§   Epilogue: Toward a Theory
of Destituent Potential

1. The archeology of politics that was in question in the "Homo Sacer" project did not propose to critique or correct this or that concept, this or that institution of Western politics. The issue was rather to call into question the place and the very originary structure of politics, in order to try to bring to light the *arcanum imperii* that in some way constituted its foundation and that had remained at the same time fully exposed and tenaciously hidden in it.

The identification of bare life as the prime referent and ultimate stakes of politics was therefore the first act of the study. The originary structure of Western politics consists in an *ex-ceptio*, in an inclusive exclusion of human life in the form of bare life. Let us reflect on the peculiarity of this operation: life is not in itself political—for this reason it must be excluded from the city—and yet it is precisely the *exceptio*, the exclusion-inclusion of this Impolitical, that founds the space of politics.

It is important not to confuse bare life with natural life. Through its division and its capture in the apparatus of the exception, life assumes the form of bare life, which is to say, that of a life that has been cut off and separated from its form. It is in this sense that one must understand the thesis at the end of *Homo Sacer I* according to which "the fundamental activity of sovereign power is the production of bare life as originary political element" (Agamben 4, p. 202/181). And it is this bare life (or "sacred" life, if *sacer* first of all designates a life that can be killed without committing homicide) that functions in the juridico-political machine of the West as a threshold of articulation between *zoè* and *bios*, natural life and politically qualified life. And it will not be possible to think another

dimension of politics and life if we have not first succeeded in deactivating the apparatus of the exception of bare life.

2. Yet in the course of the study, the structure of the exception that had been defined with respect to bare life has been revealed more generally to constitute in every sphere the structure of the *archè*, in the juridico-political tradition as much as in ontology. In fact, one cannot understand the dialectic of the foundation that defines Western ontology, from Aristotle on, if one does not understand that it functions as an exception in the sense we have seen. The strategy is always the same: something is divided, excluded, and pushed to the bottom, and precisely through this exclusion, it is included as *archè* and foundation. This holds for life, which in Aristotle's words "is said in many ways"—vegetative life, sensitive life, intellectual life, the first of which is excluded in order to function as foundation for the others—but also for being, which is equally said in many ways, one of which is separated as foundation.

It is possible, however, that the mechanism of the exception is constitutively connected to the event of language that coincides with anthropogenesis. According to the structure of the presupposition that we have already reconstructed above, in happening, language excludes and separates from itself the non-linguistic, and in the same gesture, it includes and captures it as that with which it is always already in relation. That is to say, the *ex-ceptio*, the inclusive exclusion of the real from the *logos* and in the *logos* is the originary structure of the event of language.

3. In *State of Exception*, the juridico-political machine of the West was thus described as a double structure, formed from two heterogeneous and yet intimately coordinated elements: one normative and juridical in the strict sense (*potestas*) and one anomic and extrajuridical (*auctoritas*). The juridico-normative element, in which power in its effective form seems to reside, nevertheless has need of the anomic element for it to be able to apply itself to life. On the other hand, *auctoritas* can affirm itself and have sense only in relation to *potestas*. The state of exception is the apparatus that must ultimately articulate and hold together the two aspects of the juridico-political machine by instituting a threshold of undecidability between anomie and *nomos*, between life and the juridical order, between *auctoritas* and *potestas*. As long as the two elements remain correlated but conceptually, temporally, and personally distinct—as in republican

Rome, in the opposition between senate and people, or in medieval Europe, in that between spiritual power and temporal power—their dialectic can function in some way. But when they tend to coincide in one person alone, when the state of exception, in which they are indeterminated, becomes the rule, then the juridico-political system is transformed into a killing machine.

In *The Kingdom and the Glory*, an analogous structure was brought to light in the relation between rule and governance and between inoperativity and glory. Glory appeared there as an apparatus directed at capturing within the economic-governmental machine the inoperativity of human and divine life that our culture does not seem to be in a position to think and that nevertheless never ceases to be invoked as the ultimate mystery of divinity and power. This inoperativity is so essential for the machine that it must be captured and maintained at all costs at its center in the form of glory and acclamations that, through the media, never cease to carry out their doxological function even today.

