IN ODRADEK'S WORLD
BARE LIFE AND HISTORICAL MATERIALISM IN AGAMBEN AND BENJAMIN

MIGUEL VATTER

1

Introduction: Bare Life as Threshold of Sovereign Power

In *Homo sacer* Agamben argues that the project of total domination over life, which comes into its own with totalitarian and biopolitical forms of power, depends on a logic of sovereignty that runs through Western civilization since its origins in Greece and Rome. According to this logic, every legal system, in order to enforce its norms, must capture the "bare life" of its addressees in a virtual state of exception to its own laws [27]. Bare life (*nuda vita*) is a concept that Agamben develops from Benjamin's expression *das blosse Leben,* found in early writings like "The Critique of Violence" and "Goethe's Elective Affinities." These writings put forward the thesis that fate manifests itself mythically as violence over bare life, and that such violence of fate is "identical to lawmaking violence" [SW 1: 248]. The legitimate violence that legal systems employ to enforce their own legal ends appears to Benjamin as a manifestation (and no longer a means) of a more primordial, mythical power over natural life. Symbolic of this power over life is the Greek myth of Niobe, who was punished by the gods for taking pride in her powers of childbearing. To Benjamin, this myth signals that law carries out the dictates of fate, ignoring the happiness or the innocence of human beings [SW 1: 203].[1] The mythical use of law in order to exert violence over the living is a form of biopower: "mythic violence is bloody power over bare life for its own sake [*Blutgewalt über das blosse Leben um ihrer selbst*]" [SW 1: 250]. This power over life is what determines bare life as guilty even before having committed any trespass. The question that motivates Benjamin's theoretical production concerns the redemption or emancipation of bare life from this mythical power. I argue that Agamben's political thought is a continuation of this project.

Benjamin famously and controversially opposes the mythical violence exerted by legal systems to a divine kind of violence, "just as in all spheres God opposes myth":

> *The dissolution of legal violence stems (as cannot be shown in detail here) from the guilt of bare natural life* [die Verschuldung des blossen natürlichen Lebens], *which consigns the living, innocent and unhappy, to a retribution that 'expiates'*

I would like to thank Roberto Esposito, Peter Fenves, Simona Forti, Vanessa Lemm, Alberto Moreiras, and Samuel Weber for reading previous drafts of this essay. A special thanks goes to the helpful comments of three anonymous reviewers.

1. Life appears as guilty, and thus as calling for punishment and violation, only within the "order of law," which thus belongs to "the demonic stage of human existence." On Benjamin's conception of the demonic and its relation to his angelology, see Agamben, Potentialities *138–59.*

> *the guilt of bare life—and also doubtless purifies the guilty, not of guilt, but of law. For with bare life, the rule of law over the living ceases* [Denn mit dem blossen Leben hört die Herrschaft des Rechts über den Lebendigen auf]. . . . *Divine violence is pure power over life for the sake of the living* [reine Gewalt über alles Leben um des Lebendigen willen]. [SW 1: 250]

Mythical and divine forms of violence are manifestations of "power over life": both are biopolitical forms of power. But whereas mythical violence pursues this power as an end in itself, and therefore seeks to maintain everything that lives in its context of guilt and needful of punishment, divine violence pursues power in order to "expiate" the guilt of bare life and thus put an end to the rule of law over the living. "For with bare life, the rule of law over the living ceases": this mysterious claim seems to withhold the possibility that power over bare life not only has a mythical and deadly character, but also contains the root of a "positive" or life-preserving power whose manifestation is the bloodless violence of divine, expiatory punishment.[2] Perhaps for this reason, in *Homo sacer* Agamben thematizes "bare life" in a section entitled "Threshold," which brings to a close the part of the book dedicated to sovereignty.

The purpose of this essay is to understand how a bare life that is entirely subjected to sovereign power can nevertheless be the only form in which human subjectivity is capable of escaping from the captivity of the law and heralds "the irrevocable exodus from any sovereignty" in the form of a "nonstatist politics."[3] If life is to be emancipated from the "willed" state of exception that lies at the basis of the juridical order tied to the state, Agamben needs to show the reverse of what he claims to have demonstrated throughout *Homo sacer*; namely, he needs to think "law in its nonrelation to life and life in its nonrelation to law" [Agamben, *State of Exception* 88]. Such an affirmative biopolitics beyond state and sovereignty, which is pursued by both Benjamin and Agamben in their theorizations of bare life, echoes Marx's fundamental vision of the abolition of private property and the legal-political edifice which is built on it as a condition for the final emancipation of "living labor" in a communist association of free producers.[4] My guiding hypothesis is that Agamben's positive account of bare life, as I reconstruct it through a reading of his texts prior and subsequent to *Homo sacer,* reworks four central motifs found in Marx's historical materialism: the facticity of alienated existence (section 2); the fetishism of commodities (section 3); the profanity of bourgeois society (section 4); and the nihilism of revolution (section 5). Agamben offers an account of facticity, fetishism, profanation, and nihilism as features of a bare life understood as a threshold between a state of being dominated and a new condition of freedom.

---

2. The concept of bare life is mentioned but not developed in Derrida's commentary on Benjamin's essay [Derrida, Force de la loi *124–26]. For Judith Butler, divine violence has the finality of manifesting the "sacred in life," which coincides with a dissolution of the bond between guilt and the rule of law (but not with a dissolution of guilt). The sacred in life, on her reading, is the permanent transience of bare life [Butler, "Critique, Coercion, and Sacred Life in Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence'" 216–17]. The idea of bare life is not thematized in Axel Honneth's recent commentary on "Critique of Violence" [*Pathologien Der Vernunft *154–56].*

3. Agamben, Means without End *8–9. For the most part, the recent literature in English dedicated to Agamben's political thought has centred on his conception of sovereignty, not on his positive politics of bare life. See, for instance, Norris, Geulen, Sinnerbrink, Fox, and Passavant. Passavant's essay does attempt to discuss how Agamben's thought may lead beyond the threshold of sovereignty, but without taking bare life as its guiding thread.*

*4. In this way I hope that this essay contributes to the ongoing conversation between Agamben and Negri over the idea of communism and its biopolitical presuppositions. See, for instance, Hardt and Negri's claim that "capitalist prehistory comes to an end . . . when naked life is raised up to the dignity of productive power, or really when it appears as the wealth of virtuality" [*Empire *366].*

Much of Agamben's corpus can be understood as providing an innovative interpretation and synthesis of Benjamin's theory of bare life with Heidegger's analytic of existence. The second goal of this essay is to argue that this mediation between the two great cultural antagonists of German philosophy in the early twentieth century is consistently oriented by the negative dialectics developed by Adorno. Agamben's conception of bare life becomes intelligible only if one starts from Adorno's ground-breaking intuition that "only to a life that is perverted into thingly form [is] an escape from the overall context of nature promised" [Benjamin and Adorno 69]. Adorno gives this form of bare life the name of Odradek, an animated spool of wood and metal found in a story by Kafka. Odradek's life-world symbolizes the utter profanity, the "Hell" in which things exist in capitalism: used up, forgotten, left for lost or without employment, they call in vain for our care. On Agamben's reading, Odradek's world, where nothing has its proper place and every object has lost all relation to functionality or instrumentality, also projects an image of "Heaven." For utopia is found wherever things can be enjoyed (or used) without being used up (or consumed); wherever our dealing with things escapes the confines of a rationalized and professionalized activity. Odradek's placelessness is also the outopia which is the redeemed condition of communism. The importance of Adorno in the development of Agamben's conception of bare life has to date remained unperceived. If correct, my hypothesis suggests a way of understanding Agamben's political thought as a particularly radical and consequent continuation of the project of critical theory. In particular, Agamben's recasting of Benjamin's and Adorno's discussions over historical materialism sheds light on their differences with respect to the role that theology has to play in conceiving the possibility and meaning of revolutionary praxis.

2

Heidegger, Facticity, and the Disintegration of the Life-World

Marx defines the proletariat as "a class of labourers who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital" [*Communist Manifesto* 58]. The life of the proletariat, in this sense, is a bare life, because they find work only so long as their "living labour" gets transformed into private property ("dead labour," as Marx calls it), a social power that mortifies their very lives. The existential condition of reified labor-power, starting with Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness,* has been described by the concept of facticity. It is no surprise, then, that in his effort to identify the features of the bare life of "sacred man" (*homo sacer*) that promise an escape from sovereign power over life, Agamben recurs to Heidegger's fundamental reworking of the concept of facticity.

Facticity describes that feature of human existence "for which what is at stake in its way of living is living itself."[5] In unpacking this definition, Agamben relies on the distinction between two Greek terms for life: *bios,* understood as a "way of life," and *zoe,* understood as the "fact of living" itself. By means of this distinction, Agamben can map the problem of Heideggerian facticity onto the space of modern biopower explored by Foucault. If biopolitics means that "modern man is an animal whose politics [*bios*/MV] places his existence as a living being [*zoe*/MV] in question" [Foucault 143], then this is equivalent to the claim that under capitalist conditions of production and reproduction of human life, the "world" of existential possibilities, the *bios,* of individuals can no longer

5. Agamben, Means without End *4. Compare with Heidegger's basic formula of* Da-sein *in* Sein und Zeit*: "in its Being this being is concerned about its very Being [*diesem Seienden in seinem Sein um dieses Sein selbst geht*]" [12].*

be separated from the fact of living, the *zoe,* of these individuals. For the factitious existence of reified living labor, the human world becomes all too literally a "life-world," that is, a context of social interaction with others in which one's "world," or the possible social roles (*bios*) that one can adopt in order to obtain recognition, are disclosed by the facts of one's biological "life" (*zoe*).

