

Reviews

Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009, 463+ pp.

The work of philosopher Giorgio Agamben, although already well known and respected, garnered international fame upon the publication of his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, his first opus in his vast project *Homo Sacer*. It is no surprise that the radicalism and seriousness of the thesis that Agamben puts forward in *Homo Sacer* did not go unnoticed. The political aspect of this work—the question of sovereignty and the state of exception, the centrality of the bare life and the figure of the *muselmann* in the camp—has at length been the centre of interest for commentators and criticism. Consequently, this singular focus has overshadowed the importance of the manner in which each of Agamben’s works enlighten one another; as much as an individual work is in itself a representation of Agamben’s thought, the space between the different works also sheds light on the details within his text that can appear obscure and paradoxical at times. It is for this reason that an overall perspective could offer particular and important attention to the details of Agamben’s work, and it is thankfully on such grounds that Leland de la Durantaye’s *Giorgio Agamben, A Critical Introduction* is established.

One of the most striking difficulties when reading Agamben is the multidimensionality of his work. For example, the question of biopolitics deals with many different levels at once: historical, juridical, philological, and ontological. De la Durantaye’s book is the first of its kind¹ to truly take into

¹ Leland de la Durantaye refers to Eva Geulen’s *Giorgio Agamben zur Einführung* (An introduction to Giorgio Agamben) (2005) as effectively being the first book-length introduction to Agamben’s work. However, what sets de la Durantaye’s work apart is the fact

account the entirety of Agamben's current corpus, from *The Man Without Content* (1970) to *Signaturarum* (2008). It therefore offers the best perspective for a multidimensional understanding of Agamben.

The book presents itself as an introduction to Agamben. However, this should not be taken to mean a shortcut or condensed summary of Agamben's thought, which would in fact contour his work rather than encounter it. Instead, de la Durantaye provides readers with an introduction in its proper sense; it does not presuppose any familiarity with Agamben's thought, yet has scale and richness of detail that will appeal to those who already have a strong understanding of his work.

While de la Durantaye does not simply present each of Agamben's works to us as purely in isolation from one another, this is not to say that he offers any hidden necessary principles that will harmonise them all. If there is any coherence of Agamben's corpus for de la Durantaye, it is that each work is a "good neighbor" to the other. De la Durantaye explains this notion of "the good neighbor" in his preface, referring to Agamben's discussion of the unusual principle of organisation at the Warburg Institute library, in which works are not organised in alphabetical or chronological order—rather, "each book was to answer or to ask a question of the one next to it."²

For de la Durantaye, the research of the good neighbor acts as a true principle of organisation within Agamben's work: "Agamben's eighteen works have proved, in Warburg's sense of the term, good neighbors to one another, both in that they ask and answer questions of one another, and in that these questions are not immediately apparent."³ De la Durantaye looks at the ways each work connects and relates to the next, each chapter of his introduction following Agamben's work chronologically and using scholia to examine themes that run

that Geulen's introduction is strongly focused on the figure of *Homo Sacer*, whereas de la Durantaye aims for a more balanced account of the many different aspects of Agamben's work.

² Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), xviii.

³ *Ibid.*, xviii.

through his work, such as the inoperative, the potentiality of art, and the art of citing without quotation marks.

Extensive and erudite references across numerous disciplines fill the “neighboring spaces” of Agamben’s work, the most prominent of which is the question of potentiality. The centrality and importance of this theme is made apparent by the frequency with which Agamben returns to it throughout his works, and de la Durantaye highlights this prominence by opening his book with a discussion of potentiality’s fundamental role as the creative source of thought:

In one of his most recent books, *Signatura Rerum* (2008), Agamben declares that “the genuinely philosophical element in any work, be it a work of art, one of science, or one of thought, is its capacity for being developed.” [...] For Agamben, the philosophical element – rich in potentiality – is that which, while present, goes unstated in a work and is thereby left for others to read between the lines and formulate in their own.⁴

By unravelling the fine threads of the question of potentiality in Agamben, de la Durantaye brings together various notions and subjects of research across Agamben’s text. On the one hand the radical experience of potentiality expresses fundamentally what Agamben refers to in *Infancy and History* as the pure experience of language, and its insistence on the limits that run through his work (the limit of language, representation, law and life) and on the other hand it helps to clarify a series of notions which are paradoxical in his texts, such as vocation, inoperative, de-creation, destruction and irreparable.

