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A Responsibility to the World: Saramago, Politics, Philosophy

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Contents

Saramago, Agamben, and the 'Invention of an Epidemic'

Carlo Sabbatini

Doctor Strangelove

At an Italian conference in 2003, Saramago described *Blindness* (and announced *Seeing*)[1] as a "context allegory," which narrates "simultaneously […] a reality too radical to be true and […] a reality which, given due abstractions, is what we deal with every day" (Saramago 2022a: 156). I understood the true meaning of his words when re-reading the two novels during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the same period, the philosopher Giorgio Agamben questioned the reality of the pandemic. He saw in it a pretext for the statal biopolitical project that reduces the citizen to 'bare life,' exploiting emergency legislation to nullify personal freedoms and transforming the 'exception' into the 'rule' (Agamben 2017a: 101f.; Agamben 2017e: 123–26; Agamben 2021b: 26ff.). The pandemic also taught me something about Agamben's way of thinking.

Recent interpretations of the lazaret in *Blindness* are based on Agamben's logic of the exception, of the camp, and of bare life, focusing on structural elements of contiguity between the two authors (see Nashef 2015 and 2017; Neiva 2021). But one could also find other analogies in *Seeing*, where, just to give one example, the peaceful resistance of the besieged capital is readable as a 'deactivation' of the law (Agamben 2005: 98) through which people leave the "state of virtual exception" and enter the "state of actual exception" (Agamben 2017a: 55), thus realizing the "form-of-life" (*ibid.*: 153; Agamben, 2000: 3f.). The reason why I have not taken these or other possible paths, which were at first sight very promising, is the serious risk that they will end up in sterile exercises of erudition. As I will try to show in this chapter, I have found a

1 The English versions of Saramago's novels *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* (1995) and *Ensaio sobre a Lucidez* (2004) were published respectively with the titles *Blindness* (1997) and *Seeing* (2006).

fundamental difference between the anthropologies of the two authors, which can turn the apparent convergences into mere parallelisms in themes and into clear divergences of contents and purposes.

Describing the doctor's wife, the protagonist of *Blindness*, Saramago writes:

> She could not go blind, because she had been capable of compassion, of love, of respect, of maintaining a sense of profound dignity in her relationship with others, because, recognizing the fragility of the human being, she had been capable of understanding. (Saramago 2022b: 95)

Together with this character, the author also describes the relational dimension of ethics in his novel, confirmed by a textual analysis which reveals a network of concepts such as responsibility, empathy, civics, solidarity, and trust (see Martín 2021). These concepts do not simply populate Saramago's imaginative universe, but emerge constantly from his speeches, interviews, and articles, and are summed up in his idea of an "ethical citizenship, even if it may seem old and anachronistic" (qtd. in Gómez Aguilera 2010: 152).

Reading Agamben's latest statements on the pandemic, I had the impression that this test-bed mercilessly discloses the sterility of his erudite works, showing how a community in which 'relationship' is renounced for 'contact' (Agamben 2017g: 1242; Agamben 2021b: 99–101) results in solipsism; revealing the surreptitious justification of a self-satisfied egoism behind the ontological interpretation of 'love' (Agamben, 1999a); and confirming that the 'irresponsibility' that he preaches is not freedom, escaping the pincers of the 'relationship' of moral and civil laws (Agamben, 2017e: 775; Agamben, 2017g: 1250f.), but just the result of a pathetic (or pathological) lack of sense of reality. Through the pandemic, Agamben's 'community' of the 'alone by oneself' shows up devoid of any alleged 'intimacy' (*ibid.*: 1242f.): it is nothing more than the outcome of an 'exasperated individualism' (Salzani 2022).

The only thing Agamben ruthlessly reveals is that his 'in-difference,' which "makes […] lovable (quodlibetable)" the 'singularities' (Agamben 2007a: 18), ends up in prosaic indifference towards one's neighbour. Agamben loves his neighbour so (ontologically) badly that, in the midst of the pandemic, he invited them to be wary of "medicine as religion" (Agamben 2021b: 49–54) and to

give up face masks and social distancing in order to discover the metaphysical entity of the 'face,' meeting each other like the ancient Romans did (*ibid.*: 86f.; Agamben 2021a: 111–113), whose life expectancy was much shorter than in the present. Never mind if the neighbour dies. After all—given that the core of Agamben's philosophy is the point at which opposites blur and pass into each other—inviting one to risk death is a supreme act of love. A strange love.

Saramago and Agamben confronted a pandemic in very different ways: the former as a literary fiction, the latter as a real instrument of political oppression. However, both used it to shed light on the critical predicaments of the sovereign state and its democratic form. And through these events, real or imagined, they reflected on the prospects for political change, which for both remains an open question. With their help, I would like to reflect on what happened to us and why—without repeating the sudden awakening of the characters in *Seeing*, who realise that the epidemic they thought had passed was actually far from over.

Prisoners of Bare Life

Recapping the results of his book *Homo Sacer*, Agamben writes:

1. The original political relation is the ban (the state of exception as zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion).
2. The fundamental activity of sovereign power is the production of bare life as originary political element and as threshold of articulation between nature and culture, *zoē* and *bios*.
3. Today it is not the city but rather the camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West. (Agamben 2017a: 148)

I will examine these three points to sketch a basis for comparison with Saramago.

I start with the second point. Agamben uses the Greek distinction between *zoē* as the "simple fact of living common to all living beings" and *bios* as the "form or way of living proper to an individual or a group" (Agamben 2017a: 5).

Sovereign power arises through an "inclusive exclusion (an *exceptio*)," that is, by excluding the 'fact' of the *zoē* at the very moment in which it includes and qualifies it as *bios* in the 'law' (*ibid.*: 9f.). Thus, it produces a "zone of indistinction" called "bare life," which is no longer "natural *zoē*," or "political *bios*" but is rather "life exposed to death" (*ibid.*: 75f.; see Salzani 2014).

