University of Kent

Kent Academic Repository

Frost, Tom (2014) *Jessica Whyte, Catastrophe and redemption.* Review of: Catastrophe and Redemption: The Political Thought of Giorgio Agamben by Whyte, Jessica. Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy .

Downloaded from
https://kar.kent.ac.uk/102841/ The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

The version of record is available from
https://www.c-scp.org/2014/09/03/jessica-whyte-catastrophe-and-redemption

This document version
Author's Accepted Manuscript

DOI for this version

Licence for this version
UNSPECIFIED

Additional information

Versions of research works

Versions of Record
If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

Author Accepted Manuscripts
If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in ***Title of Journal*** , Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

Enquiries
If you have questions about this document contact ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies).

A MESSIANIC REDEMPTION AFTER CAPITALISM?

Jessica Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption: The Political Thought of Giorgio Agamben* (SUNY Press, Albany: NY, 2013)

Academic interest in the thought of Giorgio Agamben has increased almost exponentially in recent years. This popularity has been tied to the fact that Agamben's work appeared to be remarkably prescient. When Agamben declared that "it is not the city but rather the camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West",[1] he appeared to predict the events of the 'War on Terror', the detention facilities at Guantanamo Bay and 'black sites' around the world, and the emergency powers passed in many Western states to limit civil liberties and human rights.

Jessica Whyte notes in her introduction to *Catastrophe and Redemption* both the fact that reception of Agamben's work has been tied up with these outside events, and that this coincidence led to the obscuring of the underlying philosophical claims in his work.[2] Whyte's study focuses on two main issues. Firstly, this volume seeks to explore the 'redemptive' element of his thought. Agamben contends that our time is making possible a new politics which can free human life from sovereign power.[3] Within this book, Whyte does engage critically with familiar tropes in Agamben's thought – the camp, his writings on Auschwitz and the *Muselmann*, the state of exception, biopolitics, and the influence of both messianism and Martin Heidegger. Importantly though, Whyte does not simply provide a recounting or a defence of Agamben's thought. In fact, she offers a very important addition to the secondary literature on his thought. Whyte focuses her criticism on what she identifies as the real weakness to his political thought, namely his tendency to see the intensification of the catastrophe of the present as the path to redemption.[4] This volume skilfully weaves together Agamben's thought with the author's own voice and argument. Whyte can be said to be inspired by Agamben's philosophical project, but differs from Agamben in clear ways, and extends his project in new directions. The volume therefore would serve both as a clear introduction to Agamben's thought for scholars and students interested in one of the leading lights in Continental philosophy today. It would also appeal to scholars well versed in Agamben's thought, as it offers a connection between the thought of Agamben and Marxism that offers scope for development in future scholarship.

Within *Catastrophe and Redemption* Whyte reads Agamben as heavily influenced by the Marxist tradition. In the first chapter, focusing on Agamben's biopolitics and his

---

[1] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (tr.) Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 181.
[2] Jessica Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption: The Political Thought of Giorgio Agamben* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013), 3.
[3] Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption*, 3.
[4] Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption*, 3.

relationship to the work of Michel Foucault, Whyte assesses Agamben's claim that Western politics has been a biopolitics since its inception. Chapter Two moves on to consider Agamben's writings on the state of exception, which he argues today has become the normal form of government through the power of the sovereign to exclude or include persons within the legal and political orders. This leads to Chapter Three, where Whyte considers the ultimate catastrophe – Auschwitz and the figure of the *Muselmann*. The camp here is the combination of the state of exception and biopolitics. Moving on from Agamben's consideration of such catastrophes, Whyte goes on in the remainder of the book to consider redemption within Agamben's work. Chapter Four is a close reading of Agamben's messianism and its relation to the law. Here, Whyte sides with Walter Benjamin's 'weak messianic power', rather than Agamben's invocation of the figure of Herman Melville's law-scribe Bartleby, who offers the response that he 'would prefer not to' when asked any question, as better suited to thinking a form of collective praxis that would break the sovereign ban. Chapter Five turns to Agamben's world to come. Here, Whyte contends that Agamben ignores the problems of exploitation and the use-value of labour power in his works. As such he is unable to adequately articulate how it would be possible to put human capacities to a new use.

The redemptive qualities of Agamben's thought often appear elusive within his writings, not least because of his claim that ontology is directly political.[5] Therefore, Whyte correctly notes that Agamben's writings on potentiality and life are also his contribution to political theory. His hope for the future comes from the collapse of the border between politics and life.[6] Despite this, whilst Agamben has often spoken of the life and politics to come,[7] details of this 'happy life' have often been scarce, particularly because they are to comprise the final part of his *Homo Sacer* series of works.[8]

This volume attempts to reconstruct the history behind Agamben's philosophy, in particular an attempt to counter Agamben's one sided teleology of Western politics. Whyte focuses attention on the 'other side' of the political events Agamben analyses in his works.[9] She claims, with validity, that the current political malaise in which we live is as much the result of the *defeats* of political movements of the past as it is the direct inheritor of those movements.[10] In a salient point, she notes that Agamben does not spend any time contemplating what the world would be like where the political struggles of modernity – women's rights, human rights, workers rights – had not taken place.[11] A result of this is that Agamben turns away from active political movements today, which leads, in Whyte's view,

