

UNGOVERNABLE POTENTIALITIES

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Ungovernable potentialities *Potencialidades ingovernáveis*

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Abstract: Giorgio Agamben's essay *What Is An Apparatus?*² presents in condensed form several of the most important strands of his research over the past decade. My aim in this paper is to survey some of these themes in order to underscore both the critical promise and limitations of Agamben's work on apparatuses. In particular, I will argue that the expanded ontology and conception of apparatuses that he develops in this essay is an essential theoretical advance, and that the one of the chief tasks for thought today is to maintain that expanded ontology and notion of apparatuses as we seek to understand and contest contemporary developments in biopolitical and control societies as they affect both human and nonhuman life.

Keywords: Apparatus. Technology. Governmentality. Human. Nonhuman

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 - 2 AGAMBEN, 2009. All subsequent references to this essay will be in parentheses.

Resumo: O ensaio de Giorgio Agamben *O Que É Um Dispositivo?* apresenta de maneira condensada vários dos mais importantes tópicos de suas pesquisas durante a década passada. Meu objetivo neste artigo é discutir alguns desses temas para sublinhar tanto o comprometimento crítico quanto as limitações do trabalho de Agamben dedicado aos dispositivos. Em especial, sustento que a ontologia expandida e a concepção de dispositivo que ele desenvolve no ensaio citado representam avanços teóricos essenciais, tendo em vista que uma das principais tarefas do pensamento hoje é preservar a ontologia expandida e a noção de dispositivo para que se possa entender e contestar os desenvolvimentos contemporâneos em biopolítica e controle social que afetam tanto a vida humana quanto a não-humana.

Palavras-chave: Dispositivo. Tecnologia. Governamentalidade. Humano. Não-humano.

What Is An Apparatus? opens with what appears at first glance to be a rather modest hypothesis. Agamben proposes that *dispositif* (translated in the English version of the essay as *apparatus*, and as *dispositivo* in Agamben's original Italian text) is a "decisive technical term in the strategy of Foucault's thought" (1). Such a hypothesis might lead the reader to believe that Agamben's approach will be primarily hermeneutical, limited to a careful analysis of the concept of *dispositif* in Foucault's work; however, the stakes of Agamben's text here are much broader than simple exegesis. The first clue we are given along these lines arises when he explains that terminological choices in a given philosopher's work are no minor matter. A concept like *dispositif* in Foucault's work plays an absolutely essential role in creating a space for thought and practice. As Agamben notes, in

a phrase that alludes to the thought of Gilles Deleuze³ as well as that of Martin Heidegger and a number of other philosophers, “terminology is the poetic moment of thought” (1). In other words, the concept of *dispositif* is hardly neutral or straightforwardly denotative; rather, it functions to help bring a phenomenon or series of phenomena to presence, to wrest them from obscurity. Moreover, this disclosive concept of *dispositif* functions *productively* in the sense that Heidegger lends this term when he speaks about a productive logic in *Being and Time* and elsewhere.⁴ A productive term or concept leaps ahead into a given field of forces and relations in order partially to delimit them and to open a space for life and thought.

What this means is that offering a straightforward definition of apparatus in Foucault’s work would constitute only a first step in understanding the deeper workings of the concept. To complicate matters, a basic definition of the term apparatus is never offered by Foucault, although he does provide some clues to how he uses the term in the 1977 interview, *The Confession of the Flesh*.⁵ When pressed on what the notion of apparatus means in his work, Foucault stresses that he has in mind both discursive and nondiscursive elements. Whereas his earlier notion of an *episteme* was used primarily to distinguish the scientific from the non-scientific within discursive systems alone, apparatuses deal with discourses of various sorts as well as non-discursive institutions, architectures, and so forth. More specifically, an apparatus refers to the *linkage* between various discursive

3 Deleuze has, of course, also written on the concept of the *dispositif* in Foucault, and his influence on Agamben’s thought on this issue is considerable. See DELEUZE, 2006.

4 See, among other texts, HEIDEGGER, 1962, par. 3.

5 FOUCAULT, 1980.

and non-discursive elements that form an ensemble, the “system of relations that can be established between these elements” (194). In focusing on the relation between both discursive and non-discursive elements, Foucault is able to catch sight of new problems, and even reframe old ones, allowing us to see the flows of power differently and opening up alternative paths and possibilities for resistance.

