritical acceptance of it within mainstream political theory (Prozorov 2009: 523).

Largely the same could be said of the general cultural atmosphere in Western countries, perhaps Europe in particular. Roman Schatz, a well-known cultural figure in Finland with a German background, recently described in an interview his views on the much-debated hesitance and lack of leadership that the German government has displayed in its responses to the Ukraine war. Apart from mentioning Germany's 'trauma' with the second world war and the distaste with military power, Schatz described poignantly how the war incited a certain disbelief in Germans.

We cite this rather non-academic description here because it reads like a snapshot of Europeans who had lulled themselves into the idea that they dwell in something like a ‘posthistorical’ condition, even though terms like ‘posthistory’ or ‘postmodernity’ may have been deemed old-fashioned long ago: ‘People were wondering how to get insects thrive again in Germany. They had started to make honey on their own balconies. The world was supposed to be a love parade. And electric cars. And sexual minorities. This doesn’t fit our worldview at all, our *feng shui* gets all mixed up!’ (Sillantaus 2022). He also alluded to the rise of radical Islamic movements in the early 2000s, noting that this too was met with a kind of evading annoyance: ‘Like what the fuck is wrong with them, the world could be such a nice place!’ (ibid.). By citing these views, we wish simply to remark that the fact that all makings must presuppose their end should not be taken exclusively as a ‘message’ directed at totalitarian leaders. It is equally necessary to recognize how dangerous and self-defeating it can be to maintain a belief in a ‘completed project.’ Uncritically expecting an overall ‘transition’ to liberal democracy and making comfortable lifestyles its main concern, the West was able to turn a blind eye to an entirely different project commenced by Putin.

In summary, the above examples illustrate what it means that *praxis* and *poiēsis* become contaminated by their other: all doings must be undone and all makings must be unmade. It is this intervention that is performed on action and production in their pure forms that ensures that politics can persist: it grants continuity to human doings and opens a space for new makings. It is not enough to do, to borrow a formulation by Agamben, but one must also find ways to generate new possibilities of doing. And in the same way, it is not enough to make, but one must also accept that this making will eventually, or simultaneously, be interrupted by other makings. Sometimes, of course, this interruption is performed the other way around. We saw in Chapter 4 that Arendt’s account of politics, even though accentuating the radically autonomous nature of *praxis*, is ultimately not strictly opposed to *poiēsis* insofar as the public space of appearances needs durable laws and institutions to be able to manifest at all. In such a case, we can say, expressed through the logic presented here, that the ‘undoing’ is performed by a making. As we saw in Chapter 3, Kojève’s scheme admits that the productive activity of the slave is indeed interrupted by the inoperative *praxis* of snobbery or pure intellectual reasoning. In this case, the ‘unmaking’ is performed by a doing. In both cases, however, the general logic remains the same: *praxis* and *poiēsis* remain meaningful categories of political activity only insofar as we take them as objects of political activity, as something to be worked on and with.

6.2 Being vs. action: notes on identity politics

Finally, we point to preliminary steps that could be taken in an attempt to apply the findings of this study outside the *praxis-poiēsis* framework. As mentioned above, we intervene what in contemporary contexts usually goes under the label of identity politics. To start with, it needs to be acknowledged that despite a vivid discussion around identity politics, for or against, no solid definition of it has yet been produced. For instance, it may manifest itself as a general cultural phenomenon of 'searching' for one's identity, one that Arendt characterized as 'fashionable' in *The Life of the Mind*, and that has not become any less fashionable over the decades. In a somewhat different sense, identity can function as a starting point for more explicitly political fights over certain rights. From this perspective, any struggle that ever evoked a particular group identity in its demands ('Votes for women!') is classified under identity politics.

However, although offering a clear definition of identity politics is beyond the scope of this study, it is possible to discern in the contemporary setting a particular strand of it, according to which politics is always intimately tied to one's identity. For instance, the frequent celebration of women or other historically excluded or underrepresented groups ascending to ministerial positions (and the often-following disappointments in the policies pursued by them) is partly indicative of what is at stake in this conception of political action. The general assumption working in the background of such a view is that good or desirable politics can be more or less directly derived from an identity. Analogous cases can be found in fields that are conventionally understood as distinct from politics, such as the much-debated case of Amanda Gorman who required that her poems, one of them recited at President Joe Biden's inaugural speech, be translated by someone who shares her identity. In this context, a proper act of translation is also expected to emerge from the particular identity of the translator.

