

Agamben's geographies of modernity

INTRODUCTION

The 16th of May 2005, Italian daily *La Repubblica* (Borgomeo 2005) published an article revealing that General Motors had for the first time officially admitted that some time back it had deployed a pilot project using human cadavers in crash tests. GM also admitted to having used human 'volunteers' in such experiments; in fact, the revelations specified that the cadavers were used "in those tests that would have provoked lesions considered too dangerous for the human volunteers". The article went on to note that revelations had also emerged implicating the University of Graz in having similarly deployed cadavers in car safety experiments. What is more, according to a recent investigation by the *Los Angeles Times*, it appears that there is a veritable trade in corpses in California (on this see also Norris 2004a). The dead utilized in these experiments are termed 'post-mortem human objects' (PMHs) in scientific jargon and their utility lies in the fact that they are considered much more 'reliable' than the crash-test dummies usually used in such simulations.

Derek Gregory, in his powerful description of the geographical logic behind the US attack on Iraq, shows how the representational war machine deployed during the invasion employed a language that translated cities into "collections of objects not congeries of people" (2004a: 201) and people into targets, into "letters on a map or coordinates on a visual display" (2004b) – preparing, in this way, the ground for a

metaphorical and actual refusal of the intimacy of corporeal engagement. This translation was matched by the systematic refusal on the part of the coalition forces to 'count' (or even estimate) Iraqi casualties, "neither bodies nor even numbers – but [...] just dead" (2004a: 207). Dead or 'still' alive, Iraqi victims of war were translated, within this discursive formation, into mere *ante* or *post mortem* human objects.

Throughout his writings, Giorgio Agamben has argued that what is at stake in the political space of modernity is, at base, the definition of biological life and death or, better yet, that it is the production of a specific biopolitical body that today is the original – and ultimate – task of sovereign power. As the Italian philosopher suggests, the radical separation between *bios* and *zoé*, 'biological' life and 'political' life, has brought about a progressive politicisation of the body and its definitive colonisation by the language of politics and science. The contemporary 'biopolitical threshold' – that 'third space' described by Agamben as the zone of indistinction between a life worth living and a life that is expendable, that does not deserve to live – is, indeed, produced through the cartography of all of our individual bodies. It is this threshold that defines the boundaries of the political today, and that marks the original spatialisation of sovereign power. It is (with)in the inscription of this mobile confine defining *what is life* – on the body of each and every individual – that the modern state finds its ultimate task, concealing in this way its macabre autopoietic destiny. The 'zombies' of the contemporary biopolitical machine spin, in fact, around an empty centre, a void left by the dissolution of a historical mission; it is here that the

exception confounds itself with the norm, and the definition of what is human with that of *ante-/post-mortem* human 'objects'.

The 'Agamben phenomenon' (that is, the wide-ranging popularization of his theories within English-language social science of the past several years) has indelibly marked reflections on the constitution of contemporary biopolitics, a reflection spurred also by the growing adoption of biometric and panoptic devices to regiment the life of citizens in many Western democracies today (Agamben 2004a, 2005a). It is not my intention here, however, to examine the wide-ranging debates surrounding Agamben's theorizations and his notions of *homo sacer*, bare life, space of exception etcetera (some of these are outlined in Edkins et al. 2004; Norris 2003, 2004a, 2004b; as well as the special issue of *Paragraph* edited by Dillon 2002). It is neither my aim to present the wealth of recent critical assessments and alternative theorisations of sovereign power and biopolitics, theorizations emergent from a variety of disciplinary contexts (among others, we can note the feminist critique of Deuben-Mankowsky 2002; and the legal/judicial appraisal of Agamben's work by scholars such as Bröckling 2003 and (with reference to Roman law specifically) McCoskey 2006).

What I intend to do here, rather, is to engage directly with Agamben's spatial theorizations, asking what specific implications these hold for (political) geographers. Indeed, I would suggest that although the debates outlined above have done much to furnish new languages, new ways of describing the permanent state of exception that

characterizes the post 9-11 era, they have contributed little to a reflection on the *spatial theory* that guides Agamben's thought. This is not to say that geographers (and those in related disciplines) have not engaged constructively with Agamben's work. What I wish to argue is that despite the fact that a proliferation of *homines sacri* has colonized the writings of geographers (and not only) regarding questions of exception, resistance and the war on terror, little, if any, focus has been given to the genuinely geographical roots from which the complex Agambian 'analytical tree' draws and, moreover, the implications of his work for critical geographical thought.