I move now to the first point. The 'paradigm' of this performance is the *homo sacer* of Roman law, the one who, according to the "sovereign ban," can be killed with impunity by everyone but cannot be sacrificed. He represents the bare life of the "state of exception," which is "at once exclude[ed] and captur[ed] within the political order" (Agamben 2017: 10f.). The "ban" is the "originary structure" of sovereignty, because in it "law refers to life and includes it in itself through its own suspension" (*ibid.*: 27). Carl Schmitt gave its standard formulation in *Political Theology*, writing that "the sovereign is the one who decides on the exception" (Schmitt 2005: 5) because he has "the legal power to suspend the validity of the law" and is therefore at the same time, *paradoxically*, inside and outside the law (Agamben 2017a: 17).

I come now to the third point. For Agamben, "biopower" is the root of Western politics, where "the realm of bare life" grows up to "gradually […] coincide with the political realm," so that "the exception everywhere becomes the rule" (*ibid.*: 11) and every citizen becomes—potentially—a *homo sacer* (Agamben 2017b: 241; Agamben 2017e: 818). The "declarations of rights," which enabled the "inscription of natural life in the juridico-political order of the nation-state" (Agamben 2017a: 106; Agamben 2000: 19f.), are for Agamben a precondition for the 'camp' as the 'space of exception' built by the sovereign 'decision.' The camp is a "piece of land placed outside the normal juridical order," in which the "law is completely suspended" and "fact and law are completely confused." Think of the "suspension of fundamental rights" and of the concentration camps in the Nazi Reich (Agamben 2017a: 139ff.; Agamben 2000: 36ff.). From these declarations to the camp, Agamben accuses democracies and totalitarianisms of using the same tools, and of dangerously blurring their boundaries (Agamben 2017a: 11f.).

Appendix Viralis (or: the Great Transformation)

For Agamben, the use of the state of exception as a paradigm of government has its correlate in the "legal civil war" fought by totalitarianisms and democracies, both externally and internally, for the "elimination" of "citizens who […] cannot be integrated into the political system" (Agamben 2017b: 168). Countries like Italy resort to exceptional legislative tools such as the 'emergency decrees' of the executive power, which replaces Parliament as a "source for the production of law," transforming democracy "into governmental" regimes (*ibid.*: 180).

Agamben applies his theories to the management of the COVID-19 emergency in *Where Are We Now?*, where he speaks of the "invention of an epidemic" (Agamben 2021b: 11) and of a pandemic "irrelevant whether it is real or simulated," which gives the states a "pretext" for the "Great Transformation." This transformation consists in imposing a state of permanent exception through "emergency decrees" to establish "a sanitation terror" (*ibid.*: 7f., 36f., 38, 42, and see 49–54, 55) through "a massive campaign to falsify the truth" (*ibid.*: 46). In the name of "biosecurity" (*ibid.*: 9, 57, 60ff.) and relying on a "society [that] believes in nothing more than bare life" (*ibid.*: 17), medical science delivers to the state "anthropological machine" the "infected" and the "asymptomatic patient": a "potentially pathogenic life," which "can be deprived of its freedoms and subjected to prohibitions and controls of all kinds" (Agamben 2021a: 108), from "social distancing" (Agamben 2021b: 9, 31ff., 36, 39, 57, 61), to the "virtual yellow star" of the green pass, to vaccines not adequately tested (Agamben 2017a: 107ff., 115f., 120).

Saramago: From the Camp to the City

According to Agamben, Schmitt's theory of sovereignty is the perfect result of biopolitics, which cannot be reformed but only overcome (see Salzani 2013a: 132). However, his theory never goes beyond these vague calls for a 'politics to come.' I think that Saramago can help us understand whether such an idea of sovereignty is the real matrix of modern democracies and whether it dooms

them too to be left behind. In other words (based on point 3), is the camp really and without appeal their biopolitical paradigm?

Taking as examples *The Stone Raft*, *Blindness*, and *Death at Intervals*,[2] David Jenkins examines Saramago's resort to "traumatic counterfactuals," which introduce inexplicable events and then extrapolate a number of consequences, such as: a) always inadequate authorities' response; b) solidarity among people; c) open endings. Through this logic of 'what ifs?' Jenkins challenges Schmitt's (and Agamben's) 'assumptions' about the claim of the sovereign state to face emergencies by treating them only in terms of political 'conflict' (Jenkins 2018: 211–18; see Schmitt 2005: 6). Although I share most of Jenkins' arguments, I do not agree with his interpretation of Ivan Ermakoff's theories of "exceptional cases," which he uses to establish a common basis for Schmitt's and Saramago's ideas on the exception. I believe, to the contrary, that a fundamental epistemological distance emerges between Schmitt and Saramago, a distance which lets us better appreciate their differences regarding the "gaps in the institutional response" (Jenkins 2018: 219). In the words of Ermakoff, we could say that Saramago proposes exceptional cases as "anomalies," which "deviate from what we believe should happen"; they are "disruptions of routine" which "pave the way to major scientific breakthroughs," crossing the threshold beyond which, according to Thomas Kuhn, the model of "normal science" is surpassed. Schmitt (and Agamben), instead, works on the model of the exception, whose "key difference" compared to the anomaly is "the explicit reference to a claim or a rule" (Ermakoff 2014: 227–9); while the exception tends to assume a paradigmatic value as it "epitomize[s] a class of phenomena" (*ibid.*: 231),[3] Saramago's anomaly has a "heuristic value," because it can be used "for the purpose of inference-making that produces 'novel facts'" (*ibid.*: 234).

In a recent essay, I tried to correlate Saramago's approach (that is open to complexity) with the current socio-environmental context, whose "increasing turbulence and uncertainty" requires an epistemological turning point in gov-

2 The English translations of *A Jangada de Pedra* (1986) and *As Intermitências da Morte* (2005) were published respectively with the titles *The Stone Raft* (1994) and *Death with Interruptions* (2008).