Foucault notes that one of his chief concerns in focusing on apparatuses is to underscore that an apparatus is a response to an urgent need at a specific historical moment. In other words, there is an urgent problem for those who govern in a given period and at a given time, a pressing need to control the behaviors or characteristics of a population; and in response to that need, various technologies and discourses are brought together in an ensemble, an apparatus, in order to establish control. As such, apparatuses help both to delimit and regulate a given population, establishing relations of power that function in both repressive and productive terms. And given the inextricable relationship between power and knowledge for Foucault, apparatuses are both made possible by and make possible knowledge formations that shape and give meaning to a given field of relations. In other words, not only do apparatuses define and make possible certain technologies of power and control, but those technologies form the base for unanticipated uses and iterations of those same technologies.

Agamben’s analysis of the concept of the apparatus moves immediately past the kind of explanatory approach I have just offered (although he does offer his own brief gloss on how the term functions in Foucault’s work) toward a genealogical one. He locates a prior version of the notion of an apparatus in Foucault’s concept of *positivity*, which Foucault used to refer to certain discursive formations, rules, and regulations that shape the formation of subjects and

their knowledge claims. A positivity functions to delimit and give sense to a particular field, to define what counts as an object, and to demarcate what does and does not count as a legitimate knowledge claim. Although Foucault's use of the notion of positivity tended, as with his concept of an episteme, to remain within a discursive register, a positivity does share with an apparatus an important participatory role in material power-knowledge relations and subject formation.

Agamben suggests that Foucault borrows this concept of positivity from G. W. F. Hegel, by way of a reading of Hegel from his (Foucault's) teacher and mentor Jean Hippolyte. In his examination of Hegel's early writings on Christianity,⁶ Hippolyte underscores the early Hegel's concern with the tension between natural religion and positive religion. In Hegel's discourse, natural religion refers to the religious doctrines and beliefs that are arrived at by an individual in an autonomous, rational manner. Positive religion (here the term positive is borrowed from a jurisprudential context to denote the laws in force in a particular historical community) is the set of rites, rules, and beliefs associated with a particular religion and externally and heteronomously imposed on a given individual. The early Hegel, heavily under the influence of Kant, is deeply concerned with the way in which positive religion hinders human freedom and autonomously chosen (natural) religious beliefs; but, he nonetheless believes that natural and positive religion must ultimately be reconciled, and that there must be a way to effect a "free association" between autonomy and the "concrete richness of life" in positive religion.

In contrasting Hegel's approach with Foucault's, Agamben is able to bring out the singular nature of Foucault's

6 See the two essays collected in HEGEL, 1948.

critical approach to positivities and apparatuses. Unlike Hegel, Foucault's chief concern lies neither simply with the mere limitation of autonomy nor with the broader dialectical reconciliation of autonomy and positivity; instead, Foucault shifts our critical focus toward an examination of the specific ways in which positivities and apparatuses function to tie together the various rules, regulation, and institutions through which power circulates. As Agamben explains, "For Foucault, what is at stake is rather the investigation of concrete modes in which the positivities (or the apparatuses) act within the relations, mechanisms, and 'plays' of power" (6). Uncovering these networks of relations that constitute power helps us to reconfigure the ways in which power-knowledge circulates and also helps us to rethink how we might contest and negotiate the forces that operate on this terrain. For Foucault, this more micropolitical approach to power-knowledge is essential for avoiding the limitations associated with an approach to politics that relies on reified universals, such as the State or The People.⁷

In continuing his genealogical analysis of apparatuses, Agamben notes that by the time the term has come into use in Foucault's context as well as in the context of contemporary common parlance, there are several splintered meanings and contexts at play. It carries juridical, technological, and military meanings, among others; but Agamben suggests that if one continues along the genealogical path he has begun, one will find that these fragmented senses of the term can actually be traced back to an earlier historical context in which these senses were first unified and deployed. At this point in the text, Agamben provides a condensed summary of the "theological genealogy of economy" research he had been undertaking for the three years prior, the fruit

7 FOUCAULT, 2008, p. 2

of which was published under the title of *The Kingdom and the Glory*. There is no possibility of providing a complete reading of this dense and important work here, and others have already explored some of the key themes in this work in relation to Agamben's essay on apparatuses.⁸ For our purposes, what is important to note is that Agamben traces the genealogy of apparatuses back to the Greek term *oikonomia* (subsequently translated into Latin as *dispositio*) and the use of this term by Christian theologians in the context of discussions surrounding the Christian Trinity. In the context of Aristotle's thought and ancient Greek culture more generally, *oikonomia* refers to the practical activity of management and administration of the home. Agamben suggests that this notion of *oikonomia* as administration was attractive to the Church Fathers in trying to make sense of the unity and multiplicity of God in the Trinity. Whereas God's substance was one, he could – through the apparatus of *oikonomia*, or *dispositio* – become multiple in his practical activity and administration of the world.

