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SACRIFICE AND DESUBJECTIVATION. THE REVOLUTIONARY SUBJECT IN BATAILLE AND THE VERY EARLY AGAMBEN

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ABSTRACT
Desubjectivation is central to Agamben's political thought. In the Homo Sacer project, Agamben identifies two different forms of desubjectivation: the first is the stripping of identity by the state; the second is an experience of letting go of the self which, he argues, provides resources for resisting contemporary biopolitics. In Homo Sacer, Agamben is also profoundly critical of Georges Bataille's thought for reproducing the logic of the sovereign ban, which is the most extreme mechanism that the state uses to deprive people of their identity. In this essay, however, I argue that Agamben's first account of the emancipatory potentials of desubjectivation, his 1970 essay On the Limits of Violence, echoes themes that are central to Bataille's thought. Agamben argues that violence can only break with the history of domination through a non-instrumental action that involves the negation of both self and other, and he formulates this idea by drawing on the example of sacrifice, Marx and Engels' analysis of proletarian revolution, and the existential problem of mortality and the limits of language. I show that while Agamben's analysis of self-negating violence draws on a range of sources, including Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin, the key claims of the essay reflect the account of desubjectivation that Bataille develops through his reflections on sacrifice, subjectivity, and the social.

KEYWORDS
Agamben, Bataille, revolution, sacrifice, desubjectivation

Agamben is perhaps best known for his analysis of the relationship between sovereignty and biopolitics. In a 2004 Interview with Agamben, Vacarme asks him about the "flip side" of this analysis—the "minor biopolitics" of movements, such as those of undocumented immigrants, the unemployed, or those with AIDS, who "already practice a politics with an awareness—and an experience—of the state of exception" (Vacarme 2004: 115). In response, Agamben gives an account of contemporary politics as a dialectic between processes of subjectivation and desubjectivation. The modern State is, he argues, an apparatus that strips people of their

traditional identities and forms of belonging. This is a reference not only to the sovereign exception, which suspends the legal recognition of individuals and populations, but to spectacular capitalism, which undermines tradition and strips people of their identities through the commodification of culture (Agamben 1993: 63-64, 83; Agamben 2000: 85). However, Agamben also points out that the regulation of subjectivity and identity is central to the functioning of modern power, as indicated by the work of Michel Foucault. As such, alongside the destruction of tradition and community, there is a process of resubjectivation that is managed by the State, through which people take on an identity that allows them to be governed.

According to Agamben, the development of biopolitics complicates the problem of identifying a "revolutionary subject", which many people continue to think "in terms of class, of the proletariat" (Vacarme 2004: 116). While "these are not obsolete problems", the categories of class and subjectivity have become an essential part of the mechanisms of government, and the risk of using them is that one "reidentify oneself, that one invest this situation with a new identity, that one produce a new subject, if you like, but one subjected to the State" (Vacarme 2004: 116). Agamben's response to this dilemma is to argue that the potential for resisting contemporary biopolitics does not lie in constituting a new revolutionary identity, but rather, in practicing a form of desubjectivation that is distinct from the one produced by the State: "Desubjectivation does not only have a dark side. It is not simply the destruction of all subjectivity. There is also this other pole, more fecund and poetic, where the subject is only the subject of its own desubjectivation" (Vacarme 2004: 124). And, according to Agamben, one finds just a moment of poetic desubjectivation in Foucault's late work on government, which not only analyses the care of the self, but also "states the apparently opposite theme: the self must be let go of...'the art of living is to destroy identity'" (Vacarme 2004: 117).

Agamben provides his clearest and most fully developed account of the 'poetic' experience of political desubjectivation in the final two volumes of the *Homo Sacer* project, *The Highest Poverty* and *The Use of Bodies*[1]. According to Agamben, the human is a being defined by inoperativity or impotentiality, that is, our capacity to suspend our ways of being and acting (Agamben 1999b: 182-183)—and, in these works, he develops an account of the 'coming politics' as a praxis in which a "work is deactivated and rendered inoperative, and in this way, restored to possibility, opened to a new possible use" (Agamben 2015: 247). The account of the politics of inoperativity that Agamben develops in the concluding volumes of the *Homo Sacer* project has, however, been ably discussed by others in the context of this special edition, and elsewhere (DeCaroli 2016; Bignall 2016; Vatter 2016; Bernstein 2017; Prozorov 2017; van der-Heiden 2020). While much remains to be said about these works, the present essay does not focus on Agamben's most recent account

[1] Part One of *The Use of Bodies* concludes with an extended analysis of Foucault's late work on the subject (Agamben 2015: 95-108).

of the emancipatory potentials of desubjectivation, but upon the earliest—and my argument is that this is to be found in an engagement with a seemingly unlikely source, namely, the thought of Georges Bataille.

In an interview from 1980, Michel Foucault states that Bataille's work provided his own generation of thinkers with important conceptual resources with which to challenge the phenomenology that was dominant at the time. Where phenomenology cast the subject as a transcendental foundation for the meaning of everyday experience, Bataille pursued limit experiences that had "the function of wrenching the subject from itself, of seeing that the subject is no longer itself, or that it is brought to its annihilation or its dissolution" (Foucault 1994: 241). Foucault argues that this practice of desubjectivation was an attempt to open out new possibilities for living, and he conceptualises his own philosophical practice in these Bataillean terms: "However boring, however erudite my books may be, I've always conceived of them as direct experiences aimed at pulling myself free of myself, at preventing me from being the same" (Foucault 1994: 242). He also claims that while the turn to Bataille (and, along with him, Nietzsche and Blanchot) was a break with Marxist orthodoxy, it was a "path toward what we expected from communism" (Foucault 1994: 249). This is because the young generation of philosophers, who confronted a society that had permitted Nazism, and a global politics structured by American Capitalism and Stalinist Communism, "wanted a world and a society that were not only different but that would be an alternative version of ourselves; we wanted to be completely other in a completely different world" (Foucault 1994: 247-8).

While Agamben obviously owes a great deal to Foucault, he is not known for being influenced by Bataille. Indeed, whenever Bataille's name appears in Agamben's work, it is as a target of criticism—and the most strident of these is the claim that Bataille's thought is "useless to us" because it offers only a "real or farcical repetition" of the relationship between sovereignty and bare life that founds political power (Agamben 2000: 7; see also Agamben 1989a: 54; Agamben 1998: 112-123; Agamben 2004: 7-8). Commentators on the relationship between the two thinkers have understandably tended to emphasise these attacks (Stronge 2017: 1; Hirsche 2014; Biles 2011). However, in her entry on Bataille in *Agamben's Philosophical Lineage*, Nadine Hartmann argues that the "persistent downplaying" of Bataille's thought "in Agamben's mature project is itself symptomatic" (Hartmann 2017: 109), and suggests that Agamben might be more indebted to Bataille than his frequent criticisms seem to suggest. In this essay, I develop Hartman's suggestion that Agamben's relationship to Bataille is more complicated than it initially appears to be. However, instead of examining those texts in which Agamben mentions Bataille, as does Hartmann, I turn to a very early text in which his name does not appear, but which, I argue, is important for understanding the development of Agamben's thought, his critique of Bataille, and his later account of the politics of desubjectivation.

