

Debordian Strategists: Agamben and Virno on the Coming Politics

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Abstract: This paper considers Agamben's political project as it develops in response to Guy Debord. By tracing the historical context of Agamben's initial engagement with Debord during the summer of 1968, I argue for a reading of *The Coming Community* as at one and the same time the opening of Agamben's explicit political project and as part of a specific theoretical horizon, namely a divergent or heretical Marxism.

The importance of Debord for Agamben's political project allows for a helpful comparison between Agamben and post-operaismo, especially the work of Paolo Virno, alongside whom Agamben published an essay recapitulating the conclusion of *The Coming Community* in a 1991 book on the Situationists. I situate Agamben's inheritance from Debord against the work of Virno in order to carry out an immanent critique of Agamben's conceptualization of language, life, and the common in relation to politics. Situating Virno's development within a similar, if fleeting, Debordian heritage, I argue that it is especially the problem of the common that remains under-conceptualized in Agamben's political project.

Introduction

IN the prologue to *The Use of Bodies*, the last volume of his Homo Sacer series, Agamben calls attention to the fact that Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* opens with the word "life" and never ceases to interrogate the historical weave of life up to and including its "concrete inversion" in the spectacular conditions of modern society.¹ On the one hand, Agamben's focus on the problem of life is not surprising, given his account of *bios* and *zoe* at the heart of the Homo Sacer project. However, the concise but thorough discussion of Debord's works that suffuses the prologue of *The Use of Bodies* also allows us to consider Agamben's conceptual deployment as an inflection on his relationship with this master of strategic philosophy.² More specifically, instead of enumerating life in spectacular so-

1. Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), xix. For Debord's remarks on the spectacle as the "concrete inversion of life," cf. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Fredy Perlman et al. (Detroit: Black & Red, 1983), 2. All references to *Society of the Spectacle* are to the numbered theses, not page numbers.
2. For a more thorough account of Debord, strategy, and philosophy, particularly in relationship to Hegel, cf. Jason E. Smith, "Strategy and the Passions: Guy Debord's Ruses," in Mark Potocnik, Frank Ruda, and Jan Völker, eds. *Beyond Potentialities?: Politics Between the Possible and the Impossible* (Zurich: diaphanes, 2011), 169-182. Smith notes Agamben's recounting of a story in a lecture given a year after Debord's death in which Agamben tells of his rebuke, given Agamben's recurring temptation to call him a philosopher, that he is not a philosopher but a strategist. My attempt to read both Agamben and Virno as Debordian strategists is situated within the ambivalent relationship between philosophy and strategy present in Debord's writings. A fuller reckoning of this relationship might begin also with Althusser, who along with Debord best understood the *Kampfplatz* of philosophy in the twentieth century. Such a reckoning would, in turn, also need to consider our inheritance of an old alternative, that of Hegel or Spinoza.

ciety as an addendum to the Homo Sacer series, we might do well to work through the implications of the Debordian context at the root of Agamben's constructive political project. Agamben's engagement with Debord, although clandestine and scattered, dates from an initial encounter in the breaks of Heidegger's 1968 Le Thor seminar, and I will argue that the genesis of Agamben's constructive political project with the publication of *The Coming Community* in 1990 is marked by the theoretical horizon of Debord's divergent or heretical Marxism.³ Agamben shares this horizon with Paolo Virno, to whom I will return in conclusion for a slight, but importantly different articulation of the strategic relation between language and life such that it allows him to reflect on a problem that remains under-theorized in Agamben's work: the common.

Before entering this analysis, it is useful to linger briefly with the Debordian horizon shared by Agamben and Virno. Both thinkers share a concern for the interaction between language and life, using the conditions of spectacular society diagnosed by Debord as points of departure. Neither Agamben nor Virno has produced an extended study on Debord, and the analysis of their similar, but not shared constructive projects is thus less a problem of identifying relations of indebtedness than demonstrating the Debordian insights that are operative in their deployment of concepts. In line with Debord's Hegelian Marxism, this shared horizon might be most succinctly encapsulated as two political reflections on Hegel's claim in the Sense-Certainty chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that in trying to speak about a "this," we speak the

