



means without
Notes on Politics end

Giorgio
Agamben

Translated by Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino

THEORY OUT OF BOUNDS

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The Face

ALL LIVING beings are in the open: they manifest themselves and shine in their appearance. But only human beings want to take possession of this opening, to seize hold of their own appearance and of their own being-manifest. Language is this appropriation, which transforms nature into *face*. This is why appearance becomes a problem for human beings: it becomes the location of a struggle for truth.

The face is at once the irreparable being-exposed of humans and the very opening in which they hide and stay hidden. The face is the only location of community, the only possible city. And that is because that which in single individuals opens up to the political is the tragicomedy of truth, in which they always already fall and out of which they have to find a way.

What the face exposes and reveals is not *something* that could be formulated as a signifying proposition of sorts, nor is it a secret doomed to remain forever incommunicable. The face's revelation is revelation of language itself. Such a revelation, therefore, does not have any real content and does not tell the truth about this or that state of being, about this or that aspect of human beings and of the world: it is *only* opening, *only* communicability. To walk in the light of the face means *to be* this opening—and to suffer it, and to endure it.

Thus, the face is, above all, the *passion* of revelation, the passion of language. Nature acquires a face precisely in the moment it feels that it is being revealed by language. And nature's being exposed and betrayed by the word, its veiling itself behind the impossibility of having a secret, appears on its face as either chastity or perturbation, as either shamelessness or modesty.

The face does not coincide with the visage. There is a face wherever something reaches the level of exposition and tries to grasp its own being exposed, wherever a being that appears sinks in that appearance and has to find a way out of it. (Thus, art can give a face even to an inanimate object, to a still nature; and that is why the witches, when accused by the inquisitors of kissing Satan's anus during the Sabbath, argued that even there there was a face. And it may be that nowadays the entire Earth, which has been transformed into a desert by humankind's blind will, might become one single face.)

I look someone in the eyes: either these eyes are cast down—and this is modesty, that is, modesty for the emptiness lurking behind the gaze—or they look back at me. And they can look at me shamelessly, thereby exhibiting their own emptiness as if there was another abyssal eye behind it that knows this emptiness and uses it as an impenetrable hiding place. Or, they can look at me with a chaste impudence and without reserve, thereby letting love and the word happen in the emptiness of our gazes.

Exposition is the location of politics. If there is no animal politics, that is perhaps because animals are always already in the open and do not try to take possession of their own exposition; they simply live in it without caring about it. That is why they are not interested in mirrors, in the image as image. Human beings, on the other hand, separate images from things and give them a name precisely because they want to recognize themselves, that is, they want to take possession of their own very appearance. Human beings thus transform the open into a world, that is, into the battlefield of a political struggle without quarter. This struggle, whose object is truth, goes by the name of History.

It is happening more and more often that in pornographic photographs the portrayed subjects, by a calculated stratagem, look into the camera, thereby exhibiting the awareness of being exposed to the gaze. This unexpected gesture violently belies the fiction that is implicit

in the consumption of such images, according to which the one who looks surprises the actors while remaining unseen by them: the latter, rather, knowingly challenge the voyeur's gaze and force him to look them in the eyes. In that precise moment, the insubstantial nature of the human face suddenly comes to light. The fact that the actors look into the camera means that they *show that they are simulating*; nevertheless, they paradoxically appear more real precisely to the extent to which they exhibit this falsification. The same procedure is used today in advertising: the image appears more convincing if it shows openly its own artifice. In both cases, the one who looks is confronted with something that concerns unequivocally the essence of the face, the very structure of truth.

We may call tragicomedy of appearance the fact that the face uncovers only and precisely inasmuch as it hides, and hides to the extent to which it uncovers. In this way, the appearance that ought to have manifested human beings becomes for them instead a resemblance that betrays them and in which they can no longer recognize themselves. Precisely because the face is solely the location of truth, it is also and immediately the location of simulation and of an irreducible impropriety. This does not mean, however, that appearance dissimulates what it uncovers by making it look like what in reality it is not: rather, what human beings truly are is nothing other than this dissimulation and this disquietude within the appearance. Because human beings neither are nor have to be any essence, any nature, or any specific destiny,

their condition is the most empty and the most insubstantial of all: it is the truth. What remains hidden from them is not something behind appearance, but rather appearing itself, that is, their being nothing other than a face. The task of politics is to return appearance itself to appearance, to cause appearance itself to appear.

