Bare Life and Life in General

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It is reassuring to think that we can make clear-cut distinctions, especially where violence is concerned. It is reassuring because we like to believe we can clearly and unequivocally distinguish violence from nonviolence, destruction from construction, killing from vivifying, death from life. It is reassuring not least of all because such clear-cut distinctions seem to give us a hold on whatever is being distinguished while keeping us at a safe distance from it.

In “What Is a Camp?” Giorgio Agamben proposes an unusual but ostensibly clear-cut definition of modern politics—a definition that in turn reposes on a no less clear-cut definition of what he calls “the camp.”¹ Previously, he argues, “the camp” was seen strictly as “the place where the most absolute conditio inhumana that ever existed on earth has been realized; in the final analysis it’s the facts that count, for the victims as for their posterity.” In contrast to this approach, Agamben proposes to define the camp not on the basis “of the events that took place there” but rather “by asking: What is a camp? What is its legal and political structure such that such events could have happened there?” He concludes, “This will lead us to consider the camp not as an historical fact and as an anomaly belonging to the past, but as the secret matrix, the nomos of the political space in which we still live.”²

Agamben’s text was originally presented in 1995 at a conference that Hent de Vries and I had organized in Amsterdam on the relation of violence, self-determination, and identity. Two years later a volume of papers presented at the conference, including Agamben’s talk, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen, was published.³ I mention this not merely to recount the ancient history of this essay but because that history, perhaps like “the camp” itself, continues to bear on the present. At the time, Agamben’s talk was bitterly criticized in the discussion that followed. I remember being one of the few who defended it—not the theory in its entirety, but the questions it sought to raise and to answer. I still feel those questions are worth raising, even if certain of the answers Agamben supplied require considerable elaboration if not revision.

What at the time, and for many readers ever since, appeared particularly scandalous in Agamben’s theory of “the camp” was precisely the point on which he insisted at the outset: namely, that the essence or nature of “the camps” could not be derived from the
“events” that took place in them.

Agamben begins his essay by referring to “the camps” in the plural, a usage that connotes not simply “camps” in general but the Nazi extermination camps in particular. However, as his argument unfolds, it becomes clear that he uses “camps” in the plural mainly to refer, theoretically at least, to the empirical diversity of “camps” rather than to their “essence,” which he designates almost always in the singular: as “the” camp. In the question that serves as title of the essay—“What Is a Camp”—the indefinite article therefore stands as an implicit announcement of the unitary “essence” that for him will characterize “the camp” as the hidden nomos of contemporary politics qua biopolitics. The “singularity” of “the camp,” then, has to be sharply distinguished from the view of the camp Agamben combats and that construes its uniqueness as a historical “anomaly.” This is an important distinction that I, however, interpret somewhat differently from Agamben.

The singularity of “the camps,” for Agamben, is not anomalous but bound into a historical continuity—one that affects not only the past but the present and the future. This in turn presupposes that despite the vast variety of camps, a single structure—and a single condition of possibility—unifies and underlies them all and therefore allows us to see them, in their unitary singularity, as the “secret matrix” of politics today.

Agamben does not use the phrase “condition of possibility” in his essay. Instead, he seeks to discover the “political-juridical structure such that such events could have been possible.” This working hypothesis makes two assumptions: first, that the conditions under which the events of the camp took place were essentially “political-juridical” in character. Second, that such political-juridical conditions were not just necessary but sufficient to produce the events in the camp. Both of these assumptions—and, above all, their connection, which suggests that the political-juridical constitutes the necessary and sufficient condition of the “camps”—can and should be contested. The assumptions may be necessary but are not sufficient to describe the reality of the camps, the character of which is diverse enough to resist assimilation to a single, unitary essence, and hence to a single unitary condition of possibility.

Agamben’s argument for this double assumption or assertion in “What Is a Camp?” should be read in connection with his Homo Sacer, also first published in 1995. Then as now what I find important in Agamben’s approach is his effort to de-quarantine “the camps” by recognizing their connection to a larger historical context and tradition. This is not to diminish the terrible singularity of “the camps” qua institutions of genocidal extermination. Rather, it is to argue that singularity in general, and that of the camps in particular, remains a relational category and must therefore be
interpreted with respect to long-standing traditions and tendencies. To relate evil to phenomena that are often thought of as neutral or even as good is not to trivialize evil but to take full measure of the force without which it could never impose itself. The uniqueness of the camps should not be treated as something essentially isolated from other, more widespread phenomena. Agamben’s effort to locate the principle or essence of the camps in a biopolitical and juridical structure, whatever its merits and demerits, constitutes one such effort. Such an approach is indispensable if one hopes to learn anything from the past that might enable one to avoid future recurrences.

