

# Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben : From Biopolitics to Political Romanticism

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引用	Journal of Philosophy of Life. 2011, 1(1), p.49-58
URL	<a href="http://doi.org/10.24729/00007010">http://doi.org/10.24729/00007010</a>

## Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben From Biopolitics to Political Romanticism

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### Abstract

Giorgio Agamben's politics of life intertwines two diverging traditions of philosophical thought: Michel Foucault's biopolitics and Carl Schmitt's political philosophy. With the help of Carl Schmitt's concept of "political romanticism," I interpret Agamben's strategy as an attempt to introduce a bio-aesthetics of political vitality. Moreover, I situate Agamben's politics of life in opposition to Schmitt's biopolitics.

In a lecture in 2005 on the political concept of movement,<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Agamben comments on Carl Schmitt's distinction between state, movement, people—the reference being to Schmitt's homonymous essay from 1933 on the tripartition of the Nazi Reich.<sup>2</sup> According to Agamben, Schmitt maintains that only the dynamism of the Nazi political movement can politicize the constitutively static State apparatus and the un-political substance of the people:

The movement is the real political element . . . the people is an un-political element whose growth the movement must protect and sustain (Schmitt uses the term *Wachsen*, biological growth, of plants and animals).<sup>3</sup>

The decisive implication of this position—which, however, for Agamben "Schmitt never dares to articulate"—is that a key concept of Schmitt's theory of sovereignty belongs to the vocabulary of biopolitics: "the people is now turned from constitutive political body into population: a demographical biological entity."

Typically, Agamben's approach to Schmitt is quite different from this and aims at the absorption of biopolitical concepts into the juridico-political domain of the sovereign exception. Starting with *Homo sacer* (1995) and more recently in the

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<sup>1</sup> Agamben (2005b).

<sup>2</sup> Schmitt (2001).

<sup>3</sup> Agamben (2005b).

ambitious volume *Il Regno e la Gloria* (2007),<sup>4</sup> Agamben turns to Schmitt in order to neutralize the empirical discontinuity which, according to Michel Foucault, modernity has introduced by politicizing the biological framework of life. Agamben's favorite gesture is the appropriation of Schmittian political categories and their alchemical transformation into ontological devices whose primary function is to provide a plane of indistinctiveness, an "indifferent background against which all perspectives are neutralized and discoloured."<sup>5</sup> Once absorbed by Agamben's prose, Schmittian terms become immemorial instruments, "paradoxical thresholds of indistinction"<sup>6</sup> that attract towards their centre of gravity the scattered debris of historical contingency and political configurations of life.

In my opinion, Agamben's theoretical project—the dialectical intertwining of Foucauldian biopolitics and Schmittian political philosophy, aimed at subsuming the former under the previously deconstructed autonomy of the latter—represents a revelatory symptom of the disease that distresses political thought. As indicated by Roberto Esposito, contemporary political theory is mostly imprisoned in the aporetic relationship between Foucault and Schmitt. On one side, the followers of Foucauldian biopolitics regard biological life as the direct source of political phenomena, the positive domain faced by the *pouvoir-savoir* of Western modernity. On the other side, Schmittian concepts are understood as theoretical devices that filter and fluidify bare life, thus preserving the separation between the pre-political living subjects and the norms imposed upon them.<sup>7</sup>

In order to move beyond this deadlock, I suggest that the focus should shift to Schmitt's account of the intersections of life and politics. Not only is Schmitt aware of the biohistorical terrain that sustains his philosophical project, but he explicitly locates sovereignty in the non-political domain of life. In *The Concept of the Political* (1927) we find an open formulation of this view. War, the leading presupposition of the political, is conceived by Schmitt as the "ever present possibility" of a concrete polarization of life-forms, the grouping of human beings according to the "intensity of an association or dissociation." The distinction between friend and enemy is the result of a topological configuration of individuals, characterized by the degree of intensity and the form of distribution of

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<sup>4</sup> See also Agamben (2005a).

<sup>5</sup> Negri (2003).

<sup>6</sup> Agamben (1998), p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Esposito (2008), p. 21.

their life-energies. Non-political antitheses are weak condensations of vital phenomena (such is the case of religious, cultural, and economic activities), whereas political formations are associations oriented toward their “most extreme possibility,” the friend-enemy separation. Since the political or non-political nature of an action depends on the trajectory of life-forces, Schmitt’s theory of the political is inseparable from a biopolitical topology. Abandoning the theological domain, politics is inscribed in the biological field in which the extreme possibility of a divergent distribution of intensities of friendship and enmity takes place.

