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Towards a Post-Hobbesian Political Community?

Nature, Artifice and the Form-of-Life

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Abstract

The article addresses the attempts of contemporary continental philosophy to develop a politics that would move beyond the Hobbesian logic of the constitution of political community. In their readings of Hobbes, Roberto Esposito and Giorgio Agamben emphasize the nihilistic character of Hobbes's approach to community. For Esposito, Hobbes's commonwealth is legitimized by a prior negation of the originary human community in the construction of the state of nature as the state of war. Yet, as Agamben shows, this negative state of nature is never fully transcended by the commonwealth, which persistently reproduces it in the state of exception. These critiques emphasize the complex relation between nature and artifice in Hobbes's thought, which have profound implications for the attempts to arrive at a 'post-Hobbesian' mode of political community. Neither a facile search for a truer, more fundamental state of nature nor an affirmation of artifice and denaturation as constitutive of human community are sufficient to evade the Hobbesian constellation. A genuine move beyond Hobbes would rather consist in thoroughly deactivating the very relation between nature and artifice whereby they become indistinct and no longer negate each other.

Keywords

community – nihilism – life – Giorgio Agamben – Roberto Esposito

Introduction

Nature and artifice are basic concepts of any political philosophy. Whether it is a matter of founding a politics on natural principles or transcending nature

through the establishment of an artificial order, abandoning the degraded artificial social order and returning to nature or intervening in the natural order through governmental artifice, political thought exists in the space between nature and artifice and as an expression of the tension between them. In contemporary continental thought this tension is arguably articulated most strongly in the discussion of political community.¹ On the one hand, the 20th century experience of fascism and Nazism has thoroughly undermined any (quasi) naturalist account of political community as the expression of the vital substance of a people, nation or race. On the other hand, the alternative understanding of community as an artifice or construct, at work in different ways in both liberal and Marxist discourses, was no less problematic, often viewed as expressing the nihilistic or technological orientation of modern politics, its reduction to the management of individual or group interests. Moreover, contemporary continental thought has problematized the very distinction between nature and artifice, demonstrating both the presence of the natural within artificial orders and the artifice involved in every invocation of nature. Various strands in continental theory have attempted to reconstruct political community in the manner that places it on the side of neither nature nor artifice but rather conceives of community as the site where the very opposition of the two terms is rendered inoperative.

The philosophy of Thomas Hobbes has been a privileged interlocutor in this enterprise, given the paradigmatic status of the Hobbesian logic of the constitution of the commonwealth through the negation of the state of nature for all modern political thought. In this article, we shall address the readings of Hobbes in the work of Roberto Esposito and Giorgio Agamben, who critically engage with him in their reconstruction of the concept of political community. These readings are significant not merely because of the new interpretation of Hobbes that they offer but also because of the function that Hobbes's philosophy serves in them. While Hobbes's logic of the constitution of the commonwealth as a political community has been paradigmatic in modern political thought, these authors argue that Hobbes's paradigmatic move rather consists in the *negation* of community and any contemporary rethinking of political community must first grapple with the problem of overcoming or neutralizing this negation.

Thus, both Esposito and Agamben emphasize the nihilistic character of Hobbes's approach, yet do so in different ways. For Esposito, Hobbes's constitution

1 Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

of the commonwealth is legitimized by a prior construction of community in strictly negative terms. The artificial institution of the commonwealth is thus preceded and conditioned by another artifice, that of the negation of human community in the construction of the state of nature as the state of war. For Agamben, the state of nature is similarly an artefact, produced by sovereign power through its self-suspension in the state of exception in which the law remains 'in force without significance'. The state of nature does not precede the institution of the commonwealth but rather results from its suspension. Best exemplified by Hobbes's interpretation of the sovereign's right to punish, this paradox demonstrates that Hobbes's state of nature is neither natural nor fully transcended by the institution of sovereignty but is a negative foundation of the commonwealth itself.