In *The Open* Agamben offers a political reading of the Husserlian-Heideggerian turn to the life-world in order to show both how biopolitical forms of power constitute themselves in and through the disclosure of life-worlds, and what kind of reinterpretation of the life-world is needed in order to move toward a positive, emancipatory biopolitics beyond the biopower of totalitarian regimes and late capitalist liberal regimes. To situate Agamben's operation on the concept of the life-world it is useful to compare it with the application that Habermas, since *Legitimation Crisis,* has given to this concept.[6] In that early work Habermas argued that if a social system can be described as entering into a "crisis," then this is possible only because there are two irreducible forms of socialization, one dependent on the system and the other on the life-world. In the latter, according to Habermas, meaning is not generated as a function of the autopoietic requirements of a social system, but stems from the communicative action oriented to understanding (*Verständigung*) of those who share the life-world. Meaning cannot be generated otherwise than as a process of exchanging reasons that justify the making of speech-acts that raise universal validity claims. The possibility of a crisis (economic, political, and cultural-motivational) reflects the noncorrespondence or contradiction between the (forced) exchange of signs in social systems and the (free and undistorted) exchange of reasons in the life-world. In order to maintain the claim that the life-world has priority over the system for the individual, one must develop an account of the fundamental motivation to make free use of one's life (for example, in the noneconomical practice of redeeming validity claims) at the level of life's factical reproduction. Agamben's interpretation of the motifs of facticity and life-world in Heidegger, and their application to a critique of political economy, can be said to provide such an account. Furthermore, his deconstruction of the Heideggerian concept of life-world carries out and radicalizes motifs that are found in the first generation of the Frankfurt School.

In *The Open* Agamben offers a new account of the life-world as a machinelike process whereby the species "man" (*anthropos*) is produced by the joining of *zoe* (life) and *bios* (world) in the form of the exception (both an exclusion that includes and an inclusion that excludes), whose end result or rest is bare life. Agamben sees this "anthropological machine" at work in the ancient life-world of the *polis,* where animal *zoe* is "included" into human *bios* only in order to "exclude" it from the political life of citizens in the form of "slaves," "barbarians," and "women" whose exploitation makes possible that political life. Conversely, in the age of totalitarian biopolitics, entire human ways of life, or *bios* (for instance, those of "Jews," "Gypsies," "homosexuals," "handicapped persons," "stateless peoples," and "savages") are "excluded" from political and civil life only in order to be "included" in it as bestial *zoe*: "pests," "vermin," "life not worthy of being lived," which is to be selected from the rest of humanity and eventually exterminated or left to die [*Open* 37].

The constitution of a life-world makes possible "man" as a species because from the start it identifies human life as a form of animal life that additionally has the capacity of being-political or being-rational. Agamben shows that these identificatory characteristics emerge once the "animal" is posited as something negative, particular, in order for the "human" as universal to be determined by way of the negation of the negation. But such

---

6. *On the fundamental opposition between life-world and system that stands at the basis of Habermas's version of critical theory, see Habermas,* Legitimation Crisis, *and Habermas,* The Theory of Communicative Action. Volume 2: Lifeworld and System.

a negation of the negation only manages to bring in the particular as something subsumed by the universal, thus eliminating *zoe* or animal life as the nonidentical. Agamben's critique of the life-world, therefore, tacitly recurs to Adorno's conception of identification: "The equating of the negation of the negation with positivity is the quintessence of identification."[7] The identification of a "human" nature turns out to be completely inhuman or bestial.[8] The legal and the anthropological machines featured in *Homo sacer* and *The Open* operate according to what Adorno called the "totalitarian" and "circular" logic of identification [174]. The particular (that is, the exclusive) and the universal (that is, the inclusive) are not allowed to engage in their "reciprocal critique" [148], and this places life and world in the condition that Marcuse called "one-dimensionality." The anthropological machine is Agamben's biopolitical version of the dialectic of enlightened humanism: in and through the humanistic (identificatory) distinction between man and animal, it constitutes a monstrous continuum of dominated life in which animal life is personalized and human life is bestialized.

Agamben wants to run the anthropological machine backwards. He seeks an Adornian "disintegration" of the life-world, where both terms, life/*zoe* and world/*bios* are allowed to fall apart and escape identification. *Bios* is bracketed from *zoe,* world from life, in order to understand the particularity of animal life as the non-identical with respect to the human life-world constituted by identifications. This newly understood *zoe* is not joined to *bios* by way of an exclusive inclusion, but is placed in a "nonrelation" to it: human worldliness is reinterpreted by Agamben to be the outgrowth of the experience of being excluded or shut out, not from the *polis* or world, as happens in modern biopolitics, but from what includes the animal in its environment. For Heidegger, animals relate to their environment because they are captivated (*benommen*) by certain things in it which function as triggers for their instincts. Unlike the animal, which is "absorbed" (*eingenommen*) by what surrounds it, Heidegger believes that the human being or *Da-sein* fashions for itself a distance from things by establishing a "world-disclosure" or a horizon of linguistically mediated sense (*Sinn* as *Bedeutsamkeit*).[9] Agamben turns Heidegger on his head by defining human freedom as a function of its proximity to, rather than distance from, animal life. To have a world now means "a grasping of the animal not-open," much as Adorno calls for a grasping of the nonidentical in a rational identity.[10] Such a noncaptivating enclosedness corresponds in Agamben to the nonidentical *qua* suffering body in Adorno and has its ultimate presupposition in Marx's idea of nature as the material that is always presupposed, and never exhausted, by human labor.[11] In a dis-integrated

---

7. "Die Gleichsetzung der Negation der Negation mit Positivität ist die Quintessenz des Identifizierens" [Adorno, Negative Dialektik *161].*

8. Only through the "anthropological machine" do animals become beasts. For the attempt to overturn this perspective, and show the "bestiality" of man from the point of view of the animal, see Derrida, L'animal que donc je suis, *and Lemm.*

9. Agamben, The Open *54. Agamben offers here a reading of theses found in Heidegger,* The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude.

10. Adorno, Negative Dialektik *150. In Agamben's discourse, the term "the Open" (*das Offene*) has two, opposite meanings. In one sense,* das Offene *refers, in the manner of Rilke or Nietzsche, to what surrounds the animal and keeps it "in," without dominating or excluding it, however. In another sense,* das Offene, *in the manner of Heidegger, is a synonym for what only a world-disclosure is able to obtain, namely, access to the Being of beings. Agamben wants to argue that the authentic world-disclosure occurs only when one is made aware of the animal Open. For a recent attempt to apply Agamben's discourse to understand the specificity of what a "German-Jewish" tradition from Kafka through Rosenzweig and Benjamin to Celan understands as "creaturely life," see Santner 10–15.*

11. Adorno, Negative Dialektik *202–03. This is the kind of conception of nature that Benjamin appeals to in Thesis XI when he envisages "a kind of labor which, far from exploiting nature, is*

life-world, *zoe* would no longer provide the "content" for *bios,* but *bios* would become a "form-of-life": "a life that can never be separated from its form, a life [*bios*] in which it is never possible to isolate something such as bare life [*zoe*]."[12] The idea of a form-of-life, "an existence over which power no longer seems to have any hold" [*Homo sacer* 153], depends on recovering Marx's understanding of human praxis as a "metabolism" with nature or the environment.

Like Heidegger, Agamben locates the point of emergence of human *bios* from animal *zoe* in the mood of "profound boredom." But for Agamben this mood signals that the properly human condition is one of being consciously "fascinated" by things without wanting to "do" anything with them or about them, analogous to the sense in which the animal finds itself contained by its environment. The inability to make use of things, because of the fascination they exert on us, becomes the spy of a new metabolism between the human being and its environment, far removed from the dominating pretensions of *homo faber.* The experience of profound boredom, when human beings are excluded from the world of occupations and professions, the world of busy-ness, contains the threshold or passage through which human life is included in animal life: "Dasein is simply an animal that has learned to become bored; it has awakened *from* its own captivation *to* its own captivation. This awakening of the living being to its own being-captivated, this anxious and resolute opening to a not-open, is the human" [*Open* 70]. Agamben's positive biopolitics is thus a call for the human being to appropriate "his own concealedness, his own animality, which neither remains hidden nor is made an object of mastery, but is thought as such, as pure abandonment" [*Open* 70]. In this condition, "the [anthropological] machine is, so to speak, stopped . . . in the reciprocal suspension of the two terms, something for which we perhaps have no name and which is neither animal nor man settles in between nature and humanity and holds itself in the mastered relation, in the saved night" [*Open* 83].[13] Bare life appears as saved when it becomes the object of a "profane illumination" that has given up all hope (at least, hope for us) of transcendence. This illumination or enlightenment sheds a light on things that does not dissipate the "night" or the unknowability in which nature remains immersed, but nonetheless is "strong enough" to emancipate the human being from the mythical power of unredeemed nature, both externally and internally.

3

Adorno, Fetishism, and the End of Use-Value

The later Benjamin sought profane illuminations amidst the "spiritual-animal kingdom" of modern political economy, where commodity fetishism, precisely in rendering individuals captive to things which have lost all of their utility in becoming exchange values, anticipates the "reconciled" human condition. Agamben's readings of Benjamin from the beginning follow the guiding thread offered by the phenomenon of commodity fetishism. The fetishism of commodities refers to a condition where things—the products rather than individuals, the producers—enjoy a properly social relationship. Under commodity

---

*capable of delivering her of the creations which lie dormant in her womb as potentials" [*Illuminations *259].*

12. Agamben, Means without End *3. For another reading of the fundamental transition from bare life to form-of-life, see Quintana.*

*13. See Adorno's injunction: "try to live in such a way that one may believe to have lived life like a good animal [*versuchen, es so zu leben, dass man glauben darf, ein gutes Tier gewesen zu sein*]" [*Negative Dialektik *294].*

fetishism, producers are isolated from each other, unaware of the social nature of their productive activity; what social life they do have is reduced to the bare life of consumers. Benjamin and Adorno think that commodity fetishism, if looked at dialectically, contains within itself the resources to overturn the alienation of consumers into a community of free producers. The key to this reversal is to understand that things are not destined to be simply the means through which human beings reproduce their lives. By establishing between things a social relation, commodity fetishism shows that things have the potential to enjoy a life beyond that assigned by their use- and exchange-values, and that human emancipation from the domination of mythical nature passes through the redemption of nature from its mythical aspect. Recognizing this surplus of life in things establishes with nature a relation other than that of domination and exploitation: just as facticity does, the phenomenon of fetishism gives access to another sense in which bare life functions as a threshold concept between domination and freedom.[14] Agamben's actualization of historical materialism is in great measure a reflection on the exchanges between Benjamin and Adorno with regard to the dialectical character of commodity fetishism.