3. Agamben describes this encounter in a 2010 interview with Hanna Leitgeb and Cornelia Vismann. Cf. "Das unheilige Leben: Ein Gespräch mit dem italienischen Philosophen Giorgio Agamben." Interview with Hanna Leitgeb and Cornelia Vismann. *Literaturen* (Berlin), 2010, 2 (1), 16-21. Further analysis of the genesis of Agamben's political project might take into account his remark in the same interview regarding a coterminous interest in the work of Hannah Arendt, coupled with his lament that most of his friends engaged in the 1968 movements considered Arendt a reactionary thinker. My argument that the genesis of Agamben's constructive politics are marked by a Debordian horizon is not intended to downplay the influence of other thinkers, such as Arendt, Foucault, Heidegger, and Benjamin, on his work, but rather to trace a thread that makes a significant contribution to his understanding of politics. My characterization of Debord as a divergent or heretical Marxist is not meant as a polemic, but rather more generally a critical engagement from within the inheritance of Marx and Marxism, similar to what André Tosel identifies as the blooming of a thousand Marxisms. Cf. André Tosel, "The Development of Marxism: From the End of Marxism-Leninism to a Thousand Marxisms—France-Italy, 1975-2005," in Jacques Bidet and Stathis Kouvelakis, eds. *Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 39-78.

universal even though we mean to say a particular: “We do not *envisage* the universal This or Being in general, but we *utter* the universal.”⁴ Here again, while neither thinker has dedicated an entire study to Hegel, this Hegelian insight about language is fundamental for both.⁵ In an early seminar on language and death in Hegel and Heidegger, Agamben uses precisely this account of Hegelian indication to argue for a conception of speech that always speaks the ineffable, showing it to be each time the nothingness that it is. The experience of nothingness, among other formulations about language in this early work, becomes integral to the explicit political project Agamben embarks on in *The Coming Community*.⁶

Virno’s variation on uttering of the universal has less to do with the repeated experience of nothingness than with the repeated re-enactment of anthropogenesis. Virno thus perhaps reads this Hegelian insight even more literally than Agamben, who traces out the way in which the utterance of the universal implicitly shows how the concept is always at work such that ineffability is precisely manifested as nothingness. By contrast, Virno attempts to simultaneously account for the physical reality produced by speaking—the physiognomic expression of logic⁷—and the way in which the fact of speaking demonstrates the potential synchronicity of anthropogenesis to any particular, contingent moment.⁸ I will return to the conceptual inter-

4. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 60.
5. I have concentrated the reference to Hegel to this brief element from Sense-Certainty because it nicely goes to a point of both similarity and difference in Agamben and Virno’s work. Future work involving the relationship of these two thinkers to Hegel and language would certainly benefit from Hegel’s discussion of language in the *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit*. Cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit, Volume 3: Phenomenology and Psychology*, ed. and trans. M.J. Petry (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1978), 156-179.
6. Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen E. Pinkus and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 6-15. My reference to this work as early (the Italian publication date is 1982, and the seminar on which it is based was held in 1979) is not meant to suggest a heavy periodization of Agamben’s works, but simply to register that the five books which precede *The Coming Community* are primarily concerned with aesthetics and language; neither of these concerns disappear in his later work, but the political valence becomes much stronger in 1990’s *The Coming Community*, which of course then carries over into the Homo Sacer project and *Means Without End* (1996), definitely his most “concrete” political analysis.
7. Paolo Virno, *When the Word Becomes Flesh: Language and Human Nature*, trans. Guiseppina Mecchia (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2015), 122-132
8. Virno, *When the Word Becomes Flesh*, 51-61; 100. We will return to this point in the final section of the paper, but the fact of speaking to which Virno refers is specifically delineated by having the logical form “to say: I say.”

play between language and life in both thinkers below, but here it is worth noting that although the text in which Virno gives this substantial treatment of language, *When the Word Becomes Flesh*, was published in 2003, several years after the opening of Agamben's political project, the two thinkers published essays on Debord alongside one other in 1991, and Agamben contributed to some of the early issues of the Italian journal *Forme di vita* with which Virno is heavily involved.⁹ While we should not force too many comparisons between the two, given the substantial differences and the more overtly political nature of Virno's writing,¹⁰ we can at least situate the shared Debordian horizon to the early 1990s, summarized by Agamben's claim in *The Coming Community* that the spectacle is "the politics we live in."¹¹ I will begin by reconstructing Agamben's scattered responses to Debord before turning to the development of language and life throughout his political project. Agamben's deepening account of language and life in the Homo Sacer project arises from Debordian concerns in the concluding chapters of *The Coming Community*, but the related problem of the common has not yet been given significant treatment by Agamben. Thus, by way of conclusion, I argue that this problem is under-conceptualized in Agamben's political project, and thereby needs to be addressed in order to lay claim to the "fuller Marxian analysis" he gestures towards in *The Coming Community*. In order to carry out this immanent critique, I return to the Debordian context of Agamben's political project, and introduce Virno's work in order to provide the resources to think the production of the common in a way that addresses the shortcomings of Agamben's approach to the coming politics.

