

## **Form-of-Life**

# Giorgio Agamben

The ancient Greeks did not have only one term to express what we mean by the word *life*. They used two semantically and morphologically distinct terms: *zoé*, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, humans, or gods), and *bios*, which signified the form or manner of living peculiar to a single individual or group. In modern languages this opposition has gradually disappeared from the lexicon (and where it is retained, as in *biology* and *zoology*, it no longer indicates any substantial difference); one term only—the opacity of which increases in proportion to the sacralization of its referent—designates that naked presupposed common element that it is always possible to isolate in each of the numerous forms of life.

By the term *form-of-life*, on the other hand, I mean a life that can never be separated from its form, a life in which it is never possible to isolate something such as naked life.

A life that cannot be separated from its form is a life for which what is at stake in its way of living is living itself. What does this formulation mean? It defines a life—human life—in which the single ways, acts, and processes of living are never simply *facts* but always and above all *possibilities* of life, always and above all power (*potenza*).<sup>1</sup> Each behavior and each form of human living is never prescribed by a

specific biological vocation, nor is it assigned by whatever necessity; instead, no matter how customary, repeated, and socially compulsory, it always retains the character of a possibility; that is, it always puts at stake living itself. That is why human beings—as beings of power who can do or not do, succeed or fail, lose themselves or find themselves—are the only beings for whom happiness is always at stake in their living, the only beings whose lives are irremediably and painfully assigned to happiness. But this immediately constitutes the form-of-life as political life. “Civitatē . . . communitatē esse institutā propter vivere et bene vivere hominū in ea [The State is a community instituted for the sake of the living and the well living of men in it].”<sup>2</sup>

Political power (*potere*) as we know it, on the other hand, always finds itself—in the last instance—on the separation of a sphere of naked life from the context of the forms of life.<sup>3</sup> In Roman law, *vita* (life) is not a juridical concept, but rather indicates the simple fact of living or a particular way of life. There is only one case in which the term *life* acquires a juridical meaning that transforms it into a veritable *terminus technicus*, and that is in the expression *vitae necisque potestas*, which designates the *pater’s* power of life and death over the male son. J. Thomas has shown that, in this formula, *que* does not have disjunctive function and *vita* is nothing but a corollary of *nex*, the power to kill.

Life, thus, originally appears in law only as the counterpart of a power that threatens death. But what is valid for the *pater’s* right of life and death is even more valid for sovereign power (*imperium*), of which the former constitutes the originary cell. Thus, in the Hobbesian foundation of sovereignty, life in the state of nature is defined only by its being unconditionally exposed to a death threat (the limitless right of everybody over everything) and political life—that is, the life that unfolds under the protection of the Leviathan—is nothing but this very same life always exposed to a threat that now rests exclusively in the hands of the sovereign. The *puissance absolue et perpetuelle*, which defines State power, is not founded—in the last instance—on a political will but rather on naked life, which is kept safe and protected only to the degree to which it submits itself to the sovereign’s (or the law’s) right of life and death. (This is precisely the originary meaning of the adjective *sacer* [sacred] when used to refer to human life.) The state of exception, which is what the sovereign each and every time decides, takes place precisely when naked life—which normally appears rejoined to the multifarious forms of social life—is explicitly put into question and revoked as the ultimate foundation of polit-

ical power. The ultimate subject that needs to be at once turned into the exception and included in the city is always naked life.