However, to merely describe a series of institutional developments, however significant they are—such as the elevation of birth to a biopolitical determinant of citizenship and simultaneously of the human itself—is not enough to account for “the camps.” Such factors may have contributed to those conditions, may even have been conditions “necessary” to the development of “the camps,” but their mere factual existence does not seem sufficient to account for what was essential to them. More than a mere description of “juridical-political” institutions seems required in order to elucidate the force that in turn made the incredible violence of those camps a reality.

Agamben’s argument in his essay contains three main points. First, “The camp is the space that opens up when the state of exception begins to become the rule.” The camp is designed to make durable a state that is initially conceived as temporary—the suspension of constitutional procedures in the face of a situation of “exception.” More abstractly, a particular organization of space is designed to immobilize time as a medium of change. But the organization is highly unusual because it is based negatively on the suspension of otherwise existing legal restraints and guarantees. This situation of nonlaw makes the camp a place where, to quote Hannah Arendt’s famous characterization of the camps, echoing the words of Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor, “anything is possible.” What Agamben does not develop, however, is the introductory part of the famous utterance of the Grand Inquisitor. The entire phrase is, “If God is dead, then anything is possible.” Second, because the camp is a place where the usual legal restraints are no longer operative, it can be said to constitute a certain exteriority that is placed within the scope and power of a system: it marks the inclusion of exclusion. Third, “Through the fact that its inmates have previously been stripped of all political status and wholly reduced to bare life, the camp is also the most absolute biopolitical space ever realized, where the powers-that-be confront pure life without any mediation.”

This convergence of the juridical-political “state of exception” with the “biopolitical” reduction of life (bios) to “pure” or “bare
life” (zoe) finds its institutional expression, according to Agamben, in “the camp,” a space in which “anything is possible.” (The power of fascination of this strange assertion appears to be in direct proportion to its vagueness and inappropriateness: that the claim that “anything was possible” in the camps is obviously not true unless anything is understood to mean “any act of violence.” But this equation of anything with violence should be anything but self-evident, although its fascinating power calls for considerable reflection, which I cannot develop here.)

The phrase “anything is possible” takes on a special significance for Agamben. Whereas for Arendt it was indissolubly linked to the death camps, Agamben expands it to apply to camps that outwardly at least have little to do with concentration camps. Agamben—and this was the provocation of his talk—sees the essence of the camps as including not just death camps but detention camps in international airports where stateless or paperless persons are held incommunicado for indefinite periods; internment camps such as those established by the French pre-war government and then taken over by Vichy; or “gated communities” in the United States. Presumably he would also include refugee camps for displaced persons in the general category. In all of these cases, the rule of law is suspended indefinitely (although how this would apply to “gated communities”—or, for that matter, whether a confined space is necessary to have the rule of law suspended—is not quite clear to me). However, Agamben’s main point is that the decisive quality defining the camps is that their inmates, or residents, are stripped of all legal protection and thereby accorded the status of “bare life.”

To understand more fully this argument, we have to recall some of the arguments more fully developed in Homo Sacer with respect to “bare life.” The reduction of life as lived by individuals or by groups to pure self-identity, to “bare life,” is what Agamben sees at work in the Roman legal notion of the homo sacer, a person who can be killed without incurring punishment and whose death cannot be understood as a “sacrifice.” The significance of this figure for Agamben derives from the fact that it exemplifies “the originary ‘political’ relation” insofar as the homo sacer embodies a sort of “inclusive exclusion” that allows it to “serve as referent of the sovereign decision.” Agamben thus adopts and adapts the notion of sovereignty elaborated by Carl Schmitt in his Political Theology, in which the sovereign is defined as “he who decides on the state of exception.” Sovereignty is thus defined as the power to decide when the constitution is to be suspended in order to cope with a state of exception that no system of positive law can deal with. This notion of exceptionality reflects Schmitt’s antinomian conception of law as such. Law is antinomian insofar as it must seek to reconcile the general—upon which positive law depends—with the singular,
which is required in order for the law to be applicable or enforceable. To be effective, law must be “applied” to singular “cases,” which, however, insofar as they are singular always introduce a nonimmanent gap with respect to the explicit formulation of the law. In order to function—in order to be law—cases must be submitted to verdicts or judgments (the German word Urteil signifies both). In order to bridge the gap between the intrinsic generality of positive law and its singular application or enforcement, Schmitt therefore introduces the necessity of a “decision” that is no longer based wholly on cognitive judgment but rather contains something like a leap of faith. This leap makes law both intrinsically political and intrinsically transcendent (theological, if you will)—precisely by virtue of its lack of immanence.\footnote{11 }