In the first section of his exposé on the Arcades Project, entitled "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century," Benjamin presents the standpoint from which he intends to renew historical materialism:

> *Corresponding to the form of the new means of production, which in the beginning is still ruled by the form of the old (Marx), are images in the collective consciousness in which the new is permeated with the old. These images are wish images; in them the collective seeks both to overcome and to transfigure the immaturity of the social product and the inadequacies in the social organization of production. . . . In the dream in which each epoch entertains images of its successor, the latter appears wedded to elements of primal history* [Urgeschichte]*—that is, to elements of a classless society. And the experiences of such a society—as stored in the unconscious of the collective—engender, through interpenetration with what is new, the utopia that has left its traces in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions.* [SW 3: 33–34]

Every society, according to Benjamin, dreams of the society that will succeed it. This dream, following Freud's fundamental thesis, formulates the fulfillment of a wish that society were otherwise than what it is.[15] Such a wish-fulfillment is expressed as an image (analogous to Freud's rebus), characterized by the return of a "primal history" in which society still had no class divisions; that is, the image contains elements of primitive communism. In the dreamwork of the society's collective unconscious, these primitive elements of a classless society are fused with the recent elements of the new forms of production of the society into a utopia, which corresponds to nonprimitive communism, that is, communism as understood by Marx, as the end of the long human prehistory and

---

14. The concept of fetishism, and its relation to facticity, characterizes Agamben's thought from his earliest publications. See Agamben's The Man without Content *and* Stanze. *It receives special attention in Agamben's "The Passion of Facticity."*

15. On this passage, see the commentary in Buck-Morss [110–58], which remains one of the most lucid interpretations to date. Where I disagree with Buck-Morss is that in my opinion she minimizes the distance between Benjamin and Adorno on the problem of the dialectical wish image. For Buck-Morss, "their disagreement was in fact limited to their evaluation of the collective's utopian desire (and hence the degree to which mass culture could be redeemed). Benjamin affirmed this desire as a transitory moment in a process of cultural transition. Adorno dismissed it as irredeemably ideological" [121]. On all these themes, see also Marinas.

the beginning of a conscious praxis on the part of the human species. To wake up to this collective dream image, for Benjamin, is then the only way to "realize" the collective unconscious wish for communism.

In a later passage of the same exposé, dedicated to the question of how Baudelaire's lyric poetry can render the industrialized landscape of the metropolis, Benjamin specifies his idea of dream image: "Such an image is afforded by the commodity per se: as fetish. Such an image is presented by the arcades, which are house no less than street. Such an image is the prostitute – seller and sold in one" [SW 3: 40]. [16] The commodity understood as a fetish; the arcade insofar as it denies the difference between the private and the public, the interior and the street; the prostitute as owner (of the means of production), worker, and commodity in one person: in all three cases the "primitive" is joined with the "modern" so as to offer a "dialectical" image of historical progress. This image is a radical contraction of the past into the present which brings the linear unfolding of historical time to a "standstill" and opens up a new place or space (literally: an ou-topia) for things in which they are "saved": communism as the "saved night" of nature.

Adorno wrote Benjamin a long response to his text, in a now famous letter, which in my opinion contains the crucial discussion out of which Agamben's own interpretation of Benjamin emerges. Adorno contests the "undialectical" approach to utopia that he finds in Benjamin's idea of a dialectical image:

> *You interpret the relationship between the oldest and the newest . . . in terms of a utopian reference to the "classless society." The archaic thereby becomes a complementary addition to the new, instead of actually being "the newest" itself, and is therefore rendered undialectical. However, at the same time, and equally undialectically, the image of classlessness is projected back into mythology . . . instead of becoming properly transparent as the phantasmagoria of Hell*. [Benjamin and Adorno 106]

For Adorno, Benjamin's idea of the image relates the modern (the newest) to the archaic (the oldest) only in a contingent manner, rather than thinking their identity. Adorno reasons as follows: only if the modern is captured in all of its primitiveness will it stand in contradiction with its concept, and only the awareness of its self-contradiction can motivate the present to transcend itself and realize a "better" society. Conversely, Benjamin is also charged with not rendering the primitive, that is, the idea of a classless society, as sufficiently modern. Communism, according to Adorno, should arise as the phantasmagoric image of "Heaven" that is projected up from the "Hell" of the capitalist present. In Benjamin, instead, Adorno finds that the idea of communism remains tied down to an archaic past, to the figure of the Golden Age, which by definition is an epoch that precedes history and for that reason is forever gone.

At stake in this criticism is the status of the commodity as dialectical image. Adorno is concerned that Benjamin negates the "Hell" of commodity fetishism in a manner that wishes to restore the primordial, "natural" use-value back to things, as depicted in the myth of the Golden Age. But, on his view, the importance of the capitalist mode of production is precisely that of constituting the commodity as

> *an alien object in which use-value perishes, and on the other, it is an alien survivor that outlives its own immediacy. It is through commodities, and not directly in relation to human beings, that we receive the promise of immortality. . . . It*

---

16. The paternity of the idea of commodity fetishism as a dialectical image is disputed among Benjamin, Horkheimer, and Adorno. See Hillach.

seems to me that this is where the basic epistemological character of Kafka is to be identified, particularly in Odradek, as a commodity that has survived to no purpose. [Benjamin and Adorno 108]

The loss of use-value of things is ultimately a gain, both for things and for individuals. A return to primitive communism rejects the positive aspects of the historical development of productive forces and means. Only this development furnishes the properly materialist ground on which to realize the promise that labor can be abolished without regression, in the form of an emancipation of productive forces in a rationally organized society.[17] Adorno thinks of communism as a state in which commodities "outlive" or "survive" their use-value, while not regressing back to a stage in which they were "merely" things. That is why he speaks of the need to "liberate things from the curse of their utility."[18]

Adorno calls such an idea of a "saved" commodity by the name of Odradek, after the character found in Kafka's story "Die Sorge des Hausvaters" in *Ein Landarzt*. Odradek is a star-shaped spool for thread with two wooden crossbar sticks coming out of it, thanks to which it can "stand upright as if on two legs." Odradek is "extraordinarily mobile and impossible to catch"; it lies about in attics, on staircases, in corridors; sometimes it moves out of the house to other homes, but it always returns. At times it even answers to very simple questions, "like a child."[19] Odradek appears to be immortal, because beings that lack purpose or end cannot die. And this very fact of the commodity's immortality is the "concern" (*Sorge*) of the "father of the house": Odradek might still be around for his children and the children of his children, having "survived" the death of the father.

Odradek plays a small but significant role within Benjamin's interpretations of Kafka. Benjamin refers to him as "the most singular bastard which the prehistoric world has begotten with guilt. . . . Odradek is the form which things assume in oblivion. They are distorted. The 'cares of a family man,' which no one can identify, are distorted" [SW 2: 811]. Odradek stands for a human product that was "begotten with guilt." It is both a thing and a child: the object of an indistinguishably biological and economic production. The "father" of the house constantly tries to forget about it or remove it from consciousness, but this removal causes him anxiety. Adorno criticizes Benjamin's interpretation of Odradek as an object springing forth from "the immemorial world and guilt." He proposes that Odradek be interpreted as "the other face of the world of things . . . a sign of distortion—but precisely as such he is also a motif of transcendence, namely, of the ultimate limit and of the reconciliation of the organic and the inorganic, or of the overcoming of death: Odradek 'lives on.' Expressed in another way, it is only to a life that is perverted in thingly form that an escape from the overall context of nature is promised" [Benjamin and Adorno 69]. Adorno thus reads Odradek as an allegory of commodity fetishism, applying Benjamin's own mystical interpretation of allegory to the commodity. Odradek is "a sign of distortion" because it stands for a reified human praxis. But Odradek is also "a motif of transcendence" because it figures the sur-vival of things over their own inorganic nature, a bare life that is a function of their fetishism.

According to Adorno, Odradek, the creature, shows concern (*Sorge*) for the father of the house, for its creator: it desires the redemption of the father.

---

17. In Adorno's criticism to Benjamin there resonates Horkheimer's theory of labor and rationality found in Horkheimer 215, 224.

*18. Benjamin and Adorno 107. In his exposé Benjamin speaks of things being "freed from the drudgery of being useful" [*Arcades Project *7].*

19. Kafka, Erzählungen *129. On such creatures in Benjamin and Kafka, see also Hanssen, and Santner 26–27.*

> *If his [Odradek's] origin lies with the father of the house, does he not then precisely represent the anxious concern and danger for the latter, does he not anticipate precisely the overcoming of the creaturely state of guilt, and is not this concern—truly a case of Heidegger put right side up—the secret key, indeed the most indubitable promise of hope, precisely through the overcoming of the house itself?* [Benjamin and Adorno 69]

By meeting the gaze of the father, Odradek undoes the father's alienation, which proceeds from his economy (*oikos-nomia*), from the law of his household.[20] Heidegger is turned "right side up," as Adorno puts it, because with Odradek the forgotten things show concern or care for *Da-sein,* and not simply the reverse.[21] For Heidegger, *Da-sein* projects into the future through its concern for its own being, and caring for things is part of this concern. But if things were to begin to care for human beings, or return their concern, then the continuum of history, which Adorno calls the "catastrophe," would be interrupted, and the utopia in which humankind "already" finds itself would let itself finally be grasped.