David Kishik tells us that a young Giorgio Agamben travelled to Paris in May of '68 "to take part in the final chain of events that turned the city on its head during that restless spring" (Kishik 2012: 1)[2]. However, Agamben has also said that he was "not completely at ease with 1968" due to the fact that he was reading the work of Hannah Arendt, who his "friends on the left considered a reactionary author, of which you absolutely could not talk" (Sofri 1985)[3]. The following year, Agamben penned an essay entitled *On the Limits of Violence*, which draws heavily on Arendt and Walter Benjamin to argue that revolutionary politics has been undermined by an instrumental theory of violence that is tied to a teleological understanding of history. In response, Agamben attempts to theorise a non-instrumental form of action that would, as such, have the capacity to call a "messianic halt" to history and "open a new chronology and a new experience of temporality" (Agamben 2009: 109). This is, he argues, what is at stake in both the ancient practice of sacrifice, Marx and Engels account of proletarian revolution, and the existential confrontation with death—and, drawing on these examples, he argues that a truly revolutionary violence "negates the self as it negates the other; it awakens a consciousness of the death of the self, even as it visits death on the other" (Agamben 2009: 108). Agamben's account of this revolutionary form of violence is brief and enigmatic, and he does not provide citations for many of the ideas that underpin it. Nonetheless, one can detect echoes of some of Agamben's early influences in the argument, including Benjamin, Heidegger, and Arendt, who I will draw upon to help illuminate his analysis. However, the key claim of Agamben's essay is that the revolutionary suspension of history can only occur through a process of self-negation, an argument that he develops by drawing on the example of sacrifice. In this essay, I am going to show that there are some remarkable similarities between Agamben's account of self-negating violence and Georges Bataille's thinking on sacrifice, sovereignty, and subjectivity[4].

[2] Kishik does not, however, specify the sense in which he 'took part' in these events.

[3] Agamben does not elaborate on the particular reason for his friends' hostility to Arendt. She had, however, published a number of books critical of the continental revolutionary tradition and of Marxism in particular by the time Agamben travelled to Paris. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) equated the Soviet Union with Nazi Germany and helped to popularise a term which went on to play a major ideological role in the Cold War. *The Human Condition* (1958) expresses the utmost admiration for Marx, before going on to critique his definition of the human as a labouring being. *On Revolution* (1963) is very critical of the French Revolution, which it compares very unfavourably with the American revolutionary experience.

[4] There are also some remarkable similarities between Agamben's analysis of revolutionary violence and some of the central theses of Furio Jesi's *Spartakus: Symbology of a Revolt*. Jesi and Agamben were both young scholars living in Rome in the late 1960s and Agamben has since drawn upon and written about his work (Agamben 2004: 26, 89; Agamben 1996). Like *On the Limits of Violence*, *Spartakus* was written in 1969, and it draws on the example of sacrifice to theorise revolt as an experience that suspends historical time (2014: 46). Jesi develops this argument, in part, by drawing on the work of Mircea Eliade, whose *Cosmos and History* argues that sacrifice regenerated time through a return to origin, which is the same account of sacrifice that we find in Agamben's essay (1954: 35-6). Citing Eliade, Jesi also argues, like Agamben, that these sacrificial rituals involved the destruction of

This suggests that Agamben first articulates his account of the emancipatory potentials of political desubjectivation through an engagement with the very thinker whose work he later declares to be 'useless'.

1. BATAILLE ON SACRIFICE AND SELF-NEGATION

The "'enigma of sacrifice' was a lifelong obsession" for Bataille (Biles 2011: 129). Throughout his work, Bataille opposed the practice of sacrifice to the productivism and instrumental rationality that dominates the modern world. However, the theoretical details of this analysis shift over time depending upon the circumstances to which Bataille was responding and the theoretical resources upon which he drew. A great deal could thus be said about the role that sacrifice plays in Bataille's thought, and we do not have space here for an extensive treatment of the issue. In what follows, I am simply going to highlight two different aspects of Bataille's thinking on sacrifice that are particularly relevant to Agamben's account of revolutionary desubjectivation: first, I illustrate the relationship between sacrifice and revolutionary politics that Bataille articulates in his 1933 essay *The Notion of Expenditure*; second, I examine the relationship between sacrifice and subjectivity in Bataille's thought by turning to his 1953 magnum opus, *The Accursed Share*, and the posthumously published *Theory of Religion*.

The Notion of Expenditure argues that utility is the supreme value of the modern world, which esteems individual activity only where it contributes to the production and conservation of material goods. However, drawing on Marcel Mauss' research amongst the Northwestern American Indians, Bataille argues that the earliest forms of economic exchange did not take the rational and utilitarian form of a barter, as classical economics presumed, but rather, involved a practice of giftgiving that squandered wealth (Bataille 1985: 121). Generalising Mauss' insight, Bataille points out that humanity has long engaged in a wide variety of activities that involve expenditure going beyond the need to preserve life and reproduce labour power: the wearing of jewellery; artistic production; competitive games; cultic practices that require "a bloody wasting of men and animals in sacrifice" (Bataille 1985: 119) and "luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity (i.e. deflected from genital finality)" (Bataille 1985: 118). According to Bataille, these forms of unproductive expenditure, which he argues had no end beyond themselves, played a central role in the social and

the subject through the confrontation with death (Jesi 2014: 157). However, I focus on Agamben's relationship to Bataille, rather than Jesi, for two reasons. First, Bataille's work is the earliest articulation, and hence the likely conceptual source, of the relationship between sacrifice, death and desubjectivation, which then appears in the work of both younger theorists. Second, establishing a connection between Bataille's concerns and the account of revolutionary desubjectivation that Agamben develops in this early essay casts a different light on his later critique of Bataille.

economic organisation of the pre-modern world. The capitalist economy, by contrast, is predicated upon acquisition, accumulation, and rational calculation, and so, in modernity, "everything that was generous, orgiastic, and excessive has disappeared" (Bataille 1985: 124). While the bourgeoisie still consume, they refuse the obligation to engage in social expenditure, and instead display their wealth behind closed doors: as a result, "the people's consciousness is reduced to maintaining profoundly the principle of expenditure by representing bourgeois existence as the shame of man and as a sinister cancellation" (Bataille 1985: 125).

Bataille not only draws on Mauss' anthropology of the gift economy to critique contemporary society, but to identify forms of resistance to it. In the early 1930s, Bataille joined the ultra-left Democratic Communist Circle (CCD), and in 1934 he participated in a massive general strike that gave rise to the Popular Front between the Communist and Socialist Parties. *The Notion of Expenditure* appeared in the CCD journal, *Critique Sociale*, and in it, Bataille identifies class struggle as the "grandest form" of unproductive social expenditure, arguing that workers have developed the principle "on such a scale that it threatens the very existence of the Masters" (Bataille 1985: 126). However, the vision of revolutionary praxis that Bataille develops by drawing analogies with "festivals, spectacles, and games" is an idiosyncratic one that does not emphasise the role of the party, or the democratic practice of workers councils, but rather, the intoxicating experience of revolt—and this is due, in part, to the fact that he reads the Marxian concern with class struggle through the lens of Durkheim's sociology. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim argues that religious rituals are able to bind a community around a common set of religious symbols due to the capacity of a collective assembly to generate strong emotions: "Once the individuals are gathered together, a sort of electricity is generated by their closeness and launches them to an extraordinary height of exaltation" (Durkheim 1995: 217). Bataille drew his analysis of the sacred from the French School of Sociology via the work of Mauss and, as Michel Richman notes, he shared its belief that "the social whole is greater than the sum of its parts, the collectivity induces transformations within its participants, and that such transformation is accessible and sustainable only within a *mouvement d'ensemble*" (Richman 2002: 5). However, the political ends to which Bataille set his analysis of the sacred differed substantially from his sociological sources. Durkheim was primarily concerned with the capacity of collective assemblies to generate social cohesion: they are, he argues, "the act by which society makes itself, and remakes itself, periodically" (Durkheim 1995: 425). Bataille, by contrast, was interested in the ways that the emotions produced by collective assemblies could be mobilised to subvert a modern society to which he was fundamentally opposed (Richman 2002: 14). Thus, in *The Notion of Expenditure*, he argues that the only way for the poor to reclaim social power is through "the revolutionary destruction of the ruling class in other words, through a bloodied and in no way limited social expenditure" (Bataille