Between Political Theology (1922), which defines sovereignty as the power to decide the state of exception, and The Concept of the Political (1932), which defines the political as the effect of the “friend-enemy grouping,” Schmitt implicitly introduces an element that will be decisive for Agamben’s later revision and elaboration of Schmittian doctrine. That element is the act of killing. If Schmitt understands the “political” in his 1932 book as a result of the “friend-enemy grouping,” the notion of the “enemy” entails the legitimacy of the act of killing. The enemy is not (yet) the homo sacer, but he does share with him certain properties: he is alive and, as enemy, killing him is legitimate. The possibility of such legitimate killing, which also does not involve a sacrifice, is for Schmitt the prerequisite of the formation and maintenance of a political entity. (This does not mean the enemy should be exterminated. Enemies are required for the political to exist. Therefore the extermination of enemies in general would equate with the end of the political. The enemy in general, remains essential in Schmittian doctrine to the constitution of the political.)

If we combine Schmitt’s earlier notion of sovereignty with his later notion of the political, we see that political sovereignty entails the legitimacy of killing—not as an end in itself but in order that a greater life, that of the polity, can be protected and maintained. The Schmittian “enemy” is thus theoretically a forerunner of Agamben’s homo sacer, to the extent that it embodies the “external” element that is “internal” to the polity insofar as it is required for the polity to constitute and perpetuate itself. This is why Schmitt’s formulation, “friend-enemy grouping” is precise although often neglected. Politics is a result of this grouping, not simply of the “enemy” per se.

From this, two consequences can be drawn that bear on the question of the “camps.” First, one of the key moves made by Agamben, already anticipated by Schmitt (and surely by many others in different forms, because it has been at the heart of Western political thinking at least since Hobbes), is the introduction of the grouping
of “life” and “death” as a decisive constituent of the political. What is implicit in Schmitt, however, becomes explicit in Agamben. Borrowing the term from Walter Benjamin, Agamben’s biopolitics redefines Schmitt’s friend-enemy grouping as the grouping of “bare life” with death. Agamben writes, “The originary political element is therefore not simply natural life, but life exposed to death (naked life or sacred life).” To become “political,” however, qua “sovereign,” this “exposure” must be transformed from a state experienced passively or merely endured to an act: “The primary foundation of political power is a life absolutely exposed to murder, which is politicized through the possibility of being put to death.”

If putting-to-death can thus be said to constitute the “primary foundation” of political power, one can see how the “camp” could come to exemplify political power in an age of biopolitics. However, Agamben sees not this aspect of the camps—their exterminatory function—as decisive for their biopolitical exemplarity but rather the way in which they contribute to making the state of exception the rule by treating their inmates as instances of “bare life,” stripped of all individuating legal and political status and protection.

Thus, in terms of Agamben’s general theory, biopolitics, and politics in general, entails legitimate killing as the exemplary act of sovereignty. But the constitution of “the camp” cannot be reduced to the act of killing and hence to the organized extermination practiced in the Nazi (and other) death camps. The latter is a result of the same process that leads to the institution of the camps in general—so Agamben—but it is not identical with this process. This is the first consequence to be drawn from our brief review of the theoretical context in which Agamben develops his theory of “the camp”; it is a consequence that corrects, in part at least, a possible erroneous interpretation of that theory based only on a reading of the one short essay, which appears to minimize the function of “extermination” in interpreting the significance of the camps.

But a second consequence emerges when we read the short essay in conjunction with the theory elaborated in Homo Sacer. The notion of political sovereignty that Agamben develops there is drawn from the experience of Roman law and hence has the Roman empire as its primary political referent. But the structure of political space in an empire seems quite different from the confined space of a “camp.” Agamben himself appears to say as much: “The founding act of the city does not consist in the establishment of frontiers but rather in their effacement or their negation (as the myth of the foundation of Rome says in its own way, but also very clearly).”