9. The first issue of *Forme di vita*, entitled "La natura umana," was also published much later, in 2004. This presents us with a roughly fifteen year span during which there were some shared publishing ventures, but neither thinker has to my knowledge engaged at any length with the other's work on language or otherwise.
10. Here we should not pass over in silence the fact that Virno dedicates *When the Word Became Flesh* to the protestors in Genoa during 2001's demonstrations, or the fact that Virno was arrested and jailed under the false accusation of being involved with the Red Brigades in the 1970s. As he notes in the interview cited above, Agamben was not involved in the movements that emerged around and after 1968, but Agamben's work has been influential for groups in the extra-parliamentary French left such as Tiqqun, and Agamben wrote an editorial for the French newspaper *Libération* in defense of the so-called Tarnac 9 after the arrest of Julien Coupat and others in 2008.
11. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 80

1. Agamben's Debord

Negotiating Agamben's texts as a response to Debord is no simple task, and not only because of the enigmatic style of *The Coming Community*. Besides the prologue to *The Use of Bodies* cited above, if we limit ourselves to direct and substantial references, we seem to have three very good candidates. First, an essay in *Means Without End*—Agamben's most focused political book, dedicated to the memory of Debord—simply entitled “Marginal Notes on *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*,” which Agamben intends literally, claiming that Debord's works need perhaps little more than “a few glosses in the margins.”¹² Second is *The Coming Community*, especially the final two chapters Shekinah and Tiananmen. And third is a book mentioned above on the Situationists from 1991, in which Agamben published an essay alongside Virno.¹³ However, a closer look reveals that certain passages are contained in all three of the texts. This is not due to redundancy or a marketing ploy, especially because these various passages, which make up large parts of the final two chapters of *The Coming Community*, are not identical in any of the three works. Instead, these texts reveal the key points of reference to Debord animating Agamben's politics. Because I will return to Virno in the conclusion, and because Agamben does not provide anything substantially different in his 1991 text,¹⁴ I will restrict my analysis to the first two texts in order to introduce the problematic of language, life, and the common for the coming politics.

In the Marginal Notes text, Agamben helpfully identifies three ways in which he wants to marshal Debord's work as “the pure power of the intellect.”¹⁵ First, Agamben adopts the centrality of commodity fetishism to Debord's account of the spectacle. Although Agamben briefly repeats this point in *The Coming Community*, he spells out the con-

12. Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 73.

13. Agamben also references Debord in passing in the final chapter of *The Kingdom and the Glory*, and I want to note two excellent papers which I only encountered after completing this paper, listed in the bibliography under the entries Abbott and McLoughlin. McLoughlin's paper treats aspects of Agamben's Debordian context with respect to the conceptual arsenal of *The Kingdom and the Glory* especially, and Abbott's paper situates Debordian aspects of *The Kingdom and the Glory* within Agamben's Aristotelianism.

14. Agamben's contribution to this volume adds some reflections on Italian politics that were originally written for the newspaper *il manifesto*. See Giorgio Agamben, “Violenza e speranza nell'ultimo spettacolo,” in *I Situazionisti* (Rome: Manifestolibri, 2001), 11-17.

15. Agamben, *Means Without End*, 74.

text of his reading more fully in the Marginal Notes text. Through his understanding of commodity fetishism, Agamben affirms the comprehensiveness of the obstacle course facing any attempt at constructing community within the spectacular society: “The ‘becoming-image’ of capital is nothing more than the commodity’s last metamorphosis, in which exchange value has completely eclipsed use value and can now achieve the status of absolute and irresponsible sovereignty over life in its entirety, after having falsified the entire social production.”¹⁶ Debord identifies such an obstacle course most clearly when he writes of the spectacle as “the epic poem of [the struggle between commodities], an epic which cannot be concluded by the fall of any Troy. The spectacle does not sing the praises of men and their weapons, but of commodities and their passions. In this blind struggle every commodity, pursuing its passion, unconsciously realizes something higher: the becoming-world of the commodity, which is also the becoming-commodity of the world.”¹⁷ The extreme element in spectacular society thereby remains linked to the simultaneously transparent and phantasmagoric present in the fetishism of the commodity form itself.