1985: 121). Similarly, in *The Popular Front in the Streets*, Bataille criticises the bureaucratic processes of parties, and argues that the masses are driven to insurrection by "the contagious emotion that, from house to house, from suburb to suburb, suddenly turns a hesitating man into a frenzied being" (Bataille 1985: 162).

As we will see in the next section of this essay, Agamben's account of revolutionary praxis in *On the Limits of Violence* echoes this phase of Bataille work insofar as it highlights the parallels between class struggle, revolt, and sacrificial violence. However, the way Agamben analyses sacrifice and revolution also contains echoes of Bataille's later work, which casts sacrifice as an example of the experience of desubjectivation that occurs at the limits of language and knowledge. While Bataille's association with the CCD was decisive for works such as *The Notion of Expenditure*, his alliance with the organised left was to prove short-lived. By the mid-1930s, Bataille had become disillusioned with the capacity of the left to resist the rising tide of fascism, in part, because he believed that the rationalism of socialist thought limited its ability to harness the libidinal energies that fascism was tapping into at the time (Galetti 2018: 24; Surya 2002: 220-221). Bataille's critique of the left played an important role in his founding the infamous secret society *Acéphale* in 1936, along with the journal of the same name, which developed a "ferociously religious" (Bataille 2018: 124) thought heavily indebted to Sade and the Nietzschean themes of the death of God, tragedy, and the Dionysian[5]. One year later, he established *The College of Sociology* with his friend Roger Caillois, which hosted a series of lectures analysing "all manifestations of social existence in which the active presence of the sacred is clear" (Hollier 1998: 5). At the beginning of the War, however, Bataille abandoned these projects, retreated to the countryside, and his work began to emphasise "inner experience" and the question of subjectivity. By the time of his major post-War works, then, Bataille's analysis of sacrifice had undergone a transformation, and he had come to theorise social institutions of useless expenditure as an experience of the "sovereign freedom" that inheres in the subject[6].

Bataille describes sovereignty as an "aspect of existence" that is "opposed to the servile and subordinate" (Bataille 1989a: 197). Sovereignty thus means, first and foremost, the freedom from work, which is only ever performed under the compulsion of the body's need to survive, or at the will of another, and is always performed for some useful end. Because sovereignty is the antithesis of work, it is exemplified in acts of useless consumption: "The sovereign individual consumes and doesn't labour, whereas at the antipode of sovereignty the slave and the man without

[5] In the first volume of *Acéphale*, Bataille went as far as to criticise political action as such, because it necessarily imposed an end upon existence, and were therefore alien to the practice of useless expenditure that was so important to his thought (Bataille 2018: 123; Galetti 2018: 24).

[6] Bataille's first treatment of the relationship between sacrifice and the structure of subjectivity is *Sacrifices*, which he wrote only months after *The Notion of Expenditure* (see Bataille 1985: 130-136). However, it is only in his post-War work that Bataille works through this relationship at length, and so it is upon this phase of his thought that I draw.

means labor and reduce their consumption to the necessities" (Bataille 1989a: 198)[7]. Bataille's later work repeats his earlier argument that modernity has eliminated the institutions and practices of useless expenditure (or what he now calls sovereignty) that characterised the pre-modern world. However, he now also takes aim at Soviet communism, which he describes as a "world of denied sovereignty" (Bataille 1989a: 291). While the atheism of communism freed humankind from subordination to God, and its insistence on equality freed people from the sovereignty of the ruling class, Bataille claims that this was on condition of 'man' "having renounced for himself everything that is truly sovereign" (Bataille 1976: 352-353; quoted in Nancy 1991: 16). On his account, communism was the most extreme outcome of the development of the modern economy, as it sought to perfect production by "revolutionary means" (Bataille 1989: 93) and subordinate the "irreducible desire that man is" to "those needs that can be brought into harmony with a life entirely devoted to producing" (Bataille 1976: 352-353; quoted in Nancy 1991: 16).

While the modern world has destroyed the institutional forms that sovereignty once took, Bataille claims that the possibility of sovereign experience persists because it is a constitutive feature of subjectivity. According to Bataille, the subject is not a substance that underpins and guarantees our knowledge of the world, but a negativity that is constituted through the relation to the object. On his account, animals do not experience a distinction between themselves and their environment (Bataille 1989b: 19); and it is the use of tools that first interrupts the "immanence" in which the human animal is originally immersed. Tools are things that we create and are therefore distinct from the naturally given world and from ourselves (Bataille 1989b: 29); as such, they provide the "nascent form of the non-I" that allows us to understand ourselves as a subject opposed to a world of objects. Bataille argues that the use of tools also introduces the means-ends schema into our relationship with the world, as we always employ them to achieve a purpose (we use the hammer to drive a nail into wood, which we use to build a house, which we use to keep ourselves dry and warm, and so on). The effect of this instrumental activity deprives things of their immediate nature, as "the purpose of a plow is alien to the reality that constitutes it; and, with greater reason, the same is true of a grain of wheat or a calf" (Bataille 1989b: 41). Our work upon the world also gives rise to the temporality of duration and denies us access to the present moment, as we begin to repress our desire for immediate pleasure in favor of a satisfaction that arrives when we complete the project. According to Bataille, then, work makes us human, but at the price of alienation from immanence: we are no longer "in the world like water," as

[7] This account of sovereignty is indebted to Kojeve, who places the dialectic between Master and Slave at the centre of his reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit.* Bataille attended Kojeve's lectures and his thought was deeply marked by this encounter. Agamben has frequently commented on the relationship between Bataille and Kojeve and their treatment of negativity and the end of history (see Agamben 1991: 49-53; Agamben 2004: 5-12).

is the animal (Bataille 1989b: 19); instead, we are subjects in a world of objects, which we can only know inasmuch as they are external to us, and to the extent we attribute them meaning by incorporating them into our projects.