In the same way some years earlier in *The Open*, the anthropological machine of the West was defined by the division and articulation within the human being of the human and the animal. And at the end of the book, the project of a deactivation of the machine that governs our conception of the human demanded not the study of new articulations between the animal and the human so much as rather the exposition of the central void, of the gap that separates—in the human being—the human and the animal. That which—once again in the form of the exception—was separated and then articulated together in the machine must be brought back to its division so that an inseparable life, neither animal nor human, can eventually appear.

4. In all these figures the same mechanism is at work: the *archè* is constituted by dividing the factical experience and pushing down to the origin—that is, excluding—one half of it in order then to rearticulate it to the other by including it as foundation. Thus, the city is founded on the division of life into bare life and politically qualified life, the human is defined by the exclusion-inclusion of the animal, the law by the *exceptio* of anomie, governance through the exclusion of inoperativity and its capture in the form of glory.

If the structure of the *archè* of our culture is such, then thought finds itself here confronted with an arduous task. Indeed, it is not a question

of thinking, as it has for the most part done up to now, new and more effective articulations of the two elements, playing the two halves of the machine off against one another. Nor is it a matter of archeologically going back to a more originary beginning: philosophical archeology cannot reach a beginning other than the one that may perhaps result from the deactivation of the machine (in this sense first philosophy is always final philosophy).

The fundamental ontological-political problem today is not work but inoperativity, not the frantic and unceasing study of a new operativity but the exhibition of the ceaseless void that the machine of Western culture guards at its center.

5. In modern thought, radical political changes have been thought by means of the concept of a "constituent power." Every constituted power presupposes at its origin a constituent power that, through a process that as a rule has the form of a revolution, brings it into being and guarantees it. If our hypothesis on the structure of the *archè* is correct, if the fundamental ontological problem today is not work but inoperativity, and if this latter can nevertheless be attested only with respect to a work, then access to a different figure of politics cannot take the form of a "constituent power" but rather that of something that we can provisionally call "destituent potential." And if to constituent power there correspond revolutions, revolts, and new constitutions, namely, a violence that puts in place and constitutes a new law, for destituent potential it is necessary to think entirely different strategies, whose definition is the task of the coming politics. A power that has only been knocked down with a constituent violence will resurge in another form, in the unceasing, unwinnable, desolate dialectic between constituent power and constituted power, between the violence that puts the juridical in place and violence that preserves it.

The paradox of constituent power is that as much as jurists more or less decisively underline its heterogeneity, it remains inseparable from constituted power, with which it forms a system. Thus, on the one hand, one affirms that constituent power is situated beyond the State, exists without it, and continues to remain external to the State even after its constitution, while the constituted power that derives from it exists only in the State. But on the other hand, this originary and unlimited power—which can, as such, threaten the stability of the system—neces-

sarily ends up being confiscated and captured in the constituted power to which it has given origin and survives in it only as the power of constitutional revision. Even Sieyès, perhaps the most intransigent theorist of the transcendence of constituent power, in the end must drastically limit its omnipotence, leaving it no other existence than the shadowy one of a *Jury constitutionnaire*, to which is entrusted the task of modifying the text of the constitution, according to definitively established procedures.

Here the paradoxes theologians had to grapple with concerning the problem of divine omnipotence seem to repeat themselves in secularized form. Divine omnipotence implied that God could do anything whatsoever, including destroying the world that he had created or annulling or subverting the providential laws with which he had willed to direct humanity toward salvation. To contain these scandalous consequences of divine omnipotence, theologians distinguished between absolute power and ordained power: *de potentia absoluta*, God can do anything, but *de potentia ordinata*, which is to say, once he has willed something, his power is thereby limited.

Just as absolute power is in reality only the presupposition of ordained power, which the latter needs to guarantee its own unconditional validity, so also can one say that constituent power is what constituted power must presuppose to give itself a foundation and legitimate itself. According to the schema that we have described many times, constituent is that figure of power in which a destituent potential is captured and neutralized, in such a way as to assure that it cannot be turned back against power or the juridical order as such but only against one of its determinate historical figures.

6. For this reason, the third chapter of the first part of *Homo Sacer I* affirmed that the relationship between constituent power and constituted power is just as complex as that which Aristotle establishes between potential and act, and it sought to clarify the relation between the two terms as a relation of ban or abandonment. The problem of constituent power here shows its irreducible ontological implications. Potential and act are only two aspects of the process of the sovereign autoconstitution of Being, in which the act presupposes itself as potential and the latter is maintained in relation with the former through its own suspension, its own being able not to pass into act. And on the other hand, act is only a conservation and a "salvation" (*soteria*)—in other words, an *Aufhebung*—of potential.

