

# POLITICS IS AN ONTOLOGICAL ISSUE

## GUEST EDITOR'S PREFACE

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### **ABSTRACT**

According to Giorgio Agamben, in order to become a subject, and consequently to give itself a history, the individual must first say itself, and by saying itself it is destined to inhabit its most authentic ethical dwelling in an ever-partial and situated way. Such ethical dwelling is identified as the impotent and totipotent infancy which, translating itself perpetually into act, is inaccessible in its breadth and in its complete availability to pure use. The present issue of «*Etica&Politica/Ethics&Politics*» aims at probing Agamben's ontology of the subject in critical terms, drawing its premises from previous or external studies to the *Homo sacer* series, and investigating its political repercussions in *Homo sacer*.

### **KEYWORDS**

Agamben, politics, ontology, ontology, politics

With the launch of the *Homo sacer* series, Giorgio Agamben became a reference point for the international philosophy. Thanks to translations in many languages and the diffusion of his thought in many countries, Agamben has been known, studied and criticized more abroad than in Italy. His contribution to the development of political philosophy towards a new and promising way, as well as his introduction of new concepts in the field, are widely acknowledged. His thinking does not simply shed light on the rules of the political game. At the same time, he does not merely denounce the exclusion of a large mass of individuals from that game. The subjects that Agamben observes with greater interest are placed on a hybrid margin between the inside and the outside: they are not protagonists, yet they are not even completely extraneous to the political discourse which is actually established on their marginalization.

Agamben's political philosophy is, first of all, an observation of structural movements and internal logics assumed by the historical forms of politics. The programmatic line exposed at the beginning of the *Homo sacer* project is to

complete and correct some of Michel Foucault's intuitions about biopolitics, understood as the geometry of modern power. The modern era is the moment in which the relation between power and life becomes more evident. Yet, on a closer inspection, power captures life since ancient times, declining this relation in various ways but always tracing a zone of suspension on which the decision between an inside and an outside can be taken.

While Foucault observed the infra-juridical plots that fill the wider meshes of the law, Agamben looks at the outer edge – which is never completely external –, describing a zone of indistinction from which a sovereign decision defines life. As a matter of fact, he reflects on the interweaving of sovereign and biopolitical logic in order to identify a relationship between power and life which, before becoming normative, is primarily ontological.

Therefore, the topic extends beyond a strictly political issue. In 2002, in *L'Aperto*, Agamben returns on a variety of issues already touched in his previous studies and shows how the same logic of exception is not only at the basis of the birth of law and politics, but also of the human being itself: the definition is a space to be constantly conquered through the set of distinctions and articulations that have always marked the boundary around the concept of man, both as a natural datum and a political task.

The human being, conceived as a borderline concept which is never reducible to an elementary dimension, is rather to be understood as a process of humanisation or animalisation, in which life oscillates between its natural data and the attempt to give itself a history – until the contemporary moment when the historical task has ended up coinciding with the natural datum. In the effort to give oneself a history, life becomes human, and the human being rediscovers itself as a subject, that is, an individual aware of its own location as well as of the affirmation of its concrete form of life.

According to Agamben, the bond that politics establish with the living being and with human life primarily shows the way the West gives shape to its own categories and objects. Agamben polarizes political thinkers: some define him as heretical or impolitical, whereas some others consider him a sort of prophet. In order to understand his political philosophy, it is necessary to embed it in a much wider and more complex ontological framework, which the success of the *Homo sacer* series has obscured for a certain period, but in which Agamben calibrated the logical tools of his criticism of politics and, most of all, of metaphysics, language, and history.

Agamben's political philosophy is an ontology, because it consists in a critical look aimed at exploring the way man thinks and speaks, thereby giving itself a history. In other words, politics is first and foremost an ontology because it deals with the ways in which the human being defines, finds and prepares a well-

defined dwelling for itself. In Agamben's thought, the conception of the human being goes beyond the status of an "animal endowed with language": the human is such by receiving a language that is not its own, and with which it initiates the history of the forms of life.

Rejecting the image of a subject that has always been self-adherent to itself, Agamben identifies the language as the transcendental dimension in which the process of subjectification initiates. Only in the immediate self-presence of the enunciation – a process of appropriation of the symbolic and linguistic apparatus – the human being determines itself as a subject. Such process of subjectification, however, is indissolubly linked to a process of desubjectification, since the subject, in recognizing itself as such only by saying "I", and therefore placing itself in the enunciative instance, recognizes itself only as an infra-linguistic and self-referential function. As a consequence, the human being as a subject constantly finds itself confined in a form of life that makes its existence possible, thereby destining it to historical determination.

In order to become a subject, a human life, and consequently to give itself a history, the individual must first say itself, and by saying itself it is destined to inhabit its most authentic ethical dwelling in an ever-partial and situated way. Such ethical dwelling is identified as the impotent and totipotent infancy which, translating itself perpetually into act, is inaccessible in its breadth and in its complete availability to pure use.

The present issue of «*Etica&Politica/Ethics&Politics*» aims at probing Agamben's ontology of the subject in critical terms, drawing its premises from previous or external studies to the *Homo sacer* series, and investigating its political repercussions in *Homo sacer: the paradox of sovereignty*, the figures of inert resistance, the destituent gesture through which Agamben imagines a very problematic overcoming of the metaphysical-nihilism bound and, with it, of the subject-object dichotomy.

Is it possible to think of a political life free from any figure of a relationship, which is both lived "together" and beyond any kind of relationship? With what ontological categories is it possible to think such a life? What does it mean to overcome the subject-object dichotomy? How can we access such a form-of-life, if every decision to access it is already a cut into the totipotential dimension? In what way the deactivation of Western ontology allows a way of emancipation, and how can such emancipation be lived by a subject who is no longer a subject but a simple contemplation of power?