What Bataille calls "sovereign experience" involves the dissolution of the structures of instrumentality, temporality, and knowledge, that arise from the use of tools. If work employs a means to achieve an end, sovereignty involves the "enjoyment of possibilities that utility doesn't justify" (Bataille 1989a: 198). This non-instrumental enjoyment necessarily transforms the experience of temporality: whereas the worker delays the gratification of their desires to attain the end towards which they are working, sovereignty involves the full enjoyment of the present without view to anything other than the moment. Sovereignty thus involves a miraculous interruption of the normal temporal order and the projects that structure it, and in this sovereign moment, the anticipation and futurity that mark the human experience of time dissolve into nothing. Finally, the experience of sovereignty undermines the relation to the object that makes possible knowledge of the world. Bataille writes that knowledge is always the result of "an operation useful to some end...to know is always to strive, to work; is always a servile operation, indefinitely resumed, indefinitely repeated" (Bataille 1989a: 202). The intense consciousness of the moment that occurs in the sovereign experience dissolves one's rational understanding of the world as a collection of objects that can be known, and instead generates a relation of un-knowing that neutralises "every operation of knowledge within ourselves" (Bataille 1989a: 203). For Bataille, then, the subject is only constituted through its relation to the object, and is thus the non-non-I. The nothingness of this subject is revealed as such in sovereign experiences of useless consumption that dissolve the relation to the object that constitutes the subject and thereby demonstrate that "at bottom, I am this subjective and contentless existence" (Bataille 1989a: 378).

Bataille locates this kind of anti-utilitarian moment in a host of subjective experiences and cultural forms, including "laughter, tears, poetry, tragedy and comedy...play, anger, intoxification, ecstasy, dance, music, combat, the funereal horror, the magic of childhood, the sacred...the divine and the diabolical, eroticism...beauty...crime, cruelty, fear, disgust" (Bataille 1989a: 230). However, he sees sacrifice as the most important of the historical institutions through which societies made it possible for individuals to undergo the dissolution of the relation between subject and object. The practice of sacrifice removes something from the profane realm and gives it over to the sacred in a ritual that usually involves the killing or consumption of the victim. From the perspective of the religious believers, this gives them access to a spiritual realm that stands over against the human world of utility. For Bataille, however, the ineffable realm that believers think is the world of spirit is, in fact, the immanent relation to the world that we lost as a result of becoming human. What is important about the act of sacrifice, on his account, is that it destroys the utility of the object: "The thing – only the thing – is what sacrifice means

to destroy in its victim" (Bataille 1989b: 43)[8]. As an act of useless consumption, sacrifice is concerned only with the present moment, and is therefore "the antithesis of production, which is accomplished with a view to the future (Bataille 1989b: 49). In returning an object of utility to the immanence from which it comes, the individual who sacrifices also asserts that they are not reducible to the profane realm things and projects, as they also belong also to the "sovereign world of Gods and myths, to the world of violent and uncalculated generosity" (Bataille 1989b: 44). Finally, Bataille argues that sacrifice has the capacity to interrupt the individual's capture by the utilitarian order by forcing those who participate into an existential confrontation with death:

> Death is the great affirmer, the wonder-struck cry of life. The real order does not so much reject the negation of life that is death as it rejects the affirmation of intimate life, whose measureless violence is a danger to the stability of things, an affirmation that is fully revealed only in death…that intimate life, which had lost the ability to fully reach me, which I regard primarily as a thing, is fully restored to my sensibility through its absence. Death reveals life in its plenitude and dissolves the real order (Bataille 1989b: 46-7).

Sacrifice thus not only played a crucial economic and social role in pre-modern societies: it also produced profound subjective effects in those who took part in the ritual. In sacrifice, "the individual identifies with the victim in the sudden movement that restores it to immanence" (Bataille 1989b: 51) and they are, as such, forced to confront the inevitability of their own destruction; as a result, the one who sacrifices escapes the structures of reason, and brushes up against the immanent world that is lost when we become human.

However, Bataille also points to the limits of historical institutions, such as sacrifice, through which sovereignty was experienced. He describes the monopolisation of sovereignty by the aristocracy as the "perversion" of the sovereign freedom that belongs to all human beings, who "possess and have never entirely lost the value that is attributed to gods and human beings" (Bataille 1989a: 197). Bataille also argues that the objective order of sovereignty tended to obscure the subjective experience of freedom, and that when this inner experience was thematised historically, it was treated as a mystical experience, rather than as a product of human subjectivity and a manifestation of its limits. Moreover, the religious framework that sacrifice provided for understanding the experience of sovereignty means that the form of subjectivity that accompanies it was consumed by anguished as a result of its being overawed by the sacred realm (Bataille 1989b: 95). While the modern world has destroyed the institutions of sovereignty, Bataille suggests that, along with the development of the "clear consciousness" of modern science, this offers the possibility

[8] Bataille argues that killing is not necessary – it is just the most extreme form of negation of the "real order" and therefore discloses the "deep meaning" of the practice of useless expenditure (Bataille 1989b: 47-9).

of a more conscious and egalitarian experience of the sovereign freedom that is inherent to human beings: "Sovereignty designates the movement of free and internally wrenching violence that animates the whole, dissolves the whole, and reveals the impossible in laughter, ecstasy, or tears. But the impossible thus revealed is not an equivocle position; it is the sovereign self-consciousness that, precisely, no longer turns away from itself" (Bataille 1989b: 110-111). Indeed, in Bataille's later work, it is not sacrifice that is the contemporary exemplar of sovereign experience, but the "sovereign thought" of Friedrich Nietzsche, whose transvaluation of all values refuses the servile world, and gives to humanity a "gift that nothing limits; it is the sovereign gift, the gift of subjectivity" (Bataille 1989a: 371).

Bataille's work draws upon the history of sacrifice to both critique the productivism and instrumental rationality of modernity and identify forms of praxis that might break with it. However, the way that he understands useless expenditure, and the possibility for such practices in the contemporary world, shifts over time. In his earliest analysis of the sacred, he draws on Durkheimian sociology to identify class struggle as the contemporary form of unproductive expenditure, and casts insurrection as a collective assembly that transforms and binds together its participants and which, as such, has the capacity to put an end to the reign of the bourgeoisie. By the time of his later, more theoretically developed work, Bataille has abandoned his concern with class struggle, and he casts the sacrificial confrontation with death as the exemplary historical instance of sovereign experience. For the later Bataille, then, sacrifice reveals something about the nature of subjectivity, which is a nothingness that comes to light as such through acts of useless consumption. This allows him to identify forms of resistance to the instrumentalism of modernity in a range of limit experiences in which the subject undergoes its own desubjectivation, from laughter and poetry, to the thought and life of Friedrich Nietzsche. The earlier Bataille thus draws upon the history of sacrifice to argue that the revolutionary subject emerges through the intoxicating experience of insurrecionary class struggle. For the later Bataille, we might say that it is the subject as such that is 'revolutionary,' or at least a site for breaking free from the instrumental order of things—but only insofar as that subject is understood to be a negativity that is revealed as such through experiences of desubjectivation.

2. ON THE LIMITS OF REVOLUTIONARY VIOLENCE

In February of 1970 a young Giorgio Agamben wrote to Hannah Arendt thanking her for the "decisive experience" her work had given him—and to this letter, he appended a copy of *On the Limits of Violence* (Agamben 2009: 111). The essay opens by drawing on Arendt's *The Human Condition* to analyse the origins of the political tradition, and to argue that this tradition is experiencing a crisis that undermines its fundamental presuppositions. It concludes by making the rather enigmatic

argument that revolutionary violence is the "unsayable that perpetually overwhelms the possibility of language and eludes all justification" (Agamben 2009: 109). Now that I have laid out some of the key aspects of Bataille's thinking on sacrifice, class struggle, and subjectivity, I am going to argue that Agamben's essay reads Arendt's account of revolutionary new beginnings through a theory of sacrificial violence that echoes themes central to Bataille's thought. In the process, Agamben articulates some of the fundamental themes that he will wrestle with over the ensuing decades, and which become central to his political thought some twenty years later.