That is, to the extent the political can be derived from Roman models, its political space will tend to be expansive and universalizing rather than limited and concentrationary, as with the camps.
The *homo sacer* could be killed with impunity, but he was not interned. In the Roman empire this was not necessary. In the modern political world, according to Agamben, it is. Agamben conceives the modern function of the camps to be that of providing a more durable institutional form to the state of exception. But why should this have become necessary today? And above all, can a biopolitical-legal conception provide a satisfactory account either of the history of the camps or of their contemporary reality?¹⁴

The history of the camps indicates that at least in their origins they were more diverse than the image of death camps would suggest. Nonetheless, they were linked to killing and hence to death from the start. The phrase *concentration camp* arose in connection not just with military conflicts but also with colonial ones. The first camps explicitly designated as “concentrations” appeared during the wars waged by the Spanish in Cuba from 1868–1878. Like the fortified villages later imposed by the French in the Algerian War and by the Americans and their South Vietnamese allies during the Vietnam War, the *reconcentrados* were designed to group the civilian population in order to control them more effectively. Although thus designed initially as internment camps, hundreds of thousands of inmates perished in the *reconcentrados*, dying from starvation, sickness, or malnutrition. The killing was indirect but nonetheless systematic because the conditions of life that the Spanish imposed on the camps were incompatible with long-term survival. Photos of the victims and survivors show emaciated and cadaver-like figures that closely resemble those of the Nazi camps. The institution was subsequently adopted by the United States in its war in the Philippines (1899–1902) and by the British during the Second Boer War (1899–1902). Despite high death rates caused by the impossible living conditions and brutal treatment of their inmates, these camps were not yet organized as instruments of systematic, much less genocidal, extermination. A distinction could still be drawn between concentration camps as such and death camps.

These early instances of concentration camps suggest they developed not just as an elaboration of the “state of exception,” as Agamben argues, but as instruments in military conflicts of, initially at least, a colonial nature.

The colonial dimension recently has been shown to be decisive in the later elaboration of Nazi genocide and of the camps as their primary instrument. During its colonization of South West Africa, Germany legitimated its war of annihilation by invoking its need for “living space” (*Lebensraum*), a term introduced in 1901 by the political geographer Friedrich Ratzel. German colonial policies were also legitimated by a rhetoric that treated Africans as subhumans who had to be exterminated in order to make room for the “living space” needed by German settlers. Military operations
against indigenous peoples systematically disregarded international rules of war and often deliberately aimed at annihilation of the enemy rather than at mere conquest. The Nazis put into practice similar policies a half-century later in Eastern Europe, this time with Jews, Slavs, and Communists as the primary victims.

In addition to ideology and military policies, strong personal connections existed between the genocidal colonial warfare of Wilhelminian Germany and National Socialism. The most prominent link involved Dr. Heinrich Göring, who served as first Reichskommissar for German South West Africa and was venerated by his son, Hermann. A no-less-influential figure was Franz Ritter von Epp, who played an active role in the annihilation of the Herero people, and then, after World War I, founded the Freikorps Epp, which helped crush the Munich Soviet Republic. From 1919 to 1928 he served in Munich as commander of the newly formed Epp-Bataillon of the Reichswehr, in which capacity he directly employed such future Nazi leaders as Gregor Strasser, Walther Schultze, and Hitler himself. Epp joined the National Socialist Party in 1928, and Hitler subsequently assigned him the task of planning the colonial policies of the Reich that were to be put into practice after the victorious end of the war.

The concentration camps created in German South West Africa anticipated in many respects those later established in Europe: they included what has been described as “the twentieth century’s first death camp”—namely, the Shark Island Camp (referred to by German troops as the Todesinsel, Death Island), which functioned from 1905 to 1907. In addition, internment and forced labor camps were also established in which inmates were killed indirectly through unlivable living conditions. In both cases, genocide served the purpose of creating Lebensraum. More generally, a pattern emerged in which not just death but organized and systematic killing directed at ethnic groups was practiced and justified as promoting a higher and better life.

This conjunction of military and colonial conflict should enjoin us to question whether the model of the homo sacer and of “bare life” invoked by Agamben is sufficient to explain the essential reality of the camps—a term that should be used in the plural and never simply in the singular. A purely biopolitical perspective seems unable to account for the selective process by which certain groups and not others were designated to be victims of the colonial, and then of the Nazi, killing machine. The biopolitical mechanism based on “bare life” may have constituted a necessary condition for this process, but it remains to be shown that it was a sufficient one.

Even though colonized peoples in Africa and then in Europe were denied the legal protection normally accorded to citizens, their exclusion from such protection went far beyond that of the
homo sacer, who presumably still remained a Roman citizen even while being singled out as capable of being killed without penalty or punishment. Rather, the colonial and racist criteria on which such victimization was based seem difficult to derive from the concept of “bare life,” inasmuch as they presuppose a hierarchization of life itself—a hierarchy within and among the living that would enable or even require certain living beings to be put to death so that other living beings could survive and flourish. The existence of this kind of value system argues against the notion of “bare life” as a sufficient explanatory principle, especially if, as Agamben’s argument implies, such “bare life” is understood as the simple opposite of qualified, differentiated forms of life proper to different groups of people.