In de la Durantaye’s introduction to Agamben the centrality of the question of potentiality is analysed back to its Aristotelian inheritance, although beyond a simple analysis of the notion, the potentiality is in some way put into play, particularly in the scholia of de la Durantaye’s text, offering a subtle but radical displacement of the meaning of the notion. For Agamben the inoperative is not purely inactive, nor is de-creation simply destructive; the vocation is also

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

fundamentally a revocation, and the rest is non-numerical, in the same way that potentiality is by nature not strictly limited to actuality.

However, the fine threads unraveled in the question of potentiality are not only restricted to ontology and the redefinition of the category of modality, but are also carried through into the sphere of the political and ethical.⁵ *The Coming Community* is exemplary on this point, in which the political content is inseparable from ontological reflection. In the same way that de la Durantaye shows us that Agamben's work does not form a community of ideas based on an overall hidden system, but rather according to the immanent principle of "good neighbor," we could also say that the human community in search of a new form of organisation must abandon any condition of belonging that inevitably acts as criteria for exclusion. In this respect, the projects and perspectives Agamben lays out in *Homo Sacer*, from ontology to political philosophy, do not express any fundamental fracture; instead, politics and ethics become the fields in which ontology is understood as operative, and for which philosophical work becomes the research of paradigms rather than an offering of ideas. Thus, de la Durantaye, with detail and diversity equal to Agamben's text, the essential elaboration in which "the Idea of Potentiality" and "the Potential of Paradigms" connect.

It is truly from the point of Agamben's use of the paradigm, central to de la Durantaye's reading of *Homo Sacer*, that de la Durantaye's book takes a more critical turn. De la Durantaye looks back at the numerous articles that critique Agamben and recognises that most point in one common direction: towards Agamben's paradigmatic method. For de la Durantaye, therefore, clarification of Agamben's understanding and use of the paradigm constitutes a key element of an understanding of *Homo Sacer*, and equally the condition for avoiding the trap of an oversimplified critique. Referring back to Benjamin's notion of dialectical images and Foucault's use of paradigm, de la Durantaye exposes the essentially paradoxical nature of a paradigm, its double nature, which is at the same time a concrete historical event and an explicative model for other contexts. It is this

⁵ "The problem of potentiality is not a problem among others in *Homo Sacer*; it is *the* problem that gives its logic, and its paradoxes, to all others" (ibid., 233).

paradoxical nature of the paradigm with which the numerous critiques of Agamben so often take issue.

However, if de la Durantaye follows Agamben's complex use of paradigm and defends its subtleties against critique, he will concur with the critics on the *Remnants of Auschwitz*. In his conclusion on the *Remnants of Auschwitz*, he gives us his most direct critique of Agamben:

Even more than *Homo Sacer*, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, has polarized readers—and with good reason. It is the only one of Agamben's works where steps in reasoning seem to have been silenced or skipped, and it is the only one that shows signs of haste. Its aim seems to shift and its final claim – a refutation of any and all negationist arguments—appears doubly dubious in that such a theoretical refutation is not compellingly presented as something in which readers are in need, and because the theoretical arguments offered rests on a strained analogy. [...] Whether the problem lies in the technique or in its execution, there can be little question that a problem lies exists.⁶

Continuing with his reading of Agamben, and essentially considering Agamben's theory of the state of exception and his interpretation of messianic time, de la Durantaye progresses towards the development of the positive form of resolution that Agamben introduces.

De la Durantaye's *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* offers us the rare opportunity to encounter Agamben's work extensively, with a true attention to detail and a sum of references that will satisfy longtime readers of Agamben. It follows the development of Agamben's complex logic with consistency and coherence, helping the reader to overcome the numerous difficulties that Agamben's enigmatic texts often presents. De la Durantaye's book is therefore a true introduction, and thus provides a solid ground for the study of Agamben.

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⁶ Ibid., 297.