To be sure, many advocates of this variety of identity politics would contest that identity is the *only* thing that matters. Yet, it is arguably possible to detect a strong tendency to emphasize the priority of identity over any precise content, type, or qualification of doing politics. In other words, if taken to the extreme, to its 'pure' form, we are left with a type of politics in which the mere presence of an identity constitutes a political act, that is, politics simply emanates from being. But in the light of our conclusion, this conception quickly proves problematic. Insofar as politics is an action practiced on another action, it cannot be directly derived from being. Politics cannot emerge from identity but works *on* identities, or rather on those activities that questions of identity have power over. This means that as an activity, identity politics is always indexical not of the identity as such, but of a set of practices that are deemed violent, unethical, or oppressive. Thus, for example, to put up a campaign with the slogan 'Stop domestic violence toward women' should require no recourse to a discussion of what women really are but points to particular forms of violence that are contested. Yet, this is

naturally the challenge that identity politics always faces – there is always the risk of slipping into a concern for being and essence while trying to change a complex set of practices and techniques of power that may be both connected and indifferent to identities.

Various feminist theories have obviously addressed this problematic view by reflecting on the difficulties and paradoxes involved in trying to overcome oppressions that are directed at an identity, while avoiding the trap of essentialism and further consolidation of differences. The concern for identity has, for example, been criticized for easily lapsing into an assertion of victimhood and suffering that denies women or other excluded groups of any agency (Brown 1995). It has also been argued that feminism should drop its narrow concern with gender, and instead reinscribe its analyses of gendered power relations in a more general critique of neoliberalism (Fraser 2013). In her fierce critique of Anglo-American gender studies, Viviane Namaste (2005) argues that the 'real' problems of transsexual and transgender people get lost if we focus solely on identities themselves. Drawing from her work as a social worker in trans communities in Quebec, she argues that most transsexuals are, after all, not interested in being gender revolutionaries or deconstructing the sex/gender binary; they would just prefer to live free from oppression, whatever particular things that may refer to. As she exemplifies, some would 'rather look at the latest *Prada* catalogue' (Namaste 2005: 20) and goes as far as saying that (Western) queer theorists 'just don't get it' (ibid.).

Thus, in suggesting that the general logic of contamination may be used to intervene a purist type of identity politics, we are not suggesting that this problematic would not have been addressed by others. However, what our conclusion helps discern is what grants the success of identity politics, that is, what enables it to operate as a force that liberates more possibilities of political action. Much like we treated *praxis* and *poiēsis* as apparatuses that orient our action and reflection, we may approach identities as apparatuses that order our lives. The crucial question that arises is the following: how should these apparatuses be engaged with in a manner that does not leave us trapped in a separate sphere of identity but enables a different use of them?

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's term 'strategic essentialism,' which she coined in the 1990s (see Spivak 1993), is of help here. Even though this term has largely been forgotten or deemed outdated, it grasps in very clear terms the rather common-sensical idea that certain group identities must sometimes be strategically evoked in order to fight against certain forms of oppression, even as these identities do not really form a common essence. Spivak's later abandonment of the term precisely has to do with the tendency to forget the notion of 'strategy' in contemporary forms of identity politics. What is relevant for our purposes is that a strategizing activity captures the impossibility and insufficiency of deriving politics directly from an identity. Identities can be strategically *used* for improving the possibilities of equal political participation in a more general sense, but they can never be the exclusive goal of political activity. Much in the same sense as with pure *praxis* and *poiēsis*, the same inability to

generate actions that actually evolve into a meaningful political movement haunts any type of identity politics that stays at the level of being.

Let us briefly examine one particular example that illustrates a successful move from being to action. Natalie Wynn, an influential video essayist known for her YouTube channel ContraPoints, touches upon the question of identity definition in an episode that tackles Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling's much-discussed comments on transsexuality. Wynn's presentation is useful for our present purposes as it addresses a dominant aspect of the kind of identity politics discussed here, namely the scrupulous concern with how we are to define ourselves. That is, precisely because politics is understood as emanating from one's identity, it becomes crucial to define what we are.

