Reinterpreting (bio)Politics: Potentiality, Profanation, and Play in the Thought of Giorgio Agamben

Thesis

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Abstract

In light of the global Occupy movements, whose ostensible lack of demands or a program of transformation have been praised for opening up new movements of radical political thought, this thesis examines the conceptual relationship between potentiality, profanation, and play in the thought of Giorgio Agamben in an attempt to contribute to what it means to think emancipatory politics within the contemporary biopolitical horizon. The argument suggests that Agamben’s formulations of potentiality, profanation, and play reformulate precisely what it means to speak of a politics premised upon a genuine lack of program or demands today. In order to explicate this argument, the thesis considers potentiality, profanation, and play in concentric relation to each other, where each concept revolves around Agamben’s resistance to an ‘originary biopolitical structure,’ which he views as undergirding the entire legacy of Western thought. The argument suggests that these circles move from a broad ontological notion of potentiality to the praxis of play, where profanation serves as the conceptual circle mediating between the two. Accordingly, the thesis is divided into four sections. In the first section, the argument works to explicate Agamben’s notion of the originary structure of biopolitics. In the second section, the argument turns to examine potentiality, which serves as Agamben’s broadest ontological response to this biopolitical structure. The argument then turns toward
Agamben’s concept of profanation. In this section, the argument works to emphasize Agamben’s critique of consumption in relation to his conceptualization of profanation. In the final section, the argument considers Agamben’s notion of play, understood as a social praxis informed by the interrelated concepts of potentiality and profanation.
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Finally, I want to thank my parents, Heather and Todd, who for twenty-five years have taught me the invaluable lesson of endurance. We live in a society of precarity and abandonment. In bedrooms, bars, classrooms, and offices, the global dominance of neoliberal capitalism works to hollow out those sentiments dearest to humanity: compassion, friendship, and intimacy. And in this barren desert we
reluctantly call home, where fantasy is suffocated under the putrid smog of exhaustion, the horizon of a future politics will be won by those who are able to harness the positive potentiality of endurance and transform it into a different kind of revolutionary love. My parents have shown me this ineluctable relationship between endurance and love, and for this I cannot be grateful enough.
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Introduction: in the Shadow of Marx; in Pursuit of Foucault

“Life is the farce that everyone is forced to perform.”
—Arthur Rimbaud, A Season in Hell.

“Don’t play what’s there, play what’s not there.”
—Miles Davis.

In the cold months following the decline of the global Occupy movement, a common theme has emerged among Leftist thinkers in their analyses of the movement’s potential for the future of emancipatory politics. The focus has been on the non-programmatic nature of Occupy, and the liberated spaces that its politics has opened up. Conditioned significantly by the events of May 68’ and the swath of radical thought produced in its wake, these analyses emphasize the dual-nature of the Occupy movement’s mode of political protest—a radical dialectic of festival and insurgency—as a resurgence of the anti-identitarian, non-programmatic politics that May 68’ ostensibly made possible to think. In an attempt to contribute to the growing speculation about the spaces of liberation that Occupy has perhaps resurrected, this thesis examines the emancipatory thought of Giorgio Agamben. Although his career has spanned over three decades, Agamben’s thought is perhaps most widely known for its critical account of the Western onto-political tradition.

1 Bejamin Arditi, “Insurgencies don’t have a plan: they are the plan: Political performatives and vanishing mediators in 2011,” Journal of Media and Cultural Studies (June, 2012): 1-10.
specifically in regard to his reformulation of biopolitics in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. In turn, his thought on emancipatory politics has often not received equal attention, and where it has, it has been predominantly greeted with frustration and consigned to the realms of pessimism or political quietism. Against such claims, this thesis considers Agamben’s philosophical relevance to contemporary emancipatory thought. In order to do so I will interrogate three interrelated concepts in Agamben’s thought: potentiality, profanation, and play. Though he engages with the material exigencies of our contemporary moment—namely the full extension of advanced capitalism into all aspects of life—Agamben’s thinking on emancipation remains heavily abstract and always locates its horizon of struggle in the ontological question of separation. Agamben works to foreground and destabilize all processes of subjectification and predication, which he views as the separation of living substance from itself.

Separation and the subject are inextricable for Agamben, and it is precisely upon this ontological plane that he asks his readers to (re)consider politics today. As such, I argue that Agamben’s formulations on potentiality, profanation, and play reformulate precisely what it means to think of a politics premised upon non-programmatic modes of politics by questioning the ontological processes of separation that permeate Western thought.

Finally, I suggest that Agamben’s vision of emancipation is sought not in the production of a newer, better, or more proper mode of subjectivity. Rather, Agamben’s political

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thought lies in thinking through what it would mean to be liberated precisely from this anxious pursuit of the proper, which for him lies at the heart of the processes of separation that continue to tyrannize Western thought.

The thesis is divided into four sections. Undergirding Agamben’s political thought is a reconceptualization of biopolitics, understood broadly as the moment of the politicization of biological life. The first section will interrogate Agamben’s formulation of biopolitics in relation to the concept of separation. Separation, I claim, serves as the precise point of departure from which Agamben bases his formulations on politics. To this end, I suggest here that for Agamben Western thought remains trapped in a conceptual legacy of separation, which is the operation undergirding an originary biopolitical structure. In this section, I examine specifically Agamben’s focus on apparatuses as it relates to his meditations on biopolitical separation and subjectification.

In the remaining three sections, the thesis seeks to unravel Agamben’s more explicitly political thinking by considering his engagements with three concepts: potentiality, profanation, and play. Subtending my argument is the suggestion that we read these three concepts and their role in Agamben’s thought concentrically, insofar as they all revolve around an attempt to struggle against the originary biopolitical structure of separation, described in the first section of the thesis. In this way, I suggest a reading of Agamben that traces the ways in which his political thinking moves from the broad ontological notion of potentiality to the social praxis of play, with profanation serving as the conceptual mediator between the two.
With this suggestion serving as the thematic strand throughout the paper, I work in the second section to outline Agamben’s engagement with potentiality, which I claim serves as Agamben’s broad, ontological response to the horizon of biopolitical separation.

In the third section, the thesis turns to profanation, understood as the overcoming of biopolitical separation through the return of objects and subjectivities to free use. Here I consider in detail Agamben’s engagement with Guy Debord’s concept of the society of the spectacle. For Agamben, the spectacle, insofar as it has hollowed out the traditional conceptions of being that have hitherto kept humanity tethered to the biopolitical operation of separation, offers an unprecedented opportunity for the profanatory return of objects to free and experimental use. Crucial to the development of this argument, as well as to the thesis as a whole, is a prolonged analysis of the tension Agamben sees between the profane potentiality of the spectacle and the sphere of consumption. I work toward the end of this section to re-situate Agamen’s conceptualization of consumption in more ontological terms, over and against more classical Marxians reading of the concept. As such, I suggest in this section that Agamben’s engagement with profanation and the spectacle is foremost a critique of the enduring ontological legacy of consumption in Western thought, which he views as indelibly tethered to the originary structure of biopolitics.

In the final section, the thesis examines Agamben’s notion of play as the social praxis capable of bringing about an emancipatory politics. As a mode of social praxis,

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play takes advantage of the profanatory potential offered by the spectacle. Here I aim to advance a reading that links Agamben’s notion of play with a reconceptualization of distraction. In this reading I consider Agamben’s notion of play in comparison to Mikhail Bakhtin’s conception of the carnivalesque in relation to its legacy of radical, non-programmatic politics. Importantly, I argue that play signals the culmination and becoming-praxis of Agamben’s meditations on potentiality and profanation.

The thesis then concludes by offering some preliminary speculations regarding the different kind of politics opened up by Agamben’s play in relation to the future of the Occupy movement.

This thesis focuses specifically on arguing for the critical relevance of one thinker—Agamben—to the horizon of radical politics today. My arguments below are textual, and focus much more on inhabiting the thought of Agamben than on synthesizing or incorporating his concepts into any specific historical, cultural, or material context. In other words, I will not be “applying Agamben” to anything. Or, if I am applying him, then it is an application to the broader onto-political exigencies of the global present. Along these lines, I find it necessary to pose at the outset the question I will seek to answer throughout the thesis: Why is Agamben so essential for thinking politics today? Let us briefly set the stage upon which I will work to answer this question.

In the final few dazzling pages of The History of Sexuality, Volume I, Michel Foucault introduces the concept of biopolitics, understood as the modern structures of governmentality that make live and let die through the political administration of biological “life itself.” For Foucault, the political horizon of modernity is predicated not
on the repression of life, but on networks of power that gear society toward normative conceptions of productivity through the administration and categorization of the body.

In his analysis of biopolitics, Foucault less than subtly echoes his hostility toward the Marxist tradition—as both an analytic and a form of politics—for laboring in an antiquated vision of the ‘repressed subject.’ For Foucault, the various technologies of modern power cannot be explained away by a “repressive hypothesis;” today power works just as much to produce as it does to repress. To this end, Foucault’s contentious attack on representative (or identity) politics—as a mode of political struggle, which, through its ostensible adherence to notions of appearance, disalienation, and self-discipline—has left the figure of the Marxist proletariat looking less and less like a revolutionary subject and more and more like a tired, archaic, grandparent who is desperately in need of being put out to pasture. It would appear then, that next to the indubitable explanatory power of biopolitics, the Marxian project of class struggle and revolution ‘in the last instance’ has taken devastating blow.

Now, on the other side of the coin, Foucault’s conception of biopolitics has not gone un-critiqued by contemporary Marxism. Let us cite at length from Slavoj Zizek, who characterizes the biopolitical analytic as a politics of fear:

Today’s predominant mode of biopolitics is post-political bio-politics—an awesome example of theoretical jargon which, however, can be easily unpacked: “post-political” is a politics which claims to leave behind old ideological struggles and instead focus on expert management and administration, while “bio-politics” designates the regulation of the security and welfare of human lives as its primary goal. It is clear how these two dimensions overlap: once one renounces big ideological causes, what remains is only the efficient administration of life…almost only that. That is to say, with the depoliticized, socially objective,  

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expert administration and coordination of interests as the zero level of politics, the only way to introduce passion into this field, to actively mobilize people, is through fear, a basic constituent of today’s subjectivity. For this reason, biopolitics is ultimately a politics of fear; it focuses on defense from potential victimization or harassment.\footnote{Slavoj Zizek, \textit{Violence: Six Sideways Reflections} (New York, Picador, 2008), 40.}

For Zizek, who continues to hold fast to the importance of Marxism as a revolutionary project, the notion of biopolitics is so obsessed with what power does to the body that its only political recourse is to play an equal game of administration. While Foucault does make a radical rallying cry for an jouissanic escape to “bodies and pleasure” as a mode of combatting biopower, Zizek is correct to point out the fact that since Foucault’s death, most of the discourse on biopolitics has looked more like a politics of reform than of revolution. In short, biopolitics has tended toward such reactionary analyses of the way power governs every aspect of the body that mounting any substantial political counter-attack outside the discursive confines of the university and various academic publishing houses seems futile.