In the second section, we address the problems involved in moving beyond the Hobbesian account of political community. We shall demonstrate that neither a facile search for a truer, more fundamental state of nature than the one posited by Hobbes, nor an affirmation of artifice and denaturation as constitutive of human community are sufficient to evade the Hobbesian constellation. While every claim to naturalness can be subverted by demonstrating the dependence of this nature on numerous artefacts, the claim to have fully transcended nature is equally false, insofar every symbolic order continues to depend on the excess that it cannot symbolize and which remains in some sense 'natural'.

The failure of both re-naturalizing and de-naturalizing approaches does not, however, entail that we are stuck with the Hobbesian logic of the negative foundation. In the third section, we shall demonstrate the way this logic is rendered inoperative in Giorgio Agamben's notion of form-of-life as a 'zone of indistinction' between unqualified life and its political form, i.e. between nature and artifice. This indistinction suspends the perpetual politicization of bare life through its negative 'inclusive exclusion' in the commonwealth that both Agamben and Esposito have traced in their readings of Hobbes. Instead, bare life is no longer something to be politicized, since, as always already its own form, it is itself political.

Hobbesian Nihilism: Community and its Nullification

For Roberto Esposito, Hobbes is the first genuinely nihilist philosopher, insofar as nihilism is understood in the Heideggerian manner, not as the *expression* of the nothingness of all things but rather as its *nullification*. Nihilism recognizes the nothing at the heart of being only to turn this 'nothing' into a nullity, so

that only beings may be said to exist, 'and nothing besides'.² What is nullified in Hobbes's political thought is *community*, understood in ontological terms as the originary lack of subjectivity, identity or property that characterizes being-in-common. In Esposito's etymology of community, the *munus* in community refers to an obligation, debt or gift to the other that unites its members. What is shared in common is therefore not the proper, be it identity or property, but rather expropriation, lack and disidentification, the exposure of the self to the outside and the other.

Community isn't an entity, nor is it a collective subject, nor a totality of subjects, but rather it is the relation that makes them no longer individual subjects because it closes them off from their identity with a line, which, traversing them, alters them: it is the 'with', the 'between' and the threshold where they meet in a point of contact that brings them into relation with others to the degree to which it separates them from themselves.³

Community is not merely founded on nothing, i.e., on the absence of common presupposition or predicate, but is entirely contained in the exposure of its members to the nothing that they have in common: "it is utterly incapable of producing effects of commonality, of association, and of communion. It doesn't keep us warm and it doesn't protect us; on the contrary, it exposes us to the most extreme of risks: that of losing, along with our individuality, the borders that guarantee its inviolability with respect to the other, of suddenly falling into the nothingness of the thing."⁴

This is where nihilism comes in, not as an attribute of this community but rather of its *negation*. While in the case of community the 'nothing' referred to being as relation, as opposed to an entity, what is at stake in nihilism is the dissolution of this relation itself, the *nullification of nothing*. It is this relegation of the relation to non-being that Esposito traces in Hobbes:

The fact that Hobbes inaugurates modern political nihilism should not be simply understood in the sense that he 'discovers' the nothingness of substance of a world freed from the metaphysical constraint of any transcendental *veritas*; Hobbes rather 'covers' this nothingness of substance again with another, more powerful nothingness, which is

2 Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics* (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), 219.

3 Esposito, *Communitas*, 139.

4 Esposito, *Communitas*, 140.

precisely the function of annihilating the potentially dissolutive effects of the first.⁵