Now, Agamben is not, of course, developing a specific position on theological debates over the Trinity. His interest in this discourse lies instead in the fracture or caesura that the Church Fathers introduce between God's being and His activity. In separating God's unified existence at the level of substance from the triple form of His existence at the level of activity, the Church Fathers leave us with the paradoxical notion of activity occurring without a secure or clear foundation in being. Agamben explains this legacy in the following way: "Action (economy, but also politics) has no foundation in being: this is the schizophrenia that the theological doctrine of *oikonomia* left as its legacy to Western culture" (10).

8 HERON, 2011.

What, then, do this genealogy and fracture between being and activity have to do with the notion of apparatuses in Foucault? It is at this point that we encounter one of the central stakes of Agamben's text. At issue for both Agamben and Foucault is not simply defining apparatuses but uncovering their basic *functioning*, which is to say, uncovering the ways in which they function to dissimulate the gap between action and being by producing what appear to be "naturalized" subjects. As Agamben's notes: "The term 'apparatus' designates that in which, and through which, one realizes a pure activity of governance devoid of any foundation in being. This is the reason why apparatuses must always imply a process of subjectification, that is to say, they must produce their subject" (11).

Agamben is thus suggesting that the "schizophrenic" gap that we find in modern apparatuses between being and action has been materially and discursively inherited from this theological-economic tradition and that we have yet to come fully to grips with this inheritance. Repeatedly, throughout Western metaphysics we find this same gap, whether it crops up in the debate over *oikonomia/dispositio* among the Church Fathers, in Hegel's reflections on positivity, or even in Heidegger's discourse on *Gestell* as the dominant mode of *techne* in modernity. All of these concepts point toward general set or network of practices – that is, apparatuses – that shape, manage, and control populations and produce certain subjects; but what remains to be thought are the complex mechanisms underlying, and ontological-ethical-political stakes of, these processes of subjectification. In other words, with the concept of an apparatus, we are called to think through not just the facts of governance and control, but the underlying processes of subjectification that make governance and control possible (and that, just as importantly, also potentially derail or challenge them).

Foucault, of course, has an elaborate discourse of his own on processes of subjectification; in addition, Deleuze has explored at length the varied modes of subjectification that occur by way of apparatuses. And although influenced by these rich discourses, Agamben at this point breaks from the role of hermeneutician and seeks to set up a fresh ontological foundation for thinking through what is at issue with apparatuses in modern societies. As a means of getting at the subjectification process at work with apparatuses, Agamben suggests starting from a broad ontological partition between *substances* and *apparatuses* that mirrors the being/action, theology/*oikonomia* distinction that he has been tracking throughout his analysis. But what Agamben adds to this socio-political ontology is a third category, that of the *subject*; and it is this third category that allows us to gain access to the processes at work with apparatuses. Thus, within this proposed ontological framework, there are (a) living beings (substances, or “creatures”) on one side of the divide, and (b) apparatuses on the other side, with (c) subjects emerging at the interstices of this matrix via the interactions and shapings that occur between living beings and apparatuses.

In terms of what Agamben means by “living beings” here, it is clear that he has a very broad scope of entities in mind, including and extending well beyond human beings, which constitutes one signal difference between his work and Foucault’s inasmuch as Foucault is generally uninterested in tracking the play of power beyond human beings.⁹ With regard to apparatuses, here too Agamben differs from Foucault in allowing apparatuses to comprise a range of

9 There are, of course, exceptions to this anthropocentric tendency in Foucault’s work; likewise, Foucault’s work has immense potential in terms of helping us to understand how biopolitics circulates beyond the human. As of the writing of this essay, there are two books on Foucault and animals that are in the process of being published.