Effectively steering the discussion away from a debate over whether transwomen should be regarded as 'real' women, Wynn points out that political battles connected to transsexual and transgendered identities are simply about equality to participate in politics and society more broadly. We cite the transcript of this video at some length here because it grasps with clarity our above-presented argument that the object of politics is not identity as such, but a set of discriminatory practices that are directly or indirectly related to identities. It also brings up both the tendency on part of the wider society to misinterpret identity-based movements and the tendency on part of a minority community (in this case, the trans community) to be too focused on gaining recognition and validation for their identity:

Look, trans people can't even agree among ourselves what gender is, in fact if you even try to answer the question you end up enraging some part of the community who feels excluded. So no, trans people are not trying to "force an ideology" on people, we don't even share an ideology within our own community. What we share are a common set of political struggles against discrimination, against harassment, against excessive medical gatekeeping, against exclusion from public life. So, what would be a better slogan than "trans women are women?" Well ideally something that includes all trans people and something that evades pointless philosophizing about "biology", and "what is gender?" and "who is true trans?" and "what is a woman really?". Something that centers what actually matters, which is freeing trans people from the stigma and discrimination that have historically prevented us from becoming equal members of society. So I know it sounds kind of outdated, very 1970's, but I personally like the slogan, "trans liberation now!" It's short, it's sweet, and instead of prompting "define womanhood!" it prompts people to ask "*what do you mean liberation? Liberation from what?*" And then you can say, "well I'll tell you!" And now you're talking about politics instead of talking about semantics. Isn't that better? I feel like trans culture is just so obsessed with reassuring ourselves that we're "valid", that we sometimes forget that the end goal of a political movement is not "validity", it's equality. That's what we're supposed to be fighting for. (Wynn 2021)

Despite the focus on the struggle for self-definition, recognition, and validation of gender, what Wynn points out is that gender identities should function as indicators of shared experiences of discriminatory practices rather than the identities themselves. Consider the shift in the emphasis between the slogans 'trans women are women!' and 'trans liberation now!'. The former, often repeated by progressive liberals of all kinds, ultimately narrows the discussion down into a dispute over what properly belongs to the category of woman. In contrast, the latter makes use of a certain identity category but immediately couples it with the more general idea of liberation. With this shift, as Wynn suggests, it is immediately possible to start describing and contesting precisely the kind of oppressive practices that exclude one from participation in public life. One can, as it were, jump over the discussion of what one is, and instead focus on what one does – or, conversely, what one cannot do because of discriminatory practices.

It is not the aim of this study to 'solve' these challenges and difficulties pointed out by Wynn or others, but rather to take note of the way their critical diagnoses resonate with the argument that politics cannot concern being alone but must be practiced on a set of other practices. That there is a need for such critical reminders about the principle that politics is about equality and freedom rather than 'validation' and naming of identities is partly symptomatic of how astray we have gone with questions of identity, perhaps both as pursuers and spectators of identity politics. On the one hand, liberation will not emerge from final definitions and validations of identities. On the other hand, to reduce every instance of political campaigning that somehow involves identities to pointless identity construction, or the forcing of 'gender ideology' risks becoming a counter-productive critique that fails to see what real infringements on political and personal freedoms are at stake in, for example, the issues that transsexual and transgendered people organize around. The insufficiency of deriving politics from being does not automatically mean that one can or should wholly rid oneself of the various identifiers that name particular forms of oppression.

To be precise, our point is not to simply reiterate a general lamentation over the prevalence of identity-based politics, a critique that many intellectuals and political commentators have become accustomed to providing. Rather, to understand the wider political meanings of various identity fights requires nuance in differentiating between what kind of identity politics can have effective political leverage beyond the mere celebration of identities and what fails to do so. Put another way, precisely because the type of identity politics that revolves around the definition and celebration of identities forcefully dominates the contemporary scene of identity politics, this is all the more reason to offer more refined analyses of what instances of identity politics can become a moment for broader networks of political freedom and solidarity. The lamentable aspect of identity politics is not merely that identities enter politics as such – as long as oppression and control are exerted on specific groups, we are probably bound to see struggles that stem from such oppression. But what is problematic and merits serious reconsidering is the type of pure identity politics that we have briefly

charted here, one that is obsessed with the mere presence and validation of identities rather than their strategic use for broadening political freedoms.

To put it very briefly, the same paradoxical undertaking can then be discerned here as in the case of *praxis* and *poiēsis* that must integrate their own displacement: identity politics must both make use of and avoid equating politics with a particular identity. In this sense, identity politics is no different from the other kinds of political activity we have analyzed in this study. Like action and production, it is always dependent on its own other and this structural necessity is what grants its success. This is perhaps the general challenge of any political undertaking – how to do politics in a manner that avoids the investment in ‘pure’ politics and succeeds in balancing between conflicting drives. As suggested in our above discussion, actions like occupying university campuses or focusing exclusively on the definition and expression of identities easily become naïve enterprises that never succeed in becoming movements with broader political effects. And from another perspective, to envision politics as a smooth production process that can be controlled and measured leads to an absurd neglect of the very basic nature of all such projects – all productive processes always already presuppose their own cessation and eventually give rise to other orders. To borrow from Agamben, politics is a *necessarily ambiguous* activity; whatever its kind, it always depends on and includes its own alterity.

