

## BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

**Catherine Mills, *The Philosophy of Agamben*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill/Queen's University Press, 2008; 153 pages. ISBN: 978-0773534889.**

**Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009; 463 pages. ISBN: 978-0804761437.**

*Review by Jonathan Short, York University.*

That ontological concerns feature prominently in the work of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has undoubtedly complicated his reception, particularly in North America. To say that the intellectual heirs to pragmatism and empiricism view ontological claims with a suspicion bordering on hostility is almost to understate the situation. This is particularly true when it comes to political philosophy, where a moral justification is available to bolster an intellectual aversion. If ontology aims at comprehension at a level of abstraction or separation from empirical specificity, if its task is to unite disparate phenomena in terms of a subsuming instance or principle, the specifics are inevitably neglected or treated violently. In this vein quite diverse thinkers, from Rawls to Derrida, have urged that ontological thinking in political philosophy opens onto politically troubled terrain—as the association between the name and political orientation of the last century's greatest thinker of ontology is alone enough to suggest. Thus, sticking to the empirical specifics and abjuring the temptation to make sweeping ontological claims appears not only intellectually respectable but ethically prudent, an insurance policy of sorts against “dangerous” forms of political thought that might be associated symptomatically with the kinds of sweeping claims philosophies with strong ontological commitments seem to impose.

If something like this view orients much of recent social and political philosophy over the last several decades, the work of Agamben appears to fly directly in its face. In this Agamben certainly does himself no favours, as his persistent rhetoric of seeking the “original” sense of a

word, concept, or practise attests; likewise, startling and unsettling claims, such as that in contemporary times we are all virtually reduced to a state of bare life or that it is the concentration camp rather than the city which provides the paradigm of modernity, have appeared to many critics as bombastic, and perhaps nihilistic, excess rather than as carefully reasoned propositions. Be that as it may, the jarring effect of Agamben's apparently reductive and extreme views are also the product of an intellectual climate in which the patience to entertain such views is decidedly lacking. Perhaps for this reason, despite an immense interest in Agamben as a thinker, most secondary literature continues to display either isolated borrowing of certain concepts ("state of exception" or perhaps "bare life" chief among these), or a rather sceptical and negative type of criticism, all the while remaining mostly fixated on the predominantly political concerns of the *Homo Sacer* series of books.

This is not to say that among Agamben's readers there are not to be found those who believe that scholarly reception to date sidesteps, rather than treats adequately, his main concerns. The two books on Agamben under discussion here clearly share this belief. Mills and de la Durantaye are both of the opinion that the key obstacles to an adequate appreciation of Agamben's *oeuvre* are the diversity of subjects it treats and the level of difficulty at which it does so. It is the apparent view of both authors that these obstacles demand broad introductory works which depart significantly from premature critique as well as overly narrow focus in order to facilitate a richer understanding of Agamben's significance and what he may offer to contemporary philosophy. Indeed, Mills states near the beginning of her book that, "[she] firmly believe[s] that Agamben's work requires perspicacious, non-dogmatic and critical analysis before his version of political liberation and radicalism can be accepted." (7) While far from an unreserved endorsement, this at least prioritises the need for careful reading and an expanded tolerance for theoretical complexity. While de la Durantaye never offers his readers such a direct statement of his position, he points out in the introduction to his book that most of the secondary literature to appear thus far remains tightly focused on *Homo Sacer* and its related volumes, such that even in those rare instances when such literature explores earlier writings, it does so in a reductive manner. (10-11) For de la Durantaye, then, most literature on Agamben displays a (contradictory) tendency both to position Agamben's concern with politics as initiating a decisive break

with his earlier literary and aesthetic concerns, and, at the same time, to see the latter only insofar as they contribute to his political writings.