Agamben's historical materialism returns to Benjamin's and Adorno's idea of commodity fetishism as dialectical image. But in his interpretation of the dialectical image, Agamben clearly favors Adorno's conception over that of Benjamin. Furthermore, in his analysis of fetishism Agamben adopts and radicalizes Adorno's inversion of Heideggerian care, the crucial category of factitious existence. Agamben's preference for Adorno's conception of dialectical image is already visible in his first major book, *Stanze,* which contains a chapter significantly entitled "In the World of Odradek." Although this chapter is a loose commentary of Benjamin's 1935 exposé, already from the choice of title it appears that Agamben's reading of Benjamin is filtered through the lens of Adorno. As I have shown, to read Odradek as a dialectical image of the fetishism of commodities is an intuition that belongs to Adorno in the first instance. When Agamben takes up Benjamin's question of the relation between Baudelaire's lyric poetry and advanced capitalism, it is again Adorno's thesis that reemerges:

> *[Baudelaire] attempted to create a commodity . . . in which the process of fetishization would be pushed to such an extreme that it would annihilate the reality of the commodity as such. A commodity . . . whose value consists, thus, in its uselessness, and whose use consists in its own unhandiness is no longer a commodity: the absolute commodification of the work of art is also the most radical abolition of the commodity.* [*Stanze* 51, my translation]

---

20. Horkheimer and Adorno have always argued that the family is not only an essential moment of individuation, but also perhaps the only place where the individual experiences that happiness it longs for during the rest of its life, if only the family can be liberated from the father's authority over the household [Horkheimer 191]. See also the recent rehabilitation of the family in Honneth, Leiden an Unbestimmtheit *94–101.*

21. Judith Butler has recently given a brief reading of Adorno's preoccupation with Odradek and understands it as a "refutation of the early Heidegger . . . insofar as Odradek becomes a figure for the gesture that jettisons the very notion of will or Entschlossenheit *by which the human is defined" [*Giving an Account of Oneself *105]. Similarly, Kaufmann's interesting essay on Adorno's and Benjamin's critiques of use-value also opposes Adorno to Heidegger when it comes to the Odradek interpretation [166–69]. As I show below, I think that Agamben's intuition as to a proximity between Adorno and Heidegger (if only in the figure of the "reversal" of Heidegger) is not only more correct but also more helpful when it comes to understanding the difference between Benjamin and Adorno over the significance of Odradek.*

The strategy to overcome commodity fetishism that Agamben wishes to attribute to Benjamin's reading of Baudelaire in reality shares much more with the theory of free exchange formulated by Adorno. The priority of exchange over use value is the sine qua non of his negative dialectics. On the one hand, the exchange value of things is the social reality of identification. But, on the other hand, there is no returning to original use-value, for this would amount to a "regression into past injustice" [Adorno 150], when matters were decided on the basis of violence and expropriation, and not through exchange. Only the "realization" of "the ideal of free and just exchange [*das Ideal freien und gerechten Tausch*]" can lead beyond capitalist exchange [150].[22]

The attempt to read Heidegger's conception of the facticity of human existence together with Adorno's conception of the fetishism of commodities is one of the oldest and most constant motifs in Agamben's work.[23] The inversion of Heideggerian care, in which Adorno identifies the key to "saving" the fetishized commodity, resurfaces in Agamben as follows: "[care] wants the thing with all of its predicates, its being just so [*il suo essere tale qual è*]. It desires the 'what' only in as much as it is 'so'—this is its particular fetishism [*Esso desidera il quale solo in quanto è tale—questo è il suo particolare feticismo*] [*La comunità* 4, my translation]." The hermeneutic care for things that lays them out (*auslegen*) "as" what they are is rendered in terms of the peculiar fetishism that grasps the essence or in-itself of things in their self-exhibition of qualities.

Benjamin's 1935 exposé links the fetishism of commodities with a third kind of value, beyond their typical use- and exchange-values, which he calls "exhibition value." Exhibition-value is what art gains in the age of its mechanical reproducibility at the price of losing its "aura," the experience of an unbridgeable "distance" with respect to things [*Illuminations* 222–23]. Agamben retrieves the dialectical potential of the exhibition-value of things by identifying it as the correlate of a way of being that is entirely exposed to the self-exhibition of things. The exhibition-value of things, on this reading, neither reduces the thing to the identification made possible by these qualities (that is, to the status of a use-object), nor does it reify *Da-sein* itself. Because *Da-sein* consists in being (*sein*) the openness or exposition (*Da*) to things where they exhibit themselves as they really are in themselves, in their just-being-so, *Da-sein* remains faithful to the fundamental lack-of-essence, or emptiness-of-content, which corresponds to the nonreified, nonnaturalized conception of human existence.

Agamben's reading of Heidegger's analytic of care as a critique of reification is comparable to Lucien Goldmann's Lukácsian reading of Heidegger, except that Agamben aligns himself with Adorno's critique of Lukács's conception of reification as still being caught within identity thinking.[24] Adorno's intuition is that the reification of the subject

---

22. This is not to deny that Agamben occasionally directs criticisms to Adorno. The most extended of these remarks is contained in a text written shortly after Stanze, *where he discusses the 1938 exchange between Adorno and Benjamin over the latter's* Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire *[Agamben,* Infanzia e storia *111–27]. Agamben defends Benjamin against Adorno's charge that his analysis of Baudelaire relates in an undialectical manner the economic structure to the cultural superstructure, skipping over the necessary mediations: "Marx abolishes the metaphysical distinction between animal and ratio, between nature and culture, between matter and form, in order to assert that, in praxis, animality is humanity, nature is culture, matter is form. If this is true, the relation between structure and superstructure can be neither a causal determination nor a dialectical mediation, but an immediate identity" [Agamben,* Infanzia e storia *123, my translation]. I showed in the second section how in his subsequent work, notably in* The Open, *Agamben gives an interpretation of the above mentioned identities between man and animal, nature and culture, precisely in the sense of Adorno's "rational identity."*

*23. See the essay "The Passion of Facticity," where Agamben argues that "the structure of Dasein is marked by a kind of original fetishism" [*Potentialities *196].*

24. See Goldmann. For a recent return to these motifs, see Honneth, Verdinglichung.

needs to be counteracted through the affirmation of the priority of the object: "Things grow hard as the fragments of what was subjugated; their salvation means the love for things."[25] The love for things that is expressed in the fetishism of commodities is a necessary moment in overturning the "enmity against otherness" which defines identity-thinking and its assertion of the priority of the subject over the object [191].[26]

Agamben employs Adorno's intuition in order to rethink the conditions of the Marxist demand for an authentically social mode of production, for a community of free producers. Fetishism becomes a point of inversion in the relation between object and subject which allows the subject to divest itself of its self-identity as an owner of the object and so found a real community with others. The division of labor in capitalist societies calls for individuals to be in one way or another, but never to be "just" so, to be their "bare" life: "a singularity without identity, a common and absolutely exposed singularity" [Agamben, *La comunità* 44]. Agamben suggests that a dialectical understanding of the fetishism of the commodity indicates what is required for this coincidence of singularity and community to take place. The truth behind the fetishism of the commodity, whereby things relate to each other in a social manner, is that it provides an inverted image of the kind of impersonal and common relation individuals would have to attain with their own "living labor" in order to recover themselves out of the alienation into which they are cast by virtue of "owning" (and then "selling") their labor power. In "a community of free individuals, carrying on their work with the means of production in common" the labor-power of each would no longer be their private property; rather, it would be made use of consciously by the community for the sake of the life of the individual rather than for the sake of its products.

> *If instead we define the common . . . as a point of indifference between the proper and the improper—that is, as something that can never be grasped in terms of either expropriation or appropriation but that can be grasped, rather, only as use—the essential political problem then becomes: "How does one use the common?"* [Agamben, *Means without End* 117]

Such use-of-the-common corresponds to Adorno's formulation of communism as a "reconciled condition" where what is other (*das Fremde*) "in the vouchsafed proximity remains the far and the distinct, beyond what is heterogeneous and what is one's own."[27] In this social condition, the individual would no longer have to appropriate for itself the ways of being disclosed by the world of commodities by acquiring a profession (which ultimately expropriates the individual of its bare life), but, to the contrary, the bare life or labor-power of the individual would be called upon by the common or world or "community of free individuals" in order to be made use of "in accordance with a settled plan,"[28] with the end of releasing this life from its laboring condition into its singularity and "just" being so.

---

25. "Die Dinge verhärten sich als Bruchstücke dessen, was unterjocht ward; seine Errettung meint die Liebe zu den Dingen" [Adorno, Negative Dialektik *191].*

26. On the distinction between Lukács's and Adorno's conceptions of reification, see the still-pertinent analysis in Rose 41–48. For an Agambenian interpretation of Adorno see Düttmann. Düttmann's commentary on Minima moralia *offers a play on the variations of the Adornian expression* So ist es / Es ist so, *which clearly adopts Agamben's own play on* essere tale qual è, *which I discuss above.*

27. "In der gewährten Nähe das Ferne und Verschiedene bleibt, jenseits des Heterogenen wie des Eigenen" [Adorno, Negative Dialektik *192].*

28. Marx, Capital, *vol. 1, part 1, ch. 1, sect. 4 [*Marx-Engels Reader *327]. See also the account of the common found in Hardt and Negri,* Multitude *103–15, 202–08.*

4

Paul, Profanation, and the Free Use of the Common

In his book on the "spirit" of modern capitalism, Max Weber shows that for anything to be put to a use in modern, rationalized capitalism, the productive activity in which such use is found requires a "vocation" that places the activity beyond the principle of utility [54]. In modern capitalism, the rational calculus of utilities is only possible on the condition that things get done, not because of the happiness this will bring, but exclusively because everyone conducts their life as a professional; because one arrives at one's activity by following a vocation. The professionalization of activity, insofar as it entails an ascetic conduct of life (the "Protestant ethic"), is as such redemptive, a sign of received grace: in capitalism, the categorical imperative takes the form of an injunction to "do one's job," come what may. In order to attain what Agamben calls a "free use of the common," it is therefore necessary to emancipate praxis from its captivity under the category of the idea of vocation understood as profession. To do so, Agamben turns the idea of vocation from its Lutheran, worldly secular signification back to its originary, Pauline, messianic formulation.