Second, Agamben strongly emphasizes the centrality of language. Comparing Debord to Karl Kraus, Agamben claims “language presents itself as the image and place of justice.”¹⁸ Throughout *The Coming Community*, Agamben holds that the alienation of linguistic being is the common experience driving contemporary politics and making possible a community of whatever singularities who have appropriated their being-in-language.¹⁹ Agamben sketches a response to this accomplished nihilism in a third key point from the Marginal Notes text, which is that the gesture is an expression of liberation “after the passage of life through the trial of nihilism.” Gesture is “the other side of the commodity,”²⁰ neither use value nor exchange value, but rather what allows the fully realized commodity fetishism and concomitant linguistic experience of nihilism to sink in.

Taken together, these elements demonstrate the centrality of language and life to the task of any future community or politics according to Agamben. As “the politics in which we live,” Debord’s spectacle provides a specific historical jumping point for Agamben. Although Agamben’s comments, as well as Debord’s remarks throughout *Society of the*

16. Agamben, *Means Without End*, 76.

17. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 66.

18. Agamben, *Means Without End*, 77.

19. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 60; 65; 83.

20. Agamben, *Means Without End*, 80.

Spectacle, remain attentive to the representative and reified nature of the spectacle, it is crucial to note that in Debord's account, the spectacle is neither an image, nor a supplement to reality, but rather a social relation.²¹ Agamben takes this point up directly in the Shekinah chapter of *The Coming Community*, dissociating the spectacle from what is ubiquitously referred to today as the media.²² For Debord, this social relation is not the natural development of an alienating technology, but rather is chosen by society—the spectacle is the process whereby society chooses its own alienation. As Debord puts it in a crucial passage, “the spectacle's form and content are identically the total justification of the existing system's conditions and goals.”²³

The genesis of Agamben's political project can thus be considered as departing from a Debordian context. Agamben enigmatically outlines his constructive response to the spectacular society at the conclusion of the Shekinah chapter in *The Coming Community*:

Only those who succeed in carrying [the society of the spectacle] to completion—without allowing what reveals to remain veiled in the nothingness that reveals, but bringing language itself to language—will be the first citizens of a community with neither presuppositions nor a State, where the nullifying and determining power of what is common will be pacified and where the Shekinah will have stopped sucking the evil milk of its own separation.²⁴

The interaction between life, language, and the common in this passage rests on Agamben's assertion that “it is clear that the spectacle is language, the very communicativity or linguistic being of humans.”²⁵ In order to provide a more straightforward account of these concepts, it is helpful to turn away from Agamben's messianic prose in *The Coming Community* and towards his remarks on language and life in *The Sacrament of Language* and *The Highest Poverty*.

2. The Interplay of Language and Life in Agamben

The task and stakes of such a constructive response to the spectacular society through language and life are perhaps most clearly evident in the following two questions, posed by Agamben in the final threshold

21. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 4-6.

22. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 79.

23. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 6.

24. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 83.

25. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 80.

of *The Highest Poverty*: “How can use—that is, a relation to the world insofar as it is inappropriable—be translated into an *ethos* and a form of life? And what ontology and ethics would correspond to a life that, in use, is constituted as inseparable from its form?”²⁶ In other words, Agamben sets himself the task of articulating a form of life that is indifferent towards and unable to be absorbed by the machinations justifying the existing conditions of the society of the spectacle and contemporary capitalism, as well as a theoretical justification of such a use of linguistic life. Both of these problems are addressed through Agamben’s analysis of Franciscanism in *The Highest Poverty*, but before turning to the coincidence between language and life in this text, it is first helpful to pause over Agamben’s understanding of language itself.

The relevance of Agamben’s *The Sacrament of Language* to his political project lies chiefly in the interaction between gesture and language he identifies in the oath. As we indicated in Agamben’s “Marginal Notes on *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*,” Agamben understands gesture as the other side of the commodity, or that which is able to communicate the traversal of human existence through the trial of nihilism. In *The Sacrament of Language*, however, he considers the origins of the oath as “a gesture symmetrically opposed to that of blasphemy.”²⁷ In the linguistic event of naming, Agamben claims, we can understand the oath as a gesture whereby the speaker swears “on the correspondence between words and things that is realized in [the oath].”²⁸ This use of language is an experience wherein “it is not possible to doubt” such correspondence.²⁹ Agamben situates the spheres of religion and law as responses to the oath: “they were invented to guarantee the truth and trustworthiness of the *logos* through a series of apparatuses, among which the technicalization of the oath into a specific “sacrament”—the “sacrament of power”—occupies a central place.”³⁰ As a gesture pre-dating law and religion, the oath can be understood as a subversive element capable of redeployment against both these spheres; since Agamben connects the oath to every act of naming,³¹ this means that the event of naming occupies a central place in the coming politics.

26. Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 144.

27. Giorgio Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language: An Archaeology of the Oath*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 42.

28. Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language*, 46.

29. Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language*, 54.

30. Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language*, 59.

31. Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language*, 46.

Agamben is not entirely sanguine about the oath, since there is a concomitant risk of curse alongside it.

Every naming is, in fact, double: it is a blessing or a curse. A blessing, if the word is full, if there is a correspondence between the signifier and the signified, between words and things; a curse if the word is empty; if there remains, between the semiotic and the semantic, a void and a gap. Oath and perjury, benediction and malediction correspond to this double possibility inscribed in the logos, in the experience by means of which the living being has been constituted as speaking being.³²

Agamben considers the ambivalence of this experience in linguistic life to be full of potential, but not simply in the form of a nostalgic longing for the experience of language available prior to the emergence of law and religion. Instead, he concludes that philosophy begins when the speaker puts into question the correspondence between word and thing.³³ In a variation on his understanding of the accomplished nihilism revealed by language in *The Coming Community*,³⁴ he argues here that politics is the “governance of empty speech over bare life.”³⁵ Agamben’s reconstruction of the linguistic experience in the oath is thus to clarify lines of “resistance and change,” rather than to articulate an ontological guarantee available through some purification of language.

If the critique of the oath forms an essential element of Agamben’s account of the co-implication of language and life, his analysis of the monastic rules within Franciscanism goes much further towards an ontological situating of the coming politics. Agamben takes up the “most precious legacy of Franciscanism” in order to think a form of life in which form is irrevocably linked with life, such that the form of life could never be substantialized or appropriated by an outside, but is rather only given as common use.³⁶ According to Agamben, this is because the Franciscan monastic rules coincide to such an extent with the lives of the monks that the form of the rule is not easily identifiable as a law in the same way that the life under the rule is no longer truly life; “the rule enters in this way into a zone of undecidability with re-

32. Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language*, 69-70.

33. Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language*, 72.

34. “In this extreme nullifying unveiling, however, language (the linguistic nature of humans) remains once again hidden and separated, and thus, one last time, in its unspoken power, it dooms humans to a historical era and a State: the era of the spectacle, or of accomplished nihilism.” See Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 82.

35. Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language*, 72.

36. Agamben, *The Highest Poverty*, xiii.

spect to life.”³⁷ Such an understanding of monastic rules causes Agamben to succinctly define Franciscanism as “the attempt to realize a human life and practice absolutely outside the determinations of the law.”³⁸

Just like in his account of the oath, Agamben’s purpose in resuscitating such a legacy from Franciscanism is not a form of nostalgic longing. Instead, this understanding of life as common use provides a foothold for Agamben to introduce an understanding of ontology he thinks is capable of undergirding a life characteristic of those who would carry the society of the spectacle to its completion. In his theory of use developed at the conclusion of *The Highest Poverty*, Agamben clarifies that such an ontology is existentialist rather than essentialist.³⁹ In this sense, Agamben’s ontological account of form of life is not systematic, but rather gestural. As he puts it, “the ontology that is in question here is thus purely operative and effectual.”⁴⁰ The conflict that takes place in the common use of form of life against all other appropriable conceptions of life and law is a “purely existential reality” waiting to be liberated from the clutches of law and religion, the same two spheres that arise in response to the oath. As a gestural and active operation, such an existentialist ontology is rightly characterized as purely eventual.⁴¹ The ontology Agamben sketches in *The Highest Poverty* helps explain his remark in the postface to the 2001 Italian edition of *The Coming Community* that inoperativity rather than work is the paradigm of the coming politics. “Inoperativity does not mean idleness, but *katargesis*—that is to say an operation in which the *how* integrally replaces the *what*, in which the life without form and the form without life coincide in a form of life.”⁴² As the coming politics, such an act that renders law and religion inoperative is not deferred into the future, but rather takes place in each instance of the linguistic event form of life.

3. On Not Foreclosing Ambivalence: Form-of-Life and the Common

The interaction between language and life clearly frames a crucial aspect of Agamben’s political project as it has developed through the Homo Sac-

37. Agamben, *The Highest Poverty*, 26.

38. Agamben, *The Highest Poverty*, 110.

39. Agamben, *The Highest Poverty*, 136.

40. Ibid.

41. This is Lorenzo Chiesa and Frank Ruda’s instructive argument in their “The Event of Language as Force of Life: Agamben’s Linguistic Vitalism.” *Angelaki* vol. 16 no. 3 (September 2011): 163-180.