3 Agamben underlines that the state of exception of the camp is not an anomaly (Agamben 2017a: 137) but "the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West" (*ibid.*: 148).

ernance with respect to the paradigm of 'normal science' described by Kuhn and based on relative stability and low complexity (Sabbatini 2022; see also Ravetz 1999: 647, and Funtowicz 2001). Although it may be counterintuitive, if we consider the war events and the resulting political changes of the early 1900s, these last two characteristics are better suited to the political context of national sovereignties in which Schmitt's theory is historically rooted and finds its sphere of validity.

Saramago's crises strike the political system but are not born from and do not run out within its horizon; they show therefore the current drawbacks of Schmitt's theory about the State as a decision-making monopoly. When Agamben applies Schmitt's paradigm to today's democracies to criticize them, he runs into an anachronism, because he attacks something which is now deprived of those attributions. On the one hand, Agamben critically places Schmitt's category of the state of exception as the basis of Western democracies, and, on the other, he affirms that "the real problem, the central mystery of politics is not sovereignty, but government […]; it is not the law, but the police" (Agamben 2017c: 623). But if, *à la* Schmitt, the exception identifies the sovereign decision, and if this binomial was conceived in relation to the socio-political context of the early 1900s, the risk for Agamben is that of obscuring the differences between the model of the sovereign and the Foucauldian model of government, always re-proposing the phantom of the first behind the second.[4] As shown by his statements on the state of emergency against COVID-19, by presuming a political conspiracy behind the pandemic Agamben mirrors the same logic of the exception as the one he denounces.

Agamben strangely underestimates today's complexity and permeability of the political system. For him, the ruler's decision is still able to filter the *zoē* and capture it as bare life to produce *bios*. The bare life (represented by the camp) builds the bulwark that prevents the *zoē* from entering the *bios* and from upsetting and renewing it. Captive of this paradigm (by definition unsurpassable because it is sealed from the outside and locked inside), Agamben cannot see who or what is able to overcome it. Certainly not the bare life of today's society,

4 For an analytical evaluation that aims to integrate the presence of the two models in Agamben's thought, see McLoughlin (2012).

which he despises in *Where are we now?* Therefore, after decades of esoteric criticism, he is still left with the announcement of a politics "yet to be entirely thought" (Agamben 2000: 111).

When Saramago lets the counterfactual of *zoē* barge into *bios*, he breaks the perimeter of bare life and shows that the latter and *bios* are not the only content of the state. Hania Nashef cleverly illustrates the logic of exception and camp through the hospital in *Blindness*, where the first blind or presumed infected people are confined and deprived of rights (see Nashef 2017), but I would like to suggest another possible interpretation. I think that what is at stake in the novel is that the biological exception swallows up the sovereign in a spiral of indistinction which, instead of confirming its power, destroys it. When the collapsed fence of the lazaret shows that "there's no difference between inside and outside, between here and there, between the many and the few, between what we're living through and what we shall have to live through" (Saramago 1999a: 242), Saramago makes implode Agamben's and Schmitt's paradigm and shows a limited and intrinsically fragile sovereignty,[5] exposed to private manipulation and therefore in need of the intervention of the people (see Jenkins 2018: 223).[6]

Agamben: The Happy, Profane Life of the Quodlibet

Agamben's purpose is to recover the sense of politics that "has been contaminated by law" (Agamben 2017b: 242) and leave room for "a *nonstatal and nonjuridical* politics and human life" (Agamben 2000: 111) which are "ordered ex-

5 In *The Stone Raft* Saramago writes: "Governments are only capable and effective at times when there is no real need to put their ability and effectiveness to the test" (Saramago 1996: 184).

6 Saramago's governments are often grappling with emergencies, which they struggle to manage with internal plots, conspiracy theories, and sometimes clumsy use of the media. Just think of the "government of national salvation" in *The Stone Raft* (Saramago 1996: 184f.), of the emergency (although not decreed as state of emergency) in *Death at Intervals*, of the press releases and of the planned "government of unity and national salvation" of *Blindness* (Saramago 1999a: 130). *Seeing*, most of all, stages the ministerial debate about the "state of emergency," the "government of national salvation" and "state of siege" (Saramago 2006: 28–31), then the "rapid implementation" of the state of emergency (*ibid.*: 35) and of the state of siege (*ibid.*: 50): an escalation in which the surrounded capital becomes the real besieger of the government.

clusively for the full enjoyment of worldly life" (*ibid.*: 113). The implicit premise of this statement is Walter Benjamin's distinction between sovereign "mythic violence," which is "law-making" as well as "law-preserving," and "pure" or "divine" or "revolutionary" violence, which "neither makes nor preserves law, but deposes it" and is "anomic" in that it exists "outside" of the law (Agamben 2017b: 212f.; Benjamin 2002: 236ff.). Pure violence creates a "real state of exception," which contrasts with Schmitt's "virtual" one (where the law is only "pure form," has force but no meaning) with a "symmetrical but inverse gesture" by which "life […] is entirely transformed into law" (Agamben 2017a: 48).

This is the meaning of Agamben's "worldly life" as a "happy life […] over which sovereignty and right no longer have hold" (Agamben 2000: 113f.). Agamben calls it "form-of-life" because it is inseparable from the "form" it gives to itself and makes it impossible "to isolate something such as naked [that is, bare] life" (*ibid.*: 2f.), merging together *bios* and *zoē* (see Agamben 2017g: 1225f.). To be free in its being "whatever" (i.e., "quodlibet," or "*such* as it is") and therefore "lovable," the "singularity" of the form-of-life (Agamben, 2007a: 1f.; see Coccia 2017) needs the immediacy of the "contact," understood as "intimacy without relation," because the latter implies conditioning (Agamben 2017g: 1242). Severing the "nexus between violence and law" (Agamben 2017b: 242) and overcoming the form of the relation means for Agamben *deposing* the law or "de-activating" it, that is "rendering [it] inoperative, no-longer-at-work" without replacing it with another law (Agamben 2005: 97f.). This is the task of a "destituent potential" (Agamben 2017g: 1268ff.; see Zartaloudis 2015), which carries out a "profanation" in that it deactivates the Schmittian theological and political "apparatus" of law, through which something or someone is *consecrated* and transferred to a "separate sphere" and removed from "common use" (Agamben 2009: 17–9; Agamben, 2007b: 73f.; see Salzani 2013a: 155f.). That is why, according to Agamben, a "happy life" is "absolutely profane" (Agamben 2000: 113).

