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Giorgio Agamben's Critique of the Covid-19 Response has Little to Do with Biopolitics

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ABSTRACT

Giorgio Agamben claims that the aggressive coronavirus response in Italy turned the nation's entire population into formless *bare life*, which was cast out from meaningful human existence through a *sovereign exception*. This widely criticised argument appears to stem from Agamben's radical reinterpretation of *biopolitics*, a concept popularised by Michel Foucault. Although Agamben is often considered as the second most famous authority on the topic, some have begun to question whether his reinterpretation can operate within the framework set by his predecessor who defines the notion primarily through its life affirming and optimising effects. This has led to an unclear and contested definition of biopolitics, which hinders the notion's usage as an analytical tool. Agamben's statements on the pandemic must face similar scrutiny. According to him, life was not optimised during the pandemic. Therefore, Agamben's critique on the coronavirus response has little to do with the Foucauldian notion of biopolitics, which offers a much sounder way of analysing the Covid crisis.

KEYWORDS

Giorgio Agamben; Michel Foucault; Covid-19; pandemic; biopolitics; bare life

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic sent shockwaves around the entire world in early 2020. The Italian government was quick to take drastic measures to combat the spread of the virus as the country was becoming what has been described as “a hotspot of the pandemic”.¹ The renowned Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben did not agree with the ensuing response and rushed to publish a string of concise yet forceful writings regarding the handling of the disease and its socio-political consequences.² The short texts were quick to garner the attention of virtually everyone operating in the fields of philosophy, political theory, and beyond. This made Agamben the intellectual face of Covid-19 scepticism — if not denialism. The mere title of the initial blog post, “L'invenzione di un'epidemia [English: Invention of an Epidemic]”, would have perhaps been sufficient to warrant a storm, but the text itself was equally polemical. Here, the (ever controversial³) philosopher claims, among many other things, that the alleged pandemic is a mere

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“invention” and that it is not that different from the common flu.⁴ Therefore, one ought to also regard it as an equally (un)threatening disease and to respond to it in a corresponding manner. According to Agamben, the omnipresence of alarming news helped spread an escalating state of panic that allowed governments to set up and cement an unprecedented state of medical exception.⁵ In one of the many follow-up texts to his original piece, he went even further by stating that societies have stopped believing in anything besides bare life and that this has made people willing to renounce all social, political, cultural, and even religious aspects of their lives just so that one can prevent themselves from falling ill.⁶ This made the mere survival of the naked biological life the sole value left in the world.

Agamben’s equation seems rather odd — how and why would governments around the world reduce everything to biological survival in the face of a disease that was allegedly no more dangerous than the flu? I see only two possible explanations that would justify such a claim and neither of them seem terribly convincing: (1) there was a global conspiracy, either planned or opportunistic, yet synchronised, during which the sovereign entities grabbed power under the guise of an invented or exaggerated pandemic or (2) a prolonged obliviousness to facts, which led to overprotecting the population from a flu-like disease that did not warrant such a response. Meanwhile, governments around the world never realised what was going on. Of course, there is yet another explanation, which is to say that Agamben is incorrect and that governments were indeed looking to safeguard the population from an actual threat by “flattening the curve” of incoming patients during the early pandemic, which allowed the health care institutions to continue their operation to the best possible extent. However, even the supposedly overblown measures were not always enough to achieve such a goal since some hospitals became so overwhelmed that they needed to start choosing which patients they should prioritise.⁷

Agamben’s arguments sent the academic world into a spiralling debate. Many acclaimed thinkers such as Jean-Luc Nancy, Roberto Esposito, and Slavoj Žižek went on to voice their opinions on the matter.⁸ However, the heated opposition did not stop Agamben from approaching the topic from increasingly varied perspectives in other short texts and interviews that were released in short intervals. He tackled topics including the tragedy of students, whose life experience was altered severely due to the restrictions,⁹ and the alleged facelessness and apolitical isolation brought on by mask mandates.¹⁰ The eclectic fragments were soon compiled in the form of a concise booklet called *A che punto siamo? L’epidemia come politica*, which was subsequently translated into English as *Where Are We Now? The Epidemic as Politics*.¹¹ This collection acts as the primary source of this article.