Weber rests his interpretation of the Protestant ethic and its function in generating the "spirit" of capitalism, in large measure, on the claim that Luther creatively mistranslated Paul's eschatological idea of calling (*klesis*) into the mundane idea of profession (*Beruf*), understood as a way of conducting oneself through life (*Lebensführung*).[29] For Weber, Pauline *klesis* does not have the worldly connotation that Luther gives to the idea of calling: Paul's command that "every one should remain in the state in which he was called. . . . For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freeman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ" [I Cor. 7, 20–23] is eschatologically indifferent to worldly status. The idea is that there is no need to worry about one's standing in life since there is not much time left before this world comes to an end with the second coming of the Messiah. Agamben, instead, reads Paul's idea of vocation as a messianic injunction which refers to "a most intimate shift of every single mundane condition by virtue of its being 'called'" [Agamben, *Il tempo che resta* 28, my translation]. Agamben here identifies vocation with the messianic tension that "shifts" everything into its proper place thematized in Benjamin's and Adorno's discussions concerning Odradek. The coming-to-an-end of the world is not an event that happens at some future point in linear time, but refers to the arrest and interruption of the linear and homogeneous unfolding of time in which one conducts one's life professionally and without an end in mind.

Agamben claims that the "most rigorous definition of messianic life," that is, of this "shift" that saves the profane world, is to be found in the following passage from the First Letter to the Corinthians:

> *I mean, brethren, the appointed time has grown very short; from now on, let those who have wives live as though (*hos me*) they had none, and those who mourn as though (*hos me*) they were not mourning . . . and those who deal with the world as though (*hos me*) they had no dealings with it*. [I Cor. 7, 29–32]

Agamben takes the expression "as though" to denote that place to which one is called by the vocation. Thus, vocation means to be called "towards nothing and to no place: that is why it can coincide with the factical condition in which each thing finds itself called. But, precisely because of this, the call completely revokes the condition. The messianic voca-

---

29. See the decisive third footnote of chapter 3 of The Protestant Ethic *[207–10].*

tion is the revocation of all vocations" [30]. On this messianic reading, Paul's conception of the vocation is radically anti-Lutheran because it revokes the professional character of every worldly status and activity in which one finds oneself involved and commands that we turn over the things with which we busy ourselves into a free and common use. Thus it is not surprising to find the motif of the Franciscan *usus facti* resurface in Agamben's reading of Paul's idea of use as *chresis* [32]. Nor is one perplexed by his anachronistic association of Pauline *klesis* with the idea of social "class" and thus linking the messianic community (*ekklesia,* the community of messianic *klesesis*) to the idea of a class consciousness. To attain a class consciousness now means to remain in one's profession or calling while all the time revoking the use that these professions assign to things, and in so doing bring to an end the division of labor [35 ff.].

But what can it mean, to act by revoking our professional ethos and giving things a free use? Agamben addresses this question in a recent essay dedicated to the idea of profanation. He begins by returning to the origin of the idea of a fetish in archaic religious practices. The fetish is an object that is removed from the common use given to it by men and is translated into the space of the sacred by means of a sacrifice [*Stanze* 58]. If communism means the simultaneous "freedom" of things from their use-value and their return to a "free" and common use beyond use-value, then the separation or alienation entailed by the fetish and its sacred space needs to be profanated. Profanation becomes the model for revolutionary praxis. Marx thought that the profanation of capitalist production would of itself dispel the "mystery" of commodity fetishism.[30] Yet neither Benjamin nor Agamben shares his optimism about the profanating force of capitalism. In a fragment entitled "Capitalism as Religion"[31] Benjamin argues that capitalist enterprise not only is motivated by a secularized religious "spirit," as Weber describes it, but itself constitutes a religion. Unlike other religions, however, the cult of capitalism is not dedicated to the redemption from guilt as much as to its exacerbation. Capitalism as religion seeks to build up the debt of the believer, and thus (following Nietzsche's original identification of the root of guilt in a state of indebtedness) it accumulates their feelings of guilt [Agamben, "In Praise of Profanation" 80]. Debt accumulates because capitalism separates every thing from itself, in the form of the division between its use- and its exchange-value, so that no free use can be made of it. Capitalism sacralizes things by withdrawing them from the sphere of free use and turning them into objects of consumption: what can only be used up is what can no longer be freely used. On this model, the production of commodities as a fetishism of things is the basic ritual of capitalism as religion. As Agamben points out, consumer capitalism seems to hinder, rather than bring to fulfillment, a process of profanation.[32]

Agamben therefore proposes to rethink profanation not simply as what negates the sacred or fetish character of things: rather, profanation brings the sacred things back into the order of the profane, back into a free use, while at the same time it maintains these things immune from having use-value. A rest of the sacred is preserved in the profanation

---

30. "The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. . . . All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned" [Marx, The Communist Manifesto, Marx-Engels Reader *476].*

31. For recent interpretations of this text, see the essay dedicated to it in Samuel Weber, Targets of Opportunity, *and the commentary found in Steiner.*

32. Agamben, "In Praise of Profanation" 82. Agamben's explanation of capitalism's immunity against revolutionary consciousness (that is, its immunity against profanation) recalls the theses of Marcuse on consumer society and its ability to nullify social contradictions in One-Dimensional Man.

of things.[33] Agamben defines those things which are brought back into common use but maintain the rest of sacredness that puts them beyond utility and use-value "playthings." Therefore, the messianic revocation of professional conduct in reality amounts to a profanation of the objects of a profession or vocation by playing with and through their fetish character ["In Praise of Profanation" 75–76].

Agamben gives two striking and intentionally profanatory illustrations of what this profanation of a profession or vocation entails. The first illustration recapitulates the motif of the disintegration of the life-world with his analysis of commodity fetishism, which I discussed in previous sections. Agamben makes the following analogy: just as the plaything with which a cat pretends to hunt takes the place of a real mouse without being one (that is, because of its fetish character), so too this playful use of the fetish actually "frees" the mouse from being a biologically determined trigger or disinhibitor of the cat's (aggressive) instinct ["In Praise of Profanation" 86]. Playing with fetishes is the only way in which, so to speak, the human being becomes open to its instinctual captivation, and thereby escapes the "destiny" or "vicissitudes" that instincts pose for it. The fetish plaything of the cat becomes exemplary of a "pure means," an object which no longer has a use, which is no longer a means to attain a pregiven end. Adorno's and Horkheimer's critique of "instrumental rationality" is affirmed, but in a form that is purified of the rationalistic, civilizational framework in which it was first formulated. At the same time, this "pure means" frees the mouse (the original trigger of the instinct) to "be" just what it is, and no longer to "be" only in function of the instinct of the cat, that is, to be the cat's prey. Heidegger's motif of authentic existence is maintained, but cleansed of its original humanistic framework.

The second illustration of the idea of communism beyond use-value found in the essay on profanation is given through a reading of pornography [88–92]. Agamben argues that in the films of the porn star Chloé De Lyce one can witness the subversion of the exhibition-value of her body. Giving the body an exhibition value is what the jargon of modeling refers to as "striking a pose." The porn star in question, according to Agamben, is capable of striking poses that function as "pure means": her impassivity during the sexual act no longer communicates anything, there is neither the mimesis of pleasure nor the mimesis of a complicity with the viewer. Much like the cat playing with the fetish mouse, the porn star's poses play with the body in a way that no longer triggers the erotic "instinct" of the viewers, and thus frees their bodies from the captivation entailed by the instinct. Here the porn star, one is led to surmise, reappropiates her alienated body in and through its most extreme fetishization: not by putting this body to a nonsexual or nonpornographic use, but by separating it from all predetermined purposes (this separation in and through profanation is the "rest" of sacredness that remains amidst the greatest profanity), and thus freeing it up for an altogether other use in common. Mademoiselle De Lyce's im-passive poses, on this reading, signal a "new, collective use of sexuality" in which the body becomes a sacrificial altar of private property.

Agamben intends his interpretation of St. Paul's messianism as a clarification of Benjamin's messianic politics. In the *Theologico-Political Fragment,* Benjamin defines the messianic as a *restitutio in integrum*: a return of nature, both spatially and temporally, into a state of completion. Corresponding to the "spiritual *restitution in integrum*" in which the flesh resurrects after death, Benjamin posits a "worldly restitution that leads to the eternity of a downfall [*die Ewigkeit eines Unterganges*]. . . . For nature is messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away" [SW 3: 305–06]. The redemption of nature

---

33. The idea of the "rest" or "remainder" is fundamental to Agamben's thought, and it appears in the titles of Ciò che resta di Auschwitz *(*Remnants of Auschwitz. Homo sacer III. The Witness and the Archive*), and in* Il tempo che resta *(*The Time That Remains*).*

does not entail that nature has to be transcended into a sphere that is supernatural: nature reaches its completion in and through an "eternal" decline. The examples of profanation discussed above can also be read as figures of a redeemed nature. From this perspective, Benjamin defines revolutionary action as a striving "for such a passing away—even the passing away of those stages of mankind that are nature"; and that is why its "method must be called nihilism" [SW 3: 306]. Agamben provides a Pauline and Heideggerian declension to Benjamin's politics of nihilism: the destruction of the world means the revocation of all of its ways of being, of all of its possibilities, into the facticity of the life that can make a free use of them. In the messianic condition things are not simply remembered (taken out of the oblivion that connotes guilt), but they are "in us and with us as forgotten, as lost—and only in this sense are they unforgotten" [SW 3: 38]. Agamben's Pauline rendition of Benjamin's idea of play is a "serious" interpretation of the recovery of forgotten things as a form of their "resurrection." In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno formulates the program of a recovery of the lostness of things (where being lost refers to their being subsumed as objects by identity-thinking) in terms of the desire for the nonidentical to be named, or identified, as what it is, by the very thought that, in identifying it, necessarily misses or forgets it [152]. It is not entirely by chance, therefore, that Adorno ends the second part of *Negative Dialectics* with a Pauline reference, namely, the claim that the historical materialist "agrees with theology where he is most materialistic. His longing would be for the resurrection of the flesh."[34] Agamben's interpretation of Paul contains assumptions that correspond to what Adorno demanded, in vain, of Benjamin: "a restoration of theology, or rather a radicalization of the dialectic down to the glowing core of theology."[35] But this interpretation does not decide the question of whether Benjamin himself employs Pauline theologemes in view of such a spiritualist interpretation of *restitutio in integro*.