devices, practices, and institutions that is considerably broader than what Foucault would have included under that rubric. Thus, Agamben can say that he would include under the heading of apparatus all of the well-known apparatuses that Foucault examined (prisons, schools, madhouse, juridical measures, etc.), apparatuses that tend to function in the role of a network to bring together various registers of power, knowledge, and control; but Agamben also understands apparatuses to include more basic technological devices that are no doubt involved in power, knowledge, and control but that perhaps do not always play the organizing and network-type roles that Foucault tends to allot to his apparatuses. With this broader notion of apparatuses in view, Agamben includes under this ontological category “the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones, and – why not – language itself, which is perhaps the most ancient of apparatuses – one in which thousands and thousands of years ago a primate inadvertently let himself be captured, probably without realizing the consequences that he was about to face” (14). We shall have occasion to return to this passage in the final portion of this essay, but one can already glimpse here the outlines of our question, namely, the question concerning the manner in which Agamben has on the one hand (helpfully) expanded the scope of apparatuses beyond Foucault’s concerns but also (more questionably) reconstituted a certain anthropocentric focus in his choice of which apparatuses and living beings to analyze.

For the moment, though, let us return to Agamben’s framework and explore in more detail his third ontological category concerning the subject. In the interaction between a living being and an apparatus, a subject is produced. Here, a subject should be understood as that kind of being whose existence helps to sustain and reproduce a given apparatus; it

exists as a being that is thrown-under (*subjectum*) as support for an apparatus. And given that any particular living being encounters and is captured by multiple apparatuses in its lifetime, living beings can be viewed as going through multiple processes of subjectification. This difference between (a) the various modes of subjectification and (b) the substance that undergoes subjectification is what requires Agamben to insist upon a third ontological category. What we might identify as a singular substance, that is, a being that retains something of an identity across time, can itself become multiple subjects. And this multiplicity does not make a given substance's varied subjectivities any less real, for the subjects and subject positions produced by apparatuses (Agamben gives examples of subjects such as "the user of cellular phones, the web surfer, the writer of stories, the tango *aficionado*, [and] the anti-globalization activist" [14-15]) have a material existence and constitute and create real effects. Indeed, substances often become deeply invested in these subjectivities, sometimes identifying and at other times dis-identifying with them; they play an essential role in the organization of social life at multiple levels, including the psychic, social, economic levels.

Social theorists in recent years have become particularly adept at showing how such processes of subjectification are, while very real, nonetheless contingent and open to processes of de- and re-subjectification. It is often stressed that the substances and the subject positions in which substances find themselves caught up and with which or against which their lives are organized *are not identical*. There is an ontological fissure or fold between them, analogous to the gap that Agamben identifies between being and action. In order to understand what is at issue in Agamben's analysis here, it is important to underscore that he shares with contemporary social theorists a desire to uncover the contingency of

processes of subjectification; but we have to be careful in how we figure this zone of contingency if we wish to follow Agamben's unique line of thought. For the task of coming to grips with Agamben's position, it is important to pause for a moment and consider the subtle point *that* there is a gap between being and action. If we move too quickly past this *that*, this fact of the fissure or fold, in order simply to substitute some new mode of subjectification to replace the old one, we risk losing sight of the deeply non-foundational nature of action and subjectification. In short, the fact *that* there is a gap between being and action, between substance and subject, indicates that *there is nothing we must become*.

This kind of slippage between substance and subject should not be understood as a space of freedom but rather one of potentiality as well as im-potentiality; it recalls us to the simple and subtle fact that living substances have neither a vocation nor a work to which they properly belong. And it further indicates that any vocation, identity, or work which a living being takes up or with which it is identified is done so without a ground or foundation in its being. A subject emerges only in and through a confrontation with the non-ground of inoperativity.

But what happens (as Agamben argues is the case today) when the apparatuses with which substances interact become ever more pervasive, granting ever fewer opportunities for glimpsing the gap between being and action? Moreover, what are the consequences for life and thought in view of modern apparatuses that seem to offer possibilities only for de-subjectification without any meaningful re-subjectification? These are the concerns and questions that arise as we come to grips with the shift in modern societies toward power that takes the form of governmentality and control. In modern capitalist societies, human beings are surrounded by and enveloped in apparatuses, effectively

without break or rupture. As Deleuze notes, this is one of the characteristic features of control societies in contrast with disciplinary societies.¹⁰ In the latter, discipline is certainly pervasive but there are at least minor breaks and ruptures in the interstices between institutions; in the former, the apparatuses of power function in overlapping and seamless ways to create an effectively ubiquitous network of power relations that make speaking of an “outside” to power or a “between” with regard to institutions appear senseless. Agamben underscores this Deleuzean point when he writes:

It would probably not be wrong to define the extreme phase of capitalist development in which we live as a massive accumulation and proliferation of apparatuses. It is clear that ever since *Homo sapiens* first appeared, there have been apparatuses; but we could say that today there is not even a single instant in which the life of individuals is not modeled, contaminated, or controlled by some apparatus (15).