For this reason, I would like to initiate my reflection on 'Agamben's geographies' with a couple of important caveats. First, taking to heart Derek Gregory's (2004c) invocation not to transform the victims of the new geographies of exception into the objects of theories conceived merely as academic capital (as appears to be the case in some instances), I will try to exercise the requisite prudence when writing about life and death, in order to avoid seeing *homines sacri* anywhere and everywhere and focusing my reflections, rather, on an analysis of Agamben's spatial ontologies. Secondly, Agamben's theoretical opus represents, in the eyes of many, the return of 'strong' political theory. It would be important to ask how geography can respond to such a return. What we should ask, in other words, is whether the spatial architecture of Agamben's theory of exception could perhaps be conceived as another, particularly compelling way of describing the endemic crisis - but also formidable power - of the original spatialisation that allowed for the bourgeois capture of the modern territorial state (Farinelli 2003; Minca and Bialasiewicz 2004).

A UNIFIED SPATIAL THEORY OF POWER?

Agamben affirms in the opening passages of his reflection on the political spaces of modernity that it is “not the tracing of boundaries, but their cancellation or negation [that] is the constitutive act of the city” (1995: 95; 1998a: 85).¹ Just this assertion alone would suffice to give a sense of the weight of the implicit challenge posed by his reflection for our discipline and our ways of conceiving the spaces of the political (for a somewhat different perspective, see Diken 2004). What the Italian philosopher calls for, indeed, is nothing less than a complete re-writing of the “myth of the foundation of the modern city, from Hobbes to Rousseau” (1995: 121; 1998a: 109). But a re-consideration of the foundational myths of the modern city also signifies, to a large extent, a re-consideration of the very fundamentals of geography as ‘Earth-writing’ (Dematteis 1985; Farinelli 2003; see also Isin 2002). Agamben’s theoretical enterprise, articulated within the *Homo Sacer* trilogy (1995; 1998a; 2004b), consists, then, not only in an attempt at the elaboration of a unitary theory of power but also, to my mind, in the production of a distinct *spatial* theory of power; a theory able to describe the very constitution of sovereign power and the inscription of the *homo sacer* within modern politics, based upon the (eminently spatial) concepts of the *camp* and the *ban*.

In the introductory pages of *Homo Sacer*, Agamben remarks upon the fact that although Hannah Arendt’s (1958) *The Human Condition* revealed with great insight the ways in which the *homo laborans* (and, more broadly, *biological* life) came to take

centre stage in the political grammar of modernity, her reflection on these themes has remained largely without follow-up. The fact that Michel Foucault's seminal work on biopolitics makes no reference to Arendt's earlier theorizations is, to Agamben's mind, proof of the profound resistance that Western thought encounters in this realm. Indeed, he notes that even Arendt herself established no connection between her work on the biological and her analyses of totalitarian power; analyses that, for all their perspicacity, lack entirely a consideration of the biopolitical. Foucault, on the other hand, never made the focus of his work the two key sites of modern biopolitics: the concentration camp and the great totalitarian states of the 20th century. For the Italian philosopher, these absences are revealing and of enormous import. The entry of *zoé* into the sphere of the *polis* – the politicization of bare life as such – constitutes a decisive event of modernity, and signals a radical transformation of the political-philosophical categories of classical thought (Agamben 2005b). According to Agamben (1995: 6-7; 1998a: 4), if politics today “seems to be passing through a lasting eclipse”, it is *precisely* because it has “failed to reckon with this foundational event of modernity”.

In *La potenza del pensiero* (2005b), remarking upon the Aristotelian legacy in Western political thought, Agamben argues that such a legacy cannot but be conceived in biopolitical terms for, at base, it rests upon a fundamental division, a fundamental articulation of the *zoé*. The political, as the realm of human action, is ‘removed’ from the living through the exclusion of some of their vital activities as ‘a-political’. For this reason, as Agamben (1995: 7) has argued elsewhere, the ‘enigmas’ that have

marked our century (most notably, Nazism) – and that continue to persist with us – can be resolved only within the terrain – biopolitics – within which they were entangled. Agamben’s undertaking consists, then, in nothing short of a reconsideration of the very process of the foundation of the modern city and the elaboration of a spatial (and thus political) theory of the biopolitical *nomos* that today governs the space of sovereign exception. “Only within a biopolitical horizon”, he argues, “will it be possible to decide whether the categories whose opposition founded modern politics (right/left, private/public, absolutism/democracy, etc.) – and which have been steadily dissolving, to the point of entering today into a real zone of indistinction” – will have to be definitively abandoned “or will, instead, eventually regain the meaning they lost in that very horizon” (1995: 7; 1998a: 4; see also 1996: 87).