Rather, the notion of “bare life”—in the sense of “mere life”—seems more to reflect the conscious ideology of the killers than the actual logic that informed their acts and through which they identified their prospective victims. The African and then European groups selected for annihilation by the Nazis were chosen not because they were representatives or embodiments of “bare life”; rather, they were deemed to embody inferior forms of life—forms of life inimical to the thriving of life in general, which in turn, was to be identified with biologically superior races and peoples. The opposition between bios (qualified life) and zoē (bare life) seems unable to account for the specific forces driving the extermination policies that were implemented through the camps.¹⁶

We ought, therefore, to go back to Agamben’s main source for the notion of “bare life”: Walter Benjamin’s use of the term in his essay, “Zur Kritik der Gewalt” (Critique of Violence). The concluding pages of this essay, where Benjamin introduces and discusses the notion of “bare” or “mere life” are among the most difficult he wrote. (Those who have read Benjamin extensively will have had ample occasion to measure just what such difficulty can entail.) Unfortunately, this complexity prevents me from here analyzing the arguments developed by Benjamin in any detail. Instead, I will, for the purposes of the argument that concerns me here, limit myself to commenting briefly on one short but dense passage:

Human being (Der Mensch) is in no way equivalent to the mere life (bloßen Leben) of man, no more than the mere life in him is [equivalent to] any one of his situations (Zustände) and qualities, indeed not even to the uniqueness of his physical person. As sacred as the human is (or also that life in him, which consists identically in earthly life, death and afterlife [Fortleben]), so little (sacred) are his situations, his physical, humanly vulnerable life. . . . It would surely be worthwhile investigating the origin of the dogma of the sacredness of Life.
Possibly, indeed probably it is recent, the last aberration of a weakened Western tradition in search of its lost saint. 17

Benjamin derives “mere life,” which in this essay he also identifies with “natural” and “physical” life, from what he calls the “mythical violence” that, also in this essay, he places at the origin of law and sees epitomized in the punishment meted out to Niobe, which he describes as “culpabilizing and atoning at the same time” (verschuldend und sühnend zugleich). He contrasts mythical violence with the divine violence that destroys the clan of Korah in the Bible, which he calls “absolving” (entsühnend): whereas “mythical violence is blood-violence over mere life for the sake of itself, divine, pure violence aims at pure life for the sake of the living.” 18

Like Agamben, Benjamin introduces the notion of “pure life” in a discussion of violence and its relation to juridical systems. But, unlike Agamben, the determining “other” of “bare life” is nothing that could be identified with bios, whether as forms of life or as qualified life. Rather, divine violence is named by two words, Entsühnend and das Lebendige. Both are difficult to translate into English. Benjamin places Entsühnend in opposition to Sühne, which derives from legal language and is associated with penance or penalty for something done (in German, the title of Dostoyevsky’s novel that in English is known as Crime and Punishment is generally translated as Schuld und Sühne, literally “Guilt and Penance”). Entsühnen, by contrast, seems to aim at relieving human beings from the legal couple of guilt and penance; it can be translated as “absolving” if one thinks of that word as freeing one from that juridical couplet. Das Lebendige is difficult to translate, in part, because the corresponding words in both English and French collapse a distinction that exists in German and is decisive for Benjamin’s argument, even if he does not explicitly insist on it. In English, the translation would have to be “the living”; in French, “le vivant.” But these words efface the tension between this word and another one, which is also used by Benjamin to determine a certain mode of life; namely, die Lebenden—which would also have to be translated as “the living.” The difference between the two is that the latter designates living beings, whereas the former signifies the state of being-alive. Mythical violence—and hence the legal and political system—has power over “the living” (die Lebenden) insofar as individual living beings are understood as imperfect instantiations of natural or “bare life”—that is, of life in general, life taken in its generative generality. As bearers of “bare life,” individual living beings are naturally and inevitably mortal.

But this is not enough to explain the connection between “the living” comprised of individual living beings and “guilt” and “penance.” To understand this, we must recall a “myth” that
Benjamin does not mention here but that informs his argument precisely by remaining unmentionable. According to this myth, which Benjamin displaces onto Greek tragedy, human mortality is the fault of human pride, hubris: that of Niobe, for instance, who vaunted her progeny and lost all her children as punishment. But another myth informs Benjamin’s notion of mythic violence, even if he rarely names it explicitly. If the “guilt” of pure or bare life is the origin of mythic violence, its most powerful articulation resides in the Christian notion of “original sin.”