> For the sovereign ban, which applies to the exception in no longer applying, corresponds to the structure of potential, which maintains itself in relation to act precisely through its ability not to be. Potential (in its double appearance as potential to and potential-not-to) is that through which Being founds itself sovereignly, which is to say, without anything proceeding or determining it, other than its own ability not to be. And an act is sovereign when it realizes itself by simply taking away its own potential-not-to, letting itself be, giving itself to itself. (Agamben 4, p. 54/46)

Hence the difficulty of thinking a purely destituent potential, which is to say, one completely set free from the sovereign relation of the ban that links it to constituted power. The ban here appears as a limit-form of relation, in which being is founded by maintaining itself in relation with something unrelated, which is in reality only a presupposition of itself. And if being is only the being "under the ban"—which is to say, abandoned to itself—of beings, then categories like "letting-be," by which Heidegger sought to escape from the ontological difference, also remain within the relation of the ban.

For this reason the chapter could conclude by proclaiming the project of an ontology and a politics set free from every figure of relation, even from the limit-form of the ban that is the sovereign ban:

> Instead one must think the existence of potential without any relation to being in act—not even in the extreme form of the ban and the potential-not-to be—and of the act no longer as fulfillment and manifestation of potential—not even in the form of self-giving and letting be. This implies, however, nothing less than thinking ontology and politics beyond every figure of relation, beyond even the limit-relation that is the sovereign ban. (Ibid., p. 55/47)

Only in this context could it become possible to think a purely destituent potential, that is to say, one that never resolves itself into a constituted power.

ℵ.   It is the secret solidarity between the violence that founds the juridical order and that which conserves it that Benjamin thought in the essay "Critique of Violence," in seeking to define a form of violence that escapes this dialectic: "On the interruption of this cycle maintained by mythic forms of law, on the destitution [*Entsetzung*] of the juridical order together with all the powers on which it depends as they depend on it, finally therefore on the destitution of state violence, a new historical epoch is founded" (Benjamin 4, pp. 108–109/251–252). Only a power that has been rendered inoperative and deposed by means of a violence that does not aim to found a new law is fully neutralized. Benjamin identified

this violence—or according to the double meaning of the German term *Gewalt*, "destituent power [It., *potere destituente*]"—in the proletarian general strike, which Sorel opposed to the simply political strike. While the suspension of labor in the political strike is violent, "since it provokes [*veranlasst*, "occasions," "induces"] only an external modification of labor conditions, the second, as a pure means, is non-violent" (ibid., p. 101/246). Indeed, it does not imply the resumption of labor "following external concessions and this or that modification to working conditions" but the decision to take up a labor only if it has been entirely transformed and not imposed by the state, namely, a "subversion that this kind of strike not so much provokes [*veranlasst*] as realizes [*vollzieht*]" (ibid.). In the difference between *veranlassen*, "to induce, to provoke," and *vollziehen*, "to complete, to realize," is expressed the opposition between constituent power, which destroys and re-creates ever new forms of juridical order, without ever definitively deposing it, and destituent violence, which, insofar as it deposes the juridical order once and for all, immediately inaugurates a new reality. "For this reason, the first of these undertakings is lawmaking but the second anarchistic" (ibid.).

At the beginning of the essay, Benjamin defines pure violence through a critique of the taken-for-granted relation between means and ends. While juridical violence is always a means—legitimate or illegitimate—with respect to an end—just or unjust—the criteria of pure or divine violence is not to be sought in its relation to an end but in "the sphere of means, without regard for the ends they serve" (p. 87/236). The problem of violence is not the oft-pursued one of identifying just ends but that of "finding a different kind of violence . . . that was not related to them as means at all but in some different way" (pp. 102–103/247).

What is in question here is the very idea of instrumentality, which beginning with the Scholastic concept of "instrumental cause," we have seen to characterize the modern conception of use and of the sphere of technology. While these latter were defined by an instrument that appears as such only insofar as it is incorporated into the purpose of the principal agent, Benjamin here has in mind a "pure means," namely, a means that appears as such, only insofar as it emancipates itself from every relation to an end. Violence as pure means is never a means with regard to an end: it is attested only as exposition and destitution of the relationship between violence and juridical order, between means and end.