5

Kafka, the Messianic, and Revolutionary Praxis

During the 1920s and 1930s Benjamin and Scholem engaged in an epistolary dispute over the significance of Kafka's writings, in particular his parable *Before the Law*. Scholem and Benjamin disagreed on how to understand the antinomian elements of the idea of messianism in Judaism and, more particularly, how Kafka's text reflects such antinomianism in the epoch of the destruction of tradition and experience (for Judaism this corresponds to the epoch of the crisis of the *aggadah*).[36] Agamben illustrates the threshold that divides and joins the mythical from the messianic aspects of bare life by staging the opposition between Scholem and Benjamin with regard to Kafka.

Kafka's *Before the Law* tells the story of a "man from the country" who stations himself before the open gate of the Law and waits, to the point of death, for the doorkeeper to let him in.[37] On dying, the doorkeeper reveals to him that this entrance to the Law had

---

34. "Mit der Theologie kommt er dort überein, wo er am materialistischesten ist. Seine Sehnsucht wäre die Auferstehung des Fleisches" [207].

35. Adorno's letter to Benjamin, August 2, 1935, in Benjamin, CC 498.

36. On the discussion of Kafka's relation to Judaism and theology, see Horwitz, Biale 88–90, and Kaufmann 153–54. On theological motifs in Benjamin's Kafka essays, see Weigel 170–209.

37. On the parable as a meditation on violence "before" the law, see Derrida, Force de la loi, *and Derrida, "Devant la loi: Préjugés," which Agamben discusses in* Homo sacer *49–54. On the relation between Agamben and Derrida, see the indications found in Geulen 127–28, and especially Thurschwell.*

been left open only for him, and that it would henceforth be closed again. For Agamben this parable shows how the law exercises its mythical violence over life, captivating bare life in its logic of the exception: "The open door destined only for him includes him in excluding him and excludes him in including him" [*Homo sacer* 50]. The parable describes the process through which life, caught in the state of exception, becomes entirely determined and taken over by law. This process culminates in the bare lives of the "sacred men" found at both ends of the spectrum of sovereign power: in the totalitarian egocrat as "living law," whose every desire becomes law; and in the inmates of extermination camps, whose bodies incarnate the "laws" of racial superiority or class warfare without the intermediation by positive, statutory laws that address them as individuals endowed with rights.[38]

Agamben argues that bare life in the "willed" or "virtual" state of exception characteristic of sovereign power is "life under a law that is in force without signifying. . . . And it is exactly this kind of life that Kafka describes, in which law is all the more pervasive for its total lack of content" [*Homo sacer* 53]. Agamben employs an expression that Scholem uses to describe the status of revealed Law in Kafka's *Before the Law*. According to Scholem's reading, the parable depicts the addressees of the Law as having lost the keys to unlock its meaning: they study the commentary (*aggadah*) but remain locked out of the law (*halakah*), unable to apply it and thus to follow it. Consequently, for them the Law appears as Nothingness: it "has validity but no significance."[39] Although the Law is devoid of all meaning for its students, Scholem nonetheless suggests that it continues to demand obedience and must be transmitted even though it cannot be applied, since the gate guarded by *aggadah* remains open.[40] Agamben thereby identifies Scholem's "mystical" formula of revealed Law in the time of *galut* with the *Arcanum* of the sovereign power of positive legal systems in the time of totalitarianism (in the period of states of exception). For Agamben the loss of significance of revealed Law coincides with the gradual but inevitable expansion of the "virtual" state of exception in and through systems of positive law, all the way to the point at which the state of exception is no longer exceptional but has become the rule.

Agamben takes up Benjamin's reading of the parable to illustrate the possibility of a revolutionary reversal of the "willed" state of exception in an event that would bring about a "real state of exception," where it is not that life gets taken over by the law, but conversely that all law becomes "indistinguishable from life."[41] Benjamin reads Kafka's parables as illustrations of this revolutionary turnabout of bare life in "the attempt to metamorphize life into writing [*dem Versuch der Verwandlung des Lebens ins Schrift*]" [CC 453]. On Agamben's interpretation, this metamorphosis corresponds to an "absolute intelligibility of a life wholly resolved into writing" [*Homo sacer* 55]. In the messianic condition, bare life is lived out as if it were written out ahead of the one living it, as if it were developing from a singular law unto itself. On this view, living in the messianic kingdom is equivalent to living in a condition in which law shall only have content and no form; in which law shall do justice only to each singular event and thing, and will

38. On the Führer as "living law" see Homo sacer *173, and Agamben,* State of Exception *84–86. On terror as "realization of the law of movement of some suprahuman force, Nature or History," see Arendt 465.*

*39. Cited in Moses 159. Agamben renders the thought as follows: "it does not signify, yet still affirms itself by the fact that it is in force" [*Homo sacer *51].*

40. As Stéphane Moses and others have shown, Scholem's formula of a law that is in force without signifying is meant as a positive description of the "negative theology" that he identifies in Kafka [Moses 150].

41. Agamben, Homo sacer *55. Benjamin states that "it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency" [Thesis VIII,* Illuminations *257]. For the distinction between "willed" and "real" states of emergency, see Agamben,* State of Exception *55–57.*

therefore cease to be a law whose mythical form is that of universal validity and whose mythical content is the bare life of *homo sacer.* "Benjamin proposes a messianic nihilism that nullifies even the Nothing and lets no form of law remain in force beyond its own content" [*Homo sacer* 53]. Revolutionary praxis, on this reading, entails doing everything necessary to provoke the rule of law into finally declaring a real state of exception: "The messianic task of the man from the country . . . might then be precisely that of making the virtual state of exception real, of compelling the doorkeeper to close the door of the Law (the door of Jerusalem). For the Messiah will be able to enter only after the door is closed, which is to say, after the Law's being in force without significance is at an end" [*Homo sacer* 57]. It is as if Agamben takes literally an utterance of Brecht's, reported by Benjamin, that Kafka is "the only true Bolshevik writer" [*Aufsätze* 1155].

6

Conclusion: The Life of Literature as Threshold of Sovereign Power

By way of conclusion, I propose an alternative interpretation of Benjamin's understanding of Kafka, for in my opinion Agamben's reading of Benjamin's politics of nihilism is ultimately incorrect. Both of Benjamin's essays on Kafka conclude with a meditation on the "distortion" associated with the guilt of human prehistorical progress through economies of exploitation, and how the little hunchback who represents this distortion will "disappear with the coming of the Messiah, who (a great rabbi once said) will not wish to change the world by force but will merely make a slight adjustment in it" [SW 2: 811]. In both essays the messianic is associated with the motif of looking back onto one's life as a way not to be moved away from where one finds oneself, and where one finds oneself is always illustrated by the life of the village. Benjamin's interpretation of the messianic therefore removes it from the question of the application of (revealed) Law which structures both Scholem's and Agamben's readings of Kafka. Instead, the wish for the coming of the Messiah is analogous to the beggar's wish in a Jewish joke reported by Benjamin: a beggar dreams of being a powerful king whose country happens to be invaded and is forced to abandon his castle and kingdom in the middle of the night, wearing only his shirt, so as to "finally arrive safely right here at the bench in this corner" [SW 2: 812]. The joke brings together a momentous event, a great reversal of fortune, the consequence of which is but a slight change: the beggar would still be in his place, but now he would have a decent shirt, the true object of desire. "Seek for food and clothing first, then the Kingdom of God shall be added unto you" [Hegel, qtd. in Benjamin, Thesis IV, *Illuminations* 254].

Benjamin's comic approach to the messianic brings together a Marxist and a Freudian motif. For in the joke, the messianic is related to the undoing of the fantasy of sovereignty, perhaps above all the fantasy associated with the Messiah as King. The Freudian motif expressed in the joke concerns the emotional ambivalence that structures the possibility of sovereignty, where the elevation to a position of power is at the same time the degradation of the person of the sovereign. In *Totem and Taboo,* Freud cites Sancho Panza's misadventures when he is mistaken for a king as evidence corroborating his conception of the sacred as ambivalence [50–51]. (Not entirely by coincidence, as I show below, Sancho Panza plays a crucial role in Benjamin's reading of Kafka as well.) The messianic in Benjamin, therefore, is that moment, in the literary space, when beggar and sovereign coincide in order to express both the ambivalence of sovereignty and the real object of desire behind revolutionary motivations: not power but, as in Marx's vision of communism, the satisfaction of material needs in the absence of sovereign rule.

Benjamin points out that in Kafka the descriptions of the messianic reversal are always directed toward the past: the messianic is a redemption of nature from the forgetfulness that befalls it in the form of historical progress. The messianic reversal, therefore, returns to nature its eternity in and through history. Benjamin takes up an intuition he first formulates in the *Theological-Political Fragment* according to which "the rhythm of this eternally transient world . . . the rhythm of messianic nature is happiness. For nature is messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing" [SW 3: 305–06]. Happiness is made up of precisely those events that could have happened to us but did not so happen during our transient, worldly existence.[42] To recapture what never was it must be possible to relive our past life, to recapitulate it, so to speak, and in this way to restore its completeness without denying its pastness: profane, worldly life is restored in its "eternal and total passing away" in and through the messianic interruption of historical becoming or progress.[43] Just as, upon glancing at old photo albums that recapitulate our lives, one is unable to avoid thinking of one's happiness in a past in which, *qua* actual worldly past, one never was happy (as surely as one was not actually happy when the photographs were taken), so too the messianic does not point to a future life of eternal fulfillment (as pictured in the traditional images of Paradise), but simply seeks to realize the happiness promised by the past of natural history but never actually lived in it. In Benjamin, the difference between what is and what ought to be, the difference in whose knowledge theory becomes "critical," is radically immanent to historical becoming: it always consists in realizing a meeting or appointment with a past that never happened. The eternalization of transience that Benjamin calls messianic nature is the realization in the present of what was but never happened.[44]

Viewed from such a messianic perspective, history appears like "a tempest that blows from forgetting, and study is a cavalry attack against it. Thus, the beggar on the corner bench rides towards his past in order to catch himself in the figure of the fleeing king. This ride, which is long enough for a life, corresponds to life, which is too short for a ride."[45] Benjamin compares study to a ride back in time to retrieve forgotten or repressed things like Odradek. The ultimate goal of study is to allow one to live one's life justly or barely, in the sense of living it within its own limits, because the "burden" of guilt would be "taken off the back" [SW 2: 816], undoing the distortion represented by the hunched back. Absent such an undoing or redemption from guilt through the practice of study, life remains always already ahead of itself (just as Heidegger understands it in the existential analysis of *Da-sein*), and thus appears "too short," never quite right, to those living it.