42. Giorgio Agamben, *La comunità che viene* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2001), 92-93.

er series in accordance with the Debordian concerns we outlined in *The Coming Community*. I have treated the common as a kind of shadow concept throughout the paper, and with the operative ontology of form of life in place, it is time to bring this concept onto center stage in order to press Agamben's under-theorization of it. Agamben does consistently refer to the common as a crucial concept of the coming politics. In the passage I referenced earlier as paradigmatic of Agamben's constructive response to spectacular society, for example, Agamben alludes to the disappearance of "the nullifying and determining power of what is common" in the coming community.⁴³ In the same chapter, just prior to claiming that the spectacle is "the politics we live in," Agamben identifies the appropriation of the Common logos as the most extreme form of capitalist expropriation.⁴⁴ As such, capitalism's affront on the common is precisely what is at stake in the alienation of linguistic being and experience of nihilism that render Agamben's existentialist ontology of form of life possible.

However, the common remains only a negative and limit-concept in Agamben's work, restricted to the linguistic sphere. This is a further reason why Agamben remains stuck in a form of linguistic vitalism: his ontology is unable to explain how such a form of life that resists spectacular society is able to be produced and defended in common, other than through the repetition of a meta-historical event.⁴⁵ If the form of life offered by Agamben as constitutive for the coming politics is indeed a common use of life, we require a more detailed account of its production as common. In this under-conceptualization of the common, Agamben in fact follows a similar logic as his account the oath as gesture of naming that is double, capable of both benediction and malediction.⁴⁶ However, instead of the ambivalence he maintains with respect to this double potential, the linguistic vitalism in his conception of form of life forecloses the risk involved in constructing a community at odds with spectacular society.

Such an ambivalence was identified with perspicuity by Paolo Virno in a 1991 essay on Debord he published alongside Agamben, which we referenced earlier. Before turning to the concepts of language, life, and the common in Virno, it is important to clarify the sense in which

43. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 83.

44. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 80.

45. Again, Chiesa and Ruda are perceptive, arguing that Agamben "aims at establishing a theory of the event in and of language according to which being as such is meta-metaphysically a sort of arche-event," or more simply that language itself functions as a kind of transcendental without emergence. See Chiesa and Ruda, "The Event of Language as Force of Life," 163 and 165.

46. Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language*, 69-70.

Virno's constructive project might also be said to depart from Debordian concerns. We have worked through Agamben's claim in *The Coming Community* that the spectacle "is the politics we live in," and a quick glance at Virno's essay on Debord reveals a similar appreciation for the strategic philosopher. Virno situates Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* alongside a series of texts, comprising "an unusual family album" which also consists of Raniero Panzieri's *Plus-valore e pianificazione*, Alfred Sohn-Rethel's *Intellectual and Manual Labor*, Mario Tronti's *Operai e capitale*, Antonio Negri's *La crisi di Stato-piano*, and Hans-Jürgen Krahl's *Konstitution und Klassenkampf*. Together, Virno suggests, these works form "useful picklocks to unhinge the society of mature capitalism and its State."⁴⁷ Virno specifically picks up on what he refers to as the double nature of the spectacle: it is one product or commodity among others as well as an index for the quintessence of the contemporary mode of production. Virno shares with Agamben the distance from falsely conflating the spectacle with the media: "the situationist critique has nothing to do with the jeremiads of consumerism and the alienation of free time, and does not let itself be confused with the exquisite disgust for the mass media and advertising."⁴⁸ Instead, a critique of the spectacle remains tethered to putting the mode of production itself into question.

For Virno, the contemporary mode of production is linked to language, as well as, eventually, life. In the spectacular society, language is put to work by becoming the principle recourse for social reproduction. We are meant to read this putting to work of language quite literally: Virno claims that the linguistic faculty needs to be thought together with wage labor, and not that language or immaterial labor simply replaces older forms of labor under capitalism, as some hasty and broad-sweeping assessments of post-*operaismo* thinkers occasionally suggest. In fact, Virno argues that contrary to what is suggested by a "little postmodern song," the appropriation of linguistic communication in the spectacular society radicalizes the antinomies of capitalism rather than allows them to languish or become inoperative.⁴⁹ Virno's account of language differs from Agamben, although their shared emphasis on the linguistic faculty also shares a genesis in an analysis of Debord. For Virno, "the spectacle is the reified form through which that amount of communication, intelligence, and knowledge is presented, which although always in the name of capitalist productivity, cannot come to be deposited in machines, but must manifest itself in the co-

47. Virno, *When the Word Becomes Flesh*, 20.

48. Virno, *When the Word Becomes Flesh*, 21.

49. Virno, *When the Word Becomes Flesh*, 26.

operation of living subjects.”⁵⁰ Virno subjects this broad understanding of the linguistic faculty to a different development than Agamben, but maintains language as “the terrain of conflict and the odds at stake,”⁵¹ a phrase that successfully reiterates the angle of Agamben’s constructive political project we have been pursuing from another vantage point.