So, between Marx and Foucault, the horizon of radical politics on left seems rather bleak. For Foucauldians, Marxist politics is too affirmative; it naively jumps the gun with its revolutionary fantasy of communist utopias, and in so doing plays into the hands of biopower. While for Marxism, Foucauldians get bogged down in a genealogical politics of petrification and are thus unable to take the political and discursive risks required of both revolution and communism.

But there is hope. The past decade has seen a critical intersection between lines of Marxist thought and Foucauldian biopolitics. This convergence is perhaps most
poignantly explicated in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s trilogy: *Empire, Multitude,* and *Commonwealth.* In this same vein, recent attempts have been made by thinkers such as Nick Dyer-Witherford, Jason Read, Gayatri Spivak, and David Harvey to recontextualize Marx’s notion of species-being—as he introduces it in his *1844 Manuscripts*—within the various biopolitical horizons of contemporary capitalism. In his most recent project, Dyer-Witherford argues that today capitalism and biopower have become fully integrated on a global scale, creating what he calls “the factory planet”:

The characteristic of the factory planet is the capitalist subsumption not just of production, not just of consumption, not just of social reproduction (as in Fordism), but of life’s informational, genetic and ecological dimensions, with the implications reverberating back on all the other moments of its circuit. This is the moment Marx intersects with Foucault, when capital becomes a regime of biopower. For Dyer-Witherford, any attempt to formulate a radical politics requires not only a careful consideration of biopower, but also at the same time an immanent project of communism. He calls this project “biocommunism.” It is within this hopeful and yet still undefined trajectory of thinking that I want to situate Agamben. It is my claim, however, that before we make the mad dash to institute a social praxis of biocommunism, we must first carefully and patiently think through a grammar, which is to say a disciplined and conditioned way of communicating with others, of biocommunism. It is toward the constitution of this grammar of biocommunism—which requires us to labor in the shadow of Marx, while pursuing the legacy of Foucault—that this thesis ultimately aims to contribute.

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I. Apparatuses, Separation and the Captive Body: The Originary Biopolitical Structure

The first known photograph of a human being was a ten-minute exposure in 1839 by Louis Daguerre on the Boulevard du Temple. Despite the fact that the street was actually quite busy that day, the prolonged exposure time resulted in the capture of only a single being within the frame: a man having his shoes shined in the bottom corner of the picture. What interests Giorgio Agamben about this image is the way that it captures something it’s not supposed to capture. On the one hand, there is the insignificant moment of a banal human life, carrying out the most everyday gesture. On the other hand, we have the ossifying imposition by the lens of a camera, through which insignificance is made significant—made to appear as something meaningful.9

This image, I claim, may be thought of as homologous to Agamben’s conception of an originary structure of biopolitics inherent to the onto-political legacy of Western thought. In this section I aim to explicate this legacy in order to provide the conceptual foundation from which Agamben bases his thoughts on emancipatory politics. In his analysis of Agamben’s corpus, Gregory Murray suggests: “The most pervasive, resilient, robust, sneaky, and significant concept in all of Giorgio Agamben’s essays is that of separation.”10 In this section, I want to follow Murray’s suggestion by reading Agamben’s conceptualization of biopolitics as foremost a meditation on the sneaky mechanism of separation. In order to make this argument, I work to consider the way that

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Agamben inherits Michel Foucault’s notion of an apparatus, or dispositif, and the implications that this has for Agamben’s conception of an originary biopolitical structure.

In a 1977 interview entitled “Confession of the Flesh,” Foucault defines an apparatus as:

a thoroughly heterogeneous set consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid…by the term ‘apparatus’ I mean a kind of formation, so to speak, that at a given historical moment has as its major function the response to an urgency. The apparatus therefore has a dominant strategic function.\textsuperscript{11}

The apparatus works in Foucault’s conceptual schema to explain the network of power established between and through various different historically situated elements. The strategic function of the apparatus, for Foucault, also means that this network exists at the interstices of power relations and formulations of knowledge. In tracing a genealogy of Foucault’s deployment of the term, Agamben notices that in his earlier projects, Foucault does not use “apparatus,” but rather, “positivity,” a term employed by Jean Hyppolite in his work on the young Hegel.\textsuperscript{12} For Hegel, the historical element—understood as the set of rules, institutions, and rites in which power relations are solidified—is experienced as “positivity,” as the external imposition of a social order upon the living individual that is internalized and experienced as fate “rather than as an organic part of the self.”\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{13} Zizek, Living in the End Times (New York, 2011), 416-417 and Agamben, What is an Apparatus? (Stanford, CA, 2009), 7. I want to draw attention to the homologous treatment of subjectification between Agamben and Zizek, where both seem to be inheriting Hegel’s conception of the historical element. Zizek’s use of the term organic in the above-quoted passage, demonstrates how, like Agamben, he too wants to stress a certain process of separation that undergirds subjectification—if the living substance is “organic;” the imposition of the external order upon that living substance, and the subject that is distilled as a result, must therefore be considered “synthetic.”
the apparatus is defined for Foucault in terms similar to Hegel’s notion of positivity, the way an apparatus operates for Foucault is significantly different. Foucault argues in “Confession of the Flesh,” that apparatuses always aim to “face an urgent need and to obtain an effect that is more or less immediate.” In this light, the networks formed between various intersections of discourses, institutions, rules, rituals, etc. are not static and cannot easily be reduced to a larger social order, as they are in the Hegelian analytic. What interests Foucault about positivity and its later conceptual transformation into the ‘apparatus,’ is therefore not an Hegelian synthesis of the external historical element with the living individual. Rather, as Agamben writes, “For Foucault, what is at stake is [the] investigation of concrete modes in which the positivities (or the apparatuses) act within the relations, mechanisms, and ‘plays’ of power.” The conceptual significance that the apparatus has in Foucault’s genealogy of governmentality is thus that it allows Foucault to contextualize specific elements that intersect in contingent ways to form specific, historically-constituted networks of governmentality.

Agamben argues that while Foucault always refuses the deployment of universal concepts—Law, State, Power, etc.—in exchange for meticulous genealogical constructions that would explode the safe haven offered by abstraction and generality, the term ‘apparatus’ actually “takes the place of the universal in the Foucauldian strategy.” For Foucault, apparatuses represent, “not simply this or that police measure, this or that technology of power, and not even the generality obtained by their abstraction.”

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14 Agamben, What is an Apparatus?, 5.
15 Ibid., 6.
16 Ibid., 7.
17 Ibid., 7.
they are “the network that can be established between these elements.” In other words, the apparatus, for Foucault, is a conceptual tool for probing his concerns with the historical development of the relations between power, knowledge, and language. Thus, in Agamben’s view, when Foucault sublates the apparatus into his broader conceptual concerns, he in turn forecloses the opportunity for developing a deeper genealogical consideration of the term and the original historical context from which its role in modern society originates.

It is at this point that Agamben looks to extend Foucault’s genealogy of the apparatus in order to examine its significance to the whole of Western onto-political thought, and therefore to the tradition of Western ‘governmentality.’ As Nicholas Heron correctly asserts, the specific nature of Agamben’s inquiry into this significance is foremost a matter of terminology. Agamben turns to Aristotle’s elaboration of the term oikonomia—the administration (nomia) or, more generally, the governance, of the household (oikos)—in order to examine its assumption within the early Christian tradition, where it takes on a decisively new valence. And it is precisely the light in which the early Christian tradition charged oikonomia with a specifically theological function that Agamben will locate the conceptual legacy of the apparatus.

Agamben explains how during the processes in which the notion of the Trinity was to become the orthodox dogma, the Church fathers were faced with the problem of defending its assumption against accusations of polytheism. In order to justify the Trinity and differentiate it from charges of polytheism, the Church fathers turned to oikonomia.

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18 Ibid., 8.
19 Ibid., 8-9.
Their claim, Agamben writes, turned on the argument that “God, insofar as his being and substance is concerned, is certainly one; but as to his oikonomia—that is to say the way in which he administers his home, his life, and the world that he created—he is, rather, triple.”21 Thus, monotheism’s integrity is not vitiated because God’s being—his divine substance—has not been split.

Rather, the split occurs only in the oikonomia, the administrative aspect of the triplicity of which the Trinity speaks. In Agamben’s view, the consequences of this justification have been surprisingly influential in the tradition of Western thought. What Agamben sees in Christianity’s adoption of oikonomia is the simultaneous establishment in the tradition of Western thought of a conceptual split in the economy of governmentality—a split between a discourse of theology (God and his divine substance) and a discourse of economy (the oikonomia of the Trinity). Recounting that in Latin oikonomia translates into dispositio, “from which the French term dispositif, or apparatus, derives,” Agamben claims that, “the dispositifs about which Foucault speaks are somehow linked to this theological legacy” that insinuates a split between the economy of (divine) being and governmentality.22 In other words, there is a being and an essence on the one hand, and the operations of administration and governmentality through which that being is articulated on the other. An apparatus insinuates a decisive separation from being and essence which, through that very separation, articulates and founds a created world. It is “that in which, and through which, one realizes a pure activity of governance devoid of any foundation in being.”23

21 Agamben, What is an Apparatus?, 9-10.
22 Ibid., 11.
23 Ibid., 12.
The way in which the apparatus echoes with other concepts—including Hegel’s “positivity,” Louis Althusser’s materialist conception of ideology, or Heidegger’s Gestell—is thus an important aspect of the argument, inasmuch as they all insist on the uneasy relationship between subjectification and separation, where subjectification implies de-subjectivification. That is, through the process of becoming a subject, the individuality of the living substance is separated and subsumed under the apparatus. The significant point of departure that Agamben takes from these reverberating conceptions of subjectivization, however, is a question of the way in which oikonomia undergirds the very tradition of Western thought. Importantly, for Agamben any conceptualization of the subject and its relation to the external social order turns in circles that refer back to the oikonomia, which always aims to “manage, govern, and orient” the “behaviors, gestures, and thoughts of living beings” in manners that always “purport to be useful” (I will return to the question of orientation and utility below). The structure of the apparatus thus extends far beyond the Foucauldian analytics of modern power. More broadly conceived, then, it is precisely this irreducible split between God’s nature and his economy, where action has no foundation in being, which is for Agamben the “schizophrenia which the theological doctrine of oikonomia leaves as a legacy to Western culture.”