Agamben has made major contributions to the state of the art. Indeed, few have influenced the still striving scholarly discussion on how power functions in modernity as much as he has. Agamben has gifted his readers many celebrated concepts, including but not limited to bare life and the (alleged) biopolitical subjects of *homo sacer* (the one that is cast aside from political order and can be killed without committing murder, although never sacrificed)¹² and his other, closely related notion of the *Muselmann* (the so-called living-dead or already-dead victim of the Nazi camp, perhaps named after the starving and shivering prisoners’ shaking poses, which were reminiscent of those of a praying Muslim).¹³ There are simply too many to name here. These notions

may still prove incredibly useful in the future. That being said, he has abandoned the original meaning of biopolitics, which is reflected in his views on the pandemic with regrettable consequences.

I do not focus primarily on the wider shortcomings of Agamben's general arguments regarding the pandemic. As I have mentioned, this topic has already been tackled by several authors. Instead, I emphasise on the alleged biopolitically charged elements within the curious narrative. What is at stake here is an attempt at focusing the blurred definition of biopolitics in a bid to both turn it into a more useful analytical instrument for wider purposes and use it as a tool to highlight that Agamben's questionable views regarding the pandemic response appear to stem directly from his alternative use of the term popularised by Michel Foucault. I do not wish to make the dogmatic claim that the Foucauldian definition ought to be considered as the only tolerable option. Instead, I wish to reinforce the claim that Foucault's and Agamben's views on biopolitics are irreconcilably different,¹⁴ which has led to an unnecessary state of ambiguity that could be solved relatively easily through demarcation, or the explicit separation of the distinctive meanings. Finally, I wish to argue that a Foucauldian approach offers a much sounder way of understanding the Covid response and that it manages to do so without needless polemics. Therefore, for the purposes of this essay, I am using biopolitics strictly in the Foucauldian sense.

In the first part after the introduction, I investigate some of the problems in Agamben's general theory of biopolitics. Next, I provide a brief glimpse into his writings regarding the pandemic. I focus especially on the parts that are related to the Italian philosopher's distinctive reading of biopolitics, which, as mentioned, has a hard time fitting into Foucault's earlier narrative. After this, I discuss Agamben's ideas in relation to the Foucauldian concept of state racism, meaning the elimination of "undesirable" subjects for the supposed biopolitical benefit of the greater masses. I do so to figure out whether Agamben's reading of the pandemic could perhaps be connected to Foucauldian biopolitics at least through this secondary route. Finally, I attempt to respond the key questions of this article by highlighting the reasons why Agamben's reaction to the pandemic has very little to do with Foucauldian biopolitics, why the same goes for his broader theory of what he calls biopolitics in general, what is the connection between the two, or, in other words, how does his conceptual reversal of biopolitics contribute to his rightfully criticised conclusions regarding the Covid crisis, and is there a better way of analysing the politics of the pandemic.

Background: Agamben and Biopolitics

At first glance, it may be argued that it is not excessively difficult to look for biopolitics in the modern world and that the phenomenon seems to manifest itself practically everywhere. In fact, this supposedly modern technology of power over biological human populations is sometimes ridiculed because of its seemingly over-encompassing nature. However, upon further inspection, such critique does not appear entirely fair. Foucault, who popularised the theory in the 1970s, argued that biopolitics stands diametrically opposed to another, still active although greatly diminished, "technology" of power, namely sovereign power.¹⁵ Instead of providing well-being and happiness, this chronologically speaking earlier technology was largely unconcerned with the details

of people's everyday lives. Unlike biopolitics, it was not focused on "making live"; instead, it either actively killed people or was passive in the sense that it simply allowed them to live without subjecting their bodies to political interventions.¹⁶ If I was to appropriate Agamben's formulation of bare life and to turn it on its head, I could say that sovereign power alone reduced people to bare life without any help from biopolitics. In other words, those subjected to the exception brought on by sovereign power could continue to live their bared lives, until the sovereign entity chose to intervene, which they could do at virtually any time and without suffering any consequences.¹⁷ The only intervention to life itself was a negative one. Although sovereign power has obviously changed and diluted from its most radical forms, it continues to exist today. There is still a clear counterpart to biopolitics within the Foucauldian system and, therefore, biopolitics is not an omnipresent phenomenon.

