

## The (Bio)Political Animal: Aristotelian Organicism and Agamben's *Homo Sacer*

Since its publication in 1995, Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* has occasioned an enormous amount of commentary. While much of this commentary seeks to extend or apply Agamben's insights to diverse theoretical domains or academic fields, numerous critics have also sought to limit or qualify the appeal of Agamben's formulations and now well-known terminology by calling attention to his work's oversights or shortcomings. Chief among these critiques have been assertions, sometimes strenuous, that the work is overly reductive in its application of concepts found in ancient political and legal texts to the operations of modern-day sovereign states. In line with these claims, numerous critics have also contended that Agamben's work is essentially a closed teleological system, in which originary concepts lead, almost mechanically, to inevitable, catastrophic results. In a similar vein, classicists and scholars of ancient philosophy have critiqued Agamben's usage of Aristotle's *Politics* as reductive or misguided, whether on a philological or a conceptual basis, essentially arguing that Agamben doesn't accurately represent Greek linguistic conventions or Aristotle's thought (Dubreuil 2006, Finlayson 2010, Holmes 2019, Brill 2020, Miller 2020, Cimino 2022, and Trott 2022).

This paper argues that existing criticisms of Agamben's usage of Aristotelian notions of "life," and the distinction between *zōē* and *bios* that Agamben finds central to ancient and modern political structures, are valid but can be extended substantially. The deeper issue with Agamben's work, I contend, is not that it misrepresents Aristotle's ideas in the opening of the *Politics* but that it but doesn't disclose the full context and broader significance of these ideas. Agamben's biopolitical formulations, in other words, rely upon a specific and selective reading of Aristotle's *Politics* and effectively abstract and transcendentalize claims related to nature, the *polis*, and *logos* that ultimately rationalize existing androcentric and aristocratic privilege and a normative definition of "man," as a *politikon zōon*, that is highly restrictive.

This definition of the human, moreover, which constitutes the foundation of the biopolitical capture that underwrites Agamben's entire project, is not as stable as either Aristotle or Agamben seem to believe. Rather than simply accepting the terms of Aristotle's argument and lamenting their inevitable consequences or calling "a completely new politics," as Agamben does (1995: 11), this paper critically attends to Aristotle's text with an eye toward the ways in which this foundational statement of political power qualifies or undermines its own claims. These claims, it should be noted, are not necessarily representative of "the Greeks" or "Greek thought," as Agamben contends, but are part of a larger field of historical theorizations, contestations, and arguments about the nature of the human and his or her place in the larger world (Cimino 2022: 194-95). In simply accepting Aristotle's claims and installing them as the "conceptual *arthron*" through which all of Western politics operates (Mills 2008: 109), Agamben not only obviates critical readings of Aristotle's text but transfers the terms of its biopolitical capture onto a humanistic horizon that is presented as universal, rather than constructed, and thus capable of being altered only by messianic intervention. After a brief overview of the controversial transhistorical dynamics that underwrite Agamben's approach, this paper will turn to an analysis of the problematic assumptions of social organicism that drive the conceptual development of the opening of Aristotle's *Politics*, which Agamben neither mentions nor questions, even as he is appropriating ideas from the ancient Greek thinker.

## Works Cited

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