The consequences of this legacy of separation and the structures of governmentality that undergird it have, for Agamben, been surprisingly far-reaching. Most notably, Agamben suggests that the legacy of separation has had profoundly violent consequences in relation to community, insofar as the processes whereby apparatuses subjectify individuals in order to orient them toward a notion of the good always imply

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24 Ibid., 11.
equal processes of exclusion and inclusion. By thrusting the signified contents of a representable subjectivity upon life, apparatuses work not only to formulate notions of the “good,” the “proper,” and the “productive,” but they also create notions of the “vile,” the “improper,” and the “non-productive.” Referring to the Nazi camps in *Homo Sacer*, Agamben writes, “[We must] regard the camp not as a historical fact and an anomaly belonging to the past but in some way as the hidden matrix and nomos of the political space in which we are *still* living.”25 In other words, so long as community is built around the language of signified subjectivities, the exclusionary processes proper to the camp will continue to form the organizational paradigm of humanity.26 Even when the conditions of subjective belonging have been liberally re-formulated and flexibly re-interpreted, Agamben argues, the result has nonetheless routinely involved exclusion and isolation; sooner or later calls to the purity of subjectivity and the protection of real or symbolic resources based on that purity, will become an issue of violent contention.27

In this way, what Foucault calls biopower—the integration and management of the biological existence of the human species into modalities of governmentality that seeks to maximize the productive force of human life28—is, for Agamben, precisely not a modern phenomenon, but rather the originary structure upon which the entire Western onto-political tradition has hitherto been founded. In Agamben’s view, it is necessary to

26 Ibid., 110-114.
27 Ibid., 133-134. Agamben contends in *Homo Sacer*, that if human subjectivity is constituted by its relationship of abandonment to a law which presupposes the exclusionary inclusion of bare life at its foundation, then appeals to “humanity” in the face of political violence only serve to reinscribe the politicization of (bare) life, which lies at the heart of the sovereign power. In other words, to appeal to the sacredness of human life as a foil to the sovereign’s right to death, redoubles that sovereign’s right to death. Agamben writes, “humanitarian organizations…can only grasp human life in the figure of bare or sacred life, and therefore, despite themselves, maintain a secret solidarity with the very powers they ought to fight” (128).
extend the Foucauldian list of apparatuses from the few monolithic networks of power—the madhouse, the prison, juridical measures, schools—to “literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings.”

This is the striking thesis of biopolitical separation that Agamben provides: biopolitics designates nothing more than a constellation of various apparatuses that constantly work to separate living substances from themselves by producing identifiable subjectivities. And for Agamben, this is not only an external modality of governmentality but precisely the *modus operandi* of all Western thought. What, then, does this legacy of biopolitical separation mean in terms of providing the basis for Agamben’s thinking on emancipatory politics?

If, for Agamben, on the one side there is the “ontology of creatures”—living substances—and on the other side, the originary biopolitical *oikonomia*, which seeks to separate living creatures from their ontology by submitting them to the subjectifying processes of apparatuses, then it seems to be implied that something exists before the separation. That is, insofar as living beings are concerned, for Agamben there seems to be something prior to the apparatus and before the subject that is the result of the two classes—living substances and apparatuses—coming into tension with each other. Thought in this way, there is always something that *could not have been* before the biopolitical processes of separation, which for Agamben extend to almost everything with which living substances come into contact. It is with this point in mind that Agamben will look to destabilize the processes of separation, whereby living substances are brought under the productive control of apparatuses and produced as subjects. However, it should be stressed that this is not through a hyper-glorification of substances. Rather, Agamben

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29 Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?*, 11.
wants to think a politics freed from what he sees as a false dichotomy between “the ineffability of the individual [substance]” on the one hand, and “the intelligibility of the universal [oikonomia]” on the other.\textsuperscript{30} For the romanticization of unmediated substance is itself an apparatus that implies the production of a proper subjectivity. Instead, Agamben will find a different way of thinking being—the pure potentiality that supersedes the productive relationship between apparatuses and substances.

II. Potentiality and the Ontological Primacy of Resistance

I want to briefly return to the site of the image *qua* photograph cited at the beginning of this thesis in order to approach Agamben’s conception of potentiality. As Benjamin Noys argues, “the photograph is the intersection of two lines.” The first line is “the line of separation, in which generic human gesturality is subject to capture, classification, and commodification,” whereas, “the second line is a line of flight in which the gesture is freed from its [classification] to become the gesture as such.”\textsuperscript{31} We can see how the first line intersects with the definition of biopolitical separation as explicated in the previous section to the extent that there is a homology between the capturing effects of the photograph and all other apparatuses. The second line, however, testifies to the ways in which the fixed image of the photograph (and by extension, the fixity of apparatuses) is also always for Agamben an index of reversibility: “as though something, interrupting the continuum of history had frozen the surrounding reality in a kind of messianic arrest.”\textsuperscript{32} In other words, inasmuch as the photograph captures and fixes the gesture, it also at the same time illustrates the preservation of the *dynamis* that is inherent to gesturality—“the capacity of the photograph to capture gestures reveals


gesturality as such.” While this analysis speaks to Agamben’s engagement with Benjamin’s formulations on the messianic moment of redemption inherent in the image, what I want to argue, following Noys, is that for Agamben it is precisely this *dynamis* of the photograph that is so apposite for rethinking politics today.

Commenting on Scottish photographer David Octavius Hill’s nineteenth-century photograph of a fishwife, Benjamin finds “something that cannot be silenced, that fills you with an unruly desire to know what her name was, the woman who was alive there, who even now is still real and will never consent to be wholly absorbed in art.” While the form of Agamben’s messianic moment of rupture clearly follows Benjamin’s concept of the dialectic at a standstill, what I want to contend here is that for Agamben this moment always insinuates a reversal of the fixed image via a return to gesturality. Agamben calls this gesturality pure potentiality. But what is this pure potentiality and why is it important for rethinking politics today? In the remainder of this section I will seek to answer this question, highlighting specifically the ways in which potentiality serves as the ontological foundation for Agamben’s emancipatory politics.

When Agamben refers to potentiality, his point of departure is almost always Aristotle’s *De Anima* and *Metaphysics*. In *Metaphysics*, Aristotle writes: “A thing is said to be potential if, when the act of which it is said to be potential is realized, there will be nothing impotent.” This statement carries a deeper meaning regarding the *potentiality to not-be*: “if a potentiality to not-be originally belongs to all potentiality, then there is

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34 Ibid., 5-7.
truly potentiality only where the potentiality to not-be does not lag behind actuality but passes fully into it as such.” In this way, there is “a potentiality that conserves itself and saves itself in actuality.”37 For Agamben, it is precisely the awareness and the ability to not-be, or to not do something, which differentiates humans from other living beings. Consider, for example, the possession of a faculty like vision. When I close my eyes I experience the potential to not see. As such, it is precisely the potential for vision not to actualize itself that we can say we possess vision as a faculty. If we could not experience the not-being of vision, then it would not be a faculty but rather a given condition of human existence. This access to the negative is a significant aspect of Agamben’s thought on potentiality because, as Leland Deladurantaye argues, “it denotes the possibility for a thing not to pass into existence and thereby remain at the level of mere—or pure—potentiality.”38 This, for Agamben, evinces an irreducible relationship between potentiality and impotentiality. If potentiality is simply the ability to actualize, to convert potentiality into action, then impotentiality signifies the ability to not actualize, or to not convert potentiality into action.

However, in speaking of impotentiality we are not left with a mere dialectic of potentiality, where (to return to the example of vision) seeing is opposed only to not-seeing. Rather, impotentiality should be thought in terms of dynamis or gesturality, as the ability to not convert potentiality into a clearly discernible action. In this way, for Agamben, when we are in the dark, it is not simply a matter of saying “we cannot see,” but rather of saying “we see darkness”—which is to say we see something different.

Agamben writes: “Human beings see shadows, they can experience darkness.” Important for understanding the political implications of his thinking on potentiality is this tension that Agamben sets up between darkness and light, which is mediated on both ends by the (im)potentiality of vision. As Paul Nadal asserts:

Agamben plays with the motif of darkness because it evokes the idea of a potentiality that is outside the domain of actuality-as-light: when we are in the dark, external, phenomenal objects cannot take (actual) form, everything therefore remains in the domain of the potential.39

We can thus think of a matrix, where if converting potentiality into action is linked to the separation processes of apparatuses, while remaining in pure potentiality (which is to say impotentiality) corresponds to the dynamis of pure means, freed from the converting processes of the apparatus. Whereas the oikonomia of apparatuses that force being into actuality work to construct images of what a human should be, the dynamis of Agamben’s (im)potentiality suggest that being has no proper task to which it must ascend, nor any idea of the proper that it must call its own.

I argued in the first section of this thesis that the horizon for Agamben’s emancipatory politics must be understood through the various processes of biopolitical separation that subtend the legacy of Western society. If it is the proliferation of apparatuses that separates living substance from itself through the process of subjectification, then for Agamben pure potentiality, freed from the capture of those identity-forming apparatuses, serves as the ontological point of departure for rethinking emancipation. In this sense, Agamben’s pure potentiality also exists as a register for the originary inoperativity of life— the absence of any task or destiny suitable to the human

condition. For Agamben, this means that being has no proper form of life; it is simply a form-of-life.\footnote{Agamben, \textit{Means Without End: Notes on Politics}, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 3-10.} By extension, pure potentiality signals the necessity for the ontological primacy of resistance to any mode of subjective actualization.

But this brings us to an impasse in Agamben’s thought. How can we think through the fact that (im)potentiality has always already been foreclosed in the subject? For to be a subject is to have always already submitted one’s (im)potentiality to the actualizing forces of an apparatus that orient the pure potentiality of living substances by “telling it” where to go, how to look, what to say, and what to think. Thus, from the perspective of emancipatory politics, we can only ever speak of a \textit{return} to (im)potentiality. In the next section, I look at how making the return from actualized subjectivity to pure (im)potentiality relates to Agamben’s arguments concerning the political task of profanation.
III. Profanation and the Cult of Consumption

Agamben’s political project, as I have discussed thus far, would appear to be motivated entirely by abstract tendencies. But if Agamben’s aim is to disrupt the originary biopolitical structure that undergirds Western thought, then how does his unrelentingly abstract thinking lines up in terms of the most dominating historical element of our current biopolitical structure: post-industrial capitalism? By way of answering this question, in this section I want to emphasize the relationship in Agamben’s thought between two concepts—profanation and consumption.

Agamben approaches the contemporary phase of capitalism in a truly unique manner, which is inflected foremost by his ongoing concern with the problematic of separation. In Agamben’s view, late capitalism is typified by what Guy Debord refers to as the society of the spectacle. The society of the spectacle is epitomized by the “transformation of life into a spectacular phantasmagoria,” where humanity has been driven towards a single destiny: a hollowed-out existence where identity “no longer holds any meaning.” However, in following Holderlin’s maxim in “Patmos” that “where there is danger, there also grows hope,” it is precisely at this point of postmodern purgatory that Agamben finds the potentiality for resituating emancipatory thought. Agamben finds radical potential in the fading horizon of a meaningful world; it is the absolute irreparability of our contemporary epoch that fills him with the greatest hope. He posits

that humanity is now comprised of a “global petit bourgeoisie,” living out the “absurdity of individual existence,” in which “there is nothing ‘authentic’ or ‘natural.’” And this petit bourgeoisie, for whom authenticity, proper vocation, and custom “no longer hold any meaning,” is the agent of Agamben’s emancipatory politics. This world of the spectacle has become absolutely profane.  