To make things more complicated, Agamben disagrees with his predecessor about the separation between the two technologies by equating biopolitics with its antithesis, sovereign power.¹⁸ The Italian goes even further by stating that their connection is age-old and, in fact, foundational to the Western political order, which climaxes (but does not conclude) during the Nazi death camps.¹⁹ According to him, there is no reason to even attempt forcing a separation between the two major "forms" of power.²⁰ Thus, he also ends up contributing into biopolitics' alleged ubiquity — virtually everything in modernity appears biopolitical to him. What I am attempting to showcase in this article is that the equation between the two technologies and the resulting problems seem to carry on to his recent writings regarding the pandemic. Since Agamben's polemics appear to emerge at least partly from his consolidated conception of biopolitics and sovereign power, I have chosen to begin by addressing the root of the problem. I seek to highlight that although Agamben is often labelled as the leading authority on biopolitics today, his alternative approach to the topic remains isolated from Foucault's brief but influential formulations. Furthermore, this seems to be true in the case of both his political thought in general and the coronavirus response in particular. Although the two thinkers utilise the same famous notion of "biopolitics", which Agamben adopts explicitly from Foucault, he seems to have ignored the most fundamental core of the concept as it was defined by the French thinker.

This irreconcilable difference is why Mika Ojakangas describes the relationship between Foucault and Agamben astutely as an "impossible dialogue".²¹ I see no choice but to agree with Ojakangas in stating that Agamben's ideas are virtually unrelated to the actual core of biopolitics understood in the Foucauldian sense — true biopolitics must always remain centred around the notion of care. Hence, any connection between life-affirming biopolitics and a life-diminishing force that creates bare existence can be secondary at most. This secondary connection remains a possibility because biopolitics can occasionally fulfil its goal of optimising the targeted primary forms of life by casting aside those that stand in the way of the general flourishing, for example, when inherently ill subjects are eliminated, sterilised, or otherwise barred from reproduction so that the public health can be supposedly maximised.²² The excluded person is by no means the subject of biopolitics or even affected by it, at least in any direct sense. Instead, they are simply victims of collateral damage or a side product of biopolitics' collaboration with sovereign power — something that remains unnecessary to the equation of what makes up biopolitics. If the obscure

character of *homo sacer* must be labelled as the example of something, that something is the Foucauldian notion of sovereign power, which is the diametrical opposite of biopolitics.²³

The same logic comes into play when Agamben discusses the pandemic. Once again, he appears to examine biopolitics and even evokes this familiar term; however, his arguments are in fact again tied to sovereign power (the state of exception, the power to decide over life and to dominate it). While doing this, he neglects the more obvious side of the story — the actual biopolitics of the pandemic (taking care of life, making the population proliferate, and safeguarding it against a real threat through large-scale interventions). This is to say that he disregards the real biopolitical event which is constituted by the measures that ensure not only survival of the population, but also “doing a bit better than just living”,²⁴ to borrow one of Foucault’s formulations. Whether Agamben’s claims regarding a sovereign power grab during an invented pandemic are correct does not have much to do with biopolitics per se. Certainly some of those in power may have abused the situation to gain political influence and other benefits during the once-in-a-century crisis. However, such actions did not take place on the matrix of biopolitics unless the claimed perpetrators were looking to increase the well-being of the population.

Agamben on the Pandemic

If Agamben’s writings on the pandemic were to be boiled down to a single claim, it would be that the whole population of Italy became reduced to bare life during the severe quarantines and other Covid restrictions. To quote Agamben, “people no longer believe in anything, except in a bare biological existence which should be preserved at any cost. But only tyranny, only the monstrous Leviathan with his drawn sword, can be built upon the fear of losing one’s life”.²⁵ This is to say that the sovereign entity (The Hobbesian Leviathan) determines the meaning and value of all life, which leads to the creation of a formless and bare life devoid of any other meaning besides its mere biological survival. Later on, Agamben doubles down by arguing that “people have been confined to their houses and, deprived of all social relationships, reduced to a condition of biological survival”²⁶ and that the government started to obsess about conserving “bare life, which is abstractly separated from social life”.²⁷ Although, the creation of bare life is an ancient phenomenon as per Agamben’s earlier work,²⁸ the newest state of exception appears distinctive because now “life has to be suspended in order to protect life”.²⁹ He describes the new order as a novel form of sovereign “health terror”, which is allowed to run amok because people view compliance as the only way of surviving the looming menace.³⁰ This contributes to something called “medicine-as-religion”.³¹ Agamben explains that health “has replaced salvation, biological life has taken the place of eternal life”.³² This logic occupies the area that used to belong to the church (hence the name), however, the church has done nothing to stop the new faith from taking its place, and seems to have gone as far as to grant the usurper its explicit blessing.³³

If one takes a step back and takes a look at Agamben’s various publications starting from his global breakthrough work, the very first *Homo Sacer* volume subtitled *Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, and continue to trace his moves all the way until the recent short texts compiled into *Where Are We Now?*, one can clearly see that people have already been reduced to bare life in an at least seemingly similar way before the recent turn.