7. A critique of the concept of relation has been indicated in Chapter 2.8 of the second part of the present study, in connection with Augustine's theorem: "Every essence that is called something by way of relationship is also something besides the relationship" (*Omnis essentia quae relative dicitur est etiam aliquid excepto relativo*). For Augustine, it was a question of thinking the relation between unity and trinity in God, namely, of saving the unity of the divine essence without negating its

articulation into three persons. We have shown that Augustine solves this problem by excluding and at the same time including relation in being and being in relation. The formula *excepto relativo* is to be read here according to the logic of the exception: the relative is both excluded and included in being, in the sense that the trinity of persons is captured in the essence-potential of God, in such a way that the latter is still maintained as distinct from the former. In Augustine's words, essence, which is and is said in relation, is something beyond relation. But this means, according to the structure of the sovereign exception that we have defined, that being is a presupposition of relation.

We can therefore define relation as that which constitutes its elements by at the same time presupposing them as unrelated. In this way, relation ceases to be one category among others and acquires a special ontological rank. Both in the Aristotelian potential-act, essence-existence apparatus, and in trinitarian theology, relation inheres in being according to a constitutive ambiguity: being precedes relation and exists beyond it, but it is always already constituted through relation and included in it as its presupposition.

8. It is in Scotus's doctrine of formal being that the ontological rank of relation finds its most coherent expression. On the one hand, he takes up the Augustinian axiom and specifies it in the form *omne enim quod dicitur ad aliquid est aliquid praeter relationem* ("what is said with respect to something is something beyond relation"; *Op. Ox.*, 1, d. 5, q. 1, n. 18; qtd. in Beckmann, p. 206). The correction shows that what is in question for Scotus is the problem of relation as such. If, as he writes, "relation is not included in the concept of the absolute" (ibid.), it follows that the absolute is always already included in the concept of relation. With an apparent reversal of Augustine's theorem, which brings to light the implication that remained hidden in it, he can therefore write that *omne relativum est aliquid excepta relatione* ("every relative is something excepted from the relation"; ibid., 1, d. 26, q. 1, n. 33).

What is decisive, in any case, is that for Scotus relation implies an ontology, or a particular form of being, which he defines, with a formula that will have great success in medieval thought, as *ens debilissimum*: "among all beings relation is a very weak being, because it is only the mode of being of two beings with respect to one another" (*relatio inter omnia entia est ens debilissimum, cum sit sola habitudo duorum*; *Super praed.*, q. 25, n. 10; qtd. in

Beckmann, p. 45). But this lowest form of being—which as such is difficult to know (*ita minime cognoscibile in se*; ibid.)—in reality takes on a constitutive function in Scotus's thought—and starting with him, in the history of philosophy up to Kant—because it coincides with the specific contribution of his philosophical genius, the definition of the formal distinction and of the status of the transcendental.

In the formal distinction, that is to say, Scotus has thought the being of language, which cannot be *realiter* different from the thing that it names; otherwise it could not manifest it and make it known but must have a certain consistency of its own; otherwise it would be confused with the thing. What is distinguished from the thing not *realiter* but *formaliter* is its having a name—the transcendental is language.

9. If a privileged ontological status belongs to relation, it is because the very presupposing structure of language comes to expression in it. What Augustine's theorem affirms is in fact: "all that is said enters into a relation and therefore is also something else before and outside the relation (that is to say, it is an unrelated presupposition)." The fundamental relation—the onto-logical relation—runs between beings and language, between Being and its being said or named. *Logos* is this relation, in which beings and their being said are both identified and differentiated, distant and indistinguishable.

Thinking a purely destituent potential in this sense means interrogating and calling into question the very status of relation, remaining open to the possibility that the ontological relation is not, in fact, a relation. This means engaging in a decisive hand-to-hand confrontation [It., *corpo a corpo*] with the weakest of beings that is language. But precisely because its ontological status is weak, language is the most difficult to know and grasp, as Scotus had intuited. The almost invincible force of language is in its weakness, in its remaining unthought and unsaid in what says and in that of which it is said.