Another way that Agamben speaks about separation is in terms of religion, particularly through recourse to the sacred. Agamben defines all separation as religious; he writes: “There is a religious sphere that assails every thing, every place, every human activity, in order to divide it from itself.” What interests Agamben about the sacred is the way in which it signals the removal of something from a common sphere. The emphasis here is placed on the nature of religious separation; the definite caesura between the human and the divine spheres. All apparatuses are in this way religious inasmuch as what is projected in an apparatus are ossified images that have been placed into the realm of fixed actuality. It is at this point that Agamben will posit profanation as the act that returns sacred objects back to the common sphere of free use and experimentation.

If consecration signifies the passing of something from the human sphere to the sacred, then profanation represents the opposite movement, where what is sacred is returned to the realm of the profane and thus opened up to free use. In this way, the free use of the profane order should be read precisely in terms of a pure potentiality, as suggested by Sergei Prozorov:

43 Agamben, Profanations, 81.
44 Ibid., 82-83.
Profanation of the sacred object removes it from a separate sphere, in which its use was proscribed or regulated, and renders it available for free use in a myriad of non-canonical ways, making the object in question a ‘pure means,’ whose being is divorced from any end and is wholly manifested in its sheer potentiality for whatever use.\footnote{Sergei Prozorov, “Pornography and Profanation in the Political Philosophy of Giorgio Agamben,” 77-78.}

As such, the profane world is a world where objects are never actualized and consigned to a proper use, but rather remain in their pure potentiality. This final point is important, and I will return to the precise impropriety of the profane order toward the end of this section.

Central to understanding profanation as a political strategy in Agamben’s thought is an understanding of the way he reformulates the concept of alienation. In Stanzas, Agamben introduces his interest in reformulating the concept of use by stating: “the transfiguration of the commodity into enchanted object is the sign that the exchange value is already beginning to eclipse use value.”\footnote{Agamben, Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture, trans. Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 38.} Against Louis Althusser’s proclamation that the entire section first section of Marx’s Capital—which deals with the commodity and fetishism—should be skipped on the grounds of its “flagrant” abuse of archaic Hegelianism, Agamben looks to revive the conceptual power of the alienating features inherent to the fetish.\footnote{Agamben, Means without End: Notes on Politics, 76.} I want now to briefly contextualize the way that Agamben approaches the shifting horizon of late capitalism by turning away from the more scientific Marxism’s and back to the nature of the fetish by way of his two most significant Marxian interlocutors, Georg Lukacs and Guy Debord.\footnote{Alex Murray “Beyond Spectacle and the Image: the Poetics of Guy Debord and Agamben,” in The Work of Giorgio Agamben: Law, Literature, Life, ed. Justin Clemens (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press), 166-169.} This preliminary examination of Lukacs and Debord is important for understanding Agamben’s conception

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of alienation and the way it relates to profanation, a relationship to which I will turn shortly below.

We need to first look at the way Lukacs treats alienation in the preface to the 1967 edition of his *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) in order to understand Agamben’s engagement with the fetish. In the 1923 edition, Lukacs boldly asserts: “The chapter [in *Capital*] dealing with the fetish character of the commodity contains within itself the whole of historical materialism, and the whole self-knowledge of the proletariat seen as the knowledge of capitalist society.”49 However, by 1967 Lukacs would rework his own thesis by criticizing Marx’s notion of alienation. For Lukacs, Marx’s conceptualization of alienation held onto Hegelian idealism too much, and this idealism overdetermined Marx’s broader views by forcing them into a narrow politics that valorized the transcendence of all alienation through a communist synthesis.50 Instead, Lukacs suggests, we need to return to the more critical implications inherent in Marx’s conceptualization of objectification, which for Lukacs is “a natural means by which man masters the world and as such it can be either a positive or negative fact.” This reformulation resulted for Lukacs in a shift in the way alienation should be viewed: “By contrast, alienation is a special variant of [objectification] which becomes operative in definite social conditions.”51 In other words, alienation is the result of the processes of objectification, which should be viewed as neither positive nor negative but as the process required for all historical development. As such, the desire to transcend alienation

through communist synthesis must be seen as a narrow or naïve solution to a much broader problematic regarding the way we think about historical progress.

Anselm Jappe has usefully elucidated Debord’s conceptual indebtedness to Lukacs’ reformulation of consciousness and objectification.\(^2\) Published in 1967, Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* outlines the manner in which late capitalism is predicated upon the full reign of the commodity fetish over modern society. In short, the spectacle marks the moment when the commodity has colonized social life absolutely. Moreover, and contrary to Lukacs, Debord locates modern society’s enslavement to the commodity form not in work, but in the image *qua* spectacle. The spectacle is for Debord “capital accumulated to such a degree that it becomes images.”\(^3\) Thus, for Debord, social relations today are mediated entirely by commodified images.\(^4\) Debord writes:

> For one to whom the real world becomes images, mere images are transformed into real beings – tangible figments which are the efficient motor of a trance-like behavior. Since the spectacle’s job is to cause a world that is no longer directly perceptible to be seen via different specialized mediations, it is inevitable that it should elevate the human sense of sight to the special place once occupied by touch; the most abstract of the senses, and the most easily deceived, sight is naturally the most readily adaptable to present-day society’s generalized abstraction. This is not to say, however, that the spectacle in itself is perceptible to the naked eye – even if that eye is assisted by the ear. The spectacle is by definition immune from human activity, inaccessible to any projected review or correction. It is the opposite of dialogue. Wherever representation takes on an independent existence, the spectacle establishes the rule.\(^5\)

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For Debord it is clear: anything that appears today is a product of the unilateral imposition of the spectacle upon society. The spectacle is in this way not discernible, precisely because it corresponds to modern social relations in their entirety. In Debord’s view, sight and the sensual experiences that it offers have been colonized by capitalism; moreover, there is no way of escaping the spectacle’s alienating effects. Today, appearance is constitutive of alienation and alienation is constitutive of appearance.

The conceptual rejuvenation of alienation and the commodity fetish in Debord’s work fits into Agamben’s conception of emancipatory politics in two ways. First, and perhaps most simply, it represents for Agamben an accurate description of our contemporary phase of late capitalism, where “everything that was once directly lived has become mere representation.”56 Agamben writes: “Guy Debord’s books constitute the clearest and most severe analysis of the miseries and slavery of a society that by now has extended its dominion over the whole planet—that is to say, the society of the spectacle in which we live.”57 The second reason, however, deviates from Debord’s initial rendering of the spectacle and is graspable by returning to Lukacs’ assertion that alienation not be seen as wholly negative.

While Agamben follows Debord in describing the spectacle as “the becoming-image of capital,” he moves beyond this analysis in order to assert that the spectacle has also completely permeated language and communicativity. “Capitalism,” Agamben writes, “not only aimed at the expropriation of productive activity, but also, and above all, of the linguistic and communicative nature of human beings.”58 The alienating nature of the spectacle has, in Agamben’s view, emptied communicativity of any and all truth.

56 Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, 12.
57 Agamben, Means without End: Notes on Politics, 73.
58 Ibid., 82.
content. Emptied of reference to higher truth claims, identity is rendered “idle,” and communicativity under the spectacle is thus hollowed out and begins to resemble Agamben’s *experimentum linguae*: the pure experience of potentiality, as such. Thus, inasmuch as we no longer share relationships with any objects that are based in genuine utility, the complete triumph of alienation and the commodity form under the spectacle signifies for Agamben the tabula rasa of an empty form, “freed from the need to be useful.” Thus, whereas for Debord, the spectacle’s inescapability signaled the continued enslavement of historical progression to the alienating force of capital, for Agamben this alienation is not wholly negative, insofar as it presents an unprecedented opportunity for re-examining the very foundation of historical progression.

As Jessica Whyte suggests, “For [Agamben], the fact that the spectacle calls on people to devise the meaning and worth of their individual and collective identities, provides an important break with the belief that these identities are dictated by biology or tradition.” Put in rather vulgar postmodern terms, the spectacle represents the moment when “everything has a basis in Nothing.” This point, in Agamben’s view signals a movement that has hitherto been absent in conceptions of human identity: that the spectacle forces us to play with and devise identity through pre-packaged, hollow images, implies for Agamben that society no longer believes in the truth content of a human essence. The full subordination of language to the spectacle challenges Enlightenment conceptualizations of truth and empirical meaning by forcing individuals to interact with objects on a plane that is always already shorn of reliable authenticity and proper

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60 *Ibid.*, 89.
vocation. Thus, inasmuch as it has emptied life of its content, the alienation upon which the spectacle’s logic is predicated offers the opportunity for separating ourselves from the processes of separation that undergird the originary biopolitical structure that has hitherto tyrannized Western thought.

If we return to Agamben’s definition of the profane as that which is removed from the untouchable realm of the sacred, we can say that the spectacle appears to have rendered contemporary social relations profane—language under the spectacle seems to have become so alienated that it can finally be put to a ‘free use’ that is untethered from the sacred nature of apparatuses and their truth propositions. Agamben’s project-less community, based in the pure potentiality of existence, thus already exists in a perverse sense within the spectacle. The task, then, is to perfect the imperfect nihilism of the spectacle by pushing to the extreme the alienated vacuity of the world in which we live. He writes: “Only those who will be able to carry [the spectacle and its expropriation of linguistic being] to completion…will become the first citizens of a community with neither presuppositions nor a state.”

64 Nihilism occupies a crucial role in Agamben’s larger project. Agamben asserts that spectacular capitalism signals a condition of imperfect nihilism, inasmuch as the complete devaluation of human essence remains captured by the oppressive logics of capitalism. Yoni Monad writes:

In a similar way to Nietzsche, Agamben believes that rather than maintaining a reactionary or merely critical attitude towards nihilism, our task is to put it to new use by realizing it redemptive potentiality.

Agamben’s ethics is one of a fulfilled nihilism: the realization that the world is as it is, that therein lies its wonder, and that there is no vocation or pre-given destiny for the species, and hence no historical or political tasks for human beings to fulfill…For Agamben, the human is a workless animal whose redemption lies not in finding the true path, but in losing its way in the right way.