The notions of decision, exception, and critical situation are elaborated on the basis of this topology of vital tensions. It is the polarization of human life that is sovereign and that rules over the decision about the critical situation. Decision as such, as pure exception, lacks vital force and is not able to shape the critical situation. On the contrary, decision becomes sovereign when it accepts and optimizes the topological structure of life, placing itself in the decisive human grouping of friend-enemy, which is the actual sovereign dimension of political action and the primary topological law of Schmitt’s biopolitics:

This grouping is always the decisive human grouping, the political entity. If such an entity exists at all, it is always the decisive entity, and it is sovereign in the sense that the decision about the critical situation, even if it is the exception, must always necessarily reside there.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, power is understood by Schmitt as the actual “power over the physical life of men,”<sup>9</sup> the political as the description of the procedures of distribution of life-forms according to the goals of political life, and war as the associative impulse provoked by a menace to a way of life:

There exists no rational purpose, no norm no matter how true, no program no matter how exemplary, no social idea no matter how beautiful, no legitimacy nor legality which could justify men in killing each other for this reason. If such physical destruction of human life is not motivated by an existential threat to one’s own way of life, then it cannot be justified.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Schmitt (1976), p. 38.

<sup>9</sup> Schmitt (1976), p. 47.

<sup>10</sup> Schmitt (1976), p. 49.

The epistemic shift indicated by Foucault, from the traditional vocabulary of sovereignty, founded on the power of death, to a biopower that “exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it,”<sup>11</sup> is presupposed by Schmitt’s reformulation of political categories. Thus, war must not be waged in the name of the sovereign but, as in Foucault, “in the name of life necessity,”<sup>12</sup> for the sake of mobilizing entire populations and politicizing them on the biological ground of the optimization of life-forces.

Since Schmitt often deploys the lexicon of philosophical anthropology, the Hobbesian state of nature, and the Diltheyan philosophy of life—for instance Eduard Spranger’s *Lebensformen*—the innovative biopolitical components of his thought have been often missed by interpreters. Yet, Schmitt’s conception of politics is neither rooted in a philosophical inquiry into the nature of life nor built on a metaphysics of human nature that would preliminarily frame the essence of the political. As in Foucauldian biopolitics, the actual—that is, the “existential” in Schmitt’s vocabulary—procedures of regulation, the practices of alignment and separation, protection and destruction of life are regarded by Schmitt as the immanent sources of the political. Life is politicized when the conservation and diversification of life-forces apply the friend-enemy distinction as the most effective criterion for accomplishing “the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation, of an association or dissociation.”<sup>13</sup>

Schmitt has repeatedly and explicitly formulated this biopolitical tenet: a political entity is sovereign exclusively in the sense that the decision about the critical situation resides in a *decisive human grouping*. The *locus* of the political is not sovereignty as decision or as exception but the intensity of union and separation of life-forces. As in Foucault, the goal of sovereignty is the manipulation of biological life, not “the defense of sovereignty.”<sup>14</sup>

From the perspective of the economic-technical system of capitalist production and the “liberal policy of trade, church, and education,”<sup>15</sup> the only legitimate concepts are the depoliticalized categories of ethics and economics, to

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<sup>11</sup> Foucault (1990), p. 137.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Schmitt (1976), p. 26.

<sup>14</sup> Schmitt’s thought can be regarded as a prolongation of the aims assigned to political philosophy by Rousseau: “Étant donné qu’il y avait un art de gouverner, étant donné qu’il se déployait, de voir quelle forme juridique, quelle forme institutionnelle, quel fondement de droit on allait pouvoir donner à la souveraineté qui caractérise un État. . . . Le problème de la souveraineté n’est pas éliminé; au contraire, il est rendu plus aigu que jamais.” Foucault (2004), p. 110.

<sup>15</sup> Schmitt (1976), p. 71.

which correspond mass manipulation and control, competition and regulation of government. In order to save political rationality from the neutralization introduced by liberalism, Schmitt ventures into a justification of politics articulated within the field of biophilosophical concepts. As a consequence, sovereign decision and economic competition are not considered by Schmitt as mutually exclusive domains, separated by an ontological difference of nature, but as degrees of difference that measure variations of intensity of vital movements, concepts that take shape in the context of the antagonisms of life-forces:

The political is the most intense and extreme antagonism, and every concrete antagonism becomes that much more political the closer it approaches the most extreme point, that of the friend-enemy grouping. . . . Numerous forms and degrees of intensity of the polemical character are also here possible. But the essentially polemical nature of the politically charged terms and concepts remain nevertheless recognizable.<sup>16</sup>