For this reason, philosophy is born in Plato precisely as an attempt to get to the bottom of *logoi*, and as such, it has a political character immediately and from the very start. And for this reason, when with Kant the transcendental ceases to be what thought must get to the bottom of and instead becomes the stronghold in which it takes refuge, then philosophy loses its relation with Being and politics enters into a decisive crisis. A new dimension for politics will be opened only when human beings—

the beings who have *logos* to the same extent that they are possessed by it—have gotten to the bottom of this weakest potential that determines them and tenaciously involves them in an errancy—history—that seems interminable. Only then—but this "then" is not future but always under way—will it be possible to think politics beyond every figure of relation.

10. Just as the tradition of metaphysics has always thought the human being in the form of an articulation between two elements (nature and *logos*, body and soul, animality and humanity), so also has Western political philosophy always thought politics in the figure of the relation between two figures that it is a question of linking together: bare life and power, the household and the city, violence and institutional order, anomie (anarchy) and law, multitude and people. From the perspective of our study, we must instead attempt to think humanity and politics as what results from the disconnection of these elements and investigate not the metaphysical mystery of conjunction but the practical and political one of their disjunction.

Let us define relation as what constitutes its elements by presupposing them, together, as unrelated. Thus, for example, in the couples living being/language, constituent power/constituted power, bare life/law, it is evident that the two elements are always mutually defined and constituted through their oppositional relation, and as such, they cannot preexist it; and yet the relation that unites them presupposes them as unrelated. What we have defined in the course of this study as the ban is the link, at once attractive and repulsive, that links the two poles of the sovereign exception.

We call a potential destituent that is capable of always deposing ontological-political relations in order to cause a contact (in Colli's sense; cf. part III, §6.5 above) to appear between their elements. Contact is not a point of tangency nor a *quid* or a substance in which two elements communicate: it is defined only by an absence of representation, only by a caesura. Where a relation is rendered destitute and interrupted, its elements are in this sense in contact, because the absence of every relation is exhibited between them. Thus, at the point where a destituent potential exhibits the nullity of the bond that pretended to hold them together, bare life and sovereign power, anomie and *nomos*, constituent power and constituted power are shown to be in contact without any relation. But precisely for this reason, what has been divided from itself and captured

in the exception—life, anomie, anarchic potential—now appears in its free and intact form.

11. Here the proximity between destituent potential and what in the course of our research we have designated by the term "inoperativity" appears clearly. In both what is in question is the capacity to deactivate something and render it inoperative—a power, a function, a human operation—without simply destroying it but by liberating the potentials that have remained inactive in it in order to allow a different use of them.

An example of a destituent strategy that is neither destructive nor constituent is that of Paul in the face of the law. Paul expresses the relationship between the messiah and the law with the verb *katargein*, which means "render inoperative" (*argos*), "deactivate" (Estienne's *Thesaurus* renders it with *reddo aergon et inefficacem, facio cessare ab opere suo, tollo, aboleo*, "to render *aergon* and ineffective, to cause to cease from its work, to take away, to abolish"). Thus, Paul can write that the messiah "will render inoperative [*katargese*] every power, every authority, and every potential" (1 Corinthians 15:24) and at the same time that "the messiah is the *telos* [namely, end or fulfillment] of the law" (Romans 10:4): here inoperativity and fulfillment perfectly coincide. In another passage, he says of believers that they have been "rendered inoperative [*katargethemen*] with respect to the law" (Romans 7:6). The customary translations of this verb with "destroy, annul" are not correct (the Vulgate renders it more cautiously with *evacuari*), all the more so because Paul affirms in a famous passage that he wants to "hold firm the law" (*nomon istanomen*; Romans 3:31). Luther, with an intuition whose significance would not escape Hegel, translates *katargein* with *aufheben*, which is to say, with a verb that means both "abolish" and "preserve."

In any case, it is certain that for Paul it is not a matter of destroying the law, which is "holy and just," but of deactivating its action with respect to sin, because it is through the law that human beings come to know sin and desire: "I would not have known what it is to desire if the law had not said, 'You shall not desire.' But seizing an opportunity in the commandment, sin rendered operative [*kateirgasato*, "activated"] in me all kinds of desire" (Romans 7:7–8).