The face, truth, and exposition are today the objects of a global civil war, whose battlefield is social life in its entirety, whose storm troopers are the media, whose victims are all the peoples of the Earth. Politicians, the media establishment, and the advertising industry have understood the insubstantial character of the face and of the community it opens up, and thus they transform it into a miserable secret that they must make sure to control at all costs. State power today is no longer founded on the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence—a monopoly that states share increasingly willingly with other nonsovereign organizations such as the United Nations and terrorist organizations; rather, it is founded above all on the control of appearance (of *doxa*). The fact that politics constitutes itself as an autonomous sphere goes hand in hand with the separation of the face in the world of spectacle—a world in which human communication is being separated from itself. Exposition thus transforms itself into a value that is accumulated in images and in the media, while a new class of bureaucrats jealously watches over its management.

If what human beings had to communicate to each other were always and only something, there would never be

politics properly speaking, but only exchange and conflict, signals and answers. But because what human beings have to communicate to each other is above all a pure communicability (that is, language), politics then arises as the communicative emptiness in which the human face emerges as such. It is precisely this empty space that politicians and the media establishment are trying to be sure to control, by keeping it separate in a sphere that guarantees its unseizability and by preventing communicativity itself from coming to light. This means that an integrated Marxian analysis should take into consideration the fact that capitalism (or whatever other name we might want to give to the process dominating world history today) not only was directed to the expropriation of productive activity, but was also and above all directed to the alienation of language itself, of the communicative nature of human beings.

Inasmuch as it is nothing but pure communicability, every human face, even the most noble and beautiful, is always suspended on the edge of an abyss. This is precisely why the most delicate and graceful faces sometimes look as if they might suddenly decompose, thus letting the shapeless and bottomless background that threatens them emerge. But this amorphous background is nothing else than the opening itself and communicability itself inasmuch as they are constituted as their own presuppositions as if they were a thing. The only face to remain uninjured is the one capable of taking the abyss of its own communicability upon itself and of exposing it without fear or complacency.

This is why the face contracts into an expression, stiffens into a character, and thus sinks further and further into itself. As soon as the face realizes that communicability is all that it is and hence that it has nothing to express—thus withdrawing silently behind itself, inside its own mute identity—it turns into a grimace, which is what one calls character. Character is the constitutive reticence that human beings retain in the word; but what one has to take possession of here is only a nonlatency, a pure visibility: simply a visage. The face is not something that transcends the visage: it is the exposition of the visage in all its nudity, it is a victory over character—it is word.

Everything for human beings is divided between proper and improper, true and false, possible and real: this is because they are or have to be only a face. Every appearance that manifests human beings thus becomes for them improper and factitious, and makes them confront the task of turning truth into their *own proper* truth. But truth itself is not something of which we can take possession, nor does it have any object other than appearance and the improper: it is simply their comprehension, their exposition. The totalitarian politics of the modern, rather, is the will to total self-possession: here either the improper extends its own rule everywhere, thanks to an unrestrainable will to falsification and consumption (as happens in advanced industrialized democracies), or the proper demands the exclusion of any impropriety (as happens in the so-called totalitarian states). In both these grotesque counterfeits of the face, the only truly human

possibility is lost: that is, the possibility of taking possession of impropriety as such, of exposing in the face simply your *own proper* impropriety, of walking in the shadow of its light.

The human face reproduces the duality that constitutes it within its own structure, that is, the duality of proper and improper, of communication and communicability, of potentiality and act. The face is formed by a passive background on which the active expressive traits emerge:

Just as the Star mirrors its elements and the combination of the elements into one route in its two superimposed triangles, so too the organs of the countenance divide into two levels. For the life-points of the countenance are, after all, those points where the countenance comes into contact with the world above, be it passive or active contact. The basic level is ordered according to the receptive organs; they are the face, the mask, namely forehead and cheeks, to which belong respectively nose and ears. Nose and ears are the organs of pure receptivity. . . . This first triangle is thus formed by the midpoint of the forehead, as the dominant point of the entire face, and the midpoint of the cheeks. Over it is now imposed a second triangle, composed of the organs whose activity quickens the rigid mask of the first: eyes and mouth.¹

In advertising and pornography (consumer society), the eyes and the mouth come to the foreground; in totalitarian states (bureaucracy), the passive background is dominant (the inexpressive images of tyrants

in their offices). But only the reciprocal game between these two levels constitutes the life of the face.