In Esposito's interpretation, Hobbes's attempt to found sovereign power is conditioned by the prior conversion of the originary nothingness of community into the secondary, *artificial* nothingness that he constructs in terms of the state of nature as 'state of war'. It is only when community in the sense of the originary sharing of nothing in a reciprocal exposure and expropriation is negated, that an infinite multiplicity of boundaries is drawn between the members of the community and we find ourselves in a familiar condition of a perpetual and universal predisposition towards war. The negation of community introduces into the world a negativity that in Hobbes's theory takes the form of equal capacity to kill – the sole link that now binds individuals together, since everything else is divided between particular identities. The originary condition of exposure to the other that expropriates one's identity is converted into an "unstoppable series of potential crimes."⁶ The contingent dangers involved in the exposure to the other are converted into the necessary dangerousness of being-in-common as a 'natural fact'. This construction of the state of nature leads Hobbes to a logical conclusion: "[if] the relation between men is in itself destructive, the only route of escape from this unbearable state of affairs is the destruction of the relation itself."⁷ If every relation is defective and dangerous, then security can only be attained by abolishing every relation in having everyone relate only to a Third, i.e., the sovereign. The sovereign thus becomes the universal mediator in the newly constructed world of the commonwealth, which, despite its name, is not a community at all, but a paradoxical 'union' wholly contained in dissociation: "the state is the desocialization of the communitarian bond."⁸ If the originary community united its members around the shared *munus*, the institution of sovereign power exempts everyone from this *munus*, thereby *immunizing* them against the danger they all pose to one another.⁹

It is important to note that we encounter the figure of nothingness or negativity not once, nor even twice, but *three* times in Hobbes's constitution of the commonwealth. The originary nothingness of community as the sharing of lack or expropriation is first negated in the construction of the state of nature

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 141.

7 Ibid., 27.

8 Ibid., 28.

9 See also Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life* (London: Polity, 2011), 85.

as the state of perpetual reciprocal danger, which in turn finds itself negated one more time by the institution of artificial sovereign authority which neutralizes the negativity of nature. We thus move from the negativity of the *munus* through its negation as the fictitious state of nature to the final negation of this state in the mode of the artificial order of the commonwealth. The state of nature is thus a 'negative foundation' of the commonwealth in two senses: firstly, it is a product of the negation of the originary community of sharing the nothingness of *munus*, and, secondly, it itself exists only to be negated by the institution of sovereignty. Yet, this final negation can never fully efface the negativity of the state of nature but can only restrict it to the sovereign who, as it were, absorbs it entirely in its own figure: 'the state of nature is not overcome once and for all by the civil, but resurfaces again in the same figure of the sovereign, because it is the only one to have preserved natural right in a context in which all the others have given it up.'¹⁰ This preservation of natural right is best exemplified by the 'right to punish', which in Hobbes's own argument is only conceivable as the right *retained* by the sovereign from the state of nature:

[It] is manifest that the Right which the Common-wealth (that is, he or they that represent it) have to Punish, is not grounded on any concession or gift of the Subjects. For the Subjects did not give the Sovereign that right; but onely in laying down theirs, strengthened him to use his own, as he should think fit, for the preservation of them all: so that it *was not given, but left to him*, and to him onely; and (excepting the limits set him by naturall Law) as entire, as in the condition of meer Nature, and of warre of every one against his neighbour.¹¹

Ironically, the only remnant of nature left in the commonwealth is thus the artificial "mortal god" itself, which denatures everything with the exception of itself and retains within the commonwealth that power of death that characterized every relation in the state of nature. In Giorgio Agamben's reading of Hobbes, this "preservation" of the right to punish serves as the paradigm of the sovereign state of exception, in which the positive content of the law is suspended yet its force remains intact. The state of nature is thus not antecedent to the commonwealth but rather the effect of the suspension of its positive

10 Esposito, *Communitas*, 30. See also Esposito, *Immunitas*, 86–87; Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 105–106.

11 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1985 [1651]), 354. Emphasis added.