Agamben notes that Greek thought opposed politics to violence: "To be political (to live in the *polis*) was to accept the principle that everything should be decided by the word and by persuasion, rather than by force or by violence" (Agamben 2009: 104). This political opposition was, in turn, dependent upon a distinction between corporeality, on the one hand, and truth, language and the soul on the other. The political life was predicated on the belief that "truth, in and of itself, could exert persuasive power on the human mind" (Agamben 2009: 104). The body, by contrast, was associated with violence, which "denies the liberty of its victim" and "cannot reveal inner creative spontaneity, only bare corporeality" (Agamben 2009: 105). However, Agamben argues that modernity has radically undermined the classical distinction between violence and politics. Rational persuasion is of little use against the catastrophic forms of violence invented by modern technology. Propaganda is now used to overpower the will and "reduce humans to nature" in an exercise of "linguistic violence" (Agamben 2009: 105). And, most importantly, revolutionary politics seeks to use political violence to usher in the new: as Marx puts it, "violence is the midwife of every old society which is pregnant with the new one" (Marx 1976: 916)[9].

Agamben takes Marx's belief in the creative capacities of violence as the starting point for his critique of the revolutionary tradition. While revolutionary politics has tried to use violence to put an end to exploitation and domination, it has often reproduced the very problems it sought to cure. Agamben claims that these failures are due to the "historical Darwinism" of revolutionary thought, which casts society as being subject to the "linear progression of necessary laws, similar to the laws governing the natural world" (Agamben 2009: 106). Within this schema, revolutionary violence is justified because it hastens the development of the economic laws that govern human history. Yet this vision of history establishes a "reign of mechanistic necessity that contains no space for free and conscious human action" (Agamben 2009: 106) and thereby eliminates the capacity to bring something new into the world that Marx associated with revolutionary praxis. This was to have a profoundly

[9] While Agamben does not cite Arendt on these matters, his analysis of propaganda reflects Arendt's concern with its corrosive effect on politics, as articulated in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Lying in Politics*. As we will see later in this essay, his argument that revolutionary politics seeks to bring about the new through violence echoes a key claim of *On Revolution*.

damaging effect on the course of twentieth century politics, as it was "the model adopted by totalitarian movements" whose "self-proclaimed exclusive right to revolutionary violence fostered involutional processes within authentic revolutionary movements" (Agamben 2009: 106).

Agamben develops his response to the crisis of the Western political tradition and the failures of revolutionary politics by turning to Walter Benjamin's *Critique of Violence*. Benjamin's essay describes political history as a "dialectical rising and falling" of the law-making violence that founds a legal order and the law-preserving violence that sustains it (Benjamin 1978: 300). Both natural law and positivist legal theory assume that such violent means can be used to achieve justified ends (Benjamin 1978: 278). On Benjamin's account, however, law is not built upon the justice of the ends it sanctions, but rather, upon the need to establish order and assert power, a task that is pursued through violence. The irreducible gap between law and justice leads Benjamin to the conclusion that the historical function of the law is "pernicious" and its destruction "obligatory" (Benjamin 1978: 297), an obligation to which he responds by attempting to theorise a violence that does not have an instrumental relation to a legal end. According to Benjamin, a violence that does not found or preserve a law, but seeks to suspend or depose it, has the capacity to abolish State power and found a "new historical epoch" (Benjamin 1978: 300)—and, while he provides a number of examples such a violence that deposes the law, the most important of them is the proletarian general strike.

Benjamin's analysis of the general strike draws heavily upon Georges Sorel's *Reflections on Violence*, a work that was influenced by the ideas of Emile Proudhon and the politics of revolutionary syndicalism. According to Sorel, the proletarian general strike is a political myth in which "the revolution appears as a revolt, pure and simple" (Sorel 1999: 129) and "the passage from capitalism to socialism is conceived as a catastrophe whose development defies description" (Sorel 1999: 110). This proletarian mythology, which developed out of the strike practices of revolutionary unions (*syndicats*), tends to intensify class struggle by dividing society into the two hostile camps described in the first chapter of *The Communist Manifesto*; it radicalises the working class by casting minor and every day incidents as part of the drama of a wider social war; and it is utterly hostile to any compromise with the existing order. According to Sorel, the politics of the *syndicats* generated the possibility of a revolutionary praxis that would be qualitatively different from the bourgeois revolutions, which had used State authority to "impose a certain social order in which the minority governs" (Sorel 1999: 166). This is because the proletarian general strike seeks to smash the authority of the State, rather than trying to take it over in order to wield its power—and, in so doing, the proletariat rejects the division between ruler and ruled that the State form necessitates, in favour of self-organisation. This conception of the general strike was taken up and advocated by the 'new school' of Marxist thinkers, amongst whom Sorel included himself, who had begun

to study the syndicalist movement and discovered that they had a great deal to learn from the working class. It was anathema, however, to those socialist politicians who spoke of the self-emancipation of the working class and the withering away of the State, while acting in ways that reinforced their own power and strengthened the machinery of government. Amongst these would be representatives of the working class, then, there developed a contrary vision of a political general strike, in which the *syndicats* would be placed under the control of political committees, and the aim of insurrection was to pass power "from one group of politicians to another – the people still remaining the passive beast that bears the yoke" (Sorel 1999: 149).

Benjamin reads Sorel's analysis of the general strike through the lens of his critique of legal violence. What he calls the partial strike seeks to extract concessions from the existing state and it is, as such, a manifestation of law preserving violence. The political general strike tries to overturn the existing order by seizing the State and is thus an example of law creating violence. However, this form of strike does nothing to escape the problem of domination, as the "mass of producers" simply "change their masters" (Benjamin 1978: 291). These instrumental forms of violence thus lack the capacity to fundamentally transform the political and economic situation. In the proletarian general strike, by contrast, the proletariat withdraws *in toto* from the system of capitalist exploitation backed by State violence, and is determined "to resume only a wholly transformed work, no longer enforced by the State" (Benjamin 1978: 292). The proletarian general strike is thus an 'anarchistic' and non-instrumental form of violence that has the capacity to break with the history of domination because it does not seek material gain through the State, but rather, "sets itself the sole task of destroying state power" (Benjamin 1978: 291).