Living in the Demented Labyrinth of the City

Saramago's *Seeing* is set in the country that was struck four years earlier by the epidemic of white blindness, which, by tacit agreement, has been removed from common memory, until an avalanche of blank ballots (83 %) overwhelms the parties in the elections, delegitimizing the democratic system. The colour white which connects the two facts recalls the epidemic, providing the authorities with a wavering pretext to suppose a political plot and to charge the sighted "doctor's wife" of *Blindness* with being its leader. The real object of the suppression is not the epidemic, but its revelation of the inherent weakness of sovereignty. Here Saramago takes the final step from the camp to the city. The natural event in *Blindness* laid the premise for the human action in *Seeing*, where the blank ballots as "sheer denial of any reference frame (orthodoxy)" (Vanhoutte 2018: 248) manifest themselves within the anything but solid sovereign space of modern democracy. But I would like to get to the point step by step.

The first step is *Blindness*, which seems dominated by bare life inside the hospital, abandoned by the authorities to rape and oppression, and outside it, where people live and die in search for food. The equality of both sides confirms that Saramago's 'epidemic reset' erased the *bios* of law together with the bare life as its product. Therefore, the life lived in the "demented labyrinth of the city" (Saramago 1999a: 217) is no longer bare life, but *zoē* in search of its own form, striving to become a form-of-life, as Agamben would say. Despite the ostensible analogies, there are deep differences between the two authors' anthropologies, whose consideration allows us to evaluate their distance on an ethical and political level.

In *Blindness* Saramago describes a sympathetic humankind, rooted in relationships thanks to "moral conscience" (*ibid.*: 17). Around the time he publishes the novel, he feels the need to "literally" express an "ethical feeling of existence" (qtd. in Gómez Aguilera 2010: 152). He thinks that, avoiding "complicating life with great philosophies on good and evil," it is sufficient to base oneself on the "simple" but "fundamental" rule which consists in "not harming others" and "leads not to selfishness but to human relationship" (*ibid.*: 149). Therefore, if "ethics must dominate reason" (*ibid.*: 150), "thought can never be autistic" (*ibid.*: 207), otherwise "it becomes a destructive weapon" (*ibid.*: 182).

When Saramago explains the metaphor of blindness as a "non-rational use of reason" (*ibid.*: 179f.), he is therefore referring to its disengagement from ethics and politics, which, quite to the contrary, is based on "collective responsibility" (*ibid.*: 483) through "involvement" and a "very strong feeling of solidarity" (*ibid.*: 614). As Saramago writes (recalling the Marxian concept of justice): "from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs" (Saramago, 1999a: 141). Basically, someone who considers himself outside the relationship with the others is blind. And for this reason, one can "die of blindness" (qtd. in Gómez Aguilera 2010: 179).

Michael Keren stresses this awareness of interdependence before any conceptual abstraction and any logic of covenant about a just society. Neither saints nor demons,[7] Saramago's characters seek together a revisable balance, facing difficult choices (Keren 2007: 461f.). Andre Santos Campos relates the "anonymity" of Saramago's characters to Feuerbach's "species-being," which does not erase singularity but makes man "aware of himself as a being-of-relations (he is not only *in* relation; he *is* relation)." And this becomes the "driving force" in the choral, "bottom-up" dynamic of the narrated social transformations (Santos Campos 2018: 72f.). Just think of the group of blind people led by the doctor's wife in *Blindness*, or of the peaceful and orderly people in the ex-capital in *Seeing*. There can scarcely be a clearer difference from Agamben. Agamben prefers contact to relationship, demonised as a "bond" imposed by the logic of the exception, and substitutes it with a "caesura" (Agamben 2017g: 1273), which unites us "to one another in the form of our being alone" (*ibid.*: 1243), striving to "think ontology and politics beyond every figure of relation" (Agamben 2017a: 42; and see Agamben 2017g: 1273) and to imagine such unrelatedness in the form of a community (Agamben 2017g: 1243).

Messianism and Class Struggle

Towards the end of *Blindness*, the blind doctor and his wife seek refuge in a church, where a sacrilegious man has blindfolded the sacred images and statues

7 "Humans are not inherently good or bad" (qtd. in Gómez Aguilera 2010: 151).

(Saramago 1999a: 315ff.). This episode recalls the meaning of 'profanation' in Agamben as a deactivation of the political-theological device of the law. For Saramago, too, it is a matter of revealing the crisis of a whole system of conventions, values, and hierarchies, and it is not devoid of significance that this happens while blind people roam the city, using what they find based on their needs and while "new ways of living are being invented" (*ibid.*: 256). This happens in the doctor's house too, where friends live by sharing, fulfilling what Agamben describes as 'use' without law, typical of the highest Franciscan poverty (Agamben 2005: 27; Agamben 2017: 985ff.; and see Cavalletti 2017). Agamben links this transformation to an interpretation of messianism which does not refer to a future time but to "the time *that* we ourselves are,"; "not the end of time, but *the time of the end*," which deactivates the law without annulling its form or its external consequences, but suspending it and bringing it to completion (Agamben 2005: 61–8).