It is this operativity of the law that the messianic faith neutralizes and renders inoperative, without for that reason abolishing the law. The law that is "held firm" is a law rendered destitute of its power to command,

that is to say, it is no longer a law of commands and works (*nomos ton en-tolon*, Ephesians 2:15; *ton ergon*, Romans 3:27) but of faith (*nomos pisteos*, Romans 3:27). And faith is essentially not a work but an experience of the word ("So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word"; Romans 10:17).

That is to say, the messiah functions in Paul as a destituent potential of the *mitzwoth* that define Jewish identity, without for that reason constituting another identity. The messianic (Paul does not know the term "Christian") does not represent a new and more universal identity but a caesura that passes through every identity—both that of the Jew and that of the Gentile. The "Jew according to the spirit" and "Gentile according to the flesh" do not define a subsequent identity but only the impossibility of every identity of coinciding with itself—namely, their destitution as identities: Jew as non-Jew, Gentile as non-Gentile. (It is probably according to a paradigm of this type that one could think a destitution of the apparatus of citizenship.)

In coherence with these premises, in a decisive passage of 1 Corinthians (7:29–31), Paul defines the form of life of the Christian through the formula *hos me*:

> I mean, brothers and sisters, time has grown short; what remains is so that those who have wives may be as not having, and those who mourn as not mourning, and those who rejoice as not rejoicing, and those who buy as not possessing, and those who use the world as not abusing. For the figure of this world is passing away.

The "as not" is a deposition without abdication. Living in the form of the "as not" means rendering destitute all juridical and social ownership, without this deposition founding a new identity. A form-of-life is, in this sense, that which ceaselessly deposes the social conditions in which it finds itself to live, without negating them, but simply by using them. "If," writes Paul, "at the moment of your call you find yourself in the condition of a slave, do not concern yourself with it: but even if you can become free, make use [*chresai*] rather of your condition as a slave" (1 Corinthians 7:21). "Making use" here names the deponent power of the Christian's form of life, which renders destitute "the figure of this world" (*to schema tou kosmou toutou*).

12. It is this destituent power [It., *potere destituente*] that both the anarchist tradition and twentieth-century thought sought to define without

truly succeeding in it. The destruction of tradition in Heidegger, the deconstruction of the *archè* and the fracture of hegemonies in Schürmann, what (in the footsteps of Foucault) I have called "philosophical archaeology," are all pertinent but insufficient attempts to go back to a historical *a priori* in order to depose it. But a good part of the practice of the artistic avant gardes and political movements of our time can also be seen as the attempt—so often miserably failed—to actualize a destitution of work, which has instead ended up re-creating in every place the museum apparatus and the powers that it pretended to depose, which now appear all the more oppressive insofar as they are deprived of all legitimacy.

Benjamin wrote once that there is nothing more anarchic than the bourgeois order. In the same sense, Passolini has one of the officials of Salò say that the true anarchy is that of power. If this is true, then one can understand why the thought that seeks to think anarchy—as negation of "origin" and "command," *principium* and *princeps*—remains imprisoned in endless aporias and contradictions. Because power is constituted through the inclusive exclusion (*ex-ceptio*) of anarchy, the only possibility of thinking a true anarchy coincides with the lucid exposition of the anarchy internal to power. Anarchy is what becomes thinkable only at the point where we grasp and render destitute the anarchy of power. The same holds for every attempt to think anomie: it becomes accessible only through the exposition and deposition of the anomie that the juridical order has captured within itself in the state of exception. This is also true for thought that seeks to think the unrepresentable—the *demos*—that has been captured in the representative apparatus of modern democracy: only the exposition of the *a-demia* within democracy allows us to bring to appearance the absent people that it pretends to represent.

In all these cases, destitution coincides without remainder with constitution; position has no other consistency than in deposition.

א.   The term *archè* in Greek means both "origin" and "command." To this double meaning of the term there corresponds the fact that, in our philosophical and religious traditions alike, origin, what gives a beginning and brings into being, is not only a preamble, which disappears and ceases to act in that to which it has given life, but it is also what commands and governs its growth, development, circulation, and transmission—in a word, history.