Benjamin's analysis of the deposition of the law is fundamental for Agamben's political thinking, and he returns to it repeatedly throughout his work as he attempts to theorise the 'coming politics' (Agamben 1998: 63-65; Agamben 2005a: 60-64; Agamben 2015: 269). However, in his first treatment of the *Critique*, Agamben claims that while Benjamin and Sorel pose the essential problem for revolutionary politics, the action they propose remains teleological because it is determined by the end of ousting the existing State. What Agamben is looking for, by contrast, is a violence "that contains its own principle and justification" (Agamben 2009: 107)— and to theorise such an action, he turns to the sacred violence found in the religious rituals of the ancient world. Agamben writes that sacred violence "reveals itself where humans intuit the essential proximity of life and death, violence and creation" (Agamben 2009: 108). When the community was under threat, or "the cosmos seemed empty and vacant", ancient communities would perform sacred rites that, through the "extreme act" of spilling their own blood, produced "an irruption of the sacred and an interruption of profane time" (Agamben 2009: 107). This violence gave the ancients the capacity to regenerate time and begin history anew because it resurrected the "primordial chaos" that gave birth to society, making

"humans contemporaries of the gods", and granting them "access to the original dimension of creation" (Agamben 2009: 107). Agamben then draws an analogy between sacrifice and Marx and Engels' claim that "the revolution is necessary, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found a new society" (Marx and Engels 1974: 95). What Marx and Engels indicate, according to Agamben, is that revolutionary violence can only break with the history of domination when the revolutionary class negates itself in the process of negating the ruling class. According to Agamben, then, sacrifice and proletarian revolution are both actions that call history to a "messianic halt" through a violence that does not simply aim at the negation of the existing order but which, rather, "negates the self as it negates the other; it awakens a consciousness of the death of the self, even as it visits death on the other" (Agamben 2009: 108).

Having drawn the problem of self-negation out of Marx and Engels and the example of sacrifice, Agamben concludes his essay by arguing that revolutionary violence should be understood in relation to death, which is the ultimate form of negation. This also means that revolutionary violence should also be understood in its relation to the limits of language, which is "the power we wield against death" (Agamben 2009: 109). Language and culture cannot give us access to the originary sphere in which creation and destruction coincide because they are an attempt to 'make peace' with death (the Greeks separated the word from violence precisely because the latter can threaten death). "Only by going beyond language", Agamben writes, "by negating the self and powers of speech humanity gains access to the original sphere where the knowledge of mystery and culture breaks apart, allowing words and deeds to generate a new beginning" (Agamben 2009: 109). "Revolutionary violence alone" can cross the threshold of language, through the "stunning realisation of the indissoluble unity of life and death, creation and negation" (Agamben 2009: 109).

Agamben's analysis of revolutionary violence throws up a number of major interpretative issues. On the face of it, his embrace of the emancipatory possibilities of sacred violence seems to be rather problematic: one of the few commentators on the essay, David Kishik, is clearly troubled by this aspect of Agamben's argument, as he describes the justification of the "physical killing of a sacrificial victim" as a "hypocritical convenience", and calls the idea of the negation of the other as self-negation "dubious" (Kishik 2012: 93). The stakes of Agamben's argument are also somewhat obscure, particularly in the final sections of the essay, which theorise revolutionary violence in relation to mortality and the limits of language. As such, the essay could all too easily be criticised for retreating from concrete political analysis to metaphysical abstraction, in much the same way as Agamben's later account of the 'coming politics' (Sinnerbrink 2005: 259; Power 2010; Behrman 2013).

Agamben's account of revolutionary self-negation is difficult to unpack, however, in part because he does not provide citations for key ideas that he employs. One can, nonetheless, detect echoes of some of Agamben's influences in the argument which can help to cast light on his claims and his conceptual concerns—and the most important of these influences, I argue, are Hannah Arendt and Georges Bataille.

Arendt analyses revolutionary violence, and indeed politics as such, as an expression of the human capacity to bring about the new. Arendt writes: "Beginning, before it becomes a historical event, is the supreme capacity of man; politically, it is identical with man's freedom" (Arendt 1968: 479). This "supreme capacity" is not only key to the political experience of freedom, but the essence of politics as such: what makes "man a political being", she writes, "is his faculty for action; it enables him to get together with his peers, to act in concert...to embark on something new" (Arendt 1972: 179; see also 1958: 178). Arendt's thought also ties the faculty for beginning anew that is at stake in political action to two fundamental conditions of human existence, namely, natality and speech. According to Arendt, the capacity to act politically is predicated on the fact of birth, which is the first beginning that makes all others possible by bringing something unique into the world, namely, a human being that has the capacity to act and create the new (Arendt 1958: 9). She also argues that the political importance of speech lies not in the fact that it conveys information, but rather, that it allows us to be recognised by others as a singular being: "Speech corresponds to the fact of distinctness and is the actualisation of the human condition of plurality, that is, as a distinct and unique being amongst equals...in acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and make their appearance in the human world" (Arendt 1958: 178-9).

Arendt's concern for new beginnings underpins the account of revolutionary politics that she develops in her 1963 study, *On Revolution*. In this context, Arendt argues that the French and American revolutions brought something new into the world by connecting the exercise of violence to political freedom and to historical novelty. Arendt distinguishes freedom, which involves self-government through participation in political life, from liberation, which means to be freed from restraint and oppression. While liberation from oppressive circumstances is a precondition for the exercise of political freedom, what made the French and American Revolutions unique is that they combined the desire a liberty by the broad masses of the poor with an attempt to create a new form of republican government that institutionalised freedom. The act of founding a new constitution demonstrated that the social and political order was contingent, leading to a sense that "the course of history" was beginning again and "that an entirely new story, a story never known or told before, is about to unfold" (Arendt 1963: 21). However, Arendt also argues that the revolutionary experience of freedom with respect to history was quickly undermined, in the case of the French Revolution, by an equally powerful

experience of necessity, with those taking part feeling that had been swept up in an irresistible torrent of violence that led from the bourgeois republicanism of 1789, through Jacobinism and the Terror, to Thermidor and the Napoleonic Wars. According to Arendt, this provided the model for Hegel's account of history as a dialectical process that is driven by necessity, but which leads, in the end, to a realm of freedom—an account of history that would, she argues, have a considerable influence on the revolutionary tradition, not least due to the work of Marx, who was "the greatest pupil Hegel ever had" (Arendt 1963: 47)[10].

In *On the Limits of Violence*, Agamben defends Marx against Arendt's argument that he is a thinker of historical necessity, arguing that he "constantly criticised" the Hegelian attempt to reconcile necessity and freedom (Agamben 2009: 106). Nonetheless, like Arendt, he insists that revolutionary thought and politics institutes a connection between violence and historical novelty, and that this political experience has been occluded by a teleological theory of history that understands revolutionary praxis as an expression of necessity. Agamben's debt to Arendt helps to explain the intermingling of ontological and political themes in his essay, which also attempts to rethink revolutionary violence in light of the ontological capacity of the human being to create the new, and the relationship between this faculty and language. However, Agamben also feeds these Arendtian concern through concepts that reflect his debt to Benjamin. First, he casts revolutionary violence as a messianic suspension of history, which is an obvious reference to Benjamin. Second, he describes this as an event in which creation and negation coincide, which is also an idea that is most likely drawn from Benjamin, given that it is central to Agamben's later reading of *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1999b: 148-159). In the process, he opens out a substantial difference between his account of the human capacity to begin anew and that of Arendt, who argues that the connection between new beginnings and political action makes natality the central category of political thought, whereas for metaphysics the fundamental problem is mortality (Arendt 1958: 9). Agamben, by contrast, insists that the new comes about through the coincidence of creation and negation—and in *On the Limits of Violence*, he interprets this to mean that the messianic suspension of history occurs through a confrontation with death. The claim that mortality is the existential condition of possibility for the emergence of the new generates a further difference from Arendt who, as we have seen, argues that action also needs to be understood in relation to speech. Agamben, by contrast, asserts that beginning anew requires that we negate ourselves, and

[10] While Arendt does not make the point explicitly, this critique of Marx as a theorist of historical necessity, and the malign influence that this idea had on the course of revolutionary politics, echoes her earlier argument that Stalinism justified the total domination of human beings, and the absolute erasure of their freedom, on the basis of the laws of history that Marx had ostensibly discovered (Arendt 1968: 461-464).

this requires an experience of the unsayable, because language attempts to reconcile us to death.