“The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight.”<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin’s diagnosis, which by now is more than fifty years old, has lost none of its relevance. And that is so not really or not only because power (*potere*) no longer has today any form of legitimation other than emergency, and because power everywhere and continuously refers and appeals to emergency as well as laboring secretly to produce it. (How could we not think that a system that can no longer function at all but on the basis of emergency would not also be interested in preserving such an emergency at any price?) This is the case also and above all because naked life, which was the hidden foundation of sovereignty, has become, in the meanwhile, the dominant form of life everywhere. Life—in its state of exception that has now become the norm—is the naked life that in every context separates the forms of life from their cohering into a form-of-life. The Marxian division between man and citizen is thus superseded by the division between naked life (ultimate and opaque bearer of sovereignty) and the multifarious forms of life abstractly recodified as social-juridical identities (the voter, the worker, the journalist, the student, but also the HIV-positive, the transvestite, the porno star, the elderly, the parent, the woman) that all rest on naked life. (To have mistaken such a naked life separate from its form, in its abjection, for a superior principle—sovereignty or the sacred—is the limit of Bataille’s thought, which makes it useless to us.)

Foucault’s thesis—according to which “what is at stake today is life” and hence politics has become biopolitics—is, in this sense, substantially correct. What is decisive, however, is the way in which one understands the sense of this transformation. What is left unquestioned in the contemporary debates on bioethics and biopolitics, in fact, is precisely what would deserve to be questioned before anything else, that is, the very biological concept of life. Paul Rabinow conceives of two models of life as symmetrical opposites: on the one hand, the experimental life of the scientist who is ill with leukemia and who turns his very life into a laboratory for unlimited research and experimentation, and, on the other hand, the one who, in the name of life’s sacredness, exasperates the antinomy between individual ethics and techno-science. Both models, however, participate without being aware in the

same concept of naked life. This concept—which today presents itself under the guises of a scientific notion—is actually a secularized political concept. (From a strictly scientific point of view, the concept of life makes no sense. Peter and Jean Medawar tell us that in biology, discussions about the real meaning of the words *life* and *death* are an index of a low level of conversation. Such words have no intrinsic meaning and such a meaning, hence, cannot be clarified by deeper and more careful studies.)<sup>5</sup>

Such is the provenance of the (often unperceived and yet decisive) function of medical-scientific ideology within the system of power and the increasing use of pseudoscientific concepts for ends of political control. That same withdrawal of naked life that, in certain circumstances, the sovereign used to be able to exact from the forms of life is now massively and daily exacted by the pseudoscientific representations of the body, illness, and health, and by the “medicalization” of ever-widening spheres of life and individual imagination.<sup>6</sup> Biological life, which is the secularized form of naked life and which shares its unutterability and impenetrability, thus constitutes the real forms of life literally as forms of survival: biological life remains inviolate in such forms as that obscure threat that can suddenly actualize itself in violence, in extraneity, in illnesses, in accidents. It is the invisible sovereign that stares at us behind the dull-witted masks of the powerful, who, whether or not they realize it, govern us in its name.

A political life, that is, a life directed toward the idea of happiness and cohesive with a form-of-life, is thinkable only starting with the emancipation from such a division, with the irrevocable exodus from any sovereignty. The question about the possibility of a non-Statist politics necessarily takes this form: Is today something like a form-of-life, a life for which living itself would be at stake in its own living, possible? Is today a life of power (*potenza*) available?<sup>7</sup>

I call thought the nexus that constitutes the forms of life in an inseparable context as form-of-life. I do not mean by this the individual exercise of an organ or a psychic faculty, but rather an experience, an *experimentum* that has as its object the potential character of life and human intelligence. To think does not mean merely to be affected by this or that thing, by this or that content of enacted thought, but rather at once to be affected by one’s own receptiveness and experience in each and every thing that is thought a pure power of thinking. (“When thought has become each thing in the way in which a man who actually knows is said to do so . . . its condition is still one of potentiality . . . and thought is then able to think of itself.”)<sup>8</sup>

Only if I am not always already and solely enacted, but rather delivered to a possibility and a power, only if living and intending and apprehending themselves are at stake each time in what I live and intend and apprehend—only if, in other words, there is thought—only then a form of life can become, in its own factness and thingness, form-of-life, in which it is never possible to isolate something like naked life.