According to his polemic statements, all people started to resemble the paradigmatic figures of bare life, *homines sacri*,³⁴ long before late 2019 and early 2020. However, as mentioned, life seems to assume a different level of bareness brought on by the Italian pandemic response.³⁵ Interestingly enough, it appears that there were already different levels to the bareness of the bared existence. The most memorable example is that of the *Muselmann* — the victim of the Nazi camps, who is pushed to the absolute border that separated life from death.³⁶ Such a person is clearly “barer” than the modern person who resembles the *homo sacer* due to a generalised exception that has become a rule. One is standing at the final border between life and death, the other is simply subjected to the possibility of the same happening to them. The fact that there are different degrees to bareness and formlessness would suggest that bare life is not an exclusively absolute status. Indeed, some formless lives are more formless than other “formless” lives, which would imply that at least the latter are not exactly formless or bare in the first place.

This begs the following question: where do the citizens of Italy that live under Covid restrictions land on this scale? Perhaps closer to the *Muselmänner* than the version of *homines sacri* that they already represented long before the pandemic. Although the same people were already living in the alleged paradigm of the camp, the pandemic intensified the bond between sovereign power and bare life even further.³⁷ However, the life of the isolated Italian citizen is also different from that of the *Muselman* in that the Italians’ biological survival is still valued unlike that of the destruction camp’s victim. In most cases, the *Muselmann* eventually lost even this barest imaginable form of life, which is instead made sacred during the pandemic.³⁸

This does not stop Agamben from finding the camp as the sole historical event that matches the pandemic response.³⁹ What then is the definition of bare life? Is it that the reduction takes place so that the bared life can be taken away without committing murder like he once claimed or that it is reduced to biological existence under the guise of protecting this minimal form of survival by any means necessary? Can it be both? This question seems to remain unsolved for now.

Perhaps the most notable similarity between Agamben’s pandemic writings and his more celebrated works is that they both compare modern political events to the monstrosities performed in Nazi Germany and, especially, the fate of those reduced to formlessness in the concentration camps. Indeed, he claims that the allegedly overblown response to the pandemic has led to people being kept in a “state of pure vegetative life”⁴⁰ in a manner that cannot be compared to no other historical event besides the Nazi camps. As mentioned, he was always eager to make similar, distasteful, equations.⁴¹ According to him, the Nazi camp was the ultimate manifestation of biopolitics — a purely biopolitical space, the existence of which also helped reveal the ancient connection between sovereign power and biopolitics, which has acted as the paradigm of Western politics since the dawn of language. Furthermore, the camp’s *modus operandi* goes on to persist throughout modernity rendering all human beings into something resembling the *homo sacer*.⁴²

According to Agamben, the camp and the quarantine are also strikingly similar in the sense that no matter how unrelenting they became, neither of them called for the removal of the existing constitutions.⁴³ Instead, both situations were handled with a state of exception that allowed the sovereign entity to function above regular legislation. All

Agamben's comparisons between World War II era horrors and the pandemic are striking, but none of them appear as over the top as the one where he discusses the role of educators. He lashes out against teachers who decided to comply with the "online dictatorship and to hold all their classes remotely" claiming that they are "the exact equivalent of those university professors who, in 1931, pledged allegiance to the Fascist regime".⁴⁴ Meanwhile the few people that did not obey ought to be remembered like the few heroes who were brave enough to stand against the political oppression.⁴⁵

It is important to mention that the explicit notion of biopolitics is not brought up often in the 21 pandemic writings that form *Where Are We Now?* Of course, it is a widely known fact that the Italian thinker has moved on to discuss new challenges after tackling the Foucauldian concept and related topics in his initial *Homo Sacer* instalment and some its first follow-ups during the 1990s and 2000s. Indeed, many of the issues that he has discussed since (even within the framework of the *Homo Sacer* series) are somewhat removed from his arguably most famous quest. That being said, the pandemic writings do still include some mentions of biopolitics (albeit that many of them are stirred up initially by his interviewers). These sparse, yet fascinating, references indicate that the notion of bare life, which Agamben still cites rather frequently, has not undergone a radical change from when he first introduced it. Therefore, I can still use it as the key to deciphering the Italian thinker's bold reinterpretation of biopolitics.

