

# Oikonomia of Bare Life

Agamben vs. Foucault on the possibility of good life in the biopolitical order

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## Abstract

The paper compares Giorgio Agamben's and Michel Foucault's thinking on the notion of "good life" and attempts to outline the consequences for a critique of management, or call it the possibility of political (i.e. good life) in a biopolitical order where life and political have become indistinguishable.

In the Classical world the simple natural life, the fact of living (*zoê* in Greek) which was common to all living beings (animals, human beings, gods) was distinguished from the way of living proper to an individual or a group, that is, from a qualified life, good life (*bios*). It is on the basis of this distinction that Aristotle, for example, defines *polis* in the beginning of *Politics*: "[polis is] born with regard to life, but existing essentially with regard to good life" (*Politics* 1252b,29-30). It is also in this sense that Aristotle stresses the difference in kind between *politikos* (statesman) vs. *oikonomos* (head of an estate) and *despotês* (master of the family) who are both concerned with the reproduction and subsistence of life (*Politics* I 1252a, 5-10). As a living being man's place was in *oikos* and as a political subject it was in *polis*.

Both Giorgio Agamben and Michel Foucault agree that we no longer have any idea of this: We can no longer distinguish between the simple fact of living (*zoê*) and the good life (*bios*), between our biological life as living beings and our political existence, between what is incommunicable and mute and what is communicable and sayable: we are animals in whose politics our very life as living beings is at stake.

The entrance of life in the sphere of *polis* is analysed by Foucault as a question of the development of political economy. He demonstrates how the techniques of power change at the precise moment when economy (*oikonomia*, the management of family and household) and politics (the government of *polis*) integrate: the new biopolitical arrangement is born at the moment when economy – as understood at the time: the correct manner of managing individuals, goods and wealth within the household (which a good father is expected to do in relation to his wife, children and servants) and of making the family fortunes prosper – is introduced to politics, the minute attention of the father towards his family into the management of the state.

Giorgio Agamben's starting point is that Michel Foucault's theses about the birth of biopower is substantially correct: the decisive event of modernity is the introduction of *oikonomia* into politics and the entry on bare life (*la nuda vita*) in the sphere of *polis*. But what is important is the sense in which the change is understood.

By analysing in more detail Aristotle's definition of politics as the distinction between bare life and good life (Politics 1252b) and thus in a sense as if a place where life must acquire its "goodness" (become political), Agamben argues that the juxtaposition in fact includes the former (bare life) in the latter (politics) by excluding it and that the exclusion of bare life is thus the constituting act of the *polis* of free men. Analysing next Roman law and Hobbes's justification of sovereignty, Agamben makes the conclusion that in the last instance sovereign power has in fact always been founded on bare life: Western politics has been biopolitics from the beginning.

Foucault's thesis must therefore be at least amended since the inclusion of the fact of living into politics is not an exclusive character of modern politics but constitutes rather the original nucleus of sovereign power. By placing biological life at the center of its calculations modern state does nothing else but reveals this hidden tie between power and life and confirms the alliance of modern power with the most ancient of the secrets of government: life has always been its negative foundation.

The structure within which bare life is separated from and included in politics and made this way the bearer of sovereign power has always the form of the *state of exception* (Carl Schmitt) or the *ban* (Jean-Luc Nancy). State of exception is essentially power of maintaining itself in relation to something with which there is no relation. What is banned is both surrendered to its alterity and at the same time consigned to the mercy of the one abandoning it – separated and at the same time captured. The ban relation ties together the two poles of the sovereign exception: bare life and power.

The paper speculates about the crisis at the heart of new capitalism and the new post-Fordist forms of management as a space where the state of exception acquires a permanent spatial arrangement (i.e. where the state of exception starts to become the rule) and where public and private, political life and economical life, the good life of polis and the bare of life oikos, become inseparable. What characterises the post-Fordist capitalism is not only the inclusion of *zoê* in the *polis* nor simply the fact that life as such has become the principal object of the calculations of power. What is decisive instead is that the realm of life begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoê*, fact and what is good enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction.