norms by the sovereign itself: “The state of nature is not a real epoch chronologically prior to the foundation of the City, but a principle internal to the City, which appears at the moment the City is considered *tanquam dissoluta*, ‘as if it were dissolved.’”¹² Rather than approach the state of nature as something negated and transcended by sovereignty, Agamben views it as the product of sovereignty that itself negates its positive content. Yet, sovereign power is also an effect of negation. Whereas Esposito discusses the object of this negation in terms of community, Agamben addresses it in terms of *life*. Hobbes’s institution of the positive order of the commonwealth (*bios*) is attained through the negation of unqualified life (*zoe*) that produces the very negativity that it then seeks to subsume under the state of nature. Agamben terms this negativity ‘bare life’, a life stripped of all positive predicates and exposed to the possibility of death. Yet, just as in Esposito’s argument, this bare life is nothing natural and should not be equated with *zoe* itself. It is rather a result of what Agamben calls the ‘inclusive exclusion’ of *zoe* into *bios* in the degraded and destitute form of “mere life” that is the object of politicization.¹³ It does not precede the existence of sovereignty and call for its establishment, but is rather produced by the sovereign act of self-suspension, whereby the subject ends up abandoned to the arbitrary force of law devoid of all significance.¹⁴ For both Esposito and Agamben, Hobbes’s political community ultimately ends up threatening that which it was meant to protect, i.e. human life itself: “[Set] in motion by the demand of protecting the thing from the nothing that seems to threaten it, Hobbes winds up destroying the thing itself with nothing.”¹⁵

This is due to the failure of Hobbes (and, for both authors, modern political philosophy more generally) to understand the nothingness at the heart of community in a non-nihilistic way, i.e. otherwise than as something superfluous, inessential or dangerous that must be nullified. While the relation between beings is indeed dangerous, insofar as it introduces lack and expropriation and ruptures the identities of individuals, its nullification does nothing to protect these individuals but rather leaves them exposed to the power that operates with the same means of expropriation and rupture, serving as the sole descendant of the state of nature that claims to negate: “Modern nihilism did not want or know how to excavate any deeper into the nothing of the relation, and so finds itself consigned to the nothing of the absolute, of absolute nothing.”¹⁶

12 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 105.

13 Ibid., 21.

14 Ibid., 35.

15 Esposito, *Communitas*, 142.

16 Ibid.

Both Esposito's and Agamben's readings place the relation between nature and artifice at the heart of Hobbes's political thought. Hobbes's absolutist and sacrificial politics does not descend from the originary evil of human beings universally or of any human being in particular, however this evil might be construed. The origin of this politics is rather the introduction into the world of the force of negation of the originary community or unqualified life - the artifice presented as natural so as to be negated by yet another artifice that appropriates the power of negation as its exclusive prerogative. The logic of sovereign power consists in the 'denaturalizing' protection of the commonwealth from the secondary negativity that was produced and 'naturalized' through the nullification of the primary nothingness of community. In this manner, the commonwealth secured by sovereign power ends up closed off from its ontological foundation in community or *zoe* and instead endowed with a wholly fictitious 'political ontology', which takes as the origin of the commonwealth the negative artifice reinscribed in the more edifying terms of the 'state of nature'. These political ontologies may veer into different and even opposite directions from this starting point, e.g. towards the eradication of the state of nature or its valorization, the transcendence of nature through culture or the naturalization of culture itself. Yet, as long as politics loses sight of what precedes this 'nature' and is negated by it, it remains stuck in nihilism and ends up threatening the lives it claims to protect.

Towards a Post-Hobbesian Community: Beyond Naturalization and Denaturalization

Evidently, the reading of Hobbes espoused by Esposito and Agamben may be criticized as one-sided or hyperbolic, ignoring the details and intricacies in Hobbes's argument in favour of a grand epochal interpretation of Hobbes as a nihilist *avant la lettre*. It would certainly be possible to counter Agamben's focus on the sovereign right to punish by highlighting Hobbes's retention of the individual right of resistance when its personal security, for which he gives up his natural right, is threatened.¹⁷ Alternatively, Esposito's insistence on Hobbes's negation of the anterior community may be viewed as excessive in the light of Hobbes's relative retention of the freedom of inner belief in the commonwealth, which his more authoritarian critics viewed as a symptom of his insufficient negation of the state of nature that eventually dooms the

¹⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 375–376.

Leviathan.¹⁸ Yet, what we are interested in is less the exegetical accuracy of Agamben's and Esposito's interpretations than the paradigmatic character of their reading.