Agamben states that the excessive response to the pandemic led to a situation "where the demos is no longer a political body but, instead, a biopolitical population",⁴⁶ meaning that the possibility of genuine politics has disappeared in favour of something that focuses solely on biological survival. He continues by arguing that when "health becomes the object of a state politics transformed into biopolitics, then it ceases to concern itself first and foremost with the agency of each individual and becomes, instead, an obligation which must at any cost, no matter how high, be fulfilled".⁴⁷ On a similar note, Agamben echoes his own famous statements regarding the unprecedented biopolitical nature of modernity by stating that "Modern politics is, from top to bottom, biopolitics: what is at stake is, ultimately, biological life as such. The new element is that health is becoming a juridical obligation that has to be fulfilled at all costs".⁴⁸ This is to say that although modern politics was already biopolitical to begin with, the pandemic response adds a new layer of extremity to this arrangement as health has become the sole law and religion of an even further bared population. This is a prime example of Agamben's interpretation of biopolitics diverging from his predecessor's. Foucauldian biopolitics cannot be reduced to mere survival as its core task has to do with providing wellbeing and even happiness. The *bio* in biopolitics refers to life beyond mere biology.

Again, my aim here is to shine a light on the fact that Agamben's conceptual reversal contributes to his implausible claims regarding the Covid response and that utilising the Foucauldian conception of biopolitics could lead to different results. Let us compare the two by focusing on Foucauldian ideas about biopolitics and whether they can be applied to any of Agamben's arguments that I have highlighted thus far. As mentioned, the first thing that I noticed is that it appears illogical to argue that the pandemic is an invention that is no more dangerous than the common flue while also arguing that the response reaches an unprecedented biopolitical level. If the threat is truly exaggerated and the response a mere facade for the sovereign exception without any kind of real biopolitical motivation, then it should not be thought of as an authentic biopolitical intervention in

the first place. The core of biopolitics is not about producing bare life (although it can occasionally contribute to such an end for the subjects that it excludes as threats to the general population). Instead, biopolitics has to do with the well-being and even the happiness of the targeted population. Therefore, I agree with Ojakangas, according to whom the paradigmatic biopolitical subject is the middle-class citizen of a welfare society, who receives biopolitical optimisation.⁴⁹ In the case of the Third Reich, the biopolitical subject is the “Aryan” German, whose life is allegedly maximised (the aim of biopolitics), not the *Muselman*, who has been cast out of human society, reduced to the formless existence of allegedly bare life, and finally eliminated (the functioning of sovereign power, which is the opposite of biopolitics).

Although Agamben’s radical depiction of the pandemic response does not fit the Foucauldian definition of biopolitics, the mainstream interpretation does. Governments around the world sought to safeguard and optimise lives by virtually any means necessary and were at least somewhat successful in doing so, although discussing such things goes far beyond the scope of this article. Ironically, Agamben is correct in stating that the response was indeed biopolitical; however, the arguments that he uses to back this claim up have virtually nothing to do with biopolitics. Furthermore, whether or not the response to the pandemic divorces social life and biological life from one another in a manner that reminds Agamben of fascism is an entirely different question. Answering it does not help figure out whether one is dealing with biopolitics. The fact that the powers that be sought to save and optimise lives through political interventions determines that the actual response was indeed biopolitical whereas the Nazi regime was also biopolitical, among other reasons, because it sought to perfect the “Aryan race” through its twisted destruction of “undesirables”. Neither of the examples was biopolitical *because* they created real or alleged bare life but because they were at least trying to affirm some form of life (that of the “Aryan race” or the general public). This is where solid comparisons between the two events seem to end.

Next, I approach the issue from a different perspective to see if I can salvage Agamben’s theory — at least in some sense. This is Foucault’s notion of state racism, which combined biopolitics and sovereign power long before the first *Homo Sacer* book, although Agamben has failed to grasp the nuances of his predecessor’s undeniably brief analysis.

What about State Racism?