According to Carlo Salzani, Saramago shares with Benjamin and Agamben an anti-utopian vision of history, redemptive of the oppressed and linked to simultaneity, that has as a keystone messianism as a "time of salvation (and of political action)" and recovers thereby the present through the vision of the past (Salzani 2018: 23, 29; see also Saramago qtd. in Gómez Aguilera 2010: 489). By identifying a significant analogy with Benjamin's historical materialist in "On the Concept of History," who "blast[s] open the continuum of history" (Benjamin 2006c: 396), Salzani stresses that Saramago's path is based on the interplay between the messianic "now" and the "Marxist ideological framework," which is the solid bedrock of an approach "correcting the past in a progressive social (and human) emancipation" (Salzani 2018: 22, 27; on Marxist materialism, see also Santos Campos 2018: 64ff.). Benjamin writes that in the class struggle for "crude and material things" it would be impossible to redeem the past from "conformism" without "spiritual things" such as "confidence, courage, humour, cunning, and fortitude"; their "secret heliotropism" (Benjamin 2006c: 390f.) seems to be the same force which reactivates Saramago's tension between synchrony and diachrony, pushing human beings to emancipation.

Recovering Democracy: Acting and its Political Consequences

At the 1999 conference on *Democratic Truth and Illusion* Saramago denounced the inability of current democracy "to stop and reverse" the ongoing "backwards transformation process" caused by the interference of economic powers. These have degraded the "instrumental void" between electors and delegates (necessary for the functioning of the representative system) to the point of reducing it to a "civic abdication" and an "act of renunciation" (Saramago 2018: 236–39, 241). *Seeing* works in a narrative form on the recovery from this representative democratic short circuit, which, according to Saramago, can be overthrown by a "substantial democracy" based on participation (qtd. in Gómez Aguilera 2010: 542).

What is at stake is the difference in the conception of acting and freedom in Saramago and Agamben, whose political consequences are manifest in this novel. In Agamben's messianism, what plays a central role is the "charge of redemption" (Salzani 2013a: 64) inherent in 'potentiality,' a category that Agamben develops through a close confrontation with Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and *De anima*[8] and by examining Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, the man who "would prefer not to [write]" (Agamben 1999b: 253f.). Agamben makes Bartleby the focal point of an "ontology of potentiality" (*ibid.*: 259), shifting the accent from the "potentiality to be" (which "has as its object a certain act") to the "potentiality to not-be." Instead of concentrating on the "passage from potentiality to act," he looks at potentiality as the capability "of its own impotence," coherent with the free singularity of the "*whatever*" or "*quodlibet*-like character" (Agamben 2007a: 35f.). According to Agamben, the "power to not-be" is a form of resistance that suspends and renders inoperative theological and moral devices like "essence," "historical or spiritual vocation," or "biological destiny" (*ibid.*: 43); in other words: "essential and identity presuppositions" (Salzani 2013a: 65) and their relationships, as well as the laws imposing them (see Agamben 2017g: 1250f.).

8 For a detailed analysis of the topic, see van der Heiden (2014: 240–61).

Even *Seeing* seems readable in perfect Agambenian style: the ordered people of the ex-capital, who casted blank ballots, represent a "destituent potential" whose "divine" or "pure" violence suspends the law and realises the "real state of exception," in which *zoē* joins *bios* and realises itself as a "form-of-life." But as shown by Kristof K. P. Vanhoutte, Saramago's blank ballots are very different from Bartleby's abstention, which remains within the "power not-to-be." What is at stake in *Seeing* is instead a "silent activity," an active and explicit delegitimization of the government (see Vanhoutte 2018). According to his Marxist materialistic dialectic, Saramago does not stop in potentiality but opts for actuality, which is consistent with his conviction about human beings as related to each other and to the world. Through his characters, Saramago does not place himself outside the democratic representative system but within it and criticizes its current outcome in order to change it (see Gómez Aguilera 2010: 518f., 536f.; see Martel 2019: 140). What is deactivated in *Seeing* is not the democratic institutional framework but the exception of the delegitimized ruler, whose decision now appears to be a source of crimes and abuses on the people of the ex-capital.

The Impotence and the Act

What Agamben criticises in the "potentiality to be" is the "*energhein*, being-in-act," which "can only mean passing to a certain activity" and which expresses a kind of necessity, which subordinates potentiality to act (Agamben 2007a: 35). Here it is not possible to develop this topic further, but I believe that with the 'potentiality to not-be' Agamben lays the speculative foundations of a criticism which aims at striking both the dichotomous "ethics" of "rule and life, universal and particular, necessity and liberty" (Agamben 2017f: 946) and its modern interpretation in Kant's "ontology of command and having-to-be," which rigorizes the "theological-liturgical tradition of *officium* and operability" and reduces freedom to the execution of an imperative (Agamben 2017d: 747f.).

Agamben's critical attempt is undoubtedly appealing, but it fails to account for a fundamental problem, which it shares with the same Kantian formalism he criticises. As the recourse to Bartleby shows, the 'potentiality to not-be'

is totally reabsorbed by the negation, which empties it of all meaning and content and forces it to surreptitiously postulate them from being in act, from the *energeia* of morality or of political power which were to be deactivated. Accepting power as a presupposition, Agamben's man/Bartleby is subjected to its conditions; they *can* only ever be reactive, never active.[9] Although the inoperativeness of such *argos* man claims a clear distance from nihilism and decisionism (Agamben 2007a: 43),[10] it is nevertheless compliant, 'quodlibetally' indifferent and as much 'decisionist' and nihilist as the biopower which it only apparently attacks, being completely unable to escape the binary alternative imposed by the latter (see Laclau 2007: 21f.; Mills 2008: 135f.).