For both Esposito and Agamben it is less a matter of exhaustively interpreting Hobbes than of relying on his thought to establish a particularly illustrative or striking example of a tendency in modern political thought to constitute and legitimize authority by conjuring the negativity that it then interprets as natural and seeks protection from. While Hobbes could undoubtedly be read in other, less hyperbolic and more appreciative ways, it is this reading that has attracted most attention in contemporary continental philosophy, also preoccupied with the relation between nature and artifice in today's political life. The reason for this is arguably the growing realization that the Hobbesian solution to the problem of community that marked the beginning of political modernity has become inoperative, exacerbating the problem rather than resolving it. If Hobbes's logic of sovereignty is viewed as resigning modern politics to the pursuit of security through negative means, perpetually threatening what it claims to protect, the question of a *post*-Hobbesian political community becomes a matter of exigency.¹⁹

If we approach Hobbes in terms of the artificial constitution of the state of nature as a negative foundation of political community, what could a genuinely post-Hobbesian approach be? For Esposito, "Hobbes's solution is derived from an altogether negative and even catastrophic interpretation of the principle of condivision, the initial sharing of being. It is precisely this negativity attributed to the original community that justifies the sovereign order."²⁰ It therefore appears that the way to avoid the spiraling of negativity that characterizes Hobbes's nihilism consists in the reaffirmation of the originary nothingness of community as the first, proper, real state of nature. If we abandon Hobbes's nullification of this originary natural community in an 'altogether negative' artifact of the state of nature, we would presumably also be spared the subsequent negation of that artifact in the form of sovereign power, whose legitimacy is, after all, only established on the basis of the construction of the state of nature as the site of perpetual and universal danger.

18 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 400–401. See also Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes: Meaning and Failure of a Symbol* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 55–59.

19 See Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 76–77; Esposito, *Communitas*, pp. 14–19.

20 Esposito, *Communitas*, 141.

This reaffirmation of the originary community does not only characterize Esposito's own project but applies more generally to the contemporary rethinking of political community in continental philosophy: for all their important differences, Agamben's community of 'whatever singularities', Jean-Luc Nancy's 'inoperative' community, Alain Badiou's 'generic' subject or Jacques Ranciere's 'people' are all posited as subtracted from any positive predicate and instead defined by the sheer facticity of being-there prior to any predication or determination. At the same time, all these examples clearly indicate the difficulty of subsuming the phenomena in question under the label of 'nature'. While originary in the sense of not being preceded and conditioned by anything, Esposito's community is from the outset characterized by the *expropriation* of the proper, the *withdrawal* of substance, the *alteration* of identity – in short, the prostheses of negativity that prevent this 'nature' from ever attaining anything like full presence and self-identity. What lies at the origin is always a supplement in the Derridean sense of constitutive alterity, the condition of possibility that at the same time undermines or ruptures the unity, presence or givenness of the phenomenon.²¹ The lack introduced by the *munus* characterizes Esposito's community from the outset, there having been nothing to precede it, no natural bliss later disturbed by the imperative of obligation or gift. Thus, if we want to overcome Hobbes by positing as natural the condition that precedes his own negative move of 'naturalization', we are bound to be disappointed: what precedes the artifact of the Hobbesian state of nature is a condition that is just as artificial and de-natured.

On the other hand, we should also resist the *anti-naturalist* disposition, particularly when it comes in the form of an anthropocentrism that converts the originary denaturation of human beings into a privileged status of having somehow left nature behind for artificial, symbolic structures and institutions. Irrespectively of whether this privilege is supposed to endow us with authority over the rest of nature or the burden of responsibility for it (or both), the claim of the human being to have transcended the natural realm for the symbolic realm of artifice is ultimately false for at least two reasons.

Firstly, as our discussion of Hobbes's account of the right to punish as the 'remainder' of the state of nature within the commonwealth demonstrated, no such transcendence may ever be complete, since every symbolic realm of *nomos* is constitutively dependent on an 'anomic' space within it that resists subsumption under its positive rules, norms or principles. "[T]his space devoid of law seems to be so essential to the juridical order that it must seek in every

21 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp. 145–146.

way to assure itself a relation with it, as if in order to ground itself the juridical order necessarily had to maintain itself in relation with an anomie.”²² As authors as different as Carl Schmitt and Jacques Lacan have demonstrated in different ways, there always remains an excess of the real that resists symbolization, a quasi-natural element that cannot be subsumed under the artificial order and plunges this order back into pre-symbolic, be this in the form of the sovereign state of exception or the formations of the unconscious. Even if the nature in question is as artificial as the symbolic order it disrupts, it remains a negative foundation of the latter, founding it precisely by escaping from it.