In such a situation, where individuals come increasingly to be integrated within networks of control, the possibility of glimpsing the slippage between being and action becomes all but impossible; as such, inoperativity and (im)potentiality go unheeded.

Agamben is, thus, raising the question of what forms ethics and politics might take in an age that is increasingly characterized by networks and technologies of control. The two dominant critical responses to the ubiquity of control and technology – destruction of apparatuses on the one hand, and their correct use on the other – strike Agamben as equally implausible. And although he admits to the temptation to destroy or eliminate certain technological devices such as cellphones (a temptation that indicates his distaste for apparatuses that homogenize social relations along reductive

10 DELEUZE, 1995.

and one-dimensional lines), such an approach to apparatuses would miss two key aspects of what is at issue in thinking through our current situation. The first thing to note about apparatuses is that they are not odds with human life in any simple manner. Returning to the anthropocentric tendency we took note of previously, Agamben here once again narrows his broad ontological account of apparatuses in order to talk about the way in which apparatuses are actually an essential part of the historical and cultural process of humanization. Agamben writes: "The fact is that according to all indications, apparatuses are not a mere accident in which humans are caught by chance, but rather are rooted in the very process of 'humanization' that made 'humans' out of the animals we classify under the rubric *Homo sapiens*" (16). Following Heidegger, Agamben reads this capturing of the human in *techne* and apparatuses as marking a break with the unmediated relation to natural environments that is (supposedly) characteristic of nonhuman animals. To catch sight of this break, to notice the fact that one is not entirely identical with one's environment, is a quintessentially human act for Agamben. This partial break from one's milieu (both cultural and natural) and subsequent emergence into the Open is what provides the space for an encounter with being as such (rather than with specific beings whose being is already framed in a specific manner and toward specific ends). For Agamben, this encounter with being as such corresponds to the happy life,¹¹ to a form-of-life beyond production or vocation that is perhaps best understood in terms of beatitude. Apparatuses and technological devices of various sorts today function both to help us move into the Open (by suspending our immediate relationship to the natural environment) and also to block access to the Open by

11 AGAMBEN, 2000, p. 114.

pre-clearing beings in such a way as to encourage us to miss being as such. Consequently, to seek entirely to turn one's back on apparatuses and technological devices would run the risk of missing out on a decisive aspect of the process of humanization as well as losing sight of the essential desire for the happy life that lies behind the use of apparatuses.

This double concern with humanization and the happy life is ultimately what leads Agamben to suggest that the proper response to the ubiquity of apparatuses in modern times is not destruction but *profanation*. Profanation is the process whereby apparatuses are removed from the sphere of sovereignty and control of the few (the realm of religion and the *sacred*) and returned to immanent, common use and shared happiness (the realm of the *profane*). From Agamben's perspective, the chief problem with the apparatuses, devices, and institutions that crowd modern life is that they have largely emerged from and belong to a sphere considered to be separate from and transcendent to common social life. Properly reoriented and subjected to free and common use, apparatuses would function to allow human beings and human happiness partially to escape capture and control.

The notion of profanation can be illustrated by thinking about the role of roads and the car system in many modern cities. As is well known, the modern automobile and its infrastructure have increasingly come to dominate the urban landscape. Roads - while typically funded and maintained collectively - are often constructed and reserved for the individual car user, which has the effect of making roads ever more the province of a certain kind of user. Individuals who are unable to drive their own car (perhaps because of age, income, or physical or cognitive challenges associated with driving), or people who seek to use roads without an individual car (for example, for walking, cycling, or some unanticipated social use) have become increasingly unable

to do so. In this sense, roads and the car system have been rendered sacred, the province of the few (even if this few constitutes a large number of individuals, and even if this few actually constitutes a numerical majority). Now, to respond to this apparatus of mobility through a simple principle of destruction (“Destroy all roads and cars!”) would be an ineffective strategy if our aim is return apparatuses to common use. A more promising possibility would be – to take but one example – the “Ciclovía” (bike path) or open streets movement, which aims to close temporarily certain sections of roads to cars and open them up for a wide variety of common uses, including standard forms of mobility such as cycling, skating, running, and walking, as well as turning the streets into very different kinds of social spaces, such as yoga spaces, festival markets, arts and crafts areas, makeshift parks and playgrounds, and so on. By creating alternative zones of mobility and sociality, open streets movements reclaim roads from the dominant system of the individual car and return them to the profane sphere of free and common use. It is important to note that this movement does not typically seek to eliminate altogether the automobile or similar types of transport; but it does shrink the sphere and scope of dominant forms of mobility in view of creating more genuinely shared and common spaces.