Starting from these premises, I will use the doctor's wife in *Blindness* to underline some differences between what I generically called the anthropologies of Saramago and Agamben and to evaluate their ethical and political consequences. James Martel considers this woman, who "is acting rather than unacting" (Martel 2019: 143), as the main expression of Saramago's realistic pessimism "based on bonds between human actors," which at the end of *Seeing* unleashes a second and definitive anarchist pandemic against the "affective lockdown" of "archism" (*ibid.*: 145).[11] By eliminating the doctor's wife, the government in *Seeing* makes her both an innocent victim of the conspiracy of the white ballots and a guilty instigator of the protest they only 'incubated.' Her experience during the white blindness can only bear fruit in the reconstituted 'archistic' order, after the biological pandemic has revealed it to be irretrievably compromised. Such a development, given by *Seeing*, is heralded by a sentence of the woman in the first of the two novels: "I am blind with your blindness,

9 For an exemplary critique of Bartleby as a "beautiful soul" whose "empty refusal" is the antechamber of a "social suicide," see Hardt and Negri (2000: 203–4).

10 "Politics is that which corresponds to the essential inoperability [sic!] [*inoperosità*] of humankind, to the radical being-without-work of human communities. There is politics because human beings are *argos*-beings that cannot be defined by any proper operation—that is, beings of pure potentiality, that no identity or vocation can possibly exhaust" (Agamben 2000: 140).

11 "Archism is the opposite of anarchism although it is not often called by that term" and "is a principle of rule and domination characterized by two key principles, hierarchy and representation" (Martel 2019: 127).

perhaps I might be able to see better if there were more of us who could see" (Saramago 1999a: 297).

Unlike Bartleby, who prefers not to, the woman chooses and pays the very high price of the "responsibility of having [her] eyesight when others have lost theirs" (*ibid.*: 252), going so far as to kill the leader of the exploiters of the lazaret, to lay claim to her own dignity as well as of all the women they raped.[12] Compared to Bartleby's 'potentiality to not-be,' Saramago's woman experiences the 'potentiality to be,' realizing that her being "born to see this horror" (*ibid.*: 276) makes sense in the name of the relationship with the others: a bond that Agamben must break to remain in 'impotence.' The extreme deed of the doctor's wife marks a major narrative turning point in *Blindness*, starting the riot in the hospital, whose destruction puts an end to the public and private oppression, which share the same logic of the 'affective lockdown.' Before the rebellion, the old blind man with the black eyepatch summarizes the ethical implications of her action as follows:

> If shame still has any meaning in this hell where we're expected to live and which we've turned into the hell of hells, it is thanks to that person who had the courage to go and kill the hyena in its lair […], but we, who have nothing, apart from this last shred of undeserved dignity, let us at least show that we are still capable of fighting for what is rightfully ours. (Saramago 1999a: 196)

Witnessing the Horror

In these quotations from Saramago's work, some keywords stand out, such as 'responsibility,' 'eyesight,' 'shame,' 'dignity' and 'rightfully,' which I believe can provide an interesting basis for comparison with the analysis of the testimony

12 "We shall return to that place where they humiliated us so that none of that humiliation may remain" (Saramago 1999a: 197).

proposed by Agamben in *Remnants of Auschwitz*.[13] In this work, Agamben examines some terms that indicate the witness in the Latin legal and in the Greek theological vocabularies, discarding for his purposes the meaning of the *testis* as a 'third party' and focusing on survivor (*superstes*), guarantor (*auctor*) and, in part, martyr (*martys*), but granting a privileged role to the *superstes* (see Agamben 2017e: 772, 778f., 861). Referring to "[Primo] Levi's paradox" (*ibid.*: 861), Agamben considers "the true witnesses, the 'complete witnesses' […], those who did not bear witness and could not bear witness" because they were annihilated. Therefore, the survivors who "speak in their stead, by proxy, as pseudo-witnesses […] bear witness to a missing testimony […], in the name of the impossibility of bearing witness" (*ibid.*: 784).[14] The true witnesses are represented by the so-called *Muselmann*[15] reduced to 'non-human,' who before dying experienced "the impossibility of knowing and seeing" as "he who has seen the Gorgon" (*ibid.*: 796f.). By witnessing the unbearable (unspeakable and invisible) in their stead, the survivor feels that they have also lost "humanity and responsibility when entering the camp," becoming bare life. Once the sentiment of dignity has vanished (*ibid.*: 800–2, 807), shame manifests itself as a real "ontological sentiment" in the "double movement, which is both subjectification and desubjectification" (*ibid.*: 831f.).

This last passage for Agamben underlies the same "purely discursive reality" of the 'I,' characterized by an "irreducible negativity" which "pushes his own lived experiences back into a limitless past and can no longer coincide with them." Every speaker/survivor experiences the trauma of that "double movement" as a witness: whoever knows feels an "impossibility of speaking," and whoever speaks experiences "an equally bitter impossibility to know" (*ibid.*: 842–43). This makes speaking a "paradoxical act," a testimony of the non-coincidence of living being and speaking being, subjectification and desubjectification, from which shame arises (*ibid.*: 851, 856). On the basis of

13 For an exemplary and detailed critique of Agamben's positions, see Mesnard and Kahan (2001); on this debate, see Salzani (2013a: 119f.).

14 On this topic, see Salzani (2013a: 114–9).

15 "A being from whom humiliation, horror, and fear had so taken away all consciousness and all personality as to make him absolutely apathetic" (Agamben 2017a: 151).

these characteristics, Catherine Mills considers shame in Agamben as an "auto-affection" which reveals the self-referentiality of the testimony and of the subject, depriving its ethics of any relational dimension (Mills 2008: 103f.).[16] Taking a cue from her considerations, I believe that it is precisely through the testimony that Saramago's option for such a dimension can be highlighted.