65 Agamben, Means without End: Notes on Politics, 85 and Deborah Levitt, “Spectacle,” The Agamben Dictionary, 184. The basic structure of this quotation is taken from Levitt’s analysis.
However, in Agamben’s view, the spectacle’s profane order possesses a peculiar twist, the nature of which is essential to understanding the utterly radical implications of profanation as a political strategy. For Agamben, what the spectacle illustrates is that our latest phase of capitalism is epitomized by a paradoxical concurrence of the profane and the sacred. In order to tease out this spectacular paradox, I want to follow briefly consider Agamben’s engagement with pornography, in relation to what he views as the enduring problematic of consumption.66

There is, it seems, no way to begin a critical discussion of pornography in Western culture that is not overdetermined by the tenors of dangerous provocation. Such an undertaking is always already trapped by the images of the gendered hierarchies of exploitation and abuse that are irreducible to the reality of sex work. We are channeled, from beginning to end, into an ossified apparatus of pornography, and thereby forced to engage all things pornographic with a distanced respect for certain sacred taboos of performative sexuality that define pornography’s discursive boundaries. The violent realities of pornography notwithstanding, an urgent fact remains: to talk about pornography differently is, in some way, to neglect its divine untouchability. This neglect is precisely the way that Agamben approaches pornography as a paradigm. As such, rather than defending or castigating his thought for the extent to which he does or does not deal adequately with the overdetermined discursive channels of the pornographic apparatus, I want to emphasize below the ways in which Agamben views pornography as paradigmatic of the paradoxical coincidence of the profane and the sacred that typifies our contemporary biopolitical horizon.
In an essay entitled “The Idea of Communism,” published originally in 1985 in Idea of Prose, Agamben provides an analysis of the intimate relationship between the fulfillment of happiness and pornography. He writes: “In pornography, the utopia of a classless society displays itself through gross caricatures of those traits that distinguish classes and their transfiguration in the sexual act.”67 That is, the episodic flourish of the sexual act in pornography suggests a “communist kairology of the revolutionary seizure of temporality.”68 In porn, the most everyday scenes—a young pool boy and an unhappy wife, when no one else is home—transform instantly into something different. Here bodies are no longer forced into their oppressive biopolitical structurations, but are freed in a sexual flourish that shatters subjective hierarchy, offering the utopic moment of a classless society. Thus, for Agamben, the classless society that pornography ostensibly offers corresponds directly to a profane society, where life is freed from biopolitical separation.69

However, what Agamben notices is that pornography’s image of the “utopia of a classless society” is only ever represented in the context of “a stubborn insistence on class markings in dress at the very moment that the situation both transgresses and nullifies them.”70 The very appearance of utopia is tethered to its elusión. And if we consider the thematic context of pornography concomitant to the publication of Agamben’s essay in 1985, his argument is even more explicit. The utopic moments porn offers in 1980s are only possible by the spectral eroticization of class difference as

69 The spectacle’s ability to offer the profane world of a classless society will be important below, where I introduce the relationship between consumption and politics.
70 Ibid., 73.
represented by the definite materiality of worker relations: the not-so-formal maid’s uniform, the sweaty body of the pool-boy, the plumber’s tight-fitting overalls, or the scantily-clad nurse in her smock. In this early analysis, Agamben thus wants to signal the way that “pornography withholds liberation at the very moment it represents it most starkly.”

Agamben will pick up the pornographic tensions between transparency and elusion again in 2007 in his book entitled *Profanations*. Here Agamben notices the way in which modern porn stars, “in the very act of executing their most intimate caresses, now look resolutely back into the camera, showing that they are more interested in the spectator than in their partners.” The erotic purchase of the modern porn star is increasingly centered on the ability to show spectator’s that she is aware of their gaze. As she looks brazenly back at the camera—and by extension the spectator—she “shows nothing but the showing itself (that is, one’s own absolute mediality).” The pornographic model no longer fixes her eyes on her partner(s) during the sexual act; now she looks back upon the spectator, profaning the last remaining traces of sacred conjugality. Agamben sees the profanatory act of the porn star take place most starkly in regard to the human face within the context of the erotic act:

Yet, precisely through this nullification of expressivity, eroticism penetrates where it could have no place: the human face, which does not know nudity, for it is always already bare. Shown as a pure means beyond any concrete expressivity, it becomes available for a new use, a new form of erotic communication.  

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71 Prozorov, “Pornography and Profanation in the Political Philosophy of Giorgio Agamben,” 71 and 77.  
72 Agamben, *Profanations*, 89.  
73 Catherine Mills, “Playing with the Law: Agamben and Derrida on Postjuridical Justice,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107:1 (2008): 15-36. Toward the end of her examination on Agamben’s notion of play, Mills argues that Agamben’s reference to the profanatory potential of pornography is always already overdetermined by the role that gender plays in the industry. Following this assertion, I too wonder: is profanation, as a political strategy, somehow inextricably gendered in Agamben’s thought?  
74 Agamben, *Profanations*, 90.  
75 Ibid., 87.
The fulfillment of happiness that porn offers is now signified by a “profane mediality,” where the sexual act is wrenched from the realm of the sacred and moved toward the profane during the moment in which model’s eyes leave the set (and her partner’s body) to brazenly fixate on the spectator.

At this point, Agamben folds his initial analysis of pornography in 1985 back into his discussion of “profane mediality” in Profanations. While the pornographic image presents an opportunity for putting erotic activity to a free and profane use, this profanability is always simultaneously captured by the pornographic apparatus “in a representation that may be consumed in masturbatory activity but never brought to new use as such.” What the contemporary apparatus of pornography captures, Agamben contends, is precisely “the human capacity to let erotic behaviors idle, to profane them by detaching them from their immediate ends.” In other words, the profanatory act that the modern porn star offers in her brazen gaze back at her spectators is always (re)captured by the pornographic apparatus, which insists on orienting individuals toward a proper masturbatory copula between model and viewer. This mechanism is what Agamben calls “producing the unprofanable,” and it is for him the biopolitical operation par excellence within the contemporary context of the spectacle.

In the same text where Agamben declares pornography as the paradigmatic moment where the profane world of the spectacle is recuperated by the sacred realm of capitalism, he also gestures toward a way that this unprofanability may be returned to a genuinely profane order. He turns here to what he deems the “porn art” of the French

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76 Prozorov, “Pornography and Profanation in the Political Philosophy of Giorgio Agamben,” 79.
77 Ibid., 79.
78 Agamben, Profanations, 91.
model Chloe Des Lysses, who “violates the conventions of the pornographic genre by abandoning the simulation of pleasure for the display of absolute ataraxy and indifference both to the partner and the spectator.” For Agamben, Chloe Des Lyssess’ performances refuse transformation into anything resembling complicity between the pleasure of lived sexual experience and that experience’s representation through the pornographic image:

The star, although she is aware of being exposed to their gaze, hasn’t even the slightest complicity with them. Her impassive face breaks every connection between lived experience and the expressive sphere; it no longer expresses anything, but shows itself as a place without a hint of expression, as a pure means. 

Thus, the performance of Chloe Des Lysess profanes the pornographic apparatus by presenting an image of sexual experience shorn of any claims to the truth content—pleasure and happiness—of sexual experience. Most importantly, this unsettling gesture becomes utterly inconsumable as properly pornographic.

In her reading of Agamben’s engagement with the pornographic image, Catherine Mills criticizes profanation as a political strategy on the grounds that it does nothing more than “mimic” and “repeat” the dominant functioning of the logics of capitalism that is ostensibly resists:

If the inexpressive and indifferent face of the porn star can be seen as the key figure of liberation that Agamben proposes, it is hard to know what one can make of this as a mode of political transformation...Moreover, in the absence of any further explanation from Agamben, it is not clear how repetition and mimicry of the characteristics of capitalist commodification amount to a form of liberation rather than simply an entrenchment of them. It is not hard to imagine that the gestures of playful repetition and temporary desoeuvrement that Agamben urges may be as empty and deadly as the regime of spectacular capitalism against which they are posed. 

79 Prozorov, “Pornography and Profanation in the Political Philosophy of Giorgio Agamben,” 79.
80 Agamben, Profanations, 91.
In Mills’ view, the repetition of different modes of sexual performativity is precisely congruent with the modern logic of late capitalism. Mills doubts profanation’s ability to produce a political transformation that is not always already subsumed under the commodity form; in this way she views Agamben’s politics as far too positive, insofar as Agamben seems to neglect completely the shaping power of the commodity form and the contemporary triumph of what Marx called real subsumption. Thus, even the stoicism of the actress in the face of “the anatomically demanding character of the acts she engages in,” is subsumed under that very capital logic that Agamben claims it challenges. But in demanding that Agamben’s engagement with profanation produce a

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82 In an unpublished section of capital entitled ‘Results of the Direct Production Process,’ Marx outlines the distinction between formal and real subsumption. The concern with subsumption, particularly as it may be distinguished between formal and real, circles around the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production and perhaps more importantly, the extent to which that mode of production and the abstract value form it secretes permeate human life and social relations. For Marx, this reproduction process occurs precisely on the basis of the “subsumption of the labor process under capital’s valorization process.” In other words, “in order to accumulate surplus value, and thus to valorize itself as capital, capital must subordinate the labor process to its own ends and, in so doing, transform it.” But Marx does not stop his analysis here; he recognizes two moments that inhere in the process of labor’s subordination to the value form of capitalism: formal and real subsumption. That is, first “capital subordinate the labour process to its valorisation process — it must formally subsume it — if it is to then reshape that process in its own image, or really subsume it.”

Formal subsumption, is purely formal insofar as here capital only takes hold of a labor process: it is “the subsumption under capital of a mode of labor already developed before the emergence of the capital-relation.” If for Marx formal subsumption implies only a quantitative shift in the labor process, like the extension of the working day and the fact that farmers are now compelled to take their goods to market in order to realize value, real subsumption represents a qualitative shift in the relation of human life to capital. With real subsumption “capital revolutionizes the actual mode of labor to produce the specifically capitalist mode of production.” The particularities of labor processes and the social relations that subtend them are completely subsumed within capitalism’s value form under real subsumption. Following this, Theorie Communiste suggest that the reproduction of the proletariat and the reproduction of capital become increasingly inseparable under real subsumption. In other words, “labour-power no longer has any possible ‘ways out’ of its exchange with capital in the framework of a specifically capitalist labour process.” The real subsumption of the labor process under capital is thus, “capital becoming capitalist society i.e. presupposing itself in its evolution and the creation of its organs.” Thus, with the movement of real subsumption, capital abolishes any semblance of pre-existing external forms and establishes an absolute domination over society where every aspect of life is subsumed under capital.

realistic mode of politics, Mills overlooks what I want to now suggest is the precise target of Agamben’s thoughts on pornography and profanation: consumption. That is, I want to claim that Agamben’s thoughts on profanation vis-à-vis pornography, signal more a meditation on the problematic of consumption, than on the profanatory positivity of the spectacle, even if the two concepts—profanation and consumption—are precisely inextricable to one another in relation to Agamben’s thinking of contemporary emancipatory thinking (a point to which we will return later).

Agamben turns to Benjamin’s short essay on “Capitalism as Religion” in order to describe the cultish nature of consumption under spectacular capitalism today. Agamben asserts:

If we use the term ‘spectacle’ for the extreme phase in which we are now living, in which everything is exhibited in its separation from itself, then spectacle and consumption are the two sides of a single impossibility of using. What cannot be used is, as such, given over to consumption or to spectacular exhibition…If profane means to return to common use that which has been removed to the sphere of the sacred, the capitalist religion in its extreme phase aims at creating something absolutely unprofanable.  

Here we need to separate the inherent potentiality of the spectacle from capitalism and consumption. In other words, the spectacle’s nullification of authenticity, truth content, and use value signals the absolute profanation of everything sacred. However, at the same time, the sacred realm of consumption works to “re-sacralize every object under the commodity form,” rendering it only consumable. The profanatory nature of pure means is thus always already incorporated into the cultish form of consumption and therefore barred from the possibility of free use or experimentation: “The pure means, suspended and exhibited in the sphere of [consumption], shows its own emptiness, speaks only its

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83 Agamben, Profanations, 82.
84 Ibid., 78.
own nothingness, as if no new use were possible.”

