

Curriculum Nuda Vita

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Of all of Giorgio Agamben's concepts, that of 'bare life' (or *la vita nuda* in Italian) is probably the most well mined by English-speaking thinkers, artists, activists and scholars. The concept of bare life works for us because it allows us to speak to a very intense form of powerlessness and deprivation. For the humanist—for those of us who believe in equality of all people—'bare life' is code for injustice.

Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* is the text in which the condition of this bare life is most fully articulated.¹ To be without the protections of a society's law is to inhabit the space of 'bare life'. To be reduced to bare life is to be the 'homo sacer' (or 'sacred man' in Latin): a person that may be killed, but may not be sacrificed. They are set apart from the world, not because they are valued but because they are marked. Such is the dual meaning of 'taboo': something that is precious, but also something of which to be wary. The *homo sacer* as the embodiment of bare life is not an empty slate. The marking of them as a kind of anti-sacred means they may not be sacrificed as the position of bare life removes them from humanity even at the symbolic level: they are not even thought of as a person. In terms of the global laws that establish minimum human rights, they would be denied the right to receive asylum, even when seeking refuge from violence or certain death.

The poverty of bare life is best understood in opposition to the absolute power of the sovereign, the third concept in the title of Agamben's text. For Agamben, sovereignty is not the ability to make laws, but the ability to decide when laws can be suspended. It is through these exceptions to the application/enforcement of law that the social bonds are broken.

It should now be clear why the concept is so attractive to a humanist and why so many of us have leaned on the idea to provide some steadiness to our own attempts to discuss deprivation. But wouldn't the critical impulse, at this point, be to set some limits on the use of the concept, a sort of protection against the over-exploitation of such a relevant idea so its critical stocks might be maintained? For example, to acknowledge that Guantanamo detainees' religion was recognised enough that they were permitted to have a copy of the Quran, when *Homo sacer* would not be allowed such a book. Or, I might note that however flimsy the UN Convention on the Status of Refugees has become, it is still law and still has the power to persuade many states to recognise claims for asylum. The refugee is only living in bare life in exceptional circumstances like the mandatory detention in Nauru and Manus Island.

¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford University Press: Stanford, 1998.

And what of the *chatarreros* (scrap metal collectors) in Peter Wareing's elegant depiction of street life in Barcelona for the exhibition *La vita nuda*? Could we tag along with Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak who, in *Who Sings the Nation State?* contested the possibility of a zero-point bare life when discussing undocumented migrant workers in the United States?² In that dialogue Butler described those who might be at a place of bare life according to Agamben as "not undifferentiated instances of 'bare life' but highly juridified states of dispossession".³

But instead of dismissing the varied examples of man at bare—or near-bare—life, I want to turn to the other half of the *homo sacer* conjugation: the sacred.

Remember that while *homo sacer* can be killed without consequence, he may not be used in a sacrifice. This sacredness speaks to the same dual function as that of taboo and tapu: that which is cast out is also special. So when we use the term 'bare' to describe the life of the outcast, we are likely to fall into the trap of accepting that the *homo sacer* is like us but lacking something. From that perspective we would have little to learn from the detainee, refugee or *chatarrero*—they are like us but without the accoutrements of culture that make us interesting. This, as Butler and Spivak also noted, is an impossibility—the radical otherness of the *chatearrero* is not a lack but something we may never be able to comprehend.

The sacred had a long history in twentieth century philosophy, particularly around a lack of sacredness and the mechanization that ended in the bureaucracy that underpinned the holocaust, and with the interaction of the sacred with violence in writers such as Georges Bataille and René Girard. The focus on the sacred has continued with Jean-Pierre Dupuy's *The Mark of the Sacred* which notes that the grounding lesson of today's ecological ideology must be that humans are finite animals living on an earth that must ultimately be treated as sacred and inviolable if we are to continue to dwell upon it.⁴ This view of the sacred is at odds with the overly technocratic solutions to issues such as climate change and poverty. For example, might seeing the earth as something of a *terra sacer* help us to reconstitute a certain inviolability about the rivers and the ocean, and perhaps even the atmosphere?

In literature on the public communication of the science of climate change (as caused by global warming) there is something unique and satisfying about *not trying* to erase Cartesian body-mind, or matter-mind, dualisms, but instead try to see the human as radically different to the earth on which it dwells, and with that difference not being a complete separation but a kind of mutually assured respect, a cold war *détente* between the parasite and the host.

For the *homo sacer* there are insights too. It is disadvantageous to describe those who are deprived as someone who is bare. The *chattarero* has *compañeros*, the refugee remembers a time before war, the Guantanamo detainee—presumably—prays five times a day. Let us return the *sacer* to the *homo sacer* and, as Wareing does, take a seat beside the *chatterero*. They—in and of themselves—may not seem sacred, but in the attempt to do justice to them, or do it with them, a mark is made.

² Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation State?: Language, Politics, Belonging*, Seagull Books: London, New York, Calcutta, 2007.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 25

⁴ Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred*, trans. by M.B. Debevoise, Stanford University Press: Stanford, 2013.