To do this, I would like to start with a (hopefully not excessively) cryptic reference to Kafka's *Trial*. Upon returning from the lazaret in the ghostly city, the doctor's wife drives her husband and the girl with the dark glasses to his eye clinic. It is there that she utters the words:

> The only miracle we can perform is to go on living […], to preserve the fragility of life from day to day, as if it were blind and did not know where to go, and perhaps it is like that, perhaps it really does not know, it placed itself in our hands, after giving us intelligence, and this is what we have made of it. (Saramago 1999a: 297)

The young woman with the dark glasses reproaches the doctor's wife for speaking as if she had been blind too. And the husband adds: "I am afraid you are like the witness in search of a court to which he has been summoned by who knows who, in order to make a statement about who knows what" (*ibid.*). The doctor's wife's reaction is immediate. If she were in this situation, she would release two "statements": 1) "Time is coming to an end, putrescence is spreading…"; 2) "Let's open our eyes" (*ibid.*).

Salzani's thesis about the messianic and redemptive aspect of Saramago's Marxism seems to be confirmed by these statements: if the first introduces an apocalyptic "end of time" (Agamben 2005: 62), the second shifts the focus to a messianic "present as the exigency of fulfillment" (*ibid.*: 76). However, it is necessary to take into account the only partial coincidence of Saramago's 'messianic time' along with Benjamin and Agamben's underlined by Salzani (Salzani 2018: 29); in fact, if the deviation must be identified in Saramago's option for the 'potentiality to be,' it is not possible to underestimate the clearly divergent

16 For a broader critical reconstruction of this topic, see Mills (2008: 87–105).

consequences of his messianism compared to the Agambenian 'impotent' and 'irresponsible' one.

The context of the words spoken by the doctor's wife is also interesting, if one considers Agamben's constant commitment to Kafka and *The Trial*, in which he interprets the problem of justice through the "deposition, *désoeuvrement*, in the messianic overcoming of its signifying/penal structure" by Josef K. (Salzani 2013b: 263). Even more interesting is the role that Agamben attributes to shame in this deactivation, repeatedly quoting the final passage of the novel (see Agamben 1995: 85; Agamben 2000: 133; Agamben 2017e: 830) in which the protagonist, executed "like a dog," feels that "the shame would outlive him" (Kafka 1964: 286; see Salzani 2013b: 269).[17] Josef K., who does not survive the trial, is also an integral witness; unlike the *Muselmann*, he is still capable of feeling shame, but his dying 'like a dog' on the edge of the city reaffirms the lack of a relational dimension stressed by Mills in the ethical implications of the combination shame/testimony.

Borrowing (and forcing) Agamben's distinctions, I believe that the entirety of the doctors's wife's testimony in *Blindness* derives precisely from the strength of staring at the Gorgon without falling into the impossibility of seeing and into the silence of death. In *Seeing*, she does not die 'like a dog' but *with* a dog (the dog of tears) (see Saramago 2006: 307). "Born to see this horror" to prevent her companions from "turning into animals, worse still, into blind animals" (Saramago 1999a: 133), in *Blindness* she is both *auctor* and *superstes* and in *Seeing* she becomes *martys* too: but sight and word allowed her to understand and give voice to the sacrifice of the blind people and to the silent protest of the blank ballots.

Thanks to her, from shame comes the claim to dignity which, as the old man with the black eyepatch says, "rightfully" belongs to human beings. There is a clear distance from Agamben's critique of 'secular ethics,' which he deems is based on the juridical categories of guilt and responsibility (raised "to the status of supreme ethical categories") and on the judgement of "law, independent of truth and justice" (Agamben 2017e: 773, 777). *Thanks to her*, the idea of justice

17 On the interpretation of *The Trial* in Saramago through the "paternal authority," see Saramago (2010b: 256–59).

does not lose its meaning in the hospital and remains a thread that connects the 'before,' the 'during' and the 'after,' well beyond the narrow limits of Agamben's politics, because testimony is not based on exception and thus 'unassumable,' but on an intrinsic and relational humanity and on the need to responsibly assume all that it is capable of. When her group of blind people, having come out of the lazaret, lives in her house, the doctor's wife says:

> We went down all the steps of indignity, all of them, until we reached total degradation, the same might happen here albeit in a different way, there we still had the excuse that the degradation belonged to someone else, not now, now we are all equal regarding good and evil, please, don't ask me what good and what evil are, we knew what it was each time we had to act when blindness was an exception, what is right and what is wrong are simply different ways of understanding our relationships with the others, not that which we have with ourselves, one should not trust the latter. (Saramago 1999a: 276)

Good and evil, removed from any absolutization, take on meaning for Saramago only in the relationship among differences and human frailties, making every staying together all the more crucial the more these differences and frailties are exposed.

Common Sense, Justice, Law

Agamben's ethical theory of deactivation and 'impotence' is based on three main presuppositions: 1) "Auschwitz marks the end and the ruin of every ethics of dignity and conformity to a norm," as "the threshold of a new ethics, an ethics of a form of life that begins where dignity ends" (Agamben 2017e: 807); 2) "The state of exception starts to become the rule" (Agamben 2000: 39); 3) "The camp is the paradigm itself of political space at the point in which politics becomes biopolitics and the *homo sacer* becomes indistinguishable from the citizen" (*ibid.*: 41). Saramago's choice appears to be different: 1) the hospital does not represent the end of the ethics of dignity and rules, but the place of

their reconstruction; 2) his state of exception is not able to become the rule, because it is continually crossed over by wider dynamics, which indeed 'take exception to' the sovereign and his exceptions; 3) since the overlapping of state and camp is no longer in place, the citizen remains distinct from *homo sacer*. Much of this happens because in Saramago's stories his ethics and dignity do not remain outside the gates of the camp and vulnerable people are connected by shame and pity. In *Blindness*, even the thief who took advantage of the first blind man is welcomed into the doctor's wife's group and despite his selfishness he is treated compassionately until he dies.