Foucault’s work, here again, is illustrative. Agamben notes, indeed, that the French philosopher’s reflection in his final years focussed on two distinct fields of enquiry: on the one hand, an analysis of the ‘political techniques’ by means of which “the State assumes and integrates the care of the natural life of individuals into its very centre”; on the other, an examination of those which Foucault termed the ‘technologies of the self’ that “bring the individual to bind himself to his own identity and consciousness and, at the same time, to the external power” (1995: 8; 1998a: 5; see also 1996: 16). Nonetheless, Agamben notes, the point at which these two expressions of power tend to *converge* has remained, curiously enough, overlooked in Foucault’s work (on this point, see also Fitzpatrick 2004). Indeed,

some critics have gone as far as to suggest that Foucault deliberately refused to elaborate a *unitary* theory of power. Where, in the body of power, wonders Agamben, lies then the 'zone of indistinction' – or, at least, the point of intersection – within which the 'technologies of the self' and the 'political techniques' of the State come together? Can we identify "a unitary centre in which the political 'double bind' finds its *raison d'être*?" (1995: 8; 1998a: 6).

The *Homo Sacer* trilogy (1995; 1998b; 2003) consists thus in an attempt to explore this hidden point of intersection between the juridico-institutional and the biopolitical, the two realms that Foucault so masterfully described. The key aim of Agamben's project is, indeed, to demonstrate that the two realms cannot be analysed in isolation and, more importantly still, that the *implicazione* (the 'inclusive exclusion') of bare life in the political (sphere) constitutes the original – albeit hidden – nucleus of sovereign power (1995: 9). In placing biological life at the centre of its concerns, the modern State reveals "the secret tie uniting power and bare life, thereby reaffirming the bond [...] between modern power and the most immemorial of the *arcana imperii*" (1995: 9; 1998a: 6). Moreover, Agamben adds, it is precisely upon the exclusion of the *nuda vita* (bare life) that the modern city is founded. If this is so, it is imperative that we ask ourselves, first, why the city has been founded, above all, upon an exclusion (that, at the same time, is an *implicazione*, an 'inclusive exclusion') of bare life and, subsequently, how and why has the politicization of bare life become the guiding 'metaphysical' task of the modern State. This is how Agamben inaugurates his theoretical enterprise. While much has been written by political philosophers on the

relationship between the work of Agamben and the thought of Arendt, Schmitt and Foucault (see, among others, Deranty 2004; Edkins et al. 2004; Enns 2004; Kalyvas 2004; Mills 2004; Norris, 2003, 2004a, 2004b; Zizek 2004; also the special issue of *Paragraph* edited by Dillon 2002), my main concern here will be to highlight the fact that Agamben's project is an eminently spatial one and indeed, to some extent, marked by a geographical legacy. To re-write Agamben's contribution as a geography of modernity – particularly considering the breadth of his work – is no little task, so let me make clear my intentions in this piece. I have examined elsewhere the implicitly geographical foundations of Agamben's theoretical edifice, commenting on the Schmittian (and, in part, Ratzelian) roots of his theory of exception (see Minca 2006a). What I hope to do here, rather, is to re-consider, from a geographical perspective, some of Agamben's conceptual hints – specifically, the *structure of the ban* and the *camp* as the biopolitical and geopolitical paradigm of modernity – in order to shed some light on the spatial ontologies that underpin his theory of sovereign power founded upon exception; a truly geographical theory of exception.