But what kind of study can provoke the closing of the gate of the Law and in so doing open the "little door" through which the Messiah comes? Benjamin answers by referring to another character in Kafka:

---

42. "The kind of happiness that could arouse envy in us exists only in the air we have breathed, among people we could have talked to, women who could have given themselves to us" [Benjamin, Illuminations *254].*

*43. Motifs found in Theses XVI through XVIII [*Illuminations *262–63].*

*44. See Thesis II. Agamben renders this idea as follows: "what cannot be saved is what was, the past as such. But what is saved is what never was, something new. . . . So in historical redemption what happens in the end is what never took place. This is what is saved. . . . But this—what has never happened—is the historical and wholly actual homeland of humanity" [*Potentialities *158]. In my opinion, this reading tends to emphasize too much the idea of futurity ("something new") at the expense of the past, and also introduces an idea of "homeland of humanity" that is foreign to Benjamin.*

45. SW 2: 814. For another interpretation of this conception of study in Agamben, Benjamin, and Kafka, see Samuel Weber, Benjamin's –abilities *198–210.*

> *Reversal is the direction of study which transforms existence into script. Its teacher is Bucephalus, "the new lawyer," who takes the road back without the powerful Alexander—which means, rid of the onrushing conqueror. "His flanks free and unhampered by the thighs of a rider, under a quiet lamp far from the din of Alexander's battles, he reads and turns the pages of our old books." . . . Is it really the law which would thus be invoked against myth in the name of justice? No, as a legal scholar Bucephalus remains true to his origins, except that he does not seem to be practicing law. . . . The law which is studied but no longer practiced is the gate to justice. The gate to justice is study. Yet Kafka doesn't dare attach to this study the promises which tradition has attached to the study of the Torah.* [SW 2: 815]

These are the lines in Benjamin's essay on Kafka that provoked Scholem to defend the "theological aspect" in Kafka. Scholem charges him with going too far in his "elimination of theology, throwing the baby out with the bath water."[46] The charge appears to be justified, because in the above passage Benjamin seems to be saying that the practice of studying "our old books" counts more than the content or doctrine of these books and, in particular, more than the content of the Torah, the revealed Law. The students in Kafka's narratives, who Benjamin interprets as "assistants to those creatures for whom, in Kafka's words, there is 'an infinite amount of hope'" [CC 453], "are pupils who have lost the Scripture [*Schrift*]" [SW 2: 815] yet for all that "do not belong to the hetaeric world" of myth [CC 453]. Nevertheless, Benjamin is unwilling to acknowledge Scholem's point that only the existence of the Law anchors the messianic: "Kafka's messianic category is the 'reversal' or 'study'" [CC 453]. This poses the definitive question for Benjamin: in what sense is the study of "our old books" paradigmatic of the messianic reversal?

His answer is already intimated in the figure of Bucephalus, Alexander the Great's horse, who runs away from world history and retires to study ancient tomes (whether they belong to Athens or to Jerusalem seems unimportant). In so doing he becomes the advocate, the lawyer, of everything that has been left behind by the storm of progress, but weighs on human life in the form of a mythical guilt and punishment at the hands of those who "practice" the law, whether in the form of mythical violence or in the form of divine violence. Bucephalus, an advocate who nevertheless does not practice law, an animal who nevertheless is engrossed in study, represents a figure of cultivated bare life which lies beyond the anthropological machine and its separation of animality from humanity, nature from culture, *zoe* from *bios*. Bucephalus is the answer given to the plea that someone "pray for the little hunchback too" [SW 2: 812].

But it is in the relation between Sancho Panza and Don Quixote, as set out in a prose poem of Kafka, that Benjamin sees the essential gesture of "reversal" that contains the messianic.

---

46. Benjamin, CC 446. See Kaufmann [158], where he argues that in Benjamin's reading of Kafka there is a separation of theology from revelation, and that Benjamin keeps the former and discards the latter in order to advocate an antinomian, Pauline reading of the messianic. In this sense, Kaufmann is much closer to Agamben's Benjamin interpretation than the one I offer here. Kaufmann interprets the idea of study as turning "existence into Scripture, life into doctrine" and entailing a "dream of a redeemed law . . . a code that takes the distinctions out of judgment and the judgment out of law." He even identifies this new law with Kafka's story of Sancho Panza. There is in Kaufmann the attempt to read Sancho Panza in directly Pauline terms. As Kaufmann says, Benjamin uses Sancho Panza in order to "imagine Scripture without commandment, revelation without the law" [160]. This position ultimately leads Kaufmann to see Benjamin's position and Adorno's as much closer than they are in reality, coinciding on their purportedly common "theology" just where I see them diverging most strongly.

> *Whether the pupils have lost it [the Scripture in the sense of the Torah/MV] or whether they are unable to decipher it comes down to the same thing, because, without the key that belongs to it, the Scripture is not Scripture but life [*nicht Schrift ist sondern Leben*]. Life as it is lived in the village at the foot of the hill on which the castle is built. It is in the attempt to metamorphize life into writing [*dem Versuch der Verwandlung des Lebens ins Schrift*] that I perceive the meaning of "reversal," which so many of Kafka's parables endeavour to bring about—I take "The Next Village" and "The Bucket Rider" as examples. Sancho Panza's existence is exemplary because it actually consists in rereading one's existence, however buffoonish and quixotic [*Sancho Pansas Dasein ist musterhaft, weil es eigentlich im Nachlesen des eignen wenn auch närrischen und donquichotesken besteht*]*. [CC 453]

Without the key to open the meaning of the Torah (*Schrift*), the Torah no longer exists as a "secret law" which remains valid despite its lack of application. Rather, for Benjamin, the Torah has become the (way of) life in the village at the base of the Castle. In Kafka's parables a messianic "reversal" is staged by which this life lived in the village gets "metamorphized" into writing (*Schrift*). Here Sancho Panza and the images of riding backward in time (whether of the beggar in the Jewish joke, or in the stories about riders and horses in Kafka, which Benjamin lists in the above citation) indicates, contra Agamben's reading, that the writing at stake is neither that of a Torah which fulfills itself in its transgression (as in Sabbatian interpretations of the Messiah), nor the writing of a new law "that nullifies even the Nothing and lets no form of law remain in force beyond its own content," a law represented by the idea of a writing which is fully intelligible to itself. To the contrary, the writing into which the village life gets metamorphosed and reversed (as if riding backward through one's life) is the writing of fiction. The "old books" that Bucephalus pores over, as if they were legal codices, are in reality novels and plays.

The reason why the study of fiction is the threshold through which justice enters into life is contained in the analogy that Benjamin draws between the Messiah's slight adjustment of everything and the shifting that Kafka narrates in his parable dedicated to Sancho Panza:

> *Without ever boasting of it, Sancho Panza succeeded over the years, by supplying a lot of romances of chivalry and adventure for the evening and night hours, in so diverting from him his demon, whom he later called Don Quixote, that his demon thereupon performed the maddest exploits—which, however, lacking a preordained object, which Sancho Panza himself was supposed to have been, did no one any harm. A free man, Sancho Panza followed Don Quixote on his trips and thus enjoyed great and profitable entertainment to the end of his days.*[47]

Sancho Panza studies novels in order to divert his demon, Don Quixote. In Benjamin the demonic stands for "the guilt context of the living. It corresponds to the natural condition of the living" [SW 1: 204], that is, to the condition Marx calls "prehistory" or to their "natural" history. Sancho Panza's "cunning" (an important Hegelian category that Benjamin retains)[48] consists in diverting his demon, who previously ruled over his natural life,

---

47. Kafka's prose poem is cited completely in Benjamin, SW 2: 816. Benjamin leaves the text uninterpreted.

48. "Every epoch, in fact, not only dreams the one to follow but, in dreaming, precipitates its awakening. It bears its end within itself and unfolds it—as Hegel already noticed—by cunning" [Benjamin, Arcades Project *13].*

into a fictional life that recapitulates his own in the form of a novel. This diversion has the purpose of allowing Sancho Panza to stay put in a natural life of his own, no longer blown forward by the wind of progress, no longer goaded toward the future by his demon. In the novel that recapitulates his life in reverse direction, Sancho Panza goes out to ride with Don Quixote, much like, in his dream, the beggar goes out to meet the king. The "weak" messianic force that encounters, from the opposite direction, the profane force of world politics, described in Benjamin's *Theological-Political Fragment* and in the second of his *Theses on the Philosophy of History,* in reality refers to the recapitulated life of the novel, which is always lived as if going backward, from end to beginning. Life is transformed into literature in order both to distract and to fulfill, fictionally, the destructive instincts that otherwise prey on bare life itself: these instincts manifest themselves in the ambivalent attitude toward the sovereign (or Father) as object of love (Eros) and hate (Thanatos). Therefore the politics of nihilism that Benjamin advocates, the destruction of history to clear a site from where life can be constructed consciously and in common, is played out in the space of literature, more precisely, in the activity of critique that "politicizes art" [Benjamin, *Illuminations* 242].