While Mills and de la Durantaye agree on the need to expand the scope of Agamben scholarship, and while each examines approximately the same range of texts spanning Agamben's early career in the 1970s up to his quite recent work, they do so in very different ways. Mills' account of Agamben's thought is oriented toward making sense of his political writings; while she does grant some conceptual autonomy in her treatment of early works such as *The Man Without Content* (1970) and *Stanzas* (1977), her gloss on most of Agamben's texts depicts them as a developmental unity. In many respects this is extremely useful, and Mills is to be commended for her exceptional clarity of exposition. The only problem with her approach is, as she is the first to admit, that it necessitates overlooking a lot of the difficulty and detail that Agamben's work contains. However, Mills' book succeeds admirably in its intention to serve as a philosophical introduction to those with little or no knowledge of the range of Agamben's work, presenting the main concerns and arguments that would enable a new reader to navigate Agamben's texts, doing so in a remarkably compact 144 pages.

Mills begins her first chapter with Agamben's theory of language as the ground of the human awareness of being, conceived as pure indication and intention to signify but understood as mysterious and "negative" by the tradition of Western metaphysics. In treating Agamben's understanding of language as the ontology of the potential, she delves into early works to show that for Agamben aesthetics is always implicitly an engagement with politics, understood by Agamben in the sense of putting into play the possible ways of being human. Mills' final chapter on Agamben's Messianism as a resolution to the problem of splitting the ground of potentiality from its particular actualisations is thus anticipated in the earlier work on language. The chapter on (bio)politics which lies between them situates Agamben's account of sovereignty as the obstacle which must be overcome if a humanity truly "fulfilled" (i.e., no longer split between potential and actual), is to be imaginable. Whether such a notion of fulfillment is tenable (and many have argued it is not) is left open by Mills, despite some suggestion in the conclusion of her book that she finds Agamben's project of liberation too removed from the concrete determinations of embodied subjectivity (such as sex, gender, race, and class). Such

abstraction threatens, in her view, Agamben's project of liberation with emptiness, since it would be difficult to see just what a liberated subject would be like if we could not specify its practical situation with respect to these concrete social markers. This criticism, of course, is aimed at Agamben's understanding of politics (and the Messianic) in terms of ontology, which, as Mills claims, appears to "relegate characteristics such as race and gender to the level of the ontic." (136) While there might be rejoinders to this criticism which would hinge on what Agamben says about the Messianic politics he envisions, that is, about how the relationship between potentiality and actuality might function, Mills does not discuss these. This is disappointing but highlights that the purpose of this work is to introduce us to the main features of Agamben's work.

For his part, de la Durantaye, despite presenting his book as a "critical introduction," has written at a length that is bound to be daunting for the uninitiated reader; at 440 pages, this book is better appreciated by those with some familiarity with Agamben's work and who already have a grasp of its main ideas. Unlike Mills, de la Durantaye abjures the centrality of politics, and while insisting that there is as much commonality of theme as diversity of interest to be found in Agamben's writings, positions the latter to win out. Beginning with an account of Agamben's treatment of potentiality, de la Durantaye provides a chronological gloss on most of the key works translated into English, supplementing these with untranslated material and doing a real scholarly service to readers confined to these translations in pointing out several of their inconsistencies and gaps. While potentiality is shown to be the abiding concern of Agamben's different fields of inquiry over time, de la Durantaye takes care not to impose a unifying structure on the different works while highlighting points of overlapping concern. While this approach is informative, it is also somewhat idiosyncratic. For instance, even though de la Durantaye refers to the important *Language and Death* several times in the course of discussing Agamben's other works, he does not provide a separate chapter on it, despite the key role it plays in the development of Agamben's thought. Similarly, the chapter devoted to *The Open* provides at best a rough overview, despite the rather obvious ways it is continuous with the concerns Agamben takes up in *Homo Sacer*, *State of Exception* and *The Time That Remains*. Some of the impression of fragmentariness is created by the inclusion of "scholia"