What original sin implies is precisely the original sacredness of life as such, held to emanate directly from the divine creator. Life as originally created—pure but not yet bare—is without death. Death first enters life as the result of man’s guilty transgression of the divine prohibition against eating from the Tree of Knowledge. In his 1916 essay “On Language as Such and the Language of Man,” Benjamin interprets the Fall as the fall from the immediacy of the divine name into the mediacy of ethical and cognitive judgment. “Judgment,” in German as in English, designates both a cognitive and judicial act/process, and this is the true “mythical origin” of right and law. By right—divine right—life is exempt from death. But such “right” only appears in the “fall” from the divinely sanctioned process of naming—Adam naming all creatures—to the cognitive-legal process of knowing the difference between good and evil.

But Benjamin’s analysis can be expanded and elaborated. The first chapter of Genesis presents life as originally without death; it is without death because it pertains not to individual living beings but to instantiations of genres. Initially God creates everything living “after its kind,” and Adam then is called upon to give each kind its proper name (Gen. 1:9–24). With the Fall, each proper generic name falls into the language of judgment, of good and evil and of life and death. The “linguistic fall” from the language of naming to that of judgment can therefore also be understood as the fall from a language adequate to generic singularity into one that seeks to articulate the relation between the singular and the general as one of properties—and of punishment.

Such punishment is already described in Genesis, although Benjamin does not deal with this aspect. Adam and Eve do not die as God first promises when he pronounces the ban on eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Instead, they are punished by being expelled from Eden and condemned to a life of toil, suffering, and above all, mortality. The first murderer, Cain, is also not immediately killed for his deed. He lives on—under divine protection, as it were—in order to found a city and father a family. The Bible thus recognizes the world-building function of mortal human beings. But it also portrays their mortality as punishment for their guilty transgression. Politics, in Genesis, can thus be said to emerge as the result of
guilt—and of killing.

In the perspective of Genesis, then, life is originally pure, bare of all relation to others, except to its creator. Life is exposed to death in the form of the divine prohibition. But death becomes a reality—imposes itself upon life—only as the result of human action and, more particularly, of human transgression. This also means that the perspective of nongeneric singular and mortal living being emerges only with the expulsion from Eden. Initially human beings are generic, pure, and immortal; afterward they are singular, vulnerable, and mortal, outliving themselves only through families, traditions, and polities.

With the advent of Christianity, however, the possibility appears of undoing what has been done and of restoring life to its original essence. This sheds new light on what Agamben calls “bare life” and what I would call “life in general.” Hobbes cites the following words of Paul to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 15:21–22) in the Leviathan, one of the founding texts of modern political theory: “For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.”

The function of the state, according to Hobbes, resides in the protection it affords its citizens. But protection from what? If the modern European nation-state develops in the aftermath of the war of religions, by which European Christianity was on the way to decimating itself in internecine strife—strife that was ultimately about the nature of salvation—then the concern with public “safety” and security that legitimates the existence of the state is at least tendentially oriented by the task of anticipating on earth what can only be fully realized with the Second Coming. Public safety anticipates individual salvation.

And salvation here means, above all, resurrection, redemption from fatal guilt, from mortality, and thus eternal life. The so-called secular politics of the nation-state would thus be constituted as the collective attempt to incarnate and preserve the promise of the Nativity while awaiting the Second Coming. The bare life of biopolitics would form the inner armature of politics in this sense—the politics of protection, as I have elsewhere called it, following Hobbes. Singular mortal beings could thus hope to be protected from their fate by subordinating themselves to a political collective that would be capable of preserving them through its survival, which in turn would serve as a worldly guarantee of future redemption and resurrection.

“Protection” is also one of the key notions in justifying the state of exception that for Agamben constitutes one of the indispensable conditions of the “camps.” The establishment of the first Nazi camp at Dachau was designed to implement “protective custody” (Schutzhaft), a legal institution that, as Agamben recalls in “What Is a Camp?”
was originally instituted in the 1850s in Prussia. Such “protective custody” departs radically from traditional penal law because it imprisons persons not on the basis of acts they have committed but in view of acts they might commit. Protective custody thus is based on an evaluation of an existential condition and as such is structurally linked to the extermination camps since it judges persons in terms of what it takes to be their entire being rather than with regard to specific acts committed.

But the real and ultimate goal of protection in general and of protective custody in particular is nothing less than the overcoming of time—of time and the future. To understand this, let us consider again the biblical perspective articulated in the book of Genesis. In this perspective, time enters the picture only with the Fall, with original sin, with guilt, and, above all, with its consequence, mortality. Time then reveals its double face: it serves as the medium by which human beings realize themselves, individually and collectively, constructively and destructively—first fully epitomized in the figure and destiny of Cain—but it also stands as the medium of perdition.