On the other hand, as philosophical anthropology of the early 20th century argued, the very attempt at the symbolic transcendence of nature arises from and defines our nature itself. It is precisely the naturally open, incomplete, potential and “out of sync” status of the human being that accounts for its need for and its development of symbolic structures of artifice that compensate for its lack of determinate environment.²³ The engagement in symbolic artifice is thus itself part of human nature. Thus, every attempt at the transcendence of nature inevitably returns one to the natural immanence from which it necessarily arises. Instead of the Hobbesian image of the Leviathan as a ‘mortal god’, contemporary post-Hobbesian perspectives rather remind one of Walter Benjamin’s figure of the baroque sovereign, “a lord of creatures that remains a creature” and perpetually fails to transcend the realm from which it arises.²⁴

While our political imagination is today more attuned to the critique of every kind of naturalization, which finds the mediated and the constructed beneath every claim to natural immediacy, what is at stake here is the diametrically opposite strategy that would supplement the exposure of artifice in every pretense to natural authenticity with a ‘re-naturalizing’ critique that exposes the falsity of every claim to transcend nature and disrupts the closure of every symbolic order into self-immanence.²⁵ The post-Hobbesian account of the relation between nature and artifice can therefore give privilege to neither nature nor artifice, yet, as we shall demonstrate in the final section, is not exhausted by affirming the tension between the two.

22 Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 51.

23 See Paolo Virno, *Multitude between Innovation and Negation* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2008), pp. 31–61; Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life* (London: Polity, 2011), pp. 80–111.

24 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: Verso, 2003), 85.

25 See Esposito, *Living Thought: The Origins and Actuality of Italian Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

Form-of-Life

If we cannot oppose the Hobbesian constitution of the state of nature as a negative foundation of the political order by either a return to nature or its ultimate transcendence in a symbolic order devoid of any natural remainder, the post-Hobbesian perspective appears to be limited to lamenting the spiral of negativity unleashed by the very constitution of political community and therefore apparently unavoidable as long as we continue to live in such communities. The mortal god would then be demoted to the mortal devil without anything else changing. Yet, the post-Hobbesian perspective also has a strong affirmative dimension, developed most explicitly in Agamben's work. From the early 1990s onwards Agamben has developed an idea of a 'form-of-life' as an alternative to the bare life captured in the sovereign state of exception. Since in the Hobbesian logic the political order is constituted by the negation of unqualified life and its inclusion in the destitute mode of bare life, the sole way out of this negative structure appears to be a politics constituted out of unqualified life itself. Thus, Agamben opposes every idea of politics as "the place in which life had to transform itself into good life and in which what had to be politicized was always already bare life"²⁶ and instead poses the question of whether "zoe really needs to be politicized or politics [is] already contained at its center."²⁷ At the end of *Homo Sacer* he answers this question affirmatively with the following programmatic statement: "This biopolitical body that is bare life must itself instead be transformed into the site for the constitution and installation of a form of life that is wholly exhausted in bare life and a *bios* that is only its own *zoe*."²⁸ This statement is simultaneously enigmatic and rigorous. Indeed, if the political form of *bios* is founded by the inclusion of *zoe* in the negated mode of bare life, then the suspension of this negation requires that *bios* and *zoe* become entirely indistinct. In this manner, life and its form would become entirely inseparable, *bios* being entirely contained in *zoe*, so that it is 'no longer possible to isolate anything like a bare life'.²⁹ This means precisely that *zoe* is no longer politicized or that politics no longer seeks to transform life 'as such' into 'good life', but is somehow located at the center of life itself. Yet, what could it possibly mean to locate politics in the unqualified life as such?