As Foucault’s work has shown, biopolitics tends fatally to morph into *thanatopolitics*. As the law begins to deal explicitly with the biological life of citizens as a good that needs taking care of, this interest immediately takes a dark turn towards the idea of a life that is, as the title of a well-known work published in Germany in 1920 puts it, “unworthy of life [*lebens unwertes Leben*]”.⁵⁰

Agamben is certainly right in that biopolitics can lead to both “positive” and “negative” outcomes. Indeed, the phenomenon seems to escape general moral classifications as it can signify both providing food for the needy and the murder of those with allegedly degenerative skull shapes. This seeming paradox has haunted many of the notable thinkers that have followed in Foucault’s footsteps, including but not limited to Agamben and Esposito.⁵¹ However, surprisingly few seem to have noticed that Foucault

managed to clear the seeming impasse in a satisfactory manner, especially in his “*Il faut défendre la société*” [Eng. “*Society Must Be Defended*”] lectures at the Collège de France.⁵² His solution was that all manifestations of biopolitics seek to affirm some form of cherished life; however, this central goal can lead to the elimination of “harmful” forms of life that stand in the way of general proliferation.⁵³ This is not to say that all forms of killing are biopolitical. Instead, the specific arrangement of state racism can only be considered biopolitical under the condition that the (literal or symbolic) elimination of limited parts of the population is employed to improve the lives of the said population at large, or at least the flourishing of some of its especially valued members, such as the healthy, heterosexual, and “Aryan” member of the Nazi Party.

In other words, there must always be a primary biopolitical subject whose life can then be optimised through the exclusion or liquidation of someone who is cast outside of the biopolitical arrangement. Therefore, the ever-affirming technology can optimise life with the cost of allegedly superfluous or harmful lives, whose demise is orchestrated through sovereign power. However, some form of optimisation remains the key to this kind of biopolitics, too. There is no biopolitics without some alleged “positive” intentions or effects, no matter how twisted the calculation becomes. The politics of life itself does not, and in fact cannot, become the politics of death; it may simply harness the sovereign power to kill as a way of optimising selected forms of life even further. As mentioned, the Third Reich was a biopolitical state because it sought to proliferate the “Aryan” population through the elimination of “undesirable” groups such as the Jews, Roma, Sinti, homosexual men, and the inherently ill. As one can see, state racism encompasses more than just racism in the outdated ethnic sense. Instead, it can be used to capture a plethora of different groups that appear to stand in the way of the claimed maximisation and optimisation of life.

As mentioned, Agamben’s formulations do not include this maxim of affirmation as the basis of all biopolitics. Instead, he chooses to describe the excluded character of bare life, *homo sacer*, as a biopolitical subject.⁵⁴ In order for such a statement to be true one would have to discard Foucault’s most fundamental definition of biopolitics entirely. Furthermore, Agamben seems to believe that whenever “a value is ascertained, a non-value is, necessarily, established: the flipside of protecting health is excluding and eliminating everything that can give rise to disease”.⁵⁵ This statement is curiously metaphysical. Can one not, at least theoretically, imagine a biopolitical arrangement that does not exclude anyone from meaningful life and takes care of everyone’s wellbeing without discrimination? I would like to claim that the Covid-19 vaccination programmes attempted to achieve exactly this. Many campaigns started off by administering doses to those most at risk due to their old age or underlying conditions. Soon everyone was able to get vaccinated if they wanted to (or in certain countries whether they wanted to or not).⁵⁶ The only way that Agamben’s case could perhaps be furthered is by stating that this is only true within Western countries and that the global picture appears vastly different.⁵⁷ However, there is no evidence to suggest that high-income countries were vaccinating their residents first to “eliminate” or “exclude” those living in developing countries because such people “can give rise to disease”.⁵⁸ The explanation is likely much simpler — governments of first world countries were simply looking to protect their own populations first. Whether this may be considered ethical is another question,

and answering it is outside the scope of this article. The same goes for the alleged efficacy or inefficacy of the vaccines.

I am by no means the first to notice the inconsistencies in Agamben's and Foucault's analyses on biopolitics. As I have established, Ojakangas has done an excellent job explaining that the figure of *homo sacer* cannot be the true subject of biopolitics since their life is in fact never affirmed, safeguarded, or optimised via biopolitical processes.⁵⁹ In fact, the *homo sacer* is completely excluded from all biopolitics, and they can thus only be included within a biopolitical arrangements through negation, as the opposite of the biopolitical subject. The real paradigmatic subject of biopolitics is rather the middle-class citizen of a welfare country, say Sweden, who receives constant biopolitical affirmation from a state that looks out for their well-being and happiness.⁶⁰ If a connection can exist between the *homo sacer* and biopolitics, it is that bare life is a plausible by-product of biopolitics operating side by side with sovereign power in an almost paradoxical manner — it is an outside casualty whose life is *not* actually touched by the technology of biopolitics in any tangible manner. Hence, the introduction of state racism does not seem to save Agamben's formulation from being deemed non-biopolitical from a Foucauldian point of view.