The balance of power between these two facets or faces of time shifts radically with the Christian promise of redemption and resurrection. Time, the medium of perdition, labor, and loss, now becomes emphatically also the medium of future salvation—of the Second Coming—and thus the medium through which mortality is to be overcome. Protection and protective custody, and perhaps politics in general, seek to parry the destructive menace of an (as yet) unredeemed future by confining it in the present. (The recent emphasis on the “short term”—especially in terms of profit maximization—can also be seen in this context).

The notion of “bare life” is therefore unable to explain adequately how the idea of salvation through protection could develop into a force of mass destruction and extermination, through the establishment of the camps, as well as by other means. Those who were taken into protective custody and ultimately killed were annihilated because they were deemed to pose a threat from within, as it were, to life in general, as it was articulated in the (racially) unified body politic. This was the conviction that moved both the policy makers and their executants to devise and carry out the program of mass extermination, directed first against political opponents—Communists, Socialists, and unionists—and then against other groups deemed dangerous by their mere existence rather than by their acts: groups such as Jews, Gypsies, and homosexuals. Through such mass extermination, organized and executed deliberately and systematically, the perpetrators could believe themselves to be protecting life in general from the forces of death—paradoxically by mobilizing those very forces. Mobilized and militarized, death was
thus “administered” in the service of life. The killing of peoples and groups in concentration camps—but also elsewhere—thereby sought to put death to death (a formula Alain Badiou invokes to describe the Pauline conception of resurrection).\textsuperscript{24}

It should be noted that the death of Christ, through which human guilt is potentially redeemed, is the result of a violent act of human beings. And not just any human beings. As any viewer of Mel Gibson’s film \textit{The Passion of the Christ} can attest, the true murderers of Christ were not the Romans—the mere executants—but the Jews. In killing Christ and denying his message of redemption and resurrection, the Jews thus could be identified with the forces that affirm the priority of death over life and of law over grace. To kill death would thus logically be to annihilate the Jews.

Between the protective-salvational function of the camps in general and the genocidal death camps in particular there can thus be seen to exist a continuity based on this political-theological tradition. The Jews had to be eliminated as a people, at least from Europe, because they had long been identified as the agents—the perverse incarnation—of the Antichrist which however also then means anti-life: forces opposing the restoration of life in general, and the embodiment, in particular, of that general life in the Third Reich. The messianic dimension of Judaism resists actualization in the present and hence universalization. Nazi policies of extermination thus can be seen as continuing—and modernizing—a much older tradition of Christian anti-Semitism. For instance, the ghettoization of the Jews—in particular, the construction of walls separating them from the Christian population—was motivated in part through the fear of typhus, traditionally associated with the Jews. The policy of containment and then of extermination was thus construed by its perpetrators as a sanitary policy, an issue of public health as much as a political one. But the walls of the ghettos were but another attempt to fulfill the protective-salvational function of modern politics.

If the notion of “bare life” could become, as Agamben argues, a lethal machine, it was in order to purge life as lived by singular living beings—which entails the constitutive relation of life to death—by subordinating life in the singular to life in general. Life in general can be seen to generate and perpetuate itself prior to and independently of death. Life in the singular cannot. But life in general is only life when it assumes a particular, nameable, identifiable form. The name that this form assumed in the modern period was most often that of the “people”; in particular, a people unified by ties of blood and soil—the biopolitical version of the criteria of modern citizenship, birth, and territory.

But a “people” is inevitably particular and limited. So the question emerges as to which “people” is to be regarded as the decisive
embodiment of life in general? If the essence of such life in general is its capacity to kill death—that is, to expunge death from life by eliminating all those who embody its irreducibility—then the status of a people to defend and protect life in general will have to be demonstrated by its ability to kill and eliminate its enemies—who by definition can be considered to be enemies of life. This is why the militarization of all aspects of political life in Germany under the Nazis and the exercise of military power ultimately to annihilate enemies emerged as the decisive criterion of what was held to be a historical destiny. And it is also why the camp emerged as one of its key figures. The camp concentrated in order to exterminate, just as the forces of life in general sought to concentrate what they took to be exterior to life itself—namely, the forces of death—in order then to annihilate them through the force of killing.

