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## **Becoming-virus, Life from the Point of View of a Virus**

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At the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak in February 2020, the controversial comments of the celebrated Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, had already become “viral,” at least within the global community of philosophers.<sup>1</sup> Ten months after the controversial comments, Agamben’s views on the current crisis are still quite fascinating. At the outset of the pandemic, still referring to it as an epidemic, he viewed it as simply a “frantic invention” based on “irrational and completely groundless emergency measures.” To be fair, Agamben wrote these views during the early stages of the outbreak in Italy when Italian authorities were still scrambling whether to impose a lockdown or not.

The current death toll in Italy is now 68,447 (as of this writing), perhaps an entire generation of baby boomers, of which Agamben himself is a member, wiped out in just a matter of months without much effort really and sans weapons of mass destruction. One wonders whether he recanted his original position, which to my mind was posted as a sincere and valid political warning, yet rather naïve, for it downplayed the effects of the virus by basing his comments on the Italian National Research Council which declared, at that time,

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<sup>1</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, “L’invenzione di un’epidemia,” in *Quodlibet* (February 2020), <https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-l-invenzione-di-un-epidemia>.

that “there is no SARS-CoV2 epidemic in Italy.” It is easy to haphazardly ridicule Agamben, but caution is warranted here.

At least, what we gather from the naivety of Agamben’s original position is a confirmation that Friedrich Nietzsche was correct when he maintained that much of human behavior and decision making profoundly depend on the way we use language. More specifically, our perspective on what is going on around us depends on, as trivial as it may seem, “semantic arbitrariness.” For instance, the use of “pandemic” instead of “epidemic” literally changed our lives overnight. In my own university, it took a while for key university administrators to realize that a faculty should have a choice between “synchronous” and “asynchronous” online teaching, that insisting on synchronicity imposes unnecessary stress on both faculty and students. The distinction has radically altered, I guess for the better, the way we now conduct ourselves during the various degrees of lockdown imposed by the government. Perhaps this is another example: the government’s decision to refer to a lockdown as an “enhanced community quarantine” instead of a “lockdown” made it more acceptable to the Filipino public. Back to Agamben’s case: I believe that he fell victim to the semantic arbitrariness of science—more specifically, the tendency to accept one set of semantics over another; by doing so, he unwittingly limited the scope of his cognitive field. To borrow a feminist trope, knowledge is informed by a standpoint.

Instead of recanting, Agamben published a rejoinder which, he claims, clarifies his original position. He writes: “The problem is not to give opinions on the gravity of the disease, but to ask about the ethical and political consequences of the epidemic” (“The enemy is not outside, it is within us.”)<sup>2</sup> Agamben, of course, gave his opinion about the gravity of the outbreak and only later slightly

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<sup>2</sup> Giorgio Agamben, “Chiarimenti,” in *Quodlibet* (March 2020), <https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-chiarimenti>. A collection of Agamben’s will appear in 2021 entitled, *Where Are We Now? The Epidemic as Politics*, to be published by ERIS Press.

modified his tone. But, as I mentioned above, even Agamben's embarrassing comments warrant caution. Unlike the arrogant Elon Musk, who simply tweeted that "the coronavirus panic is dumb," at least Agamben provides us something to ponder about: "What happens after this outbreak?" Yuval Harari, in "The world after coronavirus," provides a possible answer.<sup>3</sup>

The lesson of 9-11 should give us a clue. Our lives and the way we interact with one another will be profoundly altered! Government policies, both local and foreign, will radically change as a result of this outbreak. Police surveillance will be enhanced and international border control will become stricter. Very much like in the post-9-11 era, a shift in the semantics and politics of travel should be expected. Moreover, the spheres of public health, police, surveillance, education, even capitalism will merge into one intertwined semantics, making our lives more complex. This will also make it even more challenging for us to detect systemic oppression, as it will become more ubiquitous.

Events like 9-11 and COVID-19 justify the use of drastic measures and along with these measures is the tendency of authorities to overreact. But while I take Agamben's warnings seriously, I rather agree with another writer who maintains that Foucault provides us with a better philosophical lens, in contrast to Agamben, because, for Foucault, coercion results from the dialectics of power and not necessarily from a natural proclivity to oppress.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, by making the notion of "bare life" as his *intuitus originarius*, Agamben worries that governments always have this tendency to reduce human life into "bare life," that is, a biological life bereft of any quality, a life without

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<sup>3</sup> Yuval Noah Harari, "The world after the coronavirus," in *Financial Times* (March 2020), <https://www.ft.com/content/19d90308-6858-11ea-a3c9-1fe6fedcca75>.

<sup>4</sup> See Panagiotis Sotiris, "Against Agamben: Is a Democratic Biopolitics Possible?", in *Viewpoint Magazine* (March 2020), <https://viewpointmag.com/2020/03/20/against-agamben-democratic-biopolitics/>.

culture, tradition, and civil liberties.<sup>5</sup> I agree with him that, indeed, systems have this tendency. For me, the principle of bare life has the same efficacy as our reduction by capitalism into mere laborers or consumers. Moreover, bare life is also the principle behind the reduction of the academe into mere metrics or big data (e.g., online teaching analytics, research impact factor, etc.) by the neo-liberal university—practically all universities in operation today! However, what Agamben naively ignores is that, as opposed to a mere invention, COVID-19 is a biologically occurring virus that has reduced all of us into bare life! We may see this from the standpoint of Gilles Deleuze: the virus too is a manifestation of life—it is alive—even if from our own anthropological standpoint, it causes our demise. I imagine Deleuze urging us to “become” the virus (“becoming-virus”)<sup>6</sup> in order for us to see life from the point of view of the virus—it greets us from a human alveolus, “Hello there, welcome to my abode. It’s quite cozy in here!”

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<sup>5</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (California: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> I borrow Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s idea of “becoming-other” which they articulate in chapter 10 of *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).