SPATIAL ONTOLOGIES

According to Agamben (1995: 92; 1998a: 82), the *homo sacer* is “the original figure of life taken into the sovereign ban”, while the political space of sovereignty should be understood as constituted within a ‘double exception’: “as an excrescence of the profane in the religious and of the religious in the profane, which takes the form of a

zone of indistinction between sacrifice and homicide" (ibid.). The 'sovereign sphere', in this understanding, is thus the sphere in which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide; 'sacred life' is the life "that may be killed but not sacrificed [...] that has been captured in this sphere" (Agamben 1995: 93; 1998a: 84). Standing at two opposing ends of the political-juridical order, the sovereign and the *homo sacer* thus represent two symmetrical figures, correlated between them: "the sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially *homines sacri*, and *homo sacer* is the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereigns", Agamben (1995: 93-94; 1998a: 84) argues. Both figures are, indeed, brought together within "an action that, excepting itself from both human and divine law, from both *nomos* and *physis*, nevertheless delimits what is, in a certain sense", the first *truly political space*, the first space distinct from the spheres of both the religious and the profane, from both the 'natural' order and the 'normal' juridical order (1995: 94; 1998a: 84).

The 'sacred', for Agamben, is then the original form of the implication of the *nuda vita* in the political-juridical order, while the syntagm *homo sacer* gives name to the original political relation, that is, "bare life insofar as it operates in an inclusive exclusion as the referent of the sovereign decision" (1995: 94; 1998a: 85). The 'sacred' represents "the originary exception in which human life is included in the political order in being exposed to an unconditional capacity to be killed" (1995: 95; 1998a: 85). For this reason, it is not the tracing of boundaries "but their cancellation or negation [that] is the constitutive act of the city" (ibid.). As I suggested at the outset of this section, we should reflect on the deep meaning of this observation, for it calls for a

radical re-thinking of the categories within which we have thus far conceived the relationship between culture, nature and territory.

In developing his theory of sovereignty, Agamben begins with a number of considerations on the 'structure of exception', as conceived by Carl Schmitt (1998). The Schmittian structure of exception is founded upon the existence of an order based within a fundamental relation between the juridical-political domain and territory. According to the German legal theorist, the '*nomos* of the Earth' is the originary gesture, the founding spatial ontology that binds every juridical-political order to a concrete territory, to the '*sense* of the Earth' (1998: 29). Agamben adopts the Schmittian '*Ortung*' - the 'fundamental localisation' - as the starting point for his reasoning on the norm and its exception, that is, on the principles that decide its (dis)application. He argues that what we are faced with today is a topological relation within which "to a [juridical-political order] without localization (the state of exception, in which the law is suspended) there now corresponds a localization without order (the camp as permanent space of exception). The political system no longer orders forms of life and juridical rules in a determinate place, but instead contains at its very centre a *dislocating localization* that exceeds it and into which every form of life and every norm can be virtually taken" (Agamben 1995: 196-197; 1998a: 175, emphasis in the original). And it is just this 'dislocating localisation' that constitutes the "hidden matrix of politics today", Agamben (*ibid.*) suggests. ²

The 'hidden matrix of politics' identified by Agamben is, I will argue here, an inevitably spatial/geographical matrix. Indeed, the norm – to allow for its repetition, its enforcement, its very concrete existence, to allow for its 'measure', and the constitution of its 'outside' and its exception – *must necessarily be spatialised*. The repetition of an act without sanction (that constitutes, at base, the juridical order) requires a *where*, requires a topography able to describe, to grant materiality to the (exceptional) act; it requires a concrete space, a space that is indistinct though not indescribable, merely exceptional. This 'secret' spatial ontology, Agamben suggests, reflects the creation of a structure of power that works as a consequence of the sovereign subject's unlimited faculty to suspend the norm (thanks, precisely, to its positioning in a space of in-distinction) – and the concurrent putative inclusion of all other subjects within a (temporarily) prescribed juridical-political order (the distinction between *Ordnung* and *Ortung* in Schmittian terms). As a consequence, when the exception becomes the rule *everywhere*, "the realm of bare life – originally situated at the margins of the political order – gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoé*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction" (Agamben 1995: 12; 1998a: 9).

Sovereign power consists precisely in this very impossibility of distinguishing between an outside and an inside, norm and exception, *physis* and *nomos*. The state of exception, Agamben (1995: 44; 1998a: 37) notes, "is thus not so much a spatio-temporal suspension as a complex topological figure in which not only the exception and the norm, but also the state of nature and law, outside and inside,

pass through one another". And it is precisely this 'topological zone of indistinction' that, he argues, "we must try to fix under our gaze" (ibid.).