In a certain sense, as the above discussion of identity politics also shows, what has tied together this entire journey is a concern for the possibility of political liberation, the activity of freeing possibilities of action. That is, even though the more formal question of this study has been ‘what is politics as an activity?’, engaging with this question has flown into a concern with issues like ‘how can there be meaningful political activity?’ and ‘how can humans emancipate themselves from this or that apparatus?’ This, of course, has its roots in Agamben’s overall vision of acting otherwise, as already presented in the early chapters.

But as this piece of writing perhaps makes plain, engaging with Agamben’s beautiful yet enigmatic vision of gestuality has been marked by a gradually growing and somewhat anguished disenchantment. We ultimately had to let go of a politics of ‘pure means’ because it did not live up to the liberatory promise that in fact gave rise to this entire research project. Yet, from this critique emerged the idea that as long as we inscribe gesture within the established paradigms and view it as a second-level operation that is performed on them, we are back in a more sober position from which we can understand how politics may renew and rejuvenate itself. And now we are also in a position to briefly specify what *kind* of a liberation we are dealing with. Since we have come to argue that we cannot leave the apparatuses of *praxis* and *poiēsis* behind, it naturally follows from this conclusion that politics is a matter of finding ways to activate new possibilities of action *within* them. And perhaps this applies to the ordering forces that structure and orient our lives more generally. We cannot entirely free us *from* them, but can nevertheless work *on* and *with* them.

This also has some repercussions for the general wish to rethink politics, the overall context where this study is situated. Once we are no longer too tightly bound by a dream of an entirely new politics nor by a grief for a lost politics, we are perhaps in a position to start looking for and paying attention to ways in which various apparatuses are engaged with. The emphasis lies here on the word *various*: politics unfolds in a space ordered not by one, but by many apparatuses that are simultaneously at work. And just like there are many different orderings of power, performing displacements within them also comes in different forms. That is, it may not always be necessary to view this destabilizing activity in the image of conflictual disruption, resistance, or contestation, as has become somewhat customary in the literature concerned with the 'proper' nature of politics. Instead, to conduct a displacement within this or that apparatus may well take the form of, say, a patient exploration that unfolds as a longer and less confrontational process rather than a momentary intervention. Or it may be marked by a certain playfulness and enjoyment, as is the case with some of Agamben's examples. Perhaps politics is nothing other than this continuous possibility of exploring and experimenting *with* and *within* the apparatuses that govern us.

SUMMARY IN FINNISH

Tutkimuksessa analysoidaan politiikkaa aktiviteettina. Tämän tarkastelun lähtökohta on antiikin Kreikasta periytyvä jako kahteen eri aktiviteettiin: toimintaan (*praxis*) ja tuottamiseen (*poiēsis*). *Praxis* on toimintaa, joka on päämäärä itsessään; tässä mielessä poliittiseen toimintaan osallistuminen on jo itsessään politiikkaa riippumatta siitä, mitä päämääriä tällä saavutetaan. *Poiēsis* puolestaan on toimintaa, joka tuottaa itsensä lisäksi jotain muuta; näin ymmärrettynä politiikka on aktiviteetti, joka on alisteista jollekin päämäärälle tai lopputulokselle.

Kyseinen jako vaikuttaa edelleen tapaamme hahmottaa politiikkaa. Kun korostetaan politiikkaa julkisena toimintana ja keskusteluna esimerkiksi päätöksenteon istunnoissa, vaalidebateissa tai yleisissä mielenosoituksissa, taustalla on toimintakäsitys politiikasta. Toisaalta on hyvin yleistä puhua politiikasta jonkin yhteisen hyvän tuottamisena tai ”paremman maailman rakentamisena”. Tällöin viitataan politiikkaan tuottavana toimintana, eli aktiviteettina, joka on välillistä jonkin lopputuloksen saavuttamiseksi.