Such acts and counter-apparatuses of profanation require an enormous amount of work, coordination, and dedication if they are to be actualized and maintained. And, at present, most open streets events have been successful only in creating these alternative zones for short periods of time and in limited areas. Except in rare instances, the dominant systems of mobility tend to reassert themselves in those spaces, and most people go back to living their lives in, through, and at the edges of the standard apparatuses of control and networks of power.

If we follow Agamben's line of thinking as presented in *What Is An Apparatus?*, there is a fairly obvious explanation for why such counter-apparatuses and social spaces are – especially in modern societies – difficult to establish and maintain. As Agamben suggests, the apparatuses of control through and with which individuals live in modern societies tend not to form subjects *of any sort*; rather, they seem to operate and circulate primarily through means of desubjectification. Of course, all apparatuses contain a desubjectifying moment – apparatuses face beings who have already become subjects in various modes and by way of myriad relationships; substances are not mere blank slates upon which material effects might be impressed. So, a certain process of desubjectification is fundamental to what we typically think of as the dominant apparatuses in traditional societies (schools, medical institutions, military, prisons, family, etc.). But the apparatuses and networks of power in modern control societies seem to be able to circulate and reproduce themselves almost entirely through desubjectification without any corresponding resubjectification. In view of the desubjectification characteristic of dominant apparatuses of control in contemporary societies, Agamben notes that:

He who lets himself be captured by the “cellular telephone” apparatus – whatever the intensity of the desire that has driven him – cannot acquire a new subjectivity, but only a number through which he can, eventually, be controlled. The spectator who spends his evenings in front of the television set only gets, in exchange for his desubjectification, the frustrated mask of the couch potato, or his inclusion in the calculation of viewership ratings (21).

Consequently, when alternative social and common spaces are opened up, there generally tends to be little investment in maintaining such spaces. The individuals who occupy them for short periods of time seem to be swept

back in, without resistance, to the dominant apparatuses and technologies of modern society. This characteristic lack of resistance is what leads Agamben to describe modern desubjectified individuals as “the most docile and cowardly social body that has ever existed in human history.” Many contemporary populations have become so thoroughly constituted by the spectacle and biopolitical apparatuses as to be indistinct from them, which of course is the great danger of and source of pessimism concerning the growth of control societies. The possibilities for resistance continue to shrink, and the strategies for any remaining possibilities become ever more difficult to imagine.

There is certainly a temptation among many theorists and activists to be nostalgic in such circumstances for a recuperation of previous identities and subjectivities (largely the ones produced by disciplinary societies such as the worker, the family, the citizen, and so on) as a means of combatting near-complete desubjectification and its effects. And yet, Agamben’s work avoids this kind of backward-looking gesture, inasmuch as the attempt to recover an identity forecloses the ethical and political moment that forms the ground of his thought. Moreover, there is a certain paradox, a kind of dangerous promise, inherent to our control societies that merits further reflection. Governments and other power structures are well aware that among the “Blooms”¹² that populate control societies, there circulates unpredictable energies and possibilities. To be a member of a control society is to *know* that the vast majority of social life promises individuals nothing by way of an identity, and it is also to be continuously reminded that who I might be at any given moment (a worker, a citizen of a particular State

12 Agamben uses this term in view of Tiqqun’s development of the concept in TIQQUN, 2012.

or province, a student) can be assured for no significant length of time. Such situations of anxiety and precarity might seem to close the gap between being and action altogether, making individuals indistinct from the variety of beings they become by way of apparatuses. But the kinds of desubjectified positions we occupy within control societies are often so fleeting, so insubstantial as to tear apart and forcefully re-open that gap between being and action. This gap, as we know, is often too much for some individuals to bear, and simply glimpsing it can lead to unpredictable and reactive explosions of individual and collective violence. At the same time, the *fact* of the gap between being and action stubbornly remains at the heart of control societies; and it is only from within the space of an encounter with that gap – and with radical (im)potentiality, or what Agamben calls “the Ungovernable” at the end of this essay – that profanation of apparatuses, and the emergence of a form-of-life becomes possible.