among the main chapters; essentially these are short asides on issues connected with but apparently not directly relevant to the main glosses of major works. Several of these provide quite valuable background material, especially beneficial for advanced readers wishing a deeper understanding of Agamben's texts and in particular of his relationship to several major philosophical influences, Heidegger and Benjamin chief among them, but also including figures such as Derrida, Debord, and Warburg. However, several of them it seems to me are distracting or unsatisfying or both. The scholium on Agamben's inconsistent readings of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence, while interesting, is at best tangentially related to the chapter on *Remnants of Auschwitz* with which it is associated, just as the many discussions of Adorno would be better left to a separate chapter on the relationship between Agamben and Adorno or omitted altogether. It is as though de la Durantaye wanted to include absolutely everything his obviously extensive research into Agamben's thought has brought to light, despite the disjointedness and lengthiness this imposes on the book. Not entirely unaware of this difficulty, de la Durantaye provides a justification of sorts drawn from Agamben's work itself. According to de la Durantaye, in *The Idea of Prose* Agamben abjures conventional modes of academic presentation in favour of indirect approaches to his subject-matter, pursuing a fragmentary and elliptical style of writing. This style we are told is inspired by Benjamin's attempt to write in fragments that conserve a potentiality to align with other fragments, presenting an image that "flashes up" at an appropriate moment when its capacity to be read emerges. While this is an important theoretical point for understanding what Agamben is up to, it appears that de la Durantaye has taken it over as his mode of presenting Agamben's work. It is one thing to call attention to Agamben's mode of presentation but to begin using it oneself in a work of this length surely adds to the sense of clutter and at times extraneous detail.

This is not, however, to say that de la Durantaye's treatment does not provide more reliable interpretations of several issues in Agamben's work than that of Mills. One area where de la Durantaye's deeper engagement appears is on the subject of Agamben's use of the concentration camp as "paradigm" of the present. It is fair to say that no other feature of Agamben's work has provoked his critics as much as the claim that the concentration camp provides the paradigm of modernity.

But what is meant by this? Both Mills and de la Durantaye attempt to put this claim in the context of the larger methodological issue of the connection between the paradigm as a method and the position of the specific example within it.

For her part, Mills draws attention to the topological as distinct from topographical figure that for Agamben characterises the camp. As she articulates the distinction, “the camp reveals an abstract logic that is by no means limited to the geographical space of internment.” (85) That the camp embodies an abstract logic entails that any space of internment (topographical figure) can become part of the topological logic of the camp, thus including airports, stadiums, or perhaps even entire cities hosting international gatherings such as the G20. In these cases, all such places exemplify the political logic of internment in which whatever happens takes place beyond the purview of ordinary law, a veritable space of exception, which has become the rule and where the law legally places what occurs outside itself. This is the point at which Agamben appears to be painting too many discreet phenomena with the broad brush of the logic of the exception. Mills suggests that it is important to appreciate the deeper methodological significance of Agamben’s claims about the camp as topology, and these in turn necessitate an examination of Agamben’s discussion of the paradigm. As Mills claims, the “paradigm allows for the intelligibility of a generality by virtue of the knowability of a singularity.” (86) Pointing out that Agamben “likens” his use of paradigms to “the approach taken by Foucault,” Mills shows that for Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* Bentham’s Panopticon was used in precisely this paradigmatic way, although Foucault refers to it as a diagram. The blueprint of this architecture was a specific instance that made intelligible an entire logic of confinement and a new form or diagram of power. As an instance that constitutes or makes intelligible the class to which it also belongs, paradigms (or diagrams) are recursive or self-referential structures, and thus depart from standard conceptions of historiography, in which events follow one another in a causal chain. But at this point, while acknowledging the similarity between Foucault’s notion of a diagram and Agamben’s notion of the paradigm, Mills describes the latter’s comparison with Foucault as a “usurpation of Foucault.” (86) What she seems to mean by this is that while Foucault “steered away from the search for ‘originary’ relations,” Agamben on her view does precisely the opposite. As she goes on to claim, Agamben