In an important book, *The Principle of Anarchy* (1982), Reiner Schürmann sought to deconstruct this apparatus, beginning from an interpretation of Heidegger's thought. Thus, in the later Heidegger he distinguishes being as pure

coming to presence and being as principle of historical-epochal economies. In contrast to Proudhon and Bakunin, who did nothing but "displace the origin" by substituting a rational principle for the principle of authority, Heidegger had thought an anarchic principle, in which origin as coming to presence is emancipated from the machine of epochal economies and no longer governs a historical becoming. The limit of Schürmann's interpretation clearly appears in the very (willfully paradoxical) syntagma that furnishes the book's title: the "principle of anarchy." It is not sufficient to separate origin and command, *principium* and *princeps*: as we have shown in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, a king who rules but does not govern is only one of the two poles of the governmental apparatus, and playing off one pole against the other is not sufficient to halt their functioning. Anarchy can never be in the position of a principle: it can only be liberated as a contact, where both *archè* as origin and *archè* as command are exposed in their non-relation and neutralized.

13. In the potential/act apparatus, Aristotle holds together two irreconcilable elements: the contingent—what can be or not be—and the necessary—what cannot not be. According to the mechanism of relation that we have defined, he thinks potential as existing in itself, in the form of a potential-not-to or impotential (*adynamia*), and act as ontologically superior and prior to potential. The paradox—and at the same time, the strength—of the apparatus is that, if one takes it literally, potential can never pass over into the act and the act always already anticipates its own possibility. For this reason Aristotle must think potential as a *hexis*, a "habit," something that one "has," and the passage to the act as an act of will.

All the more complex is the deactivation of the apparatus. What deactivates operativity is certainly an experience of potential, but of a potential that, insofar as it holds its own impotential or potential-not-to firm, exposes itself in its non-relation to the act. A poet is not someone who possesses a potential to make and, at a certain point, decides to put it into action. Having a potential in reality means: being at the mercy of one's own impotential. In this poetic experience, potential and act are no longer in relation but immediately in contact. Dante expresses this special proximity of potential and act when in the *De monarchia* he writes that the whole potential of the multitude stands *sub actu*; "otherwise there would be a separate potential, which is impossible." *Sub actu* here means, according to one of the possible meanings of the preposition *sub*, immediate coincidence in time and

space (as in *sub manu*, immediately held in the hand, or *sub die*, immediately, in the same day).

At the point where the apparatus is thus deactivated, potential becomes a form-of-life and a form-of-life is constitutively destituent.

א.   Latin grammarians called those verbs deponent (*depositiva* or also *absolutiva* or *supina*) that, similarly to middle-voice verbs (which, in the footsteps of Benveniste, we have analyzed in order to seek in them the paradigm of a different ontology), cannot be said to be properly active or passive: *sedeo* (to sit), *sudo* (to sweat), *dormio* (to sleep), *iaceo* (to lie), *algeo* (to be cold), *sitio* (to be thirsty), *esurio* (to be hungry), *gaudeo* (to be glad). What do middle-voice or deponent verbs "depose"? They do not express an operation but depose it, neutralize it, and render it inoperative, and in this way, they expose it. The subject is not simply, in Benveniste's words, internal to the process, but in having deposed its action, he has exposed himself with it. In form-of-life, activity and passivity coincide. Thus, in the iconographic theme of the deposition—for example, in Titian's deposition at the Louvre—Christ has entirely deposed the glory and regality that, in some way, still belong to him on the cross, and yet precisely and solely in this way, when he is still beyond passion and action, the complete destitution of his regality inaugurates the new age of the redeemed humanity.

14. All living beings are in a form of life, but not all are (or not all are always) a form-of-life. At the point where form-of-life is constituted, it renders destitute and inoperative all singular forms of life. It is only in living a life that it constitutes itself as a form-of-life, as the inoperativity immanent in every life. The constitution of a form-of-life fully coincides, that is to say, with the destitution of the social and biological conditions into which it finds itself thrown. In this sense, form-of-life is the revocation of all factical vocations, which deposes them and brings them into an internal tension in the same gesture in which it maintains itself and dwells in them. It is not a question of thinking a better or more authentic form of life, a superior principle, or an elsewhere that suddenly arrives at forms of life and factical vocations to revoke them and render them inoperative. Inoperativity is not another work that suddenly arrives and works to deactivate and depose them: it coincides completely and constitutively with their destitution, with living a life.