THE SPATIAL STRUCTURE OF THE BAN

The relation of exception "is a relation of ban", Agamben (1995: 34) suggests, and thus, I would add, an *eminently spatial relation*. This point deserves further elaboration. According to Agamben (1995: 118; 1998a: 106), the Hobbesian 'state of nature' is not some pre-judicial condition that holds no relation to the law of the *polis*, but, rather, should be conceived as "the exception and the threshold that constitutes and dwells within it". The liminal figure that Agamben adopts to describe the geography of this threshold is that of the werewolf, the *lupo mannaro*, a figure that inhabits a zone of indistinction between the human and the feral: "a man who is transformed into a wolf and a wolf who is transformed into a man"; in other words, a *bandito* ('he who is banned'), an *homo sacer*. The life of the *lupo mannaro* constitutes a threshold of indifference and indistinction, Agamben affirms, a threshold and a passage between the animal and the human, between *physis* and *nomos*, between exclusion and inclusion, for

"he who has been banned is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but is rather *abandoned* by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and the law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable. It is literally not possible to say whether the one who has been banned is outside or inside the juridical order" (Agamben 1995: 34; 1998a: 28-29, emphasis in the original).

This *'lupificazione dell'uomo'* (the 'becoming-wolf' of man) and the concurrent 'humanization' of the wolf, Agamben insists, is "at every moment possible" within the state of exception, within the *'dissolutio civitatis'*: "the transformation into a werewolf corresponds perfectly to the state of exception, during which [...] time the city is dissolved and men [*sic*] enter into a zone in which they are no longer distinct from beasts" (1995: 120; 1998a: 107 see also 2003: 62). It is this very threshold, which is neither natural life nor social life but, rather, bare – or 'sacred' – life that is "the always present and always operative presupposition of sovereignty" (ibid.).

It is here that we should begin, according to Agamben, in order to fundamentally rethink the myth of the foundation of the modern city. As Agamben argues,

"The state of nature is, in truth, a state of exception, in which the city appears for an instant [...] *tanquam dissoluta*. The foundation is thus not an event achieved once and for all, but is continually operative in the civil state in the form of the sovereign decision. What is more, this latter refers *immediately* to the life (and not the free will) of the citizens, which thus appears as *the originary political element*" (1995: 121; 1998a: 109; emphasis added).

The life referred to here by Agamben is not simply the Greek *zoé*, or *bios*, that is, a 'qualified' form of life: "it is, rather, the *nuda vita* of *homo sacer* and the *wargus*, a zone of indistinction and continuous transit between man and beast, nature and culture" (ibid.).

According to the reading of Hobbes provided by Agamben, here lies the foundation of 'that right of Punishing' (as Hobbes termed it) exercised by every State. It is not, however, a right granted the sovereign by his subjects; rather, as Hobbes writes in the *Leviathan*, "onely in laying down theirs, strengthened him to use his own, as he should think fit, for the preservation of them all" (cited in Agamben 1995: 118; 1998a: 106). For this reason, Agamben's affirmation that the original juridico-political relation is the ban does not only regard the *formal* structure of sovereignty: it is also *substantial*, for "what the ban holds together is precisely bare life and sovereign power" (Agamben 1995: 121; 1998a: 109). We must therefore abandon, he argues, all conceptualisations of the original political act as a 'contract', all conceptualisations that imagine the transition from the 'state of nature' to the State as occurring in a definitive and distinct fashion. There exists rather, Agamben argues, a much more complex "zone of indiscernability between *nomos* and *physis*, in which the State tie, having the form of the ban, is always already also non-State and pseudo-nature, and in which nature always already appears as *nomos* and the state of exception" (ibid.).

It is precisely this (mis)understanding of the Hobbesian *mythologeme* as a (social) contract – rather than as a *ban* – that, Agamben provocatively suggests, has "condemned democracy to impotence every time it had to confront the problem of sovereign power"; it is also this (mis)recognition of the structure of the ban that has "rendered modern democracy constitutionally incapable of truly thinking a politics freed from the form of the State" (Agamben 1995: 121-22; 1998a: 109). It is this

structure of the ban that, Agamben (1995: 123; 1998a: 111) insists, “we must learn to recognize in the political relations and public spaces in which we still live” for it represents, *still*, the sovereign *nomos* that conditions every other norm, it is “the original spatialization that governs and makes possible every localization and every territorialization”.