“presupposes a temporal continuity on the basis of a ‘conceptual fundamentalism’ in which the origin of a concept determines its subsequent meaning, purpose, and valency.” (87) As Mills concludes, whatever the merits of Agamben’s paradigmatic approach, in extending it backward into the distant past where the *homo sacer* of ancient Rome becomes the paradigm case of all life exposed to sovereign violence, Agamben “overstretches the notion of a paradigm along with historical credibility.” (87) To this criticism she adds, consistent with the idea of “overstretching,” that even if we accept the methodological claim that the camp is the paradigm of modernity, this does not justify the claim that its violence is an unavoidable consequent of the unfolding of an underlying logic of Western politics.

There seem to be two points of dispute here, each generated by Mills’ assumption that Agamben is moving from the specific to the general. The first is that Agamben’s borrowing from Foucault is flawed because it imposes a logic of similarity from part to whole that is absurd. The specificity of the camp cannot be generalised to somehow characterise all of society or even those aspects of it where sovereign power is in play. The second point is aimed at Agamben’s political ontology. The method of paradigms cannot be employed to construct a sense of historical inevitability by showing the present to be the unfolding of an ancient original instance; the latter move generates the charge of an analysis that is unhistorical.

In his account of Agamben’s use of paradigms in his chapter on *Homo Sacer*, de la Durantaye challenges both these points. Against the first he argues, drawing on several interviews and Agamben’s recent text *Signatura rerum* (recently translated into English as *Signature of all Things*), that the paradigm as used by Agamben does not display a logic of part to whole but rather, following Aristotle’s understanding of analogy, moves from part to part. Agamben is thus engaged in an active transposition of what defines one historical singularity to what plays the same role in another, a transposition that also establishes the relation of commonality between singularities. Thus, as de la Durantaye claims, “the paradigm resembles more closely the ‘semantic structure’ of allegory than that of metaphor.” (224) Far from imposing on the whole an element derived from a subsumed part, Agamben is composing a series on the basis of an analogous element found in each item of that series.

Regarding the second point, de la Durantaye shows, convincingly, I believe, that far from simply overstressing the paradigmatic method, Agamben (on his own admission) is utilising Benjamin's technique of constructing a dialectical image. De la Durantaye aptly summarises Agamben's use of Benjamin: "dialectical images represent a dynamic constellation of past and present where a moment of the past is not a simple element in a historical archive but a potentially dynamic means of understanding...the present situation." (245) In this sense Agamben's idea of origin is not causal in any conventional historical sense—there is no inevitability being posited between the *homo sacer* of ancient Rome and the inhabitants of the modern state. Instead, Agamben is linking an historical element in the distant past with a similar element in our present, where, guided by an experience in that present, he seeks to put the historical archive to a new use. It should be noted that, contra Mills, because there is no linear causality suggested here between past and present, she is incorrect to claim that there is something "unavoidable" being entailed.

Even though the plausibility of Agamben's methods is not automatically resolved by understanding them, both authors are right to suggest we must understand before we can judge the issue.

**Dominic Desroches, *Expressions éthiques de l'intériorité. Éthique et distance dans la pensée de Kierkegaard. Avec une préface d'André Clair.* Québec, Presses de l'Université Laval, 2008; 384 pages. ISBN : 978-2763786254.**

*Compte rendu de Martin Provencher, Collège de Rosemont, Montréal.*

Si nous voulions comprendre pourquoi le thème de la réception a fini par s'imposer dans la philosophie continentale contemporaine, nous pourrions prendre comme point de départ les grandes catastrophes politiques du 20<sup>e</sup> siècle et montrer ensuite comment la méditation sur les nouveaux pouvoirs que la technologie procure à l'être humain a conduit des philosophes aussi différents que Heidegger, Jaspers, Adorno, Levinas, Arendt et Jonas à faire le deuil de l'ambition prométhéenne de transformer le monde au profit d'une attitude de recueillement et d'ouverture à l'autre. Dans cette histoire, le nom de Søren Kierkegaard