

No to Biopolitical Tattooing

Giorgio Agamben

translated from the French by Stuart J. Murray

The newspapers have made it clear: from now on, visitors who enter the United States on a visa will have their fingerprints and photograph filed by immigration authorities. Personally, I have no intention of submitting myself to such procedures, and this is why I have canceled indefinitely the course that I was scheduled to teach this March at New York University. I would like to explain the reason for this refusal, why, despite very cordial relations over the years with American colleagues and students alike, I consider my decision both necessary and final, and why I hope other intellectuals and other European instructors will do the same.

It is not merely a knee-jerk reaction to a procedure that has long been imposed on criminals and political dissidents. If this was all it was, we could certainly participate on moral grounds, and thereby express solidarity with the humiliating conditions to which so many human beings are submitted today. But the essence lies elsewhere. The problem exceeds the limits of personal sensitivity; quite simply, it concerns the juridico-political (or simply, “biopolitical”) status of citizens who live in allegedly democratic States.

In recent years, there have been efforts to convince us to accept as normal and humane those means of control that have always been considered as exceptional and properly inhuman. Nobody is unaware that the exercise of State control over individuals by means of tracking electronic devices, such as credit cards or cellular phones, has reached previously unimaginable proportions. One could not, however, cross certain thresholds in the control and in the manipulation of bodies without entering into a new biopolitical era, without crossing over into what Michel Foucault called the progressive animalization of man, implemented by means of the most sophisticated technologies.

Electronic scanning of fingerprints and of the retina, subcutaneous tattooing, along with other similar practices, are all elements that serve to define this threshold. Those who invoke security measures in order to justify these practices should not sway us: security measures have nothing to do with it. History teaches us how many such practices, initially reserved for foreigners, are soon applied to every citizen alike.

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What is at stake here is none other than the new and “normal” biopolitical relation between citizens and the State. This relation no longer has to do with free and active participation in the public sphere, but instead concerns the routine inscription and registration of the most private and most incommunicable element of subjectivity—the biopolitical life of the body.

While the media apparatus controls and manipulates public speech, a corresponding technological apparatus identifies and registers bare life. Between these two extremes of speech without a body and a body without speech, the space of what we once called politics is increasingly reduced, increasingly exiguous. Thus, by applying these procedures to the citizen—or rather, to the human being as such—the State is applying a technological apparatus that was invented for a dangerous class of persons. The State, which ought to constitute the very space of public life, instead has made the citizen into the suspect par excellence—to the point that humanity itself has become a dangerous class.

A few years ago, I wrote that the political paradigm of the West was no longer the city-state, but the concentration camp, and that we had crossed from Athens to Auschwitz. This was obviously a philosophical claim, not a historical account, since one could not confuse phenomena that must, on the contrary, be distinguished. I would like to suggest that at Auschwitz, tattooing undoubtedly became the most routine and most economical means of regulating the inscription and registration of deportees arriving at concentration camps. The biopolitical tattooing that the United States is now imposing in order to enter its territory could very well be the harbinger of future demands—to accept as routine the inscription of the good citizen into the gears and mechanisms of the State. This is why we must oppose it.

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