If, as we have suggested, the pornographic image serves as paradigmatic of the contemporary biopolitical structure in Agamben’s thinking. I want to argue that it is through the paradoxical image of profanation and consumption that we can trace the path of Agamben’s reformulation of contemporary emancipatory politics. In order to do so, we need to elaborate on the analytic significance that Agamben ascribes to consumption in his meditations on profanation.

When Agamben describes the operation of consumption in relation to profanation, he explicitly avoids reducing his formulations to a Marxist analytic. He turns not to Marx, nor to Debord, nor even to his closest Marxian interlocutor, Benjamin; rather he looks back to the notion of consumption as conceptualized by Pope John XXII in the thirteenth century. I want to stress this performative choice by Agamben, in order to suggest that Agamben is providing a broad critique of consumption, as it directly relates to the originary structure of biopolitics outlined in the first section.

Against the Franciscan attempt to establish a “use entirely removed from the sphere of law,” John XXII issued an order declaring: “there cannot exist a use distinct from property, because this use coincides entirely with the act of their consumption, that is, their destruction.”

Agamben follows John XXII to assert that because consumption signals the destruction of that which is consumed, it is precisely the negation of use, inasmuch as use would presuppose that the thing not be destroyed, since its destruction would preclude its use. But Agamben’s analysis does not stop here, he moves on to argue that it is only consumption that gives use meaning: “a simple de facto use, distinct from

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85 Ibid., 88.
86 Ibid., 82.
property, does not exist in nature; it is in no way something that one can ‘have.’” Citing John XXII at length, Agamben writes:

The act of use itself exists in nature neither before being exercised nor while being exercised nor after having been exercised. In fact, consumption, even in the act in which it is exercised, is always in the past or the future and, as such, cannot be said to exist in nature, but only in memory or anticipation. Therefore, it cannot be had but in the instant of its disappearance.

So, if consumption makes use impossible, then for Agamben this means that use always insinuates a non-proprietary relationship with the thing.

I want to suggest a homology between the language Agamben employs to describe the relationship between use and consumption and the manner in which he describes apparatuses and the process of separation. We can see from the abovementioned passage that Agamben reads consumption as canonization, as the making proper of objects and subjectivities. In being consumed, an object is ostensibly made proper, insofar as the consumed object is fixed into certain channels of usage—food is to be eaten, clothes are to be worn, pornography is to be viewed for masturbatory activity. As such, consumption is the movement of making-proper of the object concomitant to the nullification of the non-proprietary, profane potentiality of that object.

I would like to move Agamben’s conception of the uneasy relationship between use and consumption into the realm of subjectivity.

What does it mean to say “something is mine?” Or that the way we define ourselves as subjects who move in and out of various spaces and experiences in the world is a matter of possession, of making things belong properly to oneself? Could we not say that to become a subject is to consume certain signified contents, to make certain objects

\[87\] Ibid., 82.
\[88\] Ibid., 83.
the property of individual subjectivity? Moreover, could we not advance the claim that to consume identity through the act of self-reflexive predication (heterosexual, American, male) is to destroy the profane use of bodies and being and their pure potentiality? This is perhaps most poignantly evinced in the colloquialism, “I’ll buy that,” where the metaphorical reference to the act of consumption symbolizes the intimate process of taking in, of making a part of one’s identity certain representable facts or qualities. As such, I want to argue that consumption, as Agamben is urging us to think it, is nothing less than the reduction of experience to representable identity within the various apparatuses of governmentality that structure our biopolitical moment. Read in this way, the problem Agamben sees in consumption is that it forecloses on being’s pure impotentiality, which is the potentiality to not be.

Agamben argues that in modern capitalist society we have been completely debarred from experiencing our ability to not consume ourselves. That is, today we are witnessing a construction of the hyper-biopolitical body—a body that is always already thrust into the channels of becoming-productive and which has therefore always already lost its ability to experience any form of communicativity that does not signify. Here Agamben looks beyond more traditional conceptualizations of power conceived as “a separation of humans from what they can do,” in order to think “a more insidious operation of power” as the separation of humans from their impotentiality, or what “they can not do.”\(^89\) The extension of the capitalist apparatus into every aspect of life constantly forces potentiality into actuality. This is perhaps most readily evident if we examine the shifts in the logic of late capitalism from Fordism to post-Fordism. Under post-Fordist

capitalism, immaterial labor has become the dominant mode of production and as a result every aspect of life which has hitherto been considered outside of labor—sleep, affect, idle talk, etc.—has been channeled into the productive forces of capital logic. As a result, we see in the contemporary moment an “extreme proliferation in processes of subjectification” that are inseparable from the boundless extension of capitalism’s will to productivity into all walks of life.

Today the denial of our impotentiality is most poignantly visible in the way that we are constantly forced to perform such mantras as “I can do it,” or “I can be anything I want to be.” This unlimited, undifferentiated, injunction to be always has us thrust into the work of consuming, of converting pure potentiality into the confused networks modern biopolitics has established between jobs, vocations, and social identities. This is the misery to which modern society is enslaved: we are forced to consume the possibility of our own profanatory potentiality that the spectacle offers, rendering any image of the profane life only that—an image, consecrated and fortified by the religious logic of capitalism.

The French collective, Tiqqun, whose personal and intellectual relationship with Agamben is well known, have also taken up this strand of subjective consumption vis-à-vis spectacular capitalism. Rather than the figure of the porn star, however, Tiqqun turns to the urban hipster, who, “in his intensity as well as in the numerical extent of his legions,” is a significant typological example of the contemporary problematic of consumption vis-à-vis the profane potentiality of the spectacle. In their typology of the urbanite hipster, they write: “The hipster is he who presents himself to the world as a

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viable form of life, and thus constrains himself to a strict discipline of mendacity. As the ultimate consumer of existence, the hipster lives within the confines of an endless experimentation on himself. Afflicted with a definitive lack of belief in humanity or in language, he has measured the volume of his being and decided never to go outside it, unless it’s to ensure the self-promotion of his sterility. In this way, he replaced the emptiness of experience with the experience of emptiness.”

If the reference to the hipster suggests a useful comparison with Agamben’s concerns with spectacular capitalism, I would argue, however, that in their scathing critique, Tiqqun’s arguments gets lost in the very structure of subjective consumption they ostensibly oppose.

For Tiqqun, “being unable to come to terms with either his fundamental non-membership to this world, or the consequences of a situation of authentic exile, [the hipster] throws himself into the frenzied consumption of signs of belonging that are so expensive in this society.” Thus, the hipster is that precise figure that is barred from Tiqqun and, by extension, Agamben’s emancipatory politics, on the grounds that he is not properly using the profanatory potential of the spectacle. In these lines, however, Tiqqun reduces Agamben’s critique of consumption to a notion of a dialectical tension between dis-alienation and mastery, and in so doing, slip in through the back door a conception of the proper revolutionary figure, who would be able to master the profane nature of the spectacle. We see this movement in other works, where Tiqqun is forced to put out a “Call,” beseeching the global petit bourgeoisie to follow the proper paths toward

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becoming-revolutionary today. And in so doing, I claim, Tiqqun fall into precisely the originary biopolitical conception of the proper that Agamben is attempting to rethink.92

The point I have been trying to make in this section is twofold. First, what Agamben sees in the contemporary triumph of the commodity form under the spectacle is a mode of complete alienation, which gestures to the profane world of pure potentiality that stands in opposition to the originary biopolitical structure to which Western political thought has been enslaved. However, and secondly, for Agamben this image of the profane life is immediately recuperated by the movement of consumption, which, as I have attempted to argue, moves well beyond the act of exchange that Marxist analytics assign to the term, extending into the very biopolitical structure that separates living substances from their potentiality. As such, through this brief critique of Tiqqun’s use of Agamben, I want to argue that the spectacle and the profane life that it hints at represent for Agamben not emancipatory politics as such, but rather a moment for re-thinking emancipatory politics in relation to the bio-political process of consumption. If the contemporary phase of spectacular capitalism in which we live offers a glimpse of the profane life that undergirds Agamben’s thoughts on emancipation, it only does so by forcing us to think a mode of social praxis that resists any mode of subjective consumption.

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IV. Play and Dis-traction

In this thesis I have attempted to trace Agamben’s thinking of emancipatory politics by beginning first with his conceptualization of biopolitical separation, and moving from there to consider his conception of the ontological primacy of resistance implied by the pure potentiality inherent in human life. In the previous section, I turned to Agamben’s notion of profanation and the spectacle in order to consider the ways that consumption factors in his critique of the contemporary biopolitical structure. If, for Agamben, the ultimate horizon of emancipation is to be sought in developing ways of not consuming any image of the proper—no matter how radical or revolutionary that image purports to be—so as to unleash the pure potentiality offered up by the profanatory nature of the spectacle, we should ask what such a mode of social praxis would look like. In Infancy and History, Agamben outlines who (in addition to philosophers) he believes to be the perfect candidates for ushering in the purely profane world of the spectacle—children at play. In this final section I aim to emphasize the way that play operates in Agamben’s thinking as a praxis that both deactivates the operations of power inherent to apparatuses and that brings about the pure potentiality which forms the basis of his emancipatory thought. The thematic strand that I want to allow to organize this section is the relation of play to the production of the political.
For Agamben, play “deactivates apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power has seized,” thus giving new uses to everyday things. The precise significance of play for Agamben is that it is “an organ of profanation,” which removes objects from the biopolitical realm of the sacred and returns them to free and experimental use. A crucial aspect of play, Agamben writes, is that it holds the ability to “distract humanity from the sphere of the sacred;” here Agamben cites “children who play with whatever old things come to hand,” with a special sort of irreverence for their intended role within the social order. This notion of distraction, I claim, is crucial to understanding the way in which Agamben is formulating play as a social praxis that fits into his interrelated conceptions of pure potentiality and profanation. In order to arrive at this point, however, I want to briefly consider another mode of playful political praxis: Bakhtin’s carnivalesque. Specifically, I want to compare Bakhtin’s carnivalesque with Agamben’s conception of play in order to put into greater relief the manner in which Agamben’s engagement with play signals a unique mode of relating to the production of the political.

In Rabelais and His World, Bakhtin asserts that the foundation of all culture is inherently split between high culture and low culture. In his attempt to revive and reinterpret the work of the Renaissance writer, Francois Rabelais, Bakhtin emphasizes the ways that Rabelais portrays society as divided between language that is permitted—insofar as it is acceptable to and constitutive of the dominant norms and institution of society—and language that is not permitted. This cultural division between the

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93 Agamben, Profanations, 87.
94 Ibid., 87-89.
improper and the proper and between high and low serves as Bakhtin’s point of departure for thinking a notion of the carnivalesque.96

Bakhtin takes as his point of departure the hegemonic force of the Church (though he will argue that his conception of carnival can be thought of in relation to any historically situated hegemonic social order—the State, capitalism, etc.).97 Before Lent, the Church would fund carnivals as a tolerated form of organized, blasphemous celebration, which would make the ensuing religious sacrifice more tolerable and in turn, redouble the control of the Church over the social sphere. However, what happened during the moments of carnival far exceeded the parameters of social control that the Church had in mind. The pure moment of celebration that takes place in the carnival, Bakhtin argues, “represents an alternative cosmovision characterized by the ludic undermining of all norms.” Rather than being redoubled, in the carnival the dominant social order is turned on its head and replaced by the “familiar and free interaction between people,” a mode of interaction that temporarily abolishes all social hierarchy.98 As a political moment, the carnival irrupts into everyday life and shatters the homogeneity of the social order through the playful interaction of bodies in moments of feast, drink, dance, and costume. For Bakhtin, the shattering force of the carnival is thus predicated upon the reintroduction of the grotesque back into the social. That is, the carnival’s irruptive potential relies on the generation of grotesque bodies within the carnivalesque moment, where grotesque is always in excess to the imposed dominant

97 Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, 303-310.
social order, and where the grotesque body is the result of the unleashing of these excesses that are otherwise inassimilable within normative social institutions.