Virno’s advance on this battlefield involves a shifted conceptual constellation that brings the production of the common into sharper focus. Rather than forcing a schematic point-by-point comparison with Agamben, now that we have underscored the shared Debordian political horizon for both thinkers, it is useful to return to Virno’s differing take on Hegelian indication we observed at the outset of the paper in order to help stage this transmuted conceptual constellation. For Agamben, uttering the universal opens up the possibility of experiencing and traversing the nothingness present in every act of locution, whereas for Virno each time the universal is spoken, the moment of anthropogenesis is re-staged in the present. These differing perspectives cannot be reduced to a prioritization of negation on Agamben’s part versus an elision of the work of the concept in order to trace the positive contours of universal indication on Virno’s part.⁵²

Virno places less emphasis on the operation of use, which is so central to Agamben’s articulation of the relationship between language and life, comprising a substantial part of *The Use of Bodies*, and as a result the alternation between the two concepts remains pervasively ambivalent throughout his project.⁵³ We can locate in Virno’s account of language

50. Virno, *When the Word Becomes Flesh*, 24.

51. Paolo Virno, “Cultura e produzione sul paloscenico,” in *I Situazionisti* (Rome: Manifestolibri, 2001), 26.

52. In fact, Virno’s most recent book is a study of negation, and the function of negativity in both thinkers would make for a productive study, as would other angles such as their accounts of potentiality and time, two topics which are widely debated in English literature on Agamben, but would benefit from being read alongside Virno, especially now that his work is becoming more accessible in English. Both thinkers also share a common reference to Aristotelian theoretical and practical philosophy, in addition to an ambivalent appreciation of Arendt, especially in the case of Virno. Perhaps also of note in terms of these potential skirmishes is the fact that Virno’s doctoral work was done on Adorno, a thinker almost wholly absent from Agamben’s field of reference. For more on Virno’s interesting reconfiguration of Arendt, cf. Paolo Virno, “Virtuosity and Revolution: The Political Theory of Exodus,” trans. Ed Emory in Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, eds. *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 189-212.

53. Agamben briefly elaborates on the concept of use in *The Highest Poverty*, but his most sustained treatment to date comes in the first section of *The Use of Bodies*, comprising eight chapters.

and life a displacement of Agamben's conceptual arrangement in three movements. First, Virno argues through a reading of the later Wittgenstein that language and life are co-extensive concepts; they share an indeterminacy of lacking extrinsic purpose and obeying arbitrary rules.⁵⁴ Language and life are not identical concepts, but are rather coterminous to the extent that the fact of speaking opens up the potential space for alteration. Virno refers to this as the "naturalistic virtuosity" of speech. "Linguistic practice rests in the hiatus between the mind and the world, a gap that cannot be filled by a predetermined conduct but needs to be mastered with virtuoso performances and arbitrary rules."⁵⁵ This carries with it the important consequence that this potential space is public in a very precise sense. Neither mirroring an exterior state of things nor residing in a secret interior, this potential space is the common precondition for the strict separation of an interior and exterior out of this transindividual, and intrinsically political, potential of language.⁵⁶

Virno develops his description of naturalistic virtuosity from out of the fundamental locutionary act wherein this potential is spoken. The logical form "to say: I say" functions for Virno as a translation of the universal uttered through Hegelian indication, and it is thereby accurate to refer to "the event of language" in Virno's work. We followed Chiesa and Ruda's argument that Agamben's linguistic arche-event lapses into vitalism,⁵⁷ but this figure functions in a much more mundane sense for Virno: "the event of language is contained in the work of the epiglottis: its insertion in the world flashes through an air movement."⁵⁸ Such a formulation is not merely an ironic turn of phrase for Virno, but rather signals the naturalistic dimension of his work. Accordingly, Virno's second major deployment on the linguistic battlefield consists in the fact that life is not characterized by the meta-historical repetition of negation, but rather that life is characterized by the task of historicizing metahistory. Virno's exhibits this task through both of the coextensive terms. "Every statement of facts and of the state of things is simultaneously a statement on the use of words: what we witness, thus,

54. Virno, *When the Word Becomes Flesh*, 29.

55. Virno, *When the Word Becomes Flesh*, 30.

56. Virno, *When the Word Becomes Flesh*, 41.

57. In the prologue to *The Use of Bodies*, Agamben does signal his attention on the problem of vitalism, suggesting that the task of thought and politics today is to identify the intimate connection between being and living outside of every vitalism. Chiesa and Ruda's essay was published prior to the publication of *The Use of Bodies*, and Agamben's relationship to vitalism remains an open question, especially now that the final volume of the *Homo Sacer* series has been completed. Cf. Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, xix.