Tutkimuksessa tarkastellaan, onko näiden kahden klassisen aktiviteetin lisäksi mahdollista hahmottaa vaihtoehtoinen politiikkatyyppi. Tutkimus asettuu tästä näkökulmasta viime vuosikymmeninä käytyyn teoreettiseen keskusteluun politiikan ongelmallisesta tilasta ja sitä kautta syntyneestä halusta määrittää politiikkaa ja sen reunaehdot uudelleen. Esimerkiksi 1990-luvulla keskiöön nousseen nk. agonistisen demokratian puolestapuhujat kritisoivat politiikan jäämistä liberaalin yksilöetiikan ja konsensuspuheen varjoon. Nämä teoreetikot ovat korostaneet konfliktin ja antagonismin tärkeyttä politiikassa. Toisaalta on kannettu jo pitkään huolta siitä, että talouden ehdoilla toimivat hallintatavat tukahduttavat politiikan. Onpa ehditty tuomita koko keskustelu politiikan ”tuhosta” tai mahdollisesta ”paluusta” itsessään ongelmalliseksi. Tämä tutkimus pyrkii selventämään politiikan kiisteltyä luonnetta keskittymällä siihen aktiviteettina. Tätä ei kyseisessä kirjallisuudessa ole vielä tehty eksplisiittisesti tai temaattisesti.

Tämän analyysin lähtökohtana ja eräänlaisena tapauksena toimii italialaisfilosofi Giorgio Agambenin eleen käsite (it. *gesto*, engl. *gesture*). Agamben esittää, että ele on vaihtoehto sekä *praxikselle* että *poiēsikselle* ja tarkastelee tästä näkökulmasta kriittisesti Hannah Arendtin ja Alexandre Kojèven politiikkakäsityksiä. Näitä ajattelijointa lähestytään tässä tutkimuksessa paitsi Agambenin kansakeskustelijoina, myös toimintaa ja tuottamista korostavien politiikkakäsitysten malliesimerkkeinä. Poliitiikka oli Arendtille puhdasta *praxista*, toimintaa ja vapauden kokemusta itsessään. Kojève puolestaan on tunnettu historian lopun teesistään, eli politiikka näyttäytyi hänelle lopputuloksen tuottavana prosessina.

Arendtin ja Kojèven poliittisen ajattelun analyysissä hyödynnetään Agambenin kehittämää logiikkaa, joka toistuu eri käsitteiden kohdalla. Näitä käsitteitä ovat esimerkiksi potentiaalisuus (*potenza*), puhdas keino (*mezzo puro*), inoperatiivisuus (*inoperosità*), profanaatio (*profanazione*) ja maneerit (*maniera*).

Vaikka näiden käsitteinen näennäinen konteksti ja aihe eroavat toisistaan merkittävästi, viittaa niiden seuraama logiikka aina samanlaiseen aktiviteettiin. Tämä aktiviteetti kohdistuu johonkin konventioon tai järjestävään voimaan ja aktivoi niissä uudenlaisen toiminnan mahdollisuuksien kokeilun. Profanaatio palauttaa jonkin pyhän ja lukitun vapaaseen käyttöön; jonkin muuttaminen inoperatiiviseksi tai puhtaan keinojen tilaan vapauttaa toisinolemisen- ja tekemisen.

Agambenin harjoittaakin käsitteidensä kautta eräänlaista "horjuttamisen" metodia, jonka tarkoituksena on tuoda esille vapaan ja vaihtoehtoisen tekemisen mahdollisuudet. Tämä horjuttaminen muodostaa siis vaihtoehtoisen poliittisen toiminnan tyyppin. Analyysi toteutetaan tutkimuksessa siten, että *praxis* ja *poiēsis* toimivat tämän operaation kohteina. Tavoitteena on selvittää, onko näitä mahdollista nyrjäyttää siten, että ne mahdollistavat Agambenin visioiman toisintekemisen. Materiaalina tälle analyysille toimii Arendtin ja Kojèven tekstit.

Yksi tutkimuksen keskeisistä havainnoista on, että Agambenin toiminnan logiikassa on tietty epäselvyys sen seurauksien ja tulkinnan suhteen. Onko kyseessä todella "kolmas" ja jyrkästi erillinen aktiviteetin tyyppi? Vai viittaako ele aktiviteettiin, joka on riippuvainen kahdesta klassisesta tyypestä, toiminnasta ja tuottamisesta? Tämän kysymyksen ratkominen on tutkimuksessa jatkuvasti läsnä.

Lähtökohtaisesti on selvää, että ele toimii kontrastina dialektiseen ymmärrykseen historiasta tuottavana prosessina, joka päättyy tiettyyn lopputulokseen, "historian loppuun". Analyysi alkaakin Kojèven ajattelun tarkastelusta, joka keskittyy Agambenin historian loppu -teesiin kohdistamaan kritiikkiin. Agambenin teosten nimet sellaisenaan, kuten "Keinot vailla päämäärää" viittaavat tuottamisesta erilliseen aktiviteettiin. Toisaalta on hiukan epäselvää, miten ele tarkalleen ottaen eroaa arendtilaisesta toiminnasta. Agamben itse on käsitellyt Arendtin *praxista* vuonna 2018 julkaistussa teoksessaan *Karman*, mutta kritiikki ei lopulta anna selkeää kuvaa eleen ja toiminnan erosta. Kummatkin ovat tiettyssä mielessä toimintaa, jonka päämäärää ei voi erottaa siitä itsestään. Tutkimuksessa pyritään tästä syystä harjoittamaan Agambenin omaa "horjuttamisen" metodia Arendtin valittuihin teksteihin.