The messianic reversal in Benjamin is distinct from that indicated by Agamben because it is not a question of restoring the rest of the sacred in a profaned life by letting bare life unfold its own singular laws. The profanation that saves bare life, in Benjamin, is expressed in the profanity of a Sancho Panza who novelizes or metamorphizes life so as to give the demon a task to fulfill, a mission to accomplish, but whose object is no longer Sancho Panza's bare life. Thereby the author of the literary life is freed or saved from having to incur the guilt inherent to the necessary failure to fulfill the assigned task, to live up to one's destiny. This failure is then staged by Don Quixote, who thus becomes an allegory of a divine justice which is at once poetic and comic, as befits the idea of a demon (the agent of Fate) that itself fails to live up to destiny. For Don Quixote, in the novel, nothing is where or how it should be, so that for Sancho Panza, in a life that is barely and playfully lived out in all of its profanity, everything may be just (as in *gerecht*) where and as it should be. The slight messianic shift, in Benjamin, does not consist in an objective revolutionary reversal of the course of world history that would accomplish the Law in and through its transgression. The only act of "divine violence" that can expiate the guilt of bare life consists in shifting the Law into the register of fiction so as to enable the slight but unbridgeable abyss that exists between life and literature (and which is one of the themes of Cervantes's masterpiece) to become the fulcrum on which to divert the mythical away from bare life and loosen the hold that law has on life. The study of literature, understood as revolutionary praxis, alone can propitiate the secret appointment with the forgotten past in which mundane happiness, the materialist version of *restitutio in integro,* rests.

Agamben has argued that the messianic content in Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* is given by Paul's theology [*Il tempo che resta* 129–31]. Yet in the first of these *Theses* the dwarf called "theology," which helps historical materialism to victory, is hunchbacked. Theology is thus also affected by the distortion of all things in history.[49] Maybe it is time to consider the possibility that Benjamin sends Paul's theology

---

49. The ironical sense of the First Thesis is noticed in Wohlfarth: "Benjamin draws very different consequences from his theologico-political model than Adorno. . . . Where Adorno believes that he is defending Benjamin's own theology against its author, Benjamin gives up the kind of 'Esotericism' Adorno subscribes to him. . . . Adorno's standpoint in this sense is no less 'plump' *than Brecht's. . . . No matter whether we are dealing with theology or with autonomous art, Adorno's credo is the same: the more one contributes to historical materialism, the less one follows it" [268, my translation].*

ahead to engage the ideological illusions of his time (from Zionism to Stalinism), much in the same spirit that Kafka's Sancho Panza sent his demon Don Quixote to fight the windmills: "Sancho Panza, a sedate fool and a clumsy assistant, sent his rider on ahead; Bucephalus outlived his. Whether it is a man or a horse is no longer so important, if only the burden is taken off the back."[50] Benjamin employs theology in order to take the weight of spiritualism off the back of materialism, and allows it to become effectively historical, galloping unhampered backward into history, against the storm blowing from Paradise called progress.[51] Such a cavalry charge of an effectively historical kind of materialism seeks to rescue neither the Father of the economy nor the debts He bequeaths on the children of his children. It wants to recover the sense of free praxis which Marx once described, in the profane terms Sancho Panza would not have minded, as "making it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic" [*German Ideology* 160].

WORKS CITED

Adorno, Theodor W. *Negative Dialektik. Jargon der Eigentlichkeit*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Vol. 6 of *Gesammelte Schriften*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003.

Agamben, Giorgio. *The Witness and the Archive*. New York: Zone, 1999. Trans. of *Ciò che resta di Auschwitz [Remnants of Auschwitz]. Homo sacer III*. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1998.

———. *La comunità che viene*. Turin: Einaudi, 1990.

———. *Homo sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998.

———. *Infanzia e storia*. Turin: Einaudi, 1979.

———. "In Praise of Profanation." Trans. Kevin Attell. *Profanations*. New York: Zone, 2007. 73–92.

———. *The Man without Content*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999.

———. *Means without End: Notes on Politics*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000.

———. *The Open: Man and Animal*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004.

———. "The Passion of Facticity." *Potentialities*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999. 138–59.

———. *Stanze: La parola e il fantasma nella cultura occidentale*. Turin: Einaudi, 1979.

———. *State of Exception*. Trans. Kevin Attell. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005.

———. *Il tempo che resta [The Time That Remains]*. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2000.

Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1973.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999.

———. *Aufsätze, Essays, Vorträge. Gesammelte Schriften* 2.3. Ed. Hermann Schweppenhaeuser and Rolf Tiedemann. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991.

———. *The Complete Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*. Ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994. [CC]

———. *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken, 1968.

———. *Selected Writings. Volume 1: 1913–1926*. Ed. Marcus Bollock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996. [SW 1]

———. *Selected Writings. Volume 2: 1927–1934*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard UP, 1999. [SW 2]

———. *Selected Writings. Volume 3: 1935–1938*. Ed. Howard Eiland. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002. [SW 3]

---

*50. Benjamin, SW 2: 816. Agamben mentions this citation once, as far as I can tell, but leaves it uninterpreted [*Potentialities *154].*

51. See Thesis IX in Illuminations *257.*

Benjamin, Walter, and Theodor Adorno. *The Complete Correspondence 1928–1940*. Ed. Henri Lonitz. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999.
Biale, David. "Gershom Scholem's Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms on Kabbalah: Text and Commentary." *Modern Judaism* 5.1 (1985): 67–93.
Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Cambridge: MIT P, 1991.
Butler, Judith. "Critique, Coercion, and Sacred Life in Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence.'" *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*. Ed. Lawrence E. Sullivan and Hent de Vries. New York: Fordham UP, 2006.
———. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham UP, 2005.
Derrida, Jacques. *L'animal que donc je suis*. Paris: Galilée, 2006.
———. "Devant la loi: Préjugés." *Critique de la faculté de juger*. Paris: Minuit, 1985.
———. *Force de la loi*. Paris: Galilée, 1994.
Düttmann, Alexander García. *So ist es*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004.
Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage, 1990.
Fox, Christopher. "Sacrificial Past and Messianic Futures." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 33.5 (2007): 563–95.
Freud, Sigmund. *Totem and Taboo*. New York: Norton, 1950.
Geulen, Eva. *Giorgio Agamben zur Einführung*. Junius, 2005.
Goldmann, Lucien. *Lukács and Heidegger*. London: Routledge, 1977.
Habermas, Jürgen. *Legitimation Crisis*. Trans. T. McCarthy. Boston: Beacon, 1975.
———. *The Theory of Communicative Action. Volume 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*. Trans. T. McCarthy. Boston: Beacon, 1984.
Hanssen, Beatrice. *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2000.
Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000.
———. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin, 2005.
Heidegger, Martin. *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*. Trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1995.
———. *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1986.
Hillach, Ansgar. "Dialektisches Bild." *Benjamins Begriffe*. Ed. Erdmut Wizisla and Michael Opitz. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2000. 1: 186–229.
Honneth, Axel. *Leiden an Unbestimmtheit*. Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 2001.
———. *Pathologien Der Vernunft*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2007.
———. *Verdinglichung: Eine Anerkennungstheoretische Studie*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2005.
Horkheimer, Max. *Traditionelle und Kritische Theorie*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2005.
Horwitz, Rivka. "Kafka and the Crisis in Jewish Religious Thought." *Modern Judaism* 15 (1995): 21–73.
Kafka, Franz. *Erzählungen*. Ed. Max Brod. Place: Fischer, 1986.
Kaufmann, David. "Beyond Use, within Reason: Adorno, Benjamin, and the Question of Theology." *New German Critique* 83 (2001): 151–73.
Lemm, Vanessa. *Nietzsche's Animal Philosophy*. New York: Fordham UP, 2009.
Marcuse, Herbert. *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Intro. Douglas Kellner. Boston: Beacon, 1991.
Marinas, José-Miguel. *La fábula del bazaar: Orígenes de la cultura del consumo*. Madrid: A. Machado, 2001.
Marx, Karl. *Capital. The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert Tucker. New York: Norton, 1978.

———. *The Communist Manifesto*. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert Tucker. New York: Norton, 1978.
———. *The Communist Manifesto*. New York: Penguin Putnam, 1998.
———. *German Ideology*. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert Tucker. New York: Norton, 1978.
Moses, Stéphane. "Gershom Scholem's Reading of Kafka: Literary Criticism and Kabbalah." *New German Critique* 77 (1999): 149–67.
Norris, Andrew, ed. *Politics, Metaphysics, and Death: Essays on Giorgio Agamben's* Homo sacer. Durham: Duke UP, 2005.
Passavant, Paul. "The Contradictory State of Giorgio Agamben." *Political Theory* 35.2 (2007): 147–74.
Quintana, Laura. "De la nuda vida a la forma-de-vida. Pensar la política con Agamben desde y más allá del paradigma del biopoder." *Argumentos: Revista de la Universidad Metropolitana de México* 52 (2006): 213–60.
Rose, Gillian. *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*. London: Macmillan, 1978.
Santner, Eric. *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 2006.
Sinnerbrink, Robert. "From Machenschaft to Biopolitics: A Genealogical Critique of Biopower." *Critical Horizons* 6.1 (2005).
Steiner, Uwe. "Kapitalismus als Religion." *Benjamin Handbuch*. Ed. Burkhardt Lindner. Stuttgart: Metzler, 2006. 167–74.
Thurschwell, Adam. "Cutting the Branches for Akiba." Norris 173–97.
Weber, Samuel. *Benjamin's –abilities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008.
———. *Targets of Opportunity: On the Militarization of Thinking*. New York: Fordham UP, 2005.
Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958.
Weigel, Sigrid. *Walter Benjamin: Die Kreatur, das Heilige, die Bilder*. Frankfurt: Fischer, 2008.
Wohlfarth, Irving. "Die Passagenarbeit." *Benjamin Handbuch*. Ed. Burkhardt Lindner. Stuttgart: Metzler, 2006. 251–74.