26 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 7.

27 *Ibid.*, 11.

28 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 188.

29 Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 9.

Agamben's solution becomes clearer with the help of the analogy he draws between bare life in biopolitics and pure being in philosophy:

[In] the syntagm 'bare life', 'bare' corresponds to the Greek *haplos*, the term by which first philosophy defines pure Being. And it may be that only if we are able to decipher the political meaning of pure Being will we be able to master the bare life that expresses our subjection to political power.³⁰

On the basis of this analogy between bare life and pure being Agamben establishes the political equivalent of Heidegger's inversion of the relation between essence and existence in *Being and Time*.³¹ "Today *bios* lies in *zoe* exactly as essence, in the Heideggerian definition of Dasein, lies in existence."³² If the essence of the human is unrepresentable in terms of essential predicates ('what one is') but consists in the sheer facticity of its existence ('that one is'), then the sole form of *bios* proper to the human is indeed its own *zoe*, whose facticity is no longer the negated foundation of *bios* but rather its entire content, there being no other form, essence, task or identity that could be imposed on it. What Agamben calls form-of-life, the hyphens emphasizing the integrity of life and its form, may then be understood as "a being that is its own bare existence, [a] life that, being its own form, remains inseparable from it."³³

We encounter this figure of an integral form-of-life in the most diverse contexts of Agamben's work: the 'coming community' of whatever singularities,³⁴ the *experimentum linguae* that communicates the sheer existence of language and not its signified contents,³⁵ the "glorious body" that is nothing but the earthly body divested of its functions and open to a new use,³⁶ Franciscan monastic life extraneous to every law and norm,³⁷ 'eternal life' in the Messiah,³⁸ etc. While many of these examples are somewhat arcane or esoteric, it is

30 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 182.

31 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper Collins, 1962), 67.

32 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 188.

33 Ibid.

34 Agamben, *The Coming Community*.

35 Agamben, *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience* (London: Verso, 2007).

36 Agamben, *Nudities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), pp. 91–103.

37 Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

38 Agamben, *Kingdom and the Glory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), pp. 248–250.

important to emphasize that the term 'form-of-life' does not refer to any specific *kind* of life, which would be a *bios* that is by definition distinct from *zoe* as unqualified life and would entail the negation of the latter. It is instead a matter of treating *any* positive *bios* as nothing but a *zoe*, suspending every qualification while embracing the unqualified or, in Agamben's terms, the 'unmarked' in every form of life.³⁹ What unites the diverse figures above is precisely their subtraction from every particular predicate and their exposure in the bare facticity of their existence or 'being-thus'. A *bios* that is its own *zoe* is not some particular *bios*, some concrete form of life, but rather whatever *bios*, insofar as it is taken up solely in the aspect of its *zoe*. This obviously does not mean that this form of life is devoid of any real predicates but rather that these predicates are taken up all at once and thereby neutralized, no longer functioning as the conditions of belonging and exclusion: being-thus is 'neither this nor that, neither thus nor thus, but *thus*, as it is, with all its predicates (all its predicates is not a predicate).'⁴⁰

As a *form*, a form-of-life is certainly an artefact, yet, insofar as the sole material for this artifice is life as such, it necessarily remains natural. Conversely, as a form of *life*, this form is irreducibly natural, yet, insofar as this life is inseparable from its form, we are evidently in the domain of artifice. A form-of-life is thus an artifice that works on or rather plays with its own nature and a nature which creates artefacts out of itself. It is this understanding of life as naturally artificial that is genuinely post-Hobbesian, insofar as it is content neither with finding behind Hobbes's fictitious 'state of nature' another, presumably more natural state nor with rehearsing his claim about the possibility to transcend such a natural state. It rejects the very idea of separating nature and artifice, and consequently the very idea of the protection of nature through its negation in the formation of an artificial order and the protection of this order through the negation of the very nature it protects. Instead, the form-of-life becomes a site of a politics, in which the natural and the artificial are inseparable and could not possibly be conceived as needing protection from each other.

39 Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, 33.

40 Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 93.