There are two words in Latin that derive from the Indo-European root meaning “one”: *similis*, which expresses resemblance, and *simul*, which means “at the same time.” Thus, next to *similitudo* (resemblance) there is *simultas*, that is, the fact of being together (which implies also rivalry, enmity); and next to *similare* (to be like) there is *simulare* (to copy, to imitate, which implies also to feign, to simulate).

The face is not a *simulacrum*, in the sense that it is something dissimulating or hiding the truth: the face is the *simultas*, the being-together of the manifold visages constituting it, in which none of the visages is truer than any of the others. To grasp the face’s truth means to grasp not the *resemblance* but rather the *simultaneity* of the visages, that is, the restless power that keeps them together and constitutes their being-in-common. The face of God, thus, is the *simultas* of human faces: it is “our effigy” that Dante saw in the “living light” of paradise.

My face is my *outside*: a point of indifference with respect to all of my properties, with respect to what is properly one’s own and what is common, to what is internal and what is external. In the face, I exist with all of my properties (my being brown, tall, pale, proud, emotional . . .); but this happens without any of these properties essentially identifying me or belonging to me. The face is

the threshold of de-proprietation and of de-identification of all manners and of all qualities—a threshold in which only the latter become purely communicable. And only where I find a face do I encounter an exteriority and does an *outside* happen to me.

Be only your face. Go to the threshold. Do not remain the subjects of your properties or faculties, do not stay beneath them: rather, go with them, in them, beyond them.

(1995)

Translators' Notes

Preface

1. The term *naked life* translates the Italian *nuda vita*. This term appears also in the subtitle of Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer: il potere sovrano e la nuda vita*, as well as throughout that work. We have decided not to follow Daniel Heller-Roazen's translation of *nuda vita* as "bare life" — see *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen — and to retain the earlier translation of *nuda vita* as "naked life" to be found in Cesare Casarino's translation of Agamben's essay "Forma-di-vita" (see "Form-of-Life" in the collection edited by Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, *A Potential Politics: Radical Thought in Italy* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996], pp. 151–56).

Form-of-Life

1. The English term *power* corresponds to two distinct terms in Italian, *potenza* and *potere* (which roughly correspond to the

French *puissance* and *pouvoir*, the German *Macht* and *Vermögen*, and the Latin *potentia* and *potestas*, respectively). *Potenza* can often resonate with implications of potentiality as well as with decentralized or mass conceptions of force and strength. *Potere*, on the other hand, refers to the might or authority of an already structured and centralized capacity, often an institutional apparatus such as the state.

2. Marsilius of Padua, *The Defensor of Peace*, trans. Alan Gewirth (New York: Harper and Row, 1956), p. 15; translation modified.

3. See Yan Thomas, "*Vita necisque potestas: Le père, la cité, la mort*," in *Du châtement dans la cité: Supplices corporels et peine de mort dans le monde antique* (Rome: L'École française de Rome, 1984).

4. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), p. 257. In the Italian

translation of Benjamin's passage, "state of emergency" is translated as "state of exception," which is the phrase Agamben uses in the preceding section of this essay and which will be a crucial refrain in several of the other essays included in this volume.

5. "Experimental life" is in English in the original.

6. See, for example, Peter Medawar and Jean Medawar, *Aristotle to Zoos* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 66–67.

7. The terminology in the original is the same as that used for bank transactions (and thus "naked life" becomes here the cash reserve contained in accounts such as the "forms of life").

8. Aristotle, *On the Soul*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 1, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 682–83.

9. Dante Alighieri, *On World-Government*, trans. Herbert W. Schneider (Indianapolis: Liberal Arts, 1957), pp. 6–7; translation modified.

10. In English in the original. This term is taken from a single reference by Marx, in which he uses the English term. See Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 706.

Beyond Human Rights

1. Hannah Arendt, "We Refugees," *Menorah Journal*, no. 1 (1943): 77.

2. Hannah Arendt, *Imperialism*, Part II of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951), pp. 266–98.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 290–95.

4. Tomas Hammar, *Democracy and the Nation State: Aliens, Denizens, and Citizens in a World of International Migration* (Brookfield, Vt.: Gower, 1990).

What Is a People?

1. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1963), p. 70.