It is here that biopolitics penetrates our pre-political dimension and attempts to erase it, to swallow it whole, rendering it redundant, innocuous, transforming it into but a *residual*, into merely that which remains to the subject deprived of every other social recognition or function: to *the subject of the ban*. Sovereignty thus consists in the faculty to freely deploy the ban – and to make it appear as the logical consequence of the norm. Sovereignty, in other words, marks the limit (in the sense of both the *beginning* as well as the *end*) of the juridical order – and it is this very structure, Agamben remarks, that Carl Schmitt describes as that of the ‘exception’.

As Agamben postulates on more than one occasion (see 1995: 19; 2004b: 44-54), the paradox of sovereignty consists in the fact that the sovereign is, at the same time, *both outside and inside the juridical order*. If the sovereign is, in fact, the one to whom the juridical order grants the power of proclaiming the state of exception – and, thus, the power of suspending the order’s very validity – then we should properly conceive of the sovereign as standing “outside the juridical order”, while nevertheless belonging to it “for it is up to him to decide if the constitution, *in toto*, is to be suspended” (Schmitt 1988: 13 in Agamben 2004b: 48). Sovereign decision (re)inscribes and

reproduces, time after time, this threshold of indistinction between the outside and the inside, between exclusion and inclusion: it consists of, as Agamben insists, precisely in the impossibility of distinguishing between outside and inside. And, as I have argued a few pages hence, it is precisely this zone of indistinction that Agamben urges us to “fix under our gaze” (Agamben 1995: 44; 1998a: 37).

If in modernity (biological) life is increasingly collocated at the heart of state politics; if, today, citizens are increasingly presented as (potential) *homines sacri*, this is possible, Agamben (1995: 123; 1998a: 111) argues, only thanks “to the relation of ban [that] has constituted the essential structure of sovereign power from the beginning”. According to the Italian philosopher, there is no (social) contract that marks the transition from the ‘state of nature’ to the State, from order to disorder. Rather, (modern) sovereign power bases itself upon *the inclusive exclusion of bare life in the life of the State*. In such an understanding, (the state of) nature is nothing but *a state of exception within which the City dissolves*.

GEOGRAPHIES OF THE BAN

Taking the above to be true, we could argue that modern academic geography is born as the 19th century bourgeois attempt to produce stable and reassuring representations of this original spatialisation of sovereign power. If we accept, following Heidegger (1982), that the Modern is the moment at which the world becomes, once and for all, conceived as image (see among others Guarrasi 2001, 2002;

Pickles 2004 and Quaini 2002), it is here that we can locate the rise of that which Farinelli (1992) refers to as the new 'bourgeois' geography. This 'new' geography – heir to modern academic geography – emerges within an exquisitely 'Modern' tension: that between the Romantic imaginary characteristic of the new bourgeois subject (see Lowe 1982) and this very subject's (and, more importantly, the emergent bourgeois State's) need for a new spatial theory, a new approach to knowledge able to camouflage and to render apparently innocuous and invisible its indirect capture of power (Farinelli 1992: 115; see also Godlewska 1999; Livingstone 1992 and Livingstone and Withers 1999; for a different perspective on this indirect 'capture' see Habermas 1989).

The spatial theory that constitutes the original *nomos* of the modern bourgeois nation-state thus becomes the secret terrain within which sovereign decision is produced: sovereign decision which does not consist only of a repetition of the norm, but that sometimes translates itself into pure event, pure gesture – a gesture that continually shifts the confine of exception, also thanks to ever-new geo-writings.

That which Farinelli terms 'bourgeois geography' is assigned precisely this task by the nascent nation-state: to make disappear, within a regime of cartographic knowledge stripped of all historical memory, all trace of that zone of indistinction inhabited by the sovereign and the *homo sacer* – but also (and this is, in fact, one and the same) to produce the conditions for the affirmation of a geometrical spatial order from which the sovereign can always except himself; an order that will present itself

as the definitive (and potentially exhaustive) representation of the relation between life and territory.

The reduction of places into spaces operated by a triumphant cartographic logic (Farinelli 1992, 1987, 2003; Dematteis 1985; Gregory 1994; Guarrasi 2002; Pickles 2004) is thus nothing other than the translation into geographical terms of the original spatialisation, of the norm that produces itself through its own exception. The confusion between space (measure) and place (life) that continues to mark, still today, the work of many geographers is testimony