Väitöskirjan keskeinen väite on, että Agambenin ele on aktiviteetti, joka kohdistuu *praxikseen* ja *poiēsikseen*. Poliitiikka ei ole puhdasta toimintaa eikä puhdasta tuottamista, vaan kumpikin sisältää oman vastakohtansa ja on riippuvainen tästä toiseudesta. Poliitiikka ei kiteydy puhtaaseen toimintaan itsessään, vaan siihen täytyy myös sisältyä pysyvyyden ja järjestyksen aspekteja. Poliitiikka ei myöskään voi olla prosessi, joka tuottaa jotain lopullisesti pysyvää tai määrättyä; historian loppu vie meidät taas "takaisin" tai pikemminkin luo tilaa uusien projektien aloittamiselle ja kehkeytymiselle. Vain näin voi syntyä uusia poliittisen toiminnan mahdollisuuksia. Jos olisi vain puhdasta *praxista*, poliitiikka häviäisi aina jäljettömiin eikä saisi aikaan mitään vaikutuksia. Jos taas poliitiikka kykenisi saavuttamaan lopullisen päämäärän, tekisi tämä lopun myös poliitiikasta itsestään. Poliitiikka ei siis ole *praxista* eikä *poiēsista*, vaan tarkemmin ottaen *kohdistuu* näihin ja "tartuttaa" niihin omat vastakohtansa. Tästä seuraa

myös, että toiminta ja tuottaminen eivät ole toistensa jyrkkiä vastakohtia, vaan implikoivat toinen toisiaan.

Kyseistä johtopäätöstä tulkitaan myös rajaamalla tarkastelu eleeseen kielellisenä toimintana, eli eräänlaisena performatiivina tai puhetekona. Eleellisyys on Agambenille tärkeä käsite myös kielen filosofiassa ja hän viittaa sillä kielen tapahtumaan itsessään. Ele ei viittaa merkitystä välittävään kieleen, vaan tämän funktion pidättämiseen tai viivyttämiseen, joka avaa tilan kielen mahdollisuuden kokemukselle itsessään. Agambenin kielikäsitteet rakentuu siis eräänlaisen tyhjyyden ympärille: tärkeää on kielen potentiaalisuuden kokemus, ei sen tuottamat merkitykset. Toisaalta hän korostaa joissain teoksissa jonkin kielellisen konvention muokkaamista ja muuntelua, jota hän hahmottaa maneerin käsitteen avulla. Esimerkiksi jokin runotyylili, tietty luonnollinen kieli tai filosofinen diskurssi muovaantuvat omintakeisesti henkilökohtaisissa maneeereissa.

Tässä mielessä alun perin havaittu epätarkkuus toistuu myös Agambenin kielen filosofian kohdalla. Joko ymmärrämme hänen vaihtoehdoisen aktiviteettinsa ”puhtaana eleenä”, eli puhtaana toiminnan mahdollisuuksien tarkasteluna. Tällöin eleellä ei ole mitään kohdetta, vaan se on potentiaalisuuden itsensä tutkiskelua. Vaihtoehtoisesti ele voi olla toimintaa, jolla on aina objekti, eli se kohdistuu aina johonkin olemassa olevaan tai annettuun.

Jälkimmäinen johtopäätös näyttäytyy mielekkäämpänä nimenomaan poliittisen toiminnan ymmärtämisen näkökulmasta. Pelkkä mahdollisuuksien tarkastelu ja pohtiminen, Agambenin ”puhdas keinojen tila”, tarjoaa lopulta varsin salamyhkäisen käsityksen politiikasta eikä selitä, kuinka poliittinen aktiviteetti voi muuttaa itseä ja maailmaa suuntaan tai toiseen. Jokaisen valta-asetelman ja apparatuurin kohdalla tämä johtaa Agambenin ajattelussa hiukan kehämäisesti samaan tyhjyyden tilaan ja toimintaan itsessään. Toisaalta jos korostamme painotusta, joka on selkein maneerin käsitteen kohdalla, saamme selkeämmän käsityksen poliittisen aktiviteetin erilaisista mahdollisuuksista. Poliitiikka on tästä näkökulmasta toisintekemisen harjoittamista, joka kohdistuu johonkin konventioon tai tapahtuu suhteessa siihen.