An action becomes political when it reaches its most intense expression, leading to a state of association or dissociation. The ultimate goal of politics is to recognize and maximize the immanent dynamics of life. Schmitt's late work on the notion of *nomos*<sup>17</sup> broadens this perspective, interpreting all juridico-political concepts as *nomina actionis*, substantival manifestations of the inner tendencies of associated life: hence, the Greek substantive *nomos* is the *nomen* of the actions of *Nehmen* (taking), *Teilen* (distributing), and *Weiden* (producing).<sup>18</sup>

Against the background of Schmitt's view of political life, his aggressive polemical stance against political romanticism unveils its driving impulse. Although the romantic movement has never formulated a coherent political program, ambiguously siding with revolution and restoration, nationalism and internationalism, imperialism and anti-imperialism, more than any other political tradition it has elaborated a comprehensive conception and existential practice of organic passivity, a perverse understanding of life that threatens the survival of political agency as such. Whereas liberalism and Marxism have depoliticized life-forces by hypostatizing the economic and ethical dimensions, political romanticism is attacking the very condition of empirical action, undermining the

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<sup>16</sup> Schmitt (1976), pp. 29, 31.

<sup>17</sup> See in particular Schmitt (2003).

<sup>18</sup> See Schmitt (1958), pp. 489–504.

capacity of initiating an action and leading human grouping toward polarized outcomes.

Schmitt's description of political romanticism is therefore a crucial defense of his politics of life against the dangerous enemy of the aestheticization of politics. The bulimic aestheticization attempted by political romanticism goes beyond the cultural privilege assigned to art by liberalism or the instrumental role of artistic production envisioned by Marxism. The relevance attributed by the romantics to the aesthetic dimension is a symptom of the structural configuration of affect theorized by political romanticism. Romanticism is not fighting for the autonomy of art but for the affirmation and imposition of "a distinctively romantic productivity . . . the romantic, in the organic passivity that belongs to his occasionalist structure, wants to be productive without becoming active."<sup>19</sup>

This is the secret nature of romanticism denounced by Schmitt: romanticism has invented a lyrical, antinomic, and dialectical practice of emotional states and judgments; an empty yet seductive form of activity that seeks to replace all intensive distributions of human beings and historical facts. The aestheticization of politics pursued by the romantics is nothing but a bio-aesthetics of organic passivity, a surrogate of political vitality. Concrete reality is for political romanticism a mere *occasio* for a heightened form of productivity that claims to be more vital" than political action and decision:

Affect as a psychic fact was intrinsically interesting. When it was worked up into an artistic or logical-systematic artifact, the vital intensity of the experience already seemed to be jeopardized . . . for the romantic subject every form of art that it used was also merely an occasion, just like every concrete point of reality, which served as a point of departure for the romantic interest.<sup>20</sup>

The virulence of Schmitt's attack against political romanticism can be understood only in the context of the vitality of life. Since political romanticism has carried the battle of ideas on the terrain of life, it must be regarded as the most radical alternative to political action. The innovative form of productivity devised by political romanticism has replaced efficacious action with the higher power of

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<sup>19</sup> Schmitt (1986), pp. 104, 159.

<sup>20</sup> Schmitt (1986), p. 97.

an unprecedented “gymnastic of artistic creation,” whose primary task is to suspend vital tensions and actual antitheses:

In the romantic, it is not concepts of objects but expressions of moods, associations, colors, and sounds that are combined in an admixture. . . . The point of departure was the antithetical quality of what is concretely present and real, a quality that must be suspended. Its suspension takes place in such a way that a higher third factor (first the idea, then the state, then God) takes the antitheses as the occasion for a higher power. . . . For the romantics, everything is accounted for by virtue of the fact that, in this way, the concrete antithesis and heterogeneity disappear in a higher factor.<sup>21</sup>

By stating that “the sovereign decision on the exception is the originary juridico-political structure on the basis of which what is included in the juridical order and what is excluded from it acquire their meaning,”<sup>22</sup> Agamben transforms Schmitt’s biophilosophical defense of political activity into a disembodied machinery, attributing ontological autonomy to the sovereign decision and thus erasing the difference of intensity between political actions and bare life. The decision on the state of exception now acts by undermining vital conflicts and existential political groupings, preventing the Schmittian localization of sovereignty in the biohistorical perturbations of life: “As such, the state of exception itself is thus essentially unlocalizable.”<sup>23</sup>

Following a Parmenideian and Zenonian tradition—disguised under the robes of Aristotle—Agamben chooses the ontological reality of movement as the polemical objective of his thought:

Another interesting aspect in Aristotle is that movement is an unfinished, unaccomplished act . . . The movement is always constitutively the relation with its lack, its absence of an end, or *ergon*, or *telos* and work.