---

[5] Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption*, 32.
[6] Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption*, 44.
[7] Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (tr.) Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 1.
[8] See Matthew Sharpe, "Only Agamben Can Save Us? Against the Messianic Turn Recently Adopted In Critical Theory," *The Bible and Critical Theory*, vol. 5, no. 3 (2009), 40.1-40.20; Andreas Kalyvas, 'The Sovereign Weaver: Beyond the Camps' in *Politics, Metaphysics and Death: Essays on Giorgio Agamben's Homo Sacer* (ed.) Andrew Norris (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 116.
[9] Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption*, 155.
[10] Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption*, 41-42.
[11] Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption*, 41.

to a potential deterministic understanding of social transformation in his work.[12] Whyte also points out the deficiencies in Agamben's work in relation to human agency. Agamben does have the tendency in his thought to exclude agency – notably in his treatment of pornography he leaves no room for the roles of political movements in challenging assumptions about the roles of women and the possibilities for sex.[13] More importantly in relation to agency and political struggles, Whyte identifies that Agamben has paid insufficient attention to the role of past political struggles in resisting the forms of domination that have existed, especially in relation to human labour.[14] She also contends that he has been overly dismissive of forms of political praxis that do exist in the present – Whyte provides the example of the protests in Greece after the imposition of stringent austerity measures in 2011 as an example of such a messianic coming politics of which Agamben speaks.[15]

It is the connection to Greece and capitalism that is the main strength of this book. Whyte situates Agamben within a lineage of Marxian thinkers who contend that the extension of commodification – the 'society of the spectacle' in Guy Debord's terms[16] - empties out the 'use value' of commodities, leaving in place empty forms which are made available for new uses.[17] Whyte claims that Agamben's analysis of modernity is inadequate of adequately grasping the global dominance of capital[18] Agamben is therefore read as continuing the inquiries of Marx, especially his critique of rights, which Whyte addresses in chapter one, but he ends up dispensing with Marx's analysis of capitalism, speaking only of 'modernity' instead.[19] As such, Whyte can be read alongside many voices that are sceptical of Agamben's claim that the development of life as a political subject, which he traces to Aristotle,[20] paved the way for the Nazi state.[21] Whyte does accept that contemporary biopolitics could be traced to the great declarations of rights in the eighteenth century as Agamben claims.[22] However, in reconnecting Agamben to the Marxian lineage Whyte makes clear the deficits in Agamben's thought that result from his lack of focus upon historicity.

This theme – the need for leftist thought to engage with concrete forms of social change – looms large throughout the work. Whyte's engagement with Agamben's treatment of Auschwitz is particularly insightful. Engaging with the Holocaust and the camps is fraught with danger, especially as Whyte attempts to elucidate forms of politics and resistance which did exist within the camps.[23] However, Whyte is careful not to fetishise such forms of action. Instead, she skilfully connects Agamben's writing to Heidegger's influence, in particular *The*

[12] Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption*, 45.
[13] Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption*, 138.
[14] Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption*, 15-16.
[15] Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption*, 17.
[16] Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994).
[17] Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption*, 127.
[18] Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption*, 127.
[19] Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption*, 38.
[20] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 1.
[21] Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption*, 40.
[22] Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption*, 41.
[23] Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption*, 93-94.

Question Concerning Technology.[24] This reading of Agamben is useful, as it both paints his thought as influential for political theory, but also both too optimistic and too pessimistic at the same time.[25] Agamben is too pessimistic about the avenues for political transformation that are open to us in the present – as mentioned, Whyte points towards Greece as a possible example for this politics. However, she also contends that Agamben is too optimistic about the redemptive consequences of catastrophe. For Whyte, politics is a necessarily contingent event, a possibility that cannot be determined in advance.[26]

Whilst Agamben focuses upon developing a politics of withdrawal, giving the messianic figure of Bartleby as an example of such a life lived in pure potentiality, Whyte counters by noting that the fate of Bartleby at the end of Melville's tale was death.[27] Concerned that such a fate could not be seen as 'salvation', Whyte adopts the notion of such a politics of withdrawal, but refocuses it, asking what a politics of withdrawal from *capital* would be. Perhaps related to this point, the author is clear that this work does pose more questions than is answered. Whyte concludes that what is necessary is to begin to formulate a political thought within a society where spectacular consumption of useless commodities exists with subsistence living for billions and where a flexible class of people have their belongings made in sweatshops and worry that their holiday destinations are being engulfed in separatist struggles.[28] Such a world does not resemble Agamben's world to come. However, Whyte identifies key questions which will need to be asked in order to transform this world. Such questions relate to challenging inequality, challenging capitalism's colonialism of the future, and creating new forms of solidarity. To address these issues, Whyte draws us to her conclusion – that it is not enough to accede to teleological formations of capitalism. We must begin to develop ways to contest it.[29] This slim volume can be seen as such a call to arms.

Tom Frost, Lecturer in Legal Theory, University of Sussex

[24] Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *Basic Writings: Martin Heidegger* (ed.) David Farrell Krell, (2nd edn, Abingdon: Routledge Cavendish, 1993), 307-342.
[25] Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption*, 95.
[26] Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption*, 94.
[27] Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption*, 121.
[28] Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption*, 157.
[29] Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption*, 157.