The camps were thus both the site and the institution required to quarantine the forces of death in order to exterminate them—and thereby to protect life against the living. But what, if anything, links the death camps to other camps today—refugee camps, for instance, or internment camps? If these involve the establishment of a permanent state of exception, it must still be asked what such protective measures seek to accomplish and also from where they gather the strength to impose themselves. A possible answer can be found in the ambivalent attitude to death that marks the political culture of the West. The establishment of places of confinement, whether voluntary or imposed, mirrors the defensive-protective monotheopolitical project that has long dominated the Western political tradition. It is no accident that a key word in the description of modern politics—bürglich in German, bourgeois in French and English—is formed from the word for a fortified village: Burg in German, bourg in French. Perhaps one of the most symptomatic uses of that word is to be found in the Lutheran hymn that sums up much of the temper of the Reformation and a powerful if often hidden legacy of modern politics: “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” (Ein fester Burg ist unser Gott). In the aftermath of the Protestant attack on the universalist pretentions of the Catholic Church, the task of assuring access to salvation with purely earthly means has tended to articulate itself through reference to the fortified structure of the Burg, the fortress: seeking to protect itself against dangers from without, and thereby to avoid recognizing that the danger comes from within. The camp is an attempt to institutionalize this impossible site of salvational politics.

One of the best and surely one of the most poignant descriptions of this attempt is to be found in Kafka’s “long” story, “Der Bau,” written in the year of his death.25 In the story—usually translated in English as “The Burrow,” although a more literal rendering would be “The Building”—a first-person narrator tells the story of
his attempts to construct and fortify his burrow, which is constantly threatened from without, above all by what the narrator calls *das Tier*, “the animal,” a figure often identified with the illness that claimed Kafka’s life. The association of “animal” with mortality is not peculiar to Kafka’s story. In the Western tradition, animal life has often been regarded as a lower form of life than the human because it lacks the ability to resist—or experience—death. Animal life is in this sense the “mere” of “bare life”; life that is merely mortal. Let me conclude with a short extract of the imagined confrontation of Kafka’s (animal?) narrator with *das Tier*:

In general I try to decipher the plan of the Animal. Is it merely wandering about or is it working on its own building? If it were wandering, an arrangement with it would perhaps be possible. If it really broke through to me, I would give it some of my reserves and it would move on. Yes, it would surely move on. In my heap of earth I am allowed to dream of everything, including arrangements, although I know full well that something of the sort does not exist and that in the moment when we see each other, indeed even approach each other, we would, as though out of our senses—neither sooner nor later—with a new hunger, even if we are full, hurl ourselves at each other with claws and teeth.26
Notes


2. Agamben, “Qu’est-ce qu’un camp?” 47. Here and in what follows I am translating from the French while consulting the Italian and English editions.


6. Agamben, “Qu’est-ce qu’un camp?” 49.


8. Agamben, Homo sacer: Le pouvoir souverain et la vie nue, 81–84. Here and in what follows I am translating from the French while consulting the Italian and English editions.


11. One of Schmitt’s earliest publications, Gesetz und Urteil (1912), 2nd ed. (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1968), lays out this problem of legal practice (Rechtspraxis). The gap between law and verdict or judgment can be bridged, according to Schmitt, only by a process of “decision” that he relates, in a Humean manner, to established tradition (98, 100, 114).


14. In Il regno e la gloria, Agamben seeks to extend the legal interpretation of “biopolitics” beyond the perspective articulated by Foucault, by retracing its origins to early Christian theology, demonstrating in particular how the notion of oikonomia is invoked to mediate between theological transcendence and worldly immanence. However, his genealogy underestimates the significance of the Protestant Reformation in calling this mediation into question and thereby setting the stage for the emergence of modern biopolitics. Giorgio Agamben, Il regno e la gloria: Per una genealogia teologica dell’economia e del governo (Milan: Neri Pozza Editore, 2007). Available in English as Giorgio Agamben, The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa and Matteo Mandarini (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

15. Benjamin Madley, “From Africa to Auschwitz: How German South West Africa Incubated Ideas and Methods Adopted and Developed by the Nazis in
Eastern Europe.” European History Quarterly 35, no. 3 (2005): 429. I am indebted to Andrew Hennlich for calling this remarkable article to my attention.

16. “The growing separation between birth (bare life) and the nation-state is the new fact in the politics of our age and what we call camp is this split.” Agamben, “Qu’est-ce qu’un camp?” 54.


25. Franz Kafka, “Der Bau,” in Sämtliche Erzählungen (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1981). Agamben sees in this story a description of “precisely what has happened in the political space of Western nation-states . . . lethal traps for the very ‘peoples’ that were supposed to inhabit them.” Agamben, “In This Exile (Italian Diary, 1992–94),” in Means without End, 138–139. What I find significant, however, is not so much the “lethal” quality of the space as the confluence of outer danger with inner destiny—mortality in the guise of the illness that was soon to claim Kafka’s life.