One can therefore understand the essential function that the tradition of Western philosophy has assigned to the contemplative life and to inoperativity: form-of-life, the properly human life is the one that, by

rendering inoperative the specific works and functions of the living be-
ing, causes them to idle [It., *girare a vuoto*], so to speak, and in this way
opens them into possibility. Contemplation and inoperativity are in this
sense the metaphysical operators of anthropogenesis, which, in liberating
living human beings from every biological and social destiny and every
predetermined task, render them available for that peculiar absence of
work that we are accustomed to calling "politics" and "art." Politics and
art are not tasks nor simply "works": rather, they name the dimension in
which works—linguistic and bodily, material and immaterial, biological
and social—are deactivated and contemplated as such in order to liberate
the inoperativity that has remained imprisoned in them. And in this con-
sists the greatest good that, according to the philosopher, the human be-
ing can hope for: "a joy born from this, that human beings contemplate
themselves and their own potential for acting" (Spinoza 2, III, prop. 53).

‭א.‬   At least up to modernity, the political tradition of the West has always
sought to keep operating in every constituted system two heterogeneous powers,
which in some way mutually limited each other. Examples of this are the duality
of *auctoritas* and *potestas* in Rome, that of spiritual power and temporal power in
the Middle Ages, and that of natural law and positive law up to the eighteenth
century. These two powers could act as a reciprocal limit because they were
entirely heterogeneous: the senate, to which *auctoritas* belonged in Rome, was
lacking in the *imperium* to which the people and their supreme magistrates were
entitled; the pope did not have the temporal sword, which remained the exclu-
sive privilege of the sovereign; the unwritten natural law came from a different
source than the written laws of the city. If already in Rome beginning with
Augustus, who had caused the two powers to coincide in his person, and in the
course of the Middle Ages, with the struggles between pope and emperor, one
of the powers had sought to eliminate the others, the modern democracies and
totalitarian states had introduced in various ways one sole principle of political
power, which in this way became unlimited. Whether it is founded, in the last
analysis, on popular sovereignty, on ethnic and racial principles, or on personal
charisma, positive right no longer knows any limits. Democracies maintain con-
stituent power in the form of the power of revision and the control of the con-
stitutionality of laws on the part of a special court, but these are in fact internal
to the system and, in the last analysis, of a procedural nature.

    Let us now imagine—something that is not within the scope of this book—in
some way translating into act the action of a destituent potential in a constituted
political system. It would be necessary to think an element that, while remaining
heterogeneous to the system, had the capacity to render decisions destitute, sus-

pend them, and render them inoperative. Plato had in mind something of the kind when at the end of the *Laws* (968c), he mentions as "protector" (*phylake*) of the city a "Nocturnal Council" (*nykterinos syllogos*), which, however, is not an institution in a technical sense because, as Socrates specifies, "it is impossible to lay down the council's activities until it has been established [*prin a kosmethe*] . . . through a long standing together [*metà synousia pollen*]." While the modern State pretends through the state of exception to include within itself the anarchic and anomic element it cannot do without, it is rather a question of displaying its radical heterogeneity in order to let it act as a purely destituent potential.

Bibliography

Where English translations are available, works are cited according to the page number of the original text, followed by the page number of the translation, or else by a standard textual division that is consistent across translations and editions. Translations have frequently been altered for greater conformity with Agamben's usage. Where no English translation is listed, the translations are my own.

All biblical quotations are based on the New Revised Standard Version. All quotations from the works of Aristotle are based on *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984). All quotations from the works of Plato are based on Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997). Quotations from these and other ancient texts, however, have been thoroughly revised in light of Agamben's own translations. Transliterations from Greek and Hebrew texts follow those provided by the author in the original Italian edition.

Adorno and Sohn-Rethel: Theodor W. Adorno and Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Briefwechsel 1936–1969*, ed. Christoph Gödde (Munich: edition text + kritik, 1991).

Agamben 1: Giorgio Agamben, *L'aperto. L'uomo e l'animale* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2002). English translation: *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

Agamben 2: Giorgio Agamben, *Il Regno e la Gloria. Per una genealogia dell'economia e del governo* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2007). English translation: *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa and Matteo Mandarini (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

Agamben 3: Giorgio Agamben, *Nudità* (Rome: Nottetempo, 2009). English