58. Virno, *When the Word Becomes Flesh*, 55.

is a complete fusion of language-object and metalanguage.”⁵⁹ Enunciating the event of language gives an exaggerated visibility to the language faculty, which Virno argues is a “biological invariant.”⁶⁰ Although mundane, the event of language presents the possibility of historicizing metahistory as a perennial challenge; the challenge opened up is to both reconstruct the biological invariant while also analyzing the operative field of social practice, which shares the potential for variation indicated by the naturalistic virtuosity of the speaking animal.⁶¹

Finally, then, Virno’s dislocation of the conceptual constellation consists in a persistent commitment to ambivalence. Virno provides a compact account of this commitment in the conclusion to an essay on jokes and logic. For Virno, ambivalence can be characterized in two closely related ways: the space between the rule and regularity of species-specific action, or the treatment of meta-history as historical or historical contingency as metahistory.⁶² In either case, with respect to life, ambivalence is linked to a theory of crisis. For the former example, following Wittgenstein, “a form of life withers and declines when the same norm is realized in multiple dissimilar ways that contrast with one another.”⁶³ The potential space in which these forms are articulated is and remains ambivalent because facts within life can “thicken” into norms—and empirical regularity can take on a grammatical rule, but for precisely this reason, the relationship between rule and regularity is not given in advance or absolute. In the second example, whereby the meta-historical and historical come to be confused, such a particular crisis for a form of life reintroduces a persistent potential problem, that of “shaping life in general.”⁶⁴ This element in the theory of crisis is rightly recognized as a state of exception, and to link this analysis with our development of language and life, we would do well again to take another brief pass at Virno’s account of Hegelian indication, and the occasional and ambivalent synchronicity of anthropogenesis involved in the locutory event of language.

The ambivalence inherent in this paradoxical restaging of anthropogenesis is transitional, involving each time the actual production of

59. Virno, “Jokes and Innovative Action: For a Logic of Change,” in *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito and Andrea Casson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 143.

60. Virno, *When the Word Becomes Flesh*, 202.

61. Virno thus notes that “biopolitics is a particular derivative aspect of the inscription of meta-history within the field of empirical phenomena; an inscription [...] that distinguishes capitalism historically.” Cf. Paolo Virno, *Déjà Vu and the End of History*, trans. David Broder (London: Verso, 2015), 166.

62. Virno, “Jokes and Innovative Action: For a Logic of Change,” 166.

63. Virno, “Jokes and Innovative Action: For a Logic of Change,” 151.

64. *Ibid.*

a content from within a coextensive and coterminous potential. Although the linguistic event is mundane, as we have noted, its precise instantiation in the event of language, or as Virno also refers to the logical form “to say: I say,” the absolute performative, occurs very rarely.⁶⁵ The rarity of the absolute performative or pure expression of anthropogenesis in the linguistic faculty as such does not imply that the politics of such a form of life ought to be heroic. In fact, as we noted above, Virno argues that politics “is inherent to the very fact of having language.”⁶⁶ Politics does not characterize one among many possible interactions between life and language, but the political character of speech itself forms part of the presupposition for any form of life. Although the pure logico-linguistic form of ambivalence is rare, each instance of speaking constitutes a production in the present that extends, challenges, and/or constructs some form of life. “An act of speech establishes the present and makes it dovetail with its own unrepeatable execution, precisely because it leaves behind the perennial latency of the language faculty.”⁶⁷ Any collection of beings that would resist the contemporary mode of production manifested by capitalism in the spectacular society subject their coincidence of life and language to the field of praxis. The citizens of a coming community do not simply vow to take up arms against capitalist appropriation, but rather actively develop means of resistance and alternatives in common. The effectuality, status, and longevity of these powers of intellect and activity are not guaranteed — such is the common and ambivalent ordeal marking the terrain of the battle against capitalism.

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65. Virno, *When the Word Becomes Flesh*, 50.

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