Agamben’s ultimate concern here, however, is that contemporary control and apparatuses are “leading us to catastrophe” (24), and human beings today (the populations that are the most docile and cowardly in history) seem to lack the wherewithal to intervene and contest this trajectory. There are good reasons to share this concern, and it is clear that much of the violence and resistance to power we see around us today is often reactionary and far from revolutionary. But I want to suggest in what remains of this essay that if we reframe and re-contextualize our current situation somewhat differently, we might be able to catch sight of a number of additional possibilities for transformation and resistance that simply do not appear within the horizon of Agamben’s thought. In addition, with this reframing we will be able to see more clearly some of the different ways in which control has morphed and extended itself as modern societies get

ever closer to a series of catastrophes. If there is a chance for developing alternative forms of life beyond the present, it is equally important for us to attend to these changes in the circulation of power and control.

To explain these claims, let me return to the original ontological framework that Agamben proposes when advancing his own analysis of apparatuses. Agamben outlines a partition between living beings (substances, individuals) on the one hand, and apparatuses of an extremely wide variety on the other hand, with subjects emerging as a third category at the interstices of the interaction between living beings and apparatuses. But immediately upon proposing this broad ontological schema, in a gesture that is consistent with the overwhelming majority of his published writings, he narrows the scope of his analysis of apparatuses to those that are formed by human beings and with which human beings alone interact. This gives rise to an analysis of the subjectification and desubjectification processes that human beings undergo, and a series of reflections on the problematic consequences of these processes in control societies. But what if we refused this anthropocentric narrowing and stayed with the broader ontological framework initially proposed? What comes into view when we place human apparatuses and human subjectification/desubjectification processes alongside similar processes occurring in and among the more-than-human world?

One of the first points that comes into view, a point that is often occluded in Agamben's work (and often in Foucault's as well), is that many of the apparatuses with which we are concerned (whether we are considering those that belong to disciplinary regimes or those that are characteristic of networks of control) have their origins in the domination and control of the nonhuman world. It is difficult, for example, to gain a robust understanding of

such apparatuses as the incarceration system or certain forms of biopower associated with the maintenance of the reproductive health of populations without situating those practices in a broader context that includes the deployment of these modes of control toward nonhuman populations. And without this kind of attention to the shared processes that shape and subjectify human and nonhuman life, there is a tendency to overlook both the injustices done to the nonhuman world as well as to the ways in which human and nonhuman modes of violence often intersect and reinforce each other. A fine example of the kind of genealogical work that needs to be done along these lines can be found in David Nibert's recent book *Animal Oppression and Human Violence*.¹³ Nibert's analysis provides a broad historical overview of the ways in which the exploitation and domestication of animals not only enables a massive increase in human violence (for example, by providing the material means and infrastructure for colonialism) but also continues to promote this violence (for example, through continued land grabs aimed at securing more resources to maintain animal-based agriculture). In addition, a number of recent theorists have shown how the technologies of power and dominant means of control in biopolitical societies have their origins in attempts to domesticate animals and nature and to secure the border between human and animal.¹⁴ From the perspective of Agamben's framework, which seeks to pay close attention to the various ways in which apparatuses "humanize" us by separating out and annihilating the animal and nonhuman aspects of individuals, it is exceedingly important to understand how the technologies of power

13 NIBERT, 2013.

14 BOGGS, 2013; SESHADRI, 2012; SHUKIN 2009; SMITH, 2011 and WOLFE, 2013.

and control circulate throughout the human and nonhuman world in order to carry out this process of humanization. And it is also imperative to develop a non-anthropocentric sensibility in regard to the effects of biopower and control and to leave behind the kind of dogmatic anthropocentrism that plagues post-Heideggerian thought.