Agamben's focus on mortality and the experience of being deprived of language both reflect the concerns of his former teacher, Martin Heidegger. Agamben attended Heidegger's seminars at Le Thor in Provence in 1966 and 1968 (Agamben 2009: 103) and has said that it was through his encounter with Heidegger's thought that philosophy first became possible for him (Agamben 1999a: ii). In *Being and Time*, Heidegger famously argues that *Dasein* is characterised by its being-towards-death (Heidegger 1962: 279-311). It is our mortality that makes it possible for *Dasein* to gather itself from its fallenness in everydayness and to grasp itself as a whole through an authentic decision (Heidegger 1962: 341-348)[11]. According to Heidegger, this decision becomes possible through an experience of the mood of anxiety, which discloses our thrownness in the world (Agamben 1962: 341-348) and, in so doing, deprives us of speech (Heidegger 1977: 101; see also Agamben 1991: 57). It is highly likely, then, that Agamben's concern with mortality and the experience of the unsayable are influenced by his recent and decisive encounter with Heidegger.

Nonetheless, I claim that the particular way Agamben's interprets these issues in *On the Limits of Violence* also suggests the influence of Bataille upon his thought. The first and most obvious connection between the two thinkers is that they each theorise the confrontation with death through the historical example of sacrificial violence. Now, there are certainly differences in the way that each thinker interprets the sacrifice, with Bataille casting it as a form of useless expenditure, and Agamben arguing that it produces a suspension of time[12]. Yet there are also a number of remarkable similarities between the two. In the first place, Agamben deploys the analysis of sacrificial violence in a way that echoes Bataille's philosophical strategy, that is, by attempting to theorise a non-instrumental form of action that can break with the bourgeois order and respond to the limits of the dominant forms of revolutionary politics. Second, both thinkers interpret sacrifice as an act that forces those who participate into an existential confrontation with their own death through the act of killing another; and both cast this experience as a loss of the self that occurs at the

[11] Agamben later engages in a major critical confrontation with this aspect of Heidegger's thought. In *Language and Death*, he argues that the "call of conscience" that allows *Dasein* to gather itself and decide authentically is a manifestation of the negative ground that defines metaphysics (Agamben 1991: 54-62).

[12] It is not clear where Agamben takes his analysis of sacrifice from. As noted earlier, his account of sacrifice as an interruption and regeneration of time echoes that of Mircea Eliade in *Cosmos and History*, who Furio Jesi draws upon at around the same time that Agamben writes his essay. However, these aspects of sacrifice were not unknown to Bataille and the circle around him: in a Lecture delivered at the College of Sociology in May 1939, Roger Callois, put forward a *Theory of the Festival* that highlights many of the same features of festival that Agamben highlights in *On the Limits of Violence*: the restoration of possibility through the re-enactment of primordial chaos; the coincidence of death and rebirth; and the suspension of calendar time (Hollier 1989: 281-303)

limits of language and which thereby transforms the experience of temporality. Third, Agamben formulates the experience of sacrificial self-negation by reference to the Nietzschean theme of the Dionysian, which is central to Bataille's thought: "Violence, when it becomes self-negation, belongs neither to its agent nor its victim; it becomes elation and dispossession of self – as the Greeks understood in their figure of the mad god" (Agamben 2009: 109). Indeed, *On the Limits of Violence* concludes by comparing this Dionysian experience to the Hegelian image of the absolute as a "Bacchanalian revel in which no member is not drunk" (Agamben 2009: 109)—a link that is also made in Walter Otto's *Dionysius*, which is extracted extensively in *Acéphale* Volume 3/4 (Bataille 2018: 192). As Rebecca Comay argues, while there are some similarities between Heidegger and Bataille, given their common critique of instrumental rationality, and their insistence on the groundlessness of existence, there is a profound difference between Heidegger's thinking of death in *Being and Time*, which emphasises authenticity and self-possession, and Bataille's account of sacrifice as an ecstatic experience of abandonment and the dissolution of the self (Comay 1990: 72-77). Agamben's emphasis on the loss of the self, and his invocation of the theme of Dionysian ecstasy to describe this experience, are thus particularly strong pieces of evidence that his interpretation of sacrificial self-negation is influenced by Bataille.

My claim, then, is that Agamben first formulates the idea that desubjectivation has an emancipatory potential in this early account of the revolutionary subject; that while his account of revolutionary violence draws on Arendt's concern with new beginnings and Benjamin's messianism, the key moment of this argument is his account of sacrificial violence as an existential confrontation with death; and that the way that Agamben formulates this idea suggests the influence of Bataille upon his thinking. What remains unclear, however, is exactly what Agamben means when he argues that a revolutionary new beginning requires the negation of the self through the negation of the other. What would it mean to practice such a sacrificial politics in the context of a revolutionary process? Is Agamben advocating, for example, a revolutionary terror that puts the class enemy to death? If so, his account of revolutionary violence would certainly stand in stark contrast to that of Arendt, for whom the "lost treasure" of revolutionary politics is its attempt to found new spaces for the exercise of freedom through political action (Arendt 1963: 217-285). Indeed, at much same time that Agamben wrote his critique of revolutionary violence by drawing on Arendt's work, she penned *On Violence*, which applauded the student movements for their appetite for democratic political action, while roundly criticising their rhetorical and conceptual embrace of violence (Arendt 1972: 114-123).

To unpack the political implications of Agamben's argument, it is instructive to compare his analysis of revolution and desubjectivation to that of Bataille. We have seen that Bataille uses the example of sacrificial violence in different ways in different phases of his work. At the time that he was involved in the CCD, he drew quite

direct parallels between the violence of sacrificial festivals and that of insurrectionary class struggle. In his later work, however, the violence of sacrifice becomes a way for Bataille to theorise the "movement of free and internally wrenching violence" (Bataille 1989b: 110) associated with sovereign experience, which he identifies in a range of different practices, from poetry, to drunkenness, and laughter. Agamben's account of revolutionary violence contains echoes of both these approaches to theorising sacrificial self-negation. Like the early Bataille, he explicitly links sacrifice and revolutionary praxis, emphasises class struggle and revolt through the example of the proletarian general strike, speaks of revolutionary violence involving the killing of another, and compares the unsayable experience of revolutionary violence to a Dionysian and drunken revel. However, like the later Bataille, Agamben casts sacrifice and revolutionary violence as examples of a constitutive feature of human existence, namely, the dissolution of the subject that occurs at the limits of language. If, then, we take Bataille's later work as a model for the way that Agamben is theorising revolutionary violence, and cast the experience of desubjectivation as an 'aspect of existence' that appears in a variety of experiences and social phenomena, then the negation of self and other that enables the emergence of the new could occur through means other than physical killing, but which, like this act, brings human beings up against the limits of language and subjectivity.