Johtopäätöksissä pyritään kuvaamaan, miten tutkimuksessa harjoitettu analyysi auttaa hahmottamaan poliittista toimintaa yleisemmin. Mitä tarkoittaa ”epäpuhdas” *praxis* ja *poiēsis*? Edellistä hahmotetaan vallankumouksellisten liikkeiden esimerkkien kautta. Esimerkiksi Serbian 1990-luvun vastarintaliikkeen keskeisenä hahmona pidetty Srdja Popovic on kuvannut, kuinka tämänkaltaisille liikkeille on tärkeää keksiä uusia muotoja ja tapoja tavoittaa oman viiteryhmän ulkoisia kansanryhmiä, kuten vaikkapa maanviljelijöitä. Ei riitä, että vallataan tämä tai tuo yliopistokampus, vaan liike täytyy saada leviämään ja muuttamaan muotoaan ajan myötä. Ajatus voi vaikuttaa ilmeiseltä, mutta Serbian Otpor! -liikkeen muotoutuminen laajaksi kansanliikkeeksi kesti Popovicin mukaan viisi vuotta.

Samankaltaisia ajatuksia on esittänyt valkovenäläinen filosofi ja feministi Olga Shparaga, joka vieraili Suomessa hiljattain. Kuvauksessaan Valko-Venäjän vuonna 2020 puhjenneista protesteista hän korosti pienten ja arkistenkin toimien

kumuloitumista merkittäväksi poliittiseksi voimaksi. Hän on keskittynyt erityisesti naisten rooliin Valko-Venäjän vallankumousliikkeessä. Shparagan kuvaamia ja pääasiassa naisten kannattelemia toimia ovat olleet muun muassa ihmismuurien muodostaminen muista erilleen ajautuneiden mielenosoittajien ympärille, vangituille lähetetyt kirjeet sekä henkilökohtaisten kokemusten jakaminen vankilassa. Joskus vain muutama vaihdettu sana ohikulkijan kanssa on auttanut selviämään ja jaksamaan. Kyse on Shparagan mukaan hoivasta, joka ei ole niin sanotusti "vain" hoivaa tai jotain epäpoliittista. Päinvastoin nämä yksinkertaisilta vaikuttavat teot myös kannattelevat ja kiihdyttävät poliittista toimintaa ja antavat sille uusia muotoja ajan kuluessa.

Nämä esimerkit kuvastavat yllä kuvattua epäpuhtauden logiikkaa. Jotta toiminta (*praxis*) voi toimia merkittävänä poliittisena voimana ja luoda uusia poliittisen toiminnan mahdollisuuksia, on siihen sisällyttävä tiettyä pysyvyyttä ja järjestystä. Julkinen toiminta, arendtilaisittain julkisessa tilassa näyttäytyminen, ei itsessään riitä, vaan on kyettävä kutomaan erilaisia uusien toimien ja toimijoiden kudelmia. Poliittinen toiminta on siis aktiviteetti, joka keskeyttää "puhtaan" toiminnan ja tuo siihen rakenteita, muotoja ja järjestäytymistä. Jotkut tutkijat ovat kuvanneet tätä myös tanssin kentältä lainatun *koreografian* käsitteen avulla.

Epäpuhdasta tuottamisen politiikkaa puolestaan havainnollistetaan kuvaamalla ristiriitaa, joka liittyy aina erilaisiin utopistisiin visioihin uuden ja erilaisen maailman rakentamisesta. Jos politiikka näyttäytyy tämän tai tuon maailman rakentamisena, sisältyy siihen lähtökohtaisesti ajatus maailman saapumista päätepisteeseen, aivan kuten Kojèven historian lopussa. Tämä loppu on puolestaan alku jollekin muulle, sysäys kohti jotain määräämätöntä ja uutta. Esimerkiksi Hitler oli tunnettu monumentaalisen arkkitehtuurin ihailija; hän visioi järkälemäisiä ja suhteettoman suuria rakennuksia eri puolille Saksaa. "Kolmannen valtakunnan pääarkkitehti" Albert Speerin muistelmissa korostuu Hitlerin pakkomielle oman visionsa lopun suhteen. Hän toisteli ajatusta siitä, että tuhansien vuosien päästä Kolmannesta valtakunnasta olisi jäljellä muinaisen Rooman tavoin uljaat rauniot, jotka muistuttaisivat tulevia sukupolvia Saksan suuruudesta. Tässäkin totalitaristisessa visiossa oli siis koko ajan läsnä ajatus lopusta ja jonkin muun tilalle astumisesta.