If we maintain this broader ontological perspective concerning apparatuses, we can also gain a richer and more complex understanding of the possibilities for resistance to discipline and biopower. Just as discipline and biopower are both productive and repressive and generate significant resistance among human beings, the same is true when we examine the ways that apparatuses confront and shape the nonhuman world. In recent years, theorists and activists have argued with great persuasive force that agency and resistance are prevalent throughout the animal and natural world. One of the more extensive arguments in this vein is presented by Jason Hribal in *Fear of the Animal Planet*.¹⁵ Hribal documents an impressive number of recent instances of animals escaping a broad variety of apparatuses of control and discipline, demonstrating both remarkable intelligence and inspiring determination among animals. Likewise, environmental theorists have shown multiple instances in which the natural world, while certainly deeply vulnerable to and wounded by human power, nevertheless finds ways to move through and around control, creeping up through the cracks of paved streets and concrete jungles. In view of these ideas, we must learn to see our attempts to resist and reshape control and power as existing with and alongside these nonhuman struggles; indeed, innumerable possibilities for resistance might emerge if thought and practice were to emerge from this shared zone. Moreover, we must learn

15 HRIBAL, 2011.

to establish solidarity with nonhuman beings of all sorts, to consider how we might assist animals and the natural world in their attempts to live otherwise. To fail to make such practical and affective linkages is to reproduce the same split that undergirds the dominant anthropological machine that sustains historical and contemporary modes of biopolitical control.

Toward the very end of *What Is An Apparatus?*, Agamben notes that our control society is leading us to “catastrophe;” and although he doesn’t specifically mention ecological catastrophes here, one perhaps cannot help but being recalled to the current and predicted environmental disasters that mark our age. Continuing with the broader ontological and ethical vision we have been developing in this final section of the essay, we can see once again the merits of avoiding a narrowly anthropocentric analysis of apparatuses and control in trying to respond to these present and looming crises. For as ecological catastrophes come to dominate the social and political sphere, both the management of nature and the constitution of new subjectivities in relation to environmental issues are becoming primary sites in the circulation of power and control. A small number of geographers and other theorists have been tracking this emerging zone of control and biopolitics, dubbing it eco-governmentality or green governmentality.¹⁶ These theorists, while inspired by Foucault and Agamben, have had to take leave of the narrow anthropocentric and non-ecological contexts of their work in order to track these powerful and emergent forms of control. They have demonstrated how the so-called preservation and restoration of nature, while a seemingly innocent project beyond power and control, is in

16 An excellent overview of this scholarship is provided by RUTHERFORD, 2007.

fact deeply implicated in the very forms of governmentality that constitute the dominant social order. In mainstream approaches to environmentalism and environmental politics, nature is often characterized as a commodity and as “capital” to be managed as a resource for the wellbeing of the State and the health of populations. Worth noting as well is the manner in which scientific discourses around the climate and biodiversity have become increasingly yoked to this eco-bio-political administrative project. Mainstream environmentalism has also been able to insert itself into the productions of eco-subjectivities, ranging from green consumerist to green austerity varieties. While it is clear the ecological crises are among the most pressing issues facing contemporary societies, it is important to attend to the way in which these issues are not somehow separate from power and governmentality. Likewise, if we hope to develop a less anthropocentric ontology and ethics with regard to the nonhuman world, we must be extremely vigilant in attending to the ways in which nature and human beings are figured in these contexts of catastrophe.

In closing, allow me to return to the example of the apparatus of the mobility system that we examined previously; but this time, let us do so with the expanded ontological and ethical perspective we have developed here. I suggested above that the open streets movement is a helpful example of what Agamben calls the profanation of apparatuses, which would amount to taking a given apparatus away from its exclusive use by a sovereign and sacred group and returning it to common, free, and profane use. But what if by common use we understand the term common in a more expansive sense to denote both the human and nonhuman world? In this case, not only would we seek to return the streets to the minoritarian human groups we noted above, but we would also need to consider how streets

figure among and affect nonhuman entities and systems. Might profanation call us beyond simply opening streets and perhaps toward partial de-paving in certain areas, even restoration and corridor habitat establishments in others? And how might mobility itself be radically refigured in such a context? What might it mean for our cities, our modes of travel, our energy systems, and so forth, if we were to think about human mobilities alongside nohuman mobilities and spaces of various sorts? Likewise, as we begin to confront the deeply unsustainable nature of the individual automobile and modern transport systems, we would need to remain vigilant about the tendency simply to maintain this system and its driver-based subjectivities through ever more electric/hybrid cars on ever more roads.

What I am suggesting, then, is that the expanded ontological and critical approach to apparatuses with which Agamben begins should be rigorously maintained, despite his recurrent tendency to narrow the focus to an anthropocentric context. This expanded framework certainly makes the prospect of profanation in control societies appear even more complicated than the picture Agamben presents; but such an approach is also rich with possibilities for resistance and resubjectification that we might have otherwise missed – for what Agamben calls “the Ungovernable” is to be found among beings and in places where we might least expect it.

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