If Agamben rejects the ethics of guilt and responsibility and the law as universal devices of capture that must be deactivated or be suffered as one's lot (see Agamben 2017e: 773ff.); *if* he considers only 'happiness' as a matter of ethics, which (according to the Greek etymology of *ethos*) is 'selfhood' and therefore "the mode in which each one enters into contact with oneself" and is "contemplation of a potential"; *then* it is inevitable that what he calls form-of-life is nothing but the "articulation of a zone of irresponsibility, in which the identities and imputations of the juridical order are suspended" (Agamben 2017g: 1250f.). Saramago, instead of demonizing the law and ethics' universality, works on their insularity and relationality, speaking explicitly of responsibility and making them 'means with ends,' the ends that humanity pursues "to preserve the fragility of life from day to day" (Saramago 1999a: 297).

As Mills emphasizes, the refusal of "relationality and alterity" as "fundamental aspects of ethics" (Mills 2008: 105, and 107–31) and the messianic deactivation of "rights and law as instruments […] in a struggle for justice," leave Agamben prisoner of his "conceptual absolutism" and completely incapable of critical intervention in the face of the reality of existence, its social, cultural, political and economic inequalities and its dyscrasias, reduced to mere facticity (*ibid*.: 136). Saramago, on the other hand, consciously uses these 'instruments' to keep the human community on its feet, considering them an imperfect but ineliminable part of our social reality.[18] The writer does not expound a thematic vision. With the laconic concreteness of those who have known dictatorship, he rests his vision on the three cornerstones of common sense, justice and the

18 "There will always be laws, whether they are just or unjust" (Saramago 2022c: 110).

law (Saramago 2010: 81): the first principle, common sense, is the logic of the relationship, from whose balancing between human interests and aspirations derives the second principle, justice,[19] which finds positivity and protection in the third one, the law. Like Agamben, Saramago also denounces a "judicial system that resulted from the invention of sin" (*ibid.*: 136). However, he focuses on the commitment "to introduce common sense into our tribunals" (*ibid.*: 75). He supports The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (harshly criticized by Agamben) and accuses their violations (see *ibid.*: 16, 61, 81; Gómez Aguilera 2010: 629–636). And he sarcastically echoes the words of the government in *Seeing*, which considers rights a "mere symbol of what could be" (Saramago 2006: 85f.), to ask for respect for the Constitutions (see Saramago 2010: 46).

The relational dimension in which Saramago projects the protagonists in his novels represents the only foothold in the silence of the law and of the sovereign decision (objected to and defeated by the *zoē* in *Blindness*). An instance of justice remains alive in human beings and struggles against its opposite, which inexplicably seems to be the only remaining player in Agamben's camp. Through the doctor's wife this common sense (as the sight as *sensorium*) bridges with *Seeing*, where the sighted justice among the blind must reactivate the justice of the law, which the sighted people instead represent as blind (to bring common sense back to the courts, said Saramago). Therefore, in *Seeing* the doctor's wife on the one hand is not afraid to confess to the murder and indeed claims justice for it (see Saramago 2006: 217), and on the other she still sees in the current law a significant bulwark against the accusation of having hatched the conspiracy of the white ballots (*ibid.*: 258).

The law, as a common measure, remains imperfect but developable, subject to twisting, but also to a plurality of forces and instances of control, as Laclau objects to Agamben (see Laclau 2007). Therefore, if the doctor's wife cannot be convicted of either murder or conspiracy, her murder by the state, on the

19 Through the eyes of a sixteenth-century Florentine peasant, who embodies the ingenuity of common sense, Saramago denounces the deceit of Natural Law, speaking of the "powerful arguments of some gullible scholars, for whom the idea of Good, as a source of duty and right, is innate in the human soul and precedes any convention." For Saramago, albeit it is only an "invention of man," the law nevertheless expresses his "yearning […] to build his own freedom" (Saramago 2022c: 111).

other hand, can be politically denounced (the population of *Seeing* taking to the streets) (see Saramago 2006: 290ff.) and, who knows, perhaps legally prosecuted (Saramago 2010: 81f.). As integral witness, never blind or dumb, with her active 'no' the doctor's wife sought justice also in the law. As Saramago suggests: "A no like the one introduced in the novel *History of the siege of Lisbon* by the proofreader Raimundo Silva. That no in the novel is that of those who say: 'enough.' Those who understand that others are telling a story, but an official story" (qtd. in Gómez Aguilera 2010: 526). A far cry from Bartleby's 'I'd rather not.' While for Agamben testimony is an area of indistinction between human and non-human, for Saramago it is a choice that distinguishes the former from the latter.

Conclusion

Unlike the intellectual snob Agamben, Saramago has a very clear idea of dictatorship, because he really experienced it. Unlike the quixotic Agamben, he does not need to imagine dictatorship underneath a democratic form and to give substance to his imaginary battles by inventing the invention of an epidemic. It would be foolish to reject Agamben's meditations as a whole. But I do not share his overlap between Schmittian politics and modern democracy. According to his theory of the Great Transformation, by taking advantage of the pandemic governments are overtly imposing the state of exception as normal and permanent (see Agamben 2021b: 18, 28, 36, 39), with 'very likely' consequences such as the closure of universities to students and the ban on "gathering to have conversations about politics or culture" (*ibid.*: 39). However, for months we have resumed face-to-face lessons, and we still meet to talk about Saramago, politics, and Agamben.

Although I don't like the Italy of today, I cannot compare it to the Italy of the fascist era. Nor am I willing to seamlessly link the state in which I live to totalitarianism. Agamben does both (*ibid.*: 9, 38, 41f., 57, 69; Agamben 2021a: 115f.), and also denounces the very modern theory of rights that guarantees his freedom to denounce it. While for Agamben it is enough to 'accuse' society of being democratic (since in his idea democratic regimes share the same bi-

opolitical roots as the undemocratic ones and are therefore oppressive like the latter), Saramago accuses it of not being democratic enough. I see the serious problems with democracy, but I also believe, along with the Portuguese writer, that its very imperfections, its exposure to the traumatic counterfactuals of the *zoē*, still give us room and opportunities to try to live and think better.

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