Conclusions

Agamben suggests that the entire population of Italy was turned into formless figures of bare life by the allegedly excessive response to the invented Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing sovereign state of exception. There are several reasons why such a claim itself is unsound.⁶¹ However, I have attempted to dismantle it from the very specific viewpoint of biopolitics. Because Agamben employs the Foucauldian notion of biopolitics to describe what happened, it might appear easy to simply designate his position on the pandemic as biopolitical and stop the discussion. However, as I have stated, Agamben's reinterpreted version of biopolitics is neither the sole nor the most advantageous way of assessing the Covid crisis. The Foucauldian logic of biopolitics offers a better approach. It requires that at least some portion of the population is affirmed and optimised. A situation where the entire population is transformed into bare life in a sovereign power grab does not fulfil this requirement even if the alleged sovereign exception is based on medico-biological claims — and especially if these claims are seen as fabricated and excessive. Agamben's arguments fall short as he attempts to claim that the pandemic is both a biopolitical event and an invented threat. His position on the pandemic (and on biopolitics in general) is thus pseudo-biopolitical at most, again, judging from a Foucauldian perspective.

To conclude, Agamben is not actually discussing Foucauldian biopolitics, at least in any direct sense. This is because there can be no biopolitics unless some form of life is maximised or optimised. Simply maintaining biological existence is not enough. This holds true both in the case of the Italian thinker's acclaimed philosophical works as well as his more recent polemics regarding the pandemic response (his outlandish conclusions regarding Covid appear to emerge from – and, for the most part, cohere with – his own previous work). Instead, he seems to be discussing the sovereignty of power established through the state of exception, which stands as the geometrical opposite of biopolitics within the framework of Foucault's brief yet forceful analyses. Although the two technologies can operate in a conjoined manner in a limited sense, as I have

explained with the case of state racism, this is hardly enough to save Agamben's polemics from appearing radically different from Foucauldian biopolitics. Agamben does not seem to believe that anyone's life is maximised or optimised under the Covid restrictions and that everyone has, instead, become a subject of sovereign exception and, therefore, reduced to bare life. This is to say that sovereign power seems to be amplified whereas biopolitics is nowhere to be found.

Because Agamben's suggested constellation should not be called biopolitics without any further clarification, it is a desperate need of another name. For the sake of clarity, one ought to refer to it as the politics of bare life or, at the most, Agamben's radically revised notion of biopolitics, but never simply biopolitics without further disclaimers. While some have rushed to call for the now-tarnished thinker's "deplatformation"⁶² due to the outlandish nature of his claims, I do not think that his entire political thought ought to be disregarded completely. The highly problematic pandemic writings aside, Agamben's ideas have inspired an entire generation of scholars to study fascinating topics such as bare life and the paradigm of the camp. However, one must face the fact that his arrangements are too far removed from Foucault's to be described by a single term without violating one or the other. Agamben tries to circumvent this problem by equating the two technologies of power, however, this is not enough to alter the fact that the resulting arrangement has to do with sovereign power and not biopolitics. I would like to argue that disconnecting the two thinkers' approaches can help biopolitics become a much more useful tool for future analyses.

If Agamben is incorrect in claiming that his depiction of an unnecessary sovereign state of emergency that reduces everyone to bare life is a biopolitical intervention, this begs the following question: What would a Foucauldian biopolitical response to the pandemic look like? As I have suggested, one can start by examining the Italian government's actual measures against the spread of the virus. When the nation was hit hard and its healthcare system became incapable of dealing with the influx of hospitalised patients, the government had to rely on drastic measures to prevent unnecessary deaths. This had nothing to do with fetishising "mere survival"; instead, this was a population political manoeuvre that was employed to safeguard life under dire circumstances and to provide maximal well-being for the threatened population. Such an approach appears to lead to much more plausible arguments regarding the politics of the pandemic. One can also imagine a (hypothetical) state racist response to the pandemic where a government would have chosen to actively sacrifice members of a select strata of the population (say an ethnic minority or people with certain chronic diseases) to either get rid of them directly or to preserve vaccinations, therapeutics, or hospital beds to the chosen parts of the said population. One could still call such an arrangement biopolitical in a state racist manner. However, as mentioned, this does not apply to Agamben's analysis, according to which, no form of life was optimised. Whenever absolutely nothing is optimised, there is absolutely no place for biopolitics.