Notes on Gesture

1. Gilles de la Tourette, *Études cliniques et physiologiques sur la marche* (Paris: Bureaux de progrès, 1886).

2. Jean-Martin Charcot, *Charcot, the Clinician: The Tuesday Lessons* (New York: Raven Press, 1987).

3. See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

4. Varro, *On the Latin Language*, trans. Roland G. Kent (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 245.

5. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1983), p. 153.

Languages and Peoples

1. François De Vaux de Foletier, *Les Tsiganes dans l'ancienne France*; cited in Alice Becker-Ho, *Les princes du jargon: Un facteur négligé aux origines de l'argot des classes dangereuses; Édition augmentée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), pp. 22–23.

2. The reference is to Alice Becker-Ho, *Les princes du jargon: Un facteur négligé aux origines de l'argot des classes dangereuses* (Paris: Gérard Lebovici, 1990).

3. Becker-Ho, *Les princes du jargon; Édition augmentée*, p. 51.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

5. Gershom Scholem, "Une lettre inédite de Gershom Scholem à Franz Rosenzweig: À propos de notre langue. Une confession," trans. from German into French by Stefan Moses, *Archives des Sciences Sociales des Religions et Archives de Sociologie des Religions* 60:1 (Paris, 1985): 83–84.

Marginal Notes on Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle

1. Karl von Clausewitz, cited in Guy Debord, *Préface à la quatrième édition italienne de "La Société du Spectacle"* (Paris: Éditions Champ Libre, 1979), pp. 15–16.

2. We have translated this passage from the Italian as we could not find the original reference.

3. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), p. 165.

4. Louis Althusser, "Preface to *Capital* Volume One," in *Lenin and Philosophy*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), p. 95; but see the whole essay, and especially pp. 81 and 88.

5. Karl Kraus, "In These Great Times," in *In These Great Times*, trans. Harry Zohn (Montreal: Engendra Press, 1976), p. 70.

6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), pp. 273–74.

The Face

1. Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo (New York:

Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), pp. 422–23.

Sovereign Police

1. Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), p. 287.

Notes on Politics

1. Walter Benjamin, "Theologico-Political Fragment," in *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), p. 312.

In This Exile (Italian Diary, 1992–94)

1. Ayrton Senna — Brazilian race-car driver and charismatic public icon — died in Italy during the San Marino Grand Prix at the age of thirty-four. His death was a highly publicized media event.

2. Bettino Craxi was head of the PSI (Italian Socialist Party) from 1976 to 1987, as well as Italian prime minister from 1983 to 1986. In the early 1990s, he was at the center of the *Tangentopoli* scandal, was accused of corruption, and fled Italy for Tunisia, where he died in early 2000.

3. Giovanni Botero, *The Reason of State*, trans. P. J. and D. P. Waley (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), p. 3.

4. Here Agamben is referring to the controversial phenomenon of *pentitismo*, which ignited public opinion in Italy throughout the 1990s. *Pentiti* — "turncoats," or, literally, "the ones who have repented" — are former members of organized crime or of left-wing or right-wing political organizations who decide to disavow their beliefs publicly and to name other members of their organizations during police

investigations or trials in exchange for immunity or reduced prison terms.

5. Karl Marx, *The Letters of Karl Marx*, trans. Saul K. Padover (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1979), p. 24.

6. The term *establishment* is in English in the original.

7. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 1, trans. Martin Ostwald (Indianapolis: Liberal Arts Press, 1962), p. 16.

Political Science | Critical Theory

In this critical rethinking of the categories of politics within a new sociopolitical and historical context, distinguished political philosopher Giorgio Agamben builds on his previous work to address the status and nature of politics itself. Bringing politics face to face with its own failures of consciousness and consequence, Agamben frames his analysis in terms of clear contemporary relevance. He proposes, in his characteristically allusive and intriguing way, a politics of gesture—a politics of means without end. Attentive to the urgent demands of the political moment, as well as to the bankruptcy of political discourse, Agamben's work brings politics back to life, and life back to politics.

Giorgio Agamben teaches philosophy at the Collège International de Philosophie in Paris and at the University of Macerata in Italy. He is author of *Language and Death*, *Stanzas*, and *The Coming Community*, all published by the University of Minnesota Press.

Vincenzo Binetti is assistant professor of Romance languages and literature at the University of Michigan.

Cesare Casarino teaches in the Department of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature at the University of Minnesota.

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