Toisaalta ajatus siitä, että kaikki poliittiset "rakennusprojektit" päättyvät tai keskeytyvät jonkin muun projektin tullessa tilalle on tärkeää muistaa myös demokraattisissa olosuhteissa. Venäjän helmikuussa 2022 aloittama laajamittainen hyökkäyssota Ukrainaa vastaan havahdutti useat länsimaat siihen, kuinka sinisilmäisesti ja vaarallisesti ne olivat tuudittautuneet liberaalin demokratian jatkuvaan voittokulkuun. Kokonaiset kaksi vuosikymmentä onnistuttiin ummistamaan silmät Putinin Venäjän täysin erilaiselta visiolta maailmasta. Ajatukset historianjälkeisyydestä tai postmodernista aikakaudesta eivät ehkä ole pitkään aikaan olleet muodikkaita, mutta nämä kritiikittömät ajatukset kaikkien yhteiskuntien saapumisesta yhteiseen päätepisteeseen ovat silti vaikuttaneet länsimaissa vahvasti ja vaikuttavat yhä.

Toisin sanoen myös kaikki tuottaminen sisältää aina oman toisensa. Joku tulee päätökseen ja luo uutta tilalle tai keskeytyy uuden projektin toimesta. Toisaalta menneen politiikan jäänteet ja rauniot vaikuttavat yhä nykyisyydessä ja luovat haamuja ja varjoja nykyhetken toimintaan.

Lopuksi hahmotetaan, kuinka tutkimuksen johtopäätöstä voi soveltaa *praxis-poiēsis*-kehikosta irrallaan. Nykyaikaisessa poliittisessa keskustelussa puhutaan paljon identiteettipolitiikasta. Keskiössä on usein ajatus siitä, että politiikan tekeminen tietyn identiteetin edustajana on itsessään poliittinen teko. Esimerkiksi nuorten naisten tai muiden historiallisesti ulossuljettujen ryhmien pääsyä valtapositiioihin ihannoidaan näkökulmasta, jossa identiteettien astuminen politiikkaan näyttäytyy itsessään poliittisesti merkittävänä. Kaikki identiteettipolitiikka ei tietenkään ole näin suoraviivaista, mutta usein taustalla vaikuttaa tämänkaltainen identiteetin ensisijaisuus.

Tutkimuksen johtopäätöksen valossa tähän liittyy kuitenkin selkeä ongelma. Koska politiikka on aktiviteetti, joka ujuttaa *praxikseen* ja *poiēsikseen* vastakohtaisuuksia, on se luonteeltaan toimintaan kohdistuvaa toimintaa. Poliitiikka ei siis voi suoraan ilmetä *olemisen* muodossa. Identiteetit nimeävät tarkemmin ottaen alistavia ja ongelmallisia *toiminnan* muotoja, ei olemista itsessään. Tästä näkökulmasta identiteettipolitiikka voi käyttää identiteettejä alistavien valtasuhteiden merkitsijoinä, mutta samalla on vältettävä pysyviin identiteetteihin ja essentialismiin jähmettymistä. Esimerkiksi Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak on käyttänyt termiä ”strateginen essentialismi”, mikä kuvaa identiteettien strategista käyttämistä tiettyjen alistussuhteiden näkyväksi tekemisessä. Tutkimuksen tarkoituksena ei ole suoraan kritisoida identiteetteihin liittyvää politiikkaa sinänsä, vaan pikemminkin hahmottaa ehtoja sille, kuinka tällainen politiikka voi poikia lisää poliittisen toiminnan ja vapauden mahdollisuuksia. Jotta identiteettipolitiikka ei jäisi pelkän identiteetin toisintamisen tasolle, on sen käytettävä ”identiteettipuhetta” luodakseen lisää poliittisen osallistumisen mahdollisuuksia yleisemmin.

Yhteenvedona voidaan siis todeta, että poliittinen toiminta ei koskaan palaudu mihinkään puhtaaseen tyyppiin. Toimintaan (*praxis*) sisältyy aina jonkinasteista pysyvyyttä ja tuottamiseen (*poiēsis*) sisältyy aina ajatus lopun kautta alkavasta uudesta ja määräämättömästä. Identiteettipolitiikan on puolestaan sekä käytettävä että vältettävä identiteettejä. Poliittinen toiminta on tässä mielessä moniselitteistä ja paradoksien lomassa luovimista.

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