The experience of thought that is here in question is always the experience of a common power. Community and power identify one with the other completely, without residue, because the inherence of a communitarian principle to any power is a function of the necessarily potential character of any community. Among beings who would always already be enacted, who would always already be this or that thing, this or that identity, and who would have entirely exhausted their power in these things and identities—among such beings there could not be any community but only coincidences and factual partitions. We can communicate with others only through what in us—as much as in others—has remained potential, and any communication (as Benjamin perceives for language) is first of all communication not of something in common but of communicability itself. After all, if there existed one and only one being, it would be absolutely impotent. (That is why theologians affirm that God created the world *ex nihilo*, in other words, absolutely without power.) Where I have power, we are always already many (just like when, if there is a language, that is, a power of speech, there cannot be then one and only one being who speaks it).

That is why modern political philosophy does not begin with classical thought, which had made of contemplation, of the *bios theoreticos*, a separate and solitary activity (“exile of the alone to the alone”), but rather only with Averroism, that is, with the thought of the one and only possible intellect common to all human beings, and, crucially, with Dante’s affirmation—in *De Monarchia*—of the inherence of a multitude to the very power of thought:

*It is clear that man’s basic capacity is to have a potentiality or power for being intellectual. And since this power cannot be completely actualized in a single man or in any of the particular communities of men above mentioned, there must be a multitude in mankind through whom this whole power can be actualized. . . . the proper work of mankind taken as a whole is to exercise continually its entire capacity for intellectual growth, first, in theoretical matters, and, secondarily, as an extension of theory, in practice.<sup>9</sup>*

The diffuse intellectuality I am talking about and the Marxian notion of a “general intellect” acquire their meaning only within the perspective of this experience. They name the multitude that inheres to the power of thought as such. Intellectuality and thought are not a form of life among others in which life and social production articulate themselves, but they are rather the unitary power that constitutes the multiple forms of life as form-of-life. In the face of State sovereignty, which can affirm itself only by separating in every context naked life from its form, they are the power that incessantly reunites life to its form or prevents it from being dissociated from its form. The act of distinguishing between the mere, massive inscription of social knowledge into the productive processes (an inscription that characterizes the contemporary phase of capitalism, the society of the spectacle) and intellectuality as antagonistic power and form-of-life — such an act passes through the experience of this cohesion and this inseparability. Thought is form-of-life, life that cannot be segregated from its form; and anywhere the intimacy of this inseparable life appears, in the materiality of corporeal processes and habitual ways of life no less than in theory, there and only there is there thought. And it is this thought, this form-of-life, that, abandoning naked life to “Man” and to the “Citizen” who clothe it temporarily and represent it with their “rights,” must become the guiding concept and the unitary center of the coming politics.

Translated by Cesare Casarino

#### Notes

1. The English term *power* corresponds to two distinct terms in Italian, *potenza* and *potere*. See the entry for “Power” in the glossary at the end of this volume. In this essay I will use the original Italian term when there may be some confusion between these two notions of power. The subsequent instance where *power* appears in this paragraph also refers to *potenza*.
2. Marsilius of Padua, *The Defensor of Peace*, trans. Alan Gewirth (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), 15. I have modified Gewirth’s translation.
3. All subsequent uses of the word *power* in this section refer to *potere*.
4. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1989), 257. [In the Italian translation of Benjamin’s passage, “state of emergency” is translated as “state of exception,” which is the phrase Agamben uses in the preceding section of this essay. Trans.]
5. See, for example, Peter Medawar and Jean Medawar, *Aristotle to Zoos* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 66–67.
6. [The terminology in the original is the same as that used for bank transactions (and thus “naked life” becomes here the cash reserve contained in accounts such as the “forms of life”). Trans.]
7. All uses of the word *power* in the remainder of the essay refer to *potenza*.
8. Aristotle, *On the Soul*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 1, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 682–83.
9. Dante Alighieri, *On World Government*, trans. Herbert W. Schneider (Indianapolis: Liberal Arts, 1957), 6–7.