As a consequence of this conception of movement, the naturalistic immanence of vital activity—which is the essential presupposition of both Schmittian and

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<sup>21</sup> Schmitt (1986), pp. 107, 89.

<sup>22</sup> Agamben (1998), pp. 14–15.

<sup>23</sup> Agamben (1998), p. 15.



Foucauldian biopolitics—is suspended by Agamben in a theological zone of indifference, in the threshold of indeterminacy of an ontological stasis.

In the name of Schmitt’s juridico-political categories and Jewish messianism,<sup>24</sup> Agamben seeks to undermine the conceptual framework of Foucauldian biopolitics. In his essays and monographs, Agamben engages Foucault’s main concepts and methodological tools—apparatus and genealogy, *événementialisation* and *pouvoir-savoir*—targeting Foucauldian historicism and vitalism and replacing them with an ontotheology of contemplative life. The epistemological background of Foucault’s biopolitical thought is thus undermined and absorbed into the domains of theology and textual exegesis.

We can see this strategy at work in *Il Regno e la Gloria*.<sup>25</sup> Agamben declares explicitly that his study aims at expanding, and completing, Foucault’s enquiry on the genealogy of biopower and governmentality.<sup>26</sup> In reality, Agamben gets rid of a key presupposition of Foucault—the thesis that an epistemological discontinuity has been introduced when, in the Eighteenth century, biological life has entered into history—and substitutes Foucault’s genealogy with a remembrance of eternal life.<sup>27</sup> This gesture implies that natural vitality has to be subsumed into a higher form of life, *theōria*:

*Theōria* and the contemplative life, which the philosophical tradition has identified as its highest goal for century, will have to be dislocated onto a new plane of immanence. It is not certain that, in the process, political philosophy and epistemology will be able to maintain their present physiognomy and difference with respect to ontology. Today, blessed life lies on the same terrain as the biological body of the West.<sup>28</sup>

This new theoretical physiognomy, invoked by Agamben and imposed by the primacy of *theōria*, implies the loss of connection between *pouvoir* and *savoir*. Coherently, Agamben’s thought shifts toward the pure *savoirs* of philosophy and

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<sup>24</sup> On Agamben’s appropriation of Walter Benjamin’s messianism, see Vatter (2008), pp. 63–68.

<sup>25</sup> A reading of *Il Regno e la Gloria* that underlines the paradoxes of Agamben’s theological paradigm is provided by Roberto Esposito (2010), pp. 237–243.

<sup>26</sup> Agamben (2007), p. 9. On Agamben and biopower see Quintana Porras (2006).

<sup>27</sup> On Agamben’s concepts of “eternal life” see Vatter (2011).

<sup>28</sup> Agamben (1999), p. 239.

theology, literature and linguistics, betraying Foucault's archeological inspiration and his privilege for historicity, positive disciplines and contingent events.<sup>29</sup>

We can recognize in Agamben's eulogy of *theōria* and interchangeable masks—e.g., the Marxist situationist, the Papinian quietist, the Benjaminian kabbalist, the Arendtian liberal, the Heideggerian nihilist—the seal of political romanticism: external conflicts are suspended and aestheticized, causes act promiscuously, one reality is played against another, loosing its internal efficacy and becoming an *occasio* for the disintegrative power of a swinging judgment that accompanies political events with approbation and disgust.

As for bare life, in Agamben's thought it accomplishes the same task assigned by Schmitt to the higher third factor of romantic occasionalism: it is an Other devoid of life, a wholly exhausted form of life that allows for the “continual deflection to another domain” of concrete antitheses:<sup>30</sup>

This biopolitical body that is bare life must itself instead be transformed into the site for the constitution and installation of a form of life that is wholly exhausted in bare life and a *bios* that is only its own *zoē*.<sup>31</sup>

By locating biopolitical tensions in the suspended realm of bare life, Agamben's negative dialectics of the *homo sacer* achieves the final goal of political romanticism: *ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis*, “when you are worth nothing, you will nothing.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> On the convergence of Agamben's notion of *theōria* and the philosophy of Hannah Arendt, in opposition to Henri Bergson's vitalism, see Luisetti (2011), pp. 69–72.

<sup>30</sup> Schmitt (1976), p. 91.

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