Notes

1. Gatto et al., "Spread and Dynamics of the COVID-19 Epidemic", 10484–91.

2. See Agamben, “L’invenzione di un’epidemia”. The first piece was published in Italian on *Quodlibet* in February 22, 2020. This and 20 subsequent writings were collected and translated into Agamben, *Where Are We Now?*.
3. See Prozorov, “A Farewell to Homo Sacer?”, 63–80. Sergei Prozorov notes that Agamben’s new writings are very much on brand for him both in regard to the subject matter and the unfavourable initial response that they received from critics. The pandemic texts appear to carry an especially strong likeness to the first *Homo Sacer* volume, which delved on the sovereign exception and bare life, and received heavy criticism when it was first published.
4. Agamben, *Where are We Now?*, 11–13.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 38–9, 64.
7. As noted on the BBC website on April 29, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200428-coronavirus-how-doctors-choose-who-lives-and-dies>.
8. Nancy, “Viral Exception”; Esposito, “Cured to the Bitter End”; and Žižek, “Monitor and Punish?”
9. Agamben, *Where are We Now?*, 72–4.
10. Ibid., 86–7.
11. See Ibid.
12. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 1–12, 71–2.
13. See Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 41–4.
14. Ojakangas, “Impossible Dialogue on Bio-Power”, 26.
15. Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité I*, 181.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 177. According to Foucault, sovereign power has its roots in the father’s ancient paternal right over the lives of other family members including slaves. The father could kill any of his subordinates because it was believed that they all owed their lives to him.
18. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 1–12.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ojakangas, “Impossible Dialogue on Bio-Power”, 26.
22. Foucault, “*Il faut défendre la société*”, 228.
23. Ojakangas, “Impossible Dialogue on Bio-Power”, 5–28.
24. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 326.
25. Agamben, *Where Are We Now?*, 24–25.
26. Ibid., 38–9.
27. Ibid., 64.
28. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 1–12.
29. Agamben, *Where Are We Now?*, 28.
30. Ibid., 96–7.
31. Ibid., 64.
32. Ibid., 97.
33. Ibid.
34. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 170–2.
35. See Agamben, *Where Are We Now?*, 24–5.
36. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 41–4.
37. See Prozorov, “A Farewell to Homo Sacer?”, 63–80.
38. Ibid. Prozorov notes that even the *Muselmänner* were never entirely formless or bare as some of them still made it back to recount their stories. The same is obviously true for those living under Covid restrictions in a society that employs mere survival as its singular value. This is not to say that the two cases are similar. Life under Covid-ridden Italy was not “bare(d) life produced by sovereign power but a life endowed with a certain form, a form that might not appeal to Agamben due to its superficiality or triviality, but a form nonetheless”. Ibid. To put it differently, Agamben’s attack seems to simply moralise against a specific form of life by calling it formless, which it is not.

39. Agamben, *Where Are We Now?*, 39–40.
40. Ibid.
41. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 170–2.
42. Ibid.
43. Agamben, *Where Are We Now?*, 8.
44. Ibid., 74.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid., 68.
47. Ibid., 80.
48. Ibid., 29.
49. Ojakangas, “Impossible Dialogue on Bio-Power”, 6.
50. Agamben, *Where Are We Now?*, 80, 102 n 16; Agamben’s reference to life that is “unworthy of life” is from Binding and Hoche, *Allowing the Destruction of Life Unworthy Life*.
51. See Esposito, *Bios*, 32.
52. See Foucault, “*Il faut défendre la société*”. However, it is important to note that the lectures were not published in book form until the 1990s. This is to say that Agamben may not have been familiar with them when he was writing the first instalment in the *Homo Sacer* series.
53. Ibid., 228.
54. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 71–2.
55. Agamben, *Where Are We Now?*, 80.
56. As Reuters notes on their website on 31 December 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/countries-making-covid-19-vaccines-mandatory-2021-08-16/>.
57. Maxmen, “The Fight to manufacture COVID Vaccines”.
58. Agamben, *Where Are We Now?*, 80.
59. See Ojakangas, “Impossible Dialogue on Bio-Power”.
60. Ibid.
61. See Prozorov, “A Farewell to Homo Sacer?”, 63–80.
62. See the aptly titled piece: Christiaens, “Must Society be Defended from Agamben?”; see also van den Berge, “Biopolitics and the Coronavirus”, 3–6.

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