This is precisely what is at stake in Agamben's other major example of revolutionary desubjectivation, namely, Marx and Engels's claim that the proletariat must "rid itself of the muck of ages" in order to "found society anew" (Marx and Engels 1974: 95). The passage that Agamben cites from *The German Ideology* appears at the end of an extended analysis of the relationship between the proletariat and the possibility of a communist revolution. According to Marx and Engels, previous revolutions had seen the oppressed challenge their exploitation by the dominant class, while "the mode of activity... remained unscathed and it was only a question of a different distribution of this activity, a new distribution of labour to other persons" (Marx and Engels 1974: 94). A communist revolution, by contrast, puts an end to class society by doing away with the exploitative labour that has provided its basis (Marx and Engels 1974: 94). According to Marx and Engels, this requires the expropriation of the means of production by the proletariat; however, this can only occur through revolutionary struggle, the motivation for which comes from the development of a "communist consciousness" that is familiar with the exploitation and immiseration of the proletariat, and is thereby convinced of the "necessity of a fundamental revolution" (Marx and Engels 1974: 94). Since a successful revolution requires that the proletarian majority mobilise against the bourgeoisie, a large scale and radical change in the views of those that make up bourgeois society is needed; and this process of political education is, in turn, most effectively produced through involvement in a collective revolutionary process: "For the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only

take place in a practical movement, a revolution" (Marx and Engels 1974: 94). For Marx and Engels, then, a communist revolution abolishes class by eliminating the economic, legal and political conditions that constitute it, and this requires the widespread dissemination of a communist consciousness and the destruction of those beliefs constituted within a class divided society, all of which is to occur through the revolutionary process.

To put Marx and Engels' argument in the terms of Agamben's essay, previous revolutions have only asserted the class of the oppressed in the act of negating their oppressors; a revolution that is genuinely capable of rupturing history by putting an end to exploitation and domination must negate the revolutionary subject in the very act of negating the other[13]. This, in turn, requires a mass of individuals who undergo the "death of the self" through the revolutionary process of negating their class enemy. What Agamben's reference to *The German Ideology* suggests is that, while the example of sacrifice, and the existential confrontation with death that it involves, are central to his account of revolutionary violence, the negation of the self through the death of the other does not necessitate actual violence and the physical killing of another (although in a revolutionary process it may well). Instead, the example of sacrifice helps him to formulate the idea of self-negation or desubjectivation that he sees as the fundamental ontological condition of new beginnings, and which is necessary for revolutionary violence to bring about the new. This, in turn, allows Agamben to identify what he sees as the truly revolutionary content of Marx's analysis of revolution, namely the dissolution of the proletariat through the elimination of class; and, by implication, to criticise those versions of socialism and communism that valorise the identity of the working class, a theoretical tendency that he would warn against many years later in his interview with Vacarme[14].

[13] Agamben returns to and complicates his reading of Marx and Engels' account of proletarian self-negation in his reading of Paul's Letter to the Romans in *The Time That Remains*. In this context, he highlights the way that Marx and Engels criticise Max Stirner, who emphasises the revolt of the individual, and instead try to theorise a form of praxis in which this coincides with collective political action aimed at institutional transformation. However, Agamben also criticises the role that the party plays in Marx and Engels' thought, arguing that it would not be necessary if individual revolt and the political revolution were genuinely indistinguishable. He then juxtaposes Marx and Engels account of to the anarchist-nihilism of Benjamin. See Agamben 2005b: 29-33.

[14] Agamben's emphasis on self-negation is an important antidote to the misunderstanding of Marx's account of proletarian revolution that, according to the social theorist GM Tamas, has characterised much of the left. Tamas argues that most socialists and communists has have defined the proletariat in cultural terms, as the working class, rather than in terms of their structural function within the capitalist mode of production. This has been accompanied by a celebration of the superior moral virtues of the working class in comparison to their bourgeois oppressors, and a politics that seeks the elimination of the ruling class and flourishing of the working class, rather than, as in Marx, the attempt to eliminate the structural conditions that constitute class as such. On Tamas' account, this theory has its origins in Rousseau, rather than Marx. See (Tamas 2006). Jessica Whyte was the first to draw on Tamas to analyse Agamben's work, and I am indebted to her for introducing me to his work (Whyte 2014). It is also worth noting that the importance that Agamben assigns to the dissolution of the

3. CONCLUSION

The crux of Agamben's early analysis of revolutionary violence is the argument that the new emerges through the negation of self and other. While Agamben's argument draws upon a range of influences, I have shown that he develops this key claim through an analysis of sacrificial violence that mirrors themes central to Bataille's thinking. I have also suggested that, while the essay does involve a rhetorical embrace of violence that echoes the early Bataille, the central argument is that violence can only usher in the new when the revolutionary subject embraces its own dissolution or desubjectivation. Now, as we saw in the introduction to this essay, the theme of desubjectivation is central to Agamben's critique of contemporary politics in the *Homo Sacer* project. By the time of *Homo Sacer*, he is also deeply critical of Bataille's thought for reproducing the structure of the sovereign ban, which is the most extreme mechanism through which the State deprives individuals and populations of their identity[15].

If my argument is correct, the criticism of Bataille that Agamben develops from *Stanzas* through *Language and Death*, *Homo Sacer*, and *The Open* appears to be a gradual attempt to distance his thinking from a theorist to whom he had initially drawn close. However, the claim that the experience of desubjectivation contains an emancipatory potential remains crucial for Agamben's later political thought, which develops the idea of inoperativity as an antidote to the biopolitical management of life.

The argument that I have put forward in this essay raises the prospect that Agamben's politics of inoperativity may, in fact, be more influenced by Bataille than his criticisms would seem to indicate. Indeed, it is notable that some of Agamben's examples of the coming politics are practices that Bataille theorises in terms of sovereignty: in his interview with Vacarme, for example, Agamben states that one brushes up against a zone of desubjectivation in the "everyday mysticism of intimacy" (Agamben 2004: 117); elsewhere, he claims that ancient festivals such as Charivari "point toward a zone in which life's maximum subjection to law is reversed into freedom and license...in other words, they point towards the real state of

proletariat in this early essay puts him at odds with Arendt's position on this same issue. At much the same time that Agamben wrote his critique of revolutionary violence, Arendt gave an interview in which she argued that capitalism had deprived the working class of property, and that the Soviet Union had then abolished the proletariat as such by destroying the legal rights and institutions, such as labour unions and the ability to strike, that had defined the class (Arendt 1972: 215). On her account, the only viable response to the fate of the masses in both capitalist and communist countries is to restore property to those that have been deprived of it (Arendt 1972: 214-5).

[15] It is also possible that Bataille is an implicit target of *The Kingdom and the Glory*. Bataille argues that glorious display is an example of sovereignty that, as a form of useless consumption, is antithetical to the productivism of bourgeois modernity (Bataille 1989a: 200, 295). According to Agamben, however, the 'governmental machine' of contemporary capitalism relies on practices of glorification whose genealogy he traces back to the ancient and medieval worlds (Agamben 2011).

exception as the threshold of indifference between anomie and law" (Agamben 2005: 72-3). However, the work of thinking through the proximity and distance between Bataille, and Agamben's later account of the emancipatory politics of desubjectivation, remains to be done[16].

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