It is precisely here that we find also the center of Michel Foucault's "double bond" of modern power: the processes of "totalising power" (the political techniques by which the state adopts and integrates the concern and development of the natural life of people into its core) and "individualising power" (technologies of self) meet in so far as they are both concerned with life. It is both the object and subject of political power, the one and the same place for both the organization of power and the possible liberation from it.

Agamben characterizes such a situation where the factitious existence of people is turned into *a task* as the *oikonomia of bare life*. But does this mean that the humankind has now reached its historical telos (i.e. must take hold of its own historical being) and all that is left to accomplish is the dissolving of the political character of human societies, as Agamben seems to suggest? For this may take place only as the unconditional unfolding of the *reign of oikonomia* or by taking the bare life itself as the supreme political task. But as soon as *oikos* becomes the paradigm of politics – as is the case in both instances - then the innermost factitiousness of our existence runs the risk of turning into a fatal trap. And this would then be the trap in which we live today.

But Agamben is mistaken when drawing an equals sign between "bare life" (on which sovereign power is founded) and the life of "political economy" or "biopolitics" on which Foucault's positive notion of power is based. The political economy Foucault talks about is not the economy of capital and work of the classical political economy nor is it the critical economy of Marxian "living labour". It refers rather to the new assembly of forces that the original syntagma "*political economy*" put together: the integration of economy (in the meaning of *oikos*, the household and its management) and politics (in the meaning of governing the *polis*), the integration of men as living beings and as political subjects.

For Foucault this zone of indistinction is not the product of the functioning of sovereign power but refers rather to a new dynamics of forces that express among them power relations the classic world did not know: the “life” of biopolitics is not Agamben’s passive “bare life” (which may be killed but not sacrificed) but on the contrary the “natural richness”, wealth and plenitude of life and its active powers for the production of surplus (“more life”) and “valorization of forces” as Gabriel Tarde would have it.

According to Foucault the function of biopolitics is to “coordinate and give a purpose” to this new ensemble of forces but at the same moment it must be recognized that it is not their cause: it coordinates and gives a purpose to a power that does not belong to it, that comes from the “outside”, or rather, from the inside of the outside as beautifully articulated by Deleuze. Foucault does not in this sense neglect the analysis of sovereignty but only affirms that in relation to the inside of the new dynamics it is “blind and impotent”. It is only this way that we can understand how resistance may become articulated for Foucault not as a negation but as a process of creation and invention: “to create new forms of life” (Dits et écrits, Tome IV: 741).

But how could we understand, then, the relationship between the possible politics and “*happy life*” that Agamben sets against “bare life” (that can be separated from concrete forms of living, i.e. “good life”) and the sovereign power that is founded on the separation? Should we understand – following Antonio Negri, for example - that even if sovereign power does not originate in the prevailing order and is not confined only to maintaining it, it nevertheless has a negative foundation (of the ban relation) and in this sense no positive place in ontology? And that therefore “happy life” cannot in the strict sense be a political concept but must reveal itself as a category of ontology?

In the first book of Nichomachean Ethics Aristotle wonders whether we might understand better what it means to say that happiness is the end (supreme good) at which all things aim if we would understand what is man’s function. Is there a function, *ergon*, that is, a work or a deed proper to man or might man as such be perhaps essentially *argôs* (*a-ergos*), that is, without work and workless: “For just as the goodness and performance of a flute player, a sculptor, or any kind of expert, and generally of anyone who fulfils some function or performs some action, are thought to reside in his proper function [ergon], so the goodness and performance of man seem to reside in whatever is his proper function. Is it then possible that while a carpenter and a shoemaker have their own proper function and spheres of action, man as man has none, but was left by nature a good-for-nothing without a function [argôs]” (I 1097b, 25)

Should we now understand that “happy life” is that which corresponds to the essential absence of work of humankind, to the inoperability and radical being-without-work of human communities? And that it is in this sense that the question of “good life” in the biopolitical order is first and foremost the way in which *argîa* this essential functionlessness, potentiality and inoperability might be undertaken without becoming a historical task; or in other words, how politics might be nothing other than the exposition of humankind’s “unemployment” and being-without-work, nothing other than sovereign expenditure of its power as an indifference to any task – and how it could in this sense be entirely assigned to happiness?

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