For Bakhtin, the grotesque play that occurs in the carnival is critical for social renewal, inasmuch as it works to disrupt and transform the social order by momentarily turning it on its head. The carnivalesque is thus internal to the social order, as the irruptive force that is always threatening to shatter hegemonic power and re-scramble the way bodies interact with one another. What I want to register here is that the carnivalesque is, in Bakhtin’s view, a productive moment in relation to the political, inasmuch as the excessive and grotesque affects, actions, and inter-actions that it promotes work to subvert the forces of hegemonic order, thus producing social renewal and political transformation.99 But what can we make of the fact that, on the one hand, Bakhtin wants the carnival to be non-institutionalized, ludic, irruptive, while on the other, he wants it to do the work of subversion, social renewal and political transformation? In other words, how free is the playful moment of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque?

On the one hand, carnival is always institutionally sanctioned—it always happens as a moment that is marked out as carnivalesque within the dominant social order. Both as a literary genre and an actual moment of corporeal and spatial reorganization, carnival is an institution within the institution of the dominant social order.100 This informs Bakhtin’s assertion of the necessary split between high and low upon which culture is always predicated; carnival is the specter of low culture that is always threatening to irrupt into the high, disturbing the social order the high has claimed for itself. On the other hand, what is supposed to be unleashed during the carnival is precisely a non-

institutionalized, shattering negativity of the grotesque, pleasuring-seeking human body.\textsuperscript{101}

What gives the carnival its non-institutionalized grotesqueness is precisely the institutional injunction toward carnival, inasmuch as the taking place of the carnivalesque is precisely reliant on the fact that people recognize that the time and the place to engage their excesses is in the moment of carnival. This is also how literature becomes coded as carnivalesque—the words and the images produced, insofar as they deliberately run counter to hegemonic order, allow the reader to interpret the space opened up by the text as carnivalesque.

In this way, in order to be politically productive in the way that Bakhtin wants it to be, the playful, non-institutional moment of the carnival must itself reaffirm institutionality—the carnival must dictate its own set of internal rules of excess, parody, oddity, and debauchery. The carnival is thus the institution that not only permits but \textit{demands} playful and irruptive behavior. Those who do not play by these rules are not carnivalesque, and cannot therefore partake in the productive transformation that the carnival ostensibly offers.

This speaks to a general incongruity inherent in the playful praxis found in Bakhtin’s carnival—by collating the ludic force of the carnivalesque with the desire for political and social production, the playful praxis of the carnivalesque loses what it wants most out of the carnival, a non-institutional irruption of grotesque bodies, whose interaction turn the social order upside down. That is, carnival may overturn the dominant social order, but by consciously fixating its playful actions on the subversion of the dominant by occupying the space of low culture, carnival does not call into question the

\textsuperscript{101} \textit{Ibid.}, 90.
premise of all social order, broadly speaking. What was supposed to be a complete scrambling of all social order turns into an institutionally mandated reversal of the binary between high and low. In the rest of this section I want to work to show how Agamben’s formulations on play as social praxis represent an attempt to disentangle play from political and social production.

In order to pursue this argument concerning Agamben’s attempt to disentangle play from production, we should begin by describing his conception of play in terms of temporality. In an essay entitled “In Playland,” Agamben draws on Collodi’s description of “playland” in Pinnochio to explain the relation of time to play: “The immediate result of [the] invasion of life by play is a change and acceleration of time: ‘in the midst of continual games and every variety of amusement, the hours, the days, and the weeks passed like lightning.’ As was to be expected, the acceleration of time does not leave the calendar unaltered.” For Agamben, then, play exists in a disruptive relation to the normal time that the calendar imposes on society, where the time of the calendar is totally homologous to the temporality of the biopolitical structure: “The calendar, whose essence

102 Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 335-343. This critique of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque is heavily indebted to Wiegman’s assessment of the contemporary field of queer theory and the paradoxical relationship it evinces between the political work it wants to accomplish on the one hand, and its institutionalization as a discourse capable of carrying out that political work on the other. Wiegman asserts that the radical divergence from normativity that queer critique wants to reserve for itself in opposition to heteronormative sexuality belongs rather to no one and only becomes “queer” when it is invested with the normative functions of a queer critique. As such, queer critique’s construction of an anti-normative project of sexuality relies heavily on the institutionalized and normative reproduction, elevation, and attack upon normativity, a normativity which in turn is seen as lying anywhere else but within the discursive body that queer critique makes for itself. Queer critique’s attempt to outflank the normative thus ends in it dragging the normative along, resurrecting it in order to distinguish itself from it. Thus, the sex that queer inquiry wants to have and promises to many of us who want to have it, is somehow made precisely less queer when it actually gets had within the discursive institutions that require representations of queer embodiment. In this same manner, I would say that the carnivalesque experience that Bakhtin wants to have is somehow made less carnivalesque when it actually gets had within the discursive institutions of the carnival that require representations of the grotesque body.

is rhythm, alternation, and repetition, is now stopped in the measureless dilation of one long holiday.” Where the calendar is the temporal apparatus of the biopolitical structure that works to fix living substances into a framework of subjective rhythms, play disrupts such rhythms and subjective-becomings through a process of acceleration. Agamben suggests that the activity that occurs in play results therefore, “in the paralysis and destruction of the calendar.” But what does Agamben mean when he claims that play “paralyzes” and “destroys” the temporality of biopolitical time, and what implications does this have for the relation of play to the production of political transformation?

Having forwarded the basic hypothesis that play has a disruptive relationship to normal temporality, Agamben moves to distinguish play from ritual. Here, he looks to anthropological analyses of ‘New Year’ celebrations in Scotland and China, which through their momentary institution of various different mechanisms commonly associated with play—pandemonium, uproar, and bedlam—actual work to “ensure both the regeneration of [normal] time and the fixity of the calendar.” Agamben is noticing a disjunction between ritual and play, where the orgiastic subversion of social hierarchy evinced in play in fact serves as a means for re-instituting the biopolitical temporality of the calendar. Following Claude Levi-Strauss, Agamben concludes, “ritual fixes and structures the calendar; play on the other hand…changes and destroys it.” In this way, ritualistic play, though disruptive in its appearance, is in fact fully recuperated by the realm of the sacred, which demands that play be put to proper use by reinforcing the power of the sacred: “Scholars have long known that the realms of play and of the sacred are closely linked. Numerous well-documented researches show that the origins of most

104 Ibid., 67-68.
of the games known to us lie in ancient sacred ceremonies, in dances, ritual combat, and divinatory practice.”

In a manner that I suggest should be considered as homologous to the uneasy relationship between the profanatory impulse of the spectacle and its simultaneous recuperation into the sacred realm of consumption, Agamben notices that the temporally disruptive nature of play is always folded back into ritual and thus into the productive operations of biopolitical calendar time. In other words, play derives from the sacred, but for Agamben, it also simultaneously represents the radical transformation of the sacred. The problem is that play is always attached to ritual, which re-subsumes play’s disruptive impulses back into the work of the sacred. That is, play has always supported the reproduction of the sacred—and thus of the biopolitical structure—by preserving the unity between ritual and the sacred; play is always forced to be productive, insofar as it has as its end the reinstitution of calendar time and the sacred. This relationship between play and the sacred, Agamben contends, is still with us today in modern society:

Indeed, at parties, in dances, and at play, [modern man] desperately and stubbornly seeks exactly the opposite of what he could find there: the possibility of re-entering the lost feast, returning to the sacred and its rites, even in the form of the innane ceremonies of the new spectacular religion or a tango lesson in a provincial dance hall. In this sense, televised game shows are part of a new liturgy.

What would it mean, then, for play to be divorced from ritual and the sacred myths that is stages? Is there such thing as a pure play, divorced from the meaningful re-instantiation of the sacred? And if so, what does this pure play look like?

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105 Ibid., 69.
106 Agamben, Profanations, 76-77.
To begin answering this question Agamben turns to Emile Benveniste, who, in making an attempt to theorize pure play, divorced ritual from the sacred. Agamben writes:

The potency of the sacred act resides precisely in its conjunction of myth that articulates history and the ritual that reproduces it. If we make a comparison between this schema and that of play, the difference appears fundamental: in play only the ritual survives and all that is preserved is the form of the sacred drama, in which each element is re-enacted time and again. But what has been forgotten or abolished is the myth, the meaningfully fabulation that endows the acts with their sense and their purpose.  

In other words, pure play exists where the marriage between myth and ritual, upon which the sacred is predicated, is broken: the myth may be preserved, but only insofar as its words are empty; the rite may stay intact, but only insofar as ritualistic action does not correspond to mythical meaning. Thus, what Agamben sees as so important about Benveniste’s description of pure play is the destruction of meaning-making; word and act never unite to form something meaningful to society in play. Returning to Collodi’s Pinnochio, Agamben writes: “Playland is a country whose inhabitants are busy celebrating rituals, and manipulating objects and sacred words, whose sense and purpose they have, however, forgotten.” Pure play thus disrupts the unity between myth and ritual upon which the sacred realm, and by extension, the originary biopolitical structure, are predicated. Here we can return once more to the relation between time and play, in order to further deduce the political implication Agamben is allotting to play.

In *Profanations*, Agamben moves away from his anthropological meditations on play in order to situate the concept in terms of the contemporary biopolitical structure.

For Agamben, play’s ability to destroy calendar time corresponds directly to the

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profanation of the logics of capital that channel objects and subjectivities into consumable images. In this way, there is something completely unsalvageable about the moment of play, as compared to the moment of consumption, which always aims to salvage a proper use from that which is consumed.\textsuperscript{108} Here, we need to look to the materiality of Agamben’s play, which for him most often takes the form of children and everyday objects. He writes: “A look at the world of toys shows that children, humanity’s little scrap-dealers, will play with whatever junk comes their way, and that play thereby preserves profane objects and behavior that have ceased to exist. Everything that is old, independent of its sacred origins is liable to become a toy.” The tendency of children to use any object, regardless of its intended utility and role in the social order, as a toy—for example, a legal document is rolled up and becomes a sword—demonstrates how “in play, man frees himself from sacred time and ‘forgets’ it in human time.”\textsuperscript{109}

Like Benjamin’s dialectics at a standstill, play represents a relationship to history where the orienting processes of time come to a halt, and in that frozen state, are shattered or rendered meaningless. Along these lines, Jefferey Bernstein suggests: “For Agamben, play is intimately bound up with history insofar as it is an activity which (occurring in time) opens up the possibility of new temporalities.”\textsuperscript{110} Agamben writes that play “is the sort of use Benjamin had in mind when he wrote of Kafka’s The New Attorney that the law that is no longer applied but only studied is the gate to justice.” In this sense, play is the moment when the sacred realms of the law, economics, and politics

\textsuperscript{108}See Agamben, \textit{The Coming Community}. Here I am suggesting a common strand between play and the irreparability that Agamben allots to individuals in his coming community. In the community Agamben envisions, individuals would have no proper task to pursue; they are thus always already in a way irreparable. There is, for Agamben, a different kind of happiness to be had in the irrepairability of life; I would suggest that this also corresponds to the happiness Agamben sees in play.

\textsuperscript{109}\textit{Ibid.}, 72.

are rendered profane to the point where their original application no longer inheres within them and the effect that they once had on society and on history cease to take form. We should thus be careful to stipulate what the ‘new temporalities’ that play opens up look like.

If play is “the way in which reified social-political institutions might be rendered inoperative,” then what occurs in play cannot be recuperated within a new social-political institution but must signal a mode of social praxis outside of the movement of institutionalization itself. As Agamben writes, “The use to which the sacred is returned [in play] is a special one that does not coincide with utilitarian consumption.” Pure play cannot, therefore, produce anything before, during, or after the moment of play, because the meaning-making attached to the social-political institution of biopolitics has been frozen and rendered inoperative in play, leaving only the pure means—or to make this more visual, the pure movement—of ritual, intact.

It is at this point that we can state the clear distinction—in terms of production—between the play in Bakhtin’s carnival and the play Agamben is trying to think. Whereas for Bakhtin, play is conceived of as a negative moment that turns the social order on its head in order to produce a more bearable future social order (this is Bakhtin’s whole reason for collating carnival with Marxist class struggle), Agamben’s play is neither negative nor productive, inasmuch as it has no proper end and can therefore never be recuperated or interpreted as a representable moment in time. Like children lost in fantasy during recess, pure play desires nothing beyond the profane moment of playful experience it constructs for itself in the present, and in this way, pure play destroys all

111 Agamben, Profanations, 76.
112 Ibid., 77.
other (biopolitical) experience outside of its own fantastical moment.\textsuperscript{114} The games that are created and the toys that are deployed in Agamben’s play, are in this way absolutely singular; they can be grasped “only in the temporal dimension of a ‘once upon a time’ and a ‘no more.’”\textsuperscript{115} The inhabitant of pure play cannot represent the game he is playing, nor can he even say he is playing a proper game. To do so would be to consecrate his moment of play by placing it back into the dominant temporal frameworks of biopolitical experience.\textsuperscript{116} Thus, the player can only be lost in his game momentarily (for to linger too long in a game—to take the game too seriously—would risk bestowing upon it a utilitarian and sacred aura) after which he must find a new game to play.

In light of this argument, we can outline four preliminary conclusions concerning Agamben’s conception of play, notably as it relates to his thinking on potentiality and profanation. First,

--pure play occurs outside the marriage between ritual and the sacred, and therefore represents a purely profane moment.

Secondly,

\textsuperscript{114}Agamben, \textit{Profanations}, 76-78.
\textsuperscript{115}Ibid., 71.

Agamben writes: “The question of experience can be approached nowadays only with an acknowledgement that it is no longer accessible to us.” It is well outside the scope of this paper to examine the conceptual relationship between experience and separation, as it relates to the contemporary biopolitical horizon. However, I would pose a few questions in order to further probe this relationship in Agamben’s work. If experience is no longer available to us; was it ever? Was and is it only available in infancy? If so, how much does Agamben’s conceptions of political tasks like play, profanation, and the return to a language and experience outside of an originary biopolitical structure of separation not in fact re-instantiate a biopolitical structure by romanticizing another period in human existence, namely youth? Is this a limit to Agamben’s thinking, insofar as his exaltation of the child seems to play into the same Western liberal conceptions of heteronormative reproduction, which figure the child as the nexus of renewal and social transformation? Here more we need to push Agamben’s conceptual relationship between experience, youth, and social transformation by speculating on the ways that Agamben’s infant would differ drastically from the blonde-haired, blue-eyed, male, baby of the Western heteronormative family.
--the truly profane nature of play—“where all of sudden a car, a firearm, or a legal contract become a toy”—works to disrupt the productive flows of biopolitical time.\textsuperscript{117}

Thirdly,

--as a profane mode of existence that is disruptive to the flows of productive time, pure play can never be useful, and the games that are played in pure play can thus never be transposed into the future as useful. As such, the temporality of the future perfect (which states that “something will have been useful”) out of which traditional conceptions of social transformation are based, is abolished in play and replaced by fantasies of the present that are indelibly tethered to all that is profane.\textsuperscript{118}

Finally,

--pure play corresponds directly to pure potentiality, insofar as during the moment of play the operations of separation inherent to the biopolitical structure of Western thought (the sacred, consumption, and the proper) are rendered inoperative. In this way, in play the experience of a proper subjectivity is destroyed in exchange for the playful experience of experience itself. Play thus requires pure potentiality, but it is also the praxis that brings pure potentiality about.

These summarizing points get me back to the significance of distraction, with which we began our discussion on Agamben’s notion of play. I want to argue that distraction is the profound moment of freedom that Agamben locates in play—a moment that is never consumable; a time that belongs to nothing proper and nothing sacred; a

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 78.

\textsuperscript{118} Elizabeth A. Povinelli, Economic of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). Povinelli argues that (neo)liberalism couches social transformation in terms of the future perfect, where all change, good or bad, is always pushed into the future, where it will ostensibly work itself out. This is what keeps individuals tethered to the subjective structures of a liberal pathos. Povinelli finds emancipatory potential in the ‘economies of abandonment’ that are largely brought about by the deferred neoliberal subject. As such, I want to suggest that there is a very useful relationship to be formed between abandonment and play.
blissfully profane period in which what was once sacred is returned to its pure potentiality. We can sharpen what this implies for distraction here by distinguishing it from disinterest, where the second term remains far too heavily invested in the consumption of a productive subjectivity. To be disinterested implies that one was at one point interested; the primary aim of a social praxis of disinterest is thus to produce images that prove to oneself and others one’s own disinterest.119 To be distracted, however, means that at a certain point the subject had traction; that he was once before, but is now no longer, oriented into modes of thinking and doing that corresponded to proper ways of life. Yet to be dis-tracted is not to choose another track but to be precisely removed from any traction at all. In this way, dis-traction is the tracing of pure potentiality’s refusal to settle into any track; and it is in moments of pure play that humanity becomes the conductor of this tracing.

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Conclusion: Occupy 2.0?

I should recapitulate what I have attempted to accomplish in this thesis. First, I have tried to contribute to the literature surrounding the political thought of Agamben by suggesting that his notion of politics revolves around the conceptual interrelation between potentiality, profanation, and play. For Agamben, these concepts interact to form a foundational critique of the processes of biopolitical separation that have hitherto oriented individuals and society toward movements of propriety and subjective consumption. Related to this, I have argued that Agamben’s political thought lies in a thinking through of what it would mean to be liberated from this anxious pursuit of the proper, which for him lies at the heart of the processes of separation that continue to tyrannize Western thought. The social praxis of play thus signals the movement of this liberation; a liberation which, I have suggested, is best described as a moment of pure distraction.120

120 It is at this point that we should consider what is missing from Agamben’s reformulation of politics, as I have attempted to define it here. Absent from Agamben’s notion of play, and by extension, my argument in this thesis, is a prolonged consideration of the contemporary realities of social stratification and the question of precisely who is able to profane their particular subject position within the biopolitical horizon. As Whyte suggests, in his argument that the spectacle has created a single class—the global petit bourgeoisie—Agamben neglects the necessarily differential temporalities of capitalism, which rather than creating a single profanatory class, has resulted in the proliferation of social identities that do not correspond to the hollow form of the spectacle. As such, Agamben’s theoretical reliance on the spectacle as the lever for emancipatory politics belies the fact that today the world is divided between those who consume the spectacle and those who produce it. Along these lines, Alberto Toscano suggests that Agamben’s notion that the nullification of identity take political primacy, and that such mutations must spread globally, is predicated upon an “extrapolation of Euro-American history to the entire globe.” In turn, any consideration of the necessarily uneven development of global capitalism and the fact that class formation and identity politics may remain essential within certain geopolitical horizons is jettisoned in
I want to conclude, then, by speculating on the future of Occupy’s politics. Though the images and the spaces that Occupy occupied seem to have faded away over the past year, I want to believe that the sentiments and affects connected to these images and spaces continue to lay in rest for many of among the global petit bourgeoisie. As such, I want to use the reading I have given of Agamben’s emancipatory thought in this paper in order to pose a set of questions about what an “Occupy 2.0” could look like.

In her account, Judith Butler describes the political power of Occupy in terms of what Hannah Arendt refers to as the political moment of politics—“spaces of appearance.” In Arendt’s view, politics is premised on spaces of appearance, where the common visibility between actors generates the power and potential for collective action. Visibility creates power in these spaces of appearance by allowing actors to act in front of one another. Thus, the political happens only when individuals are visible to one another, and it is precisely this visibility that transforms individuals into political actors with the power to transform the homogeneity of the social. For Arendt, spaces of appearance, and by extension politics, are highly transposable, and follow wherever individuals become visible to one another in such a way that generates power. She writes: “the Polis, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people.

Agamben’s proposition of profanatory play. It would indeed be appropriate to critically consider how profanatory praxis may operate for those working fourteen-hour days in a sweat shop to produce the spectacular image of hollow form.

I would add that this problematic does not only run along the fault lines of capitalist production apropos to the global north and the global south. The problematic of social stratification in relation to Agamben’s demand to stop consuming identity also runs along the lines of race and gender. Marina Vishmidt and Maya Gonzales have usefully argued that Agamben’s suggestion that with the full integration of the spectacle, identity is no longer meaningful, seems to neglect those subjectivities whose possibilities in life continue to be constrained precisely by their subject positions in relation to racial and gendered hierarchies.

living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be.”

For Arendt, then, it is only in and through the creation of these spaces of appearance that individuals become world-constituting, political actors, capable of realizing social transformation.

I want to ask what it might mean to keep Arendt’s notion of the relationship between power and appearance but to drop the desire for the production of the properly political that undergirds her formulation. What would it mean to become visible to one another, not as proper political actors but as playful actors? What would it mean to create spaces of appearance, not with any particular aim to accomplish something that would be subversive, or better, or more proper, but in order to simply play? To be sure, in play we can accomplish nothing but our own ability to idle in a profane world of pure potentiality. But in so doing, we may discover what it means to break away from the chains of a biopolitical structure that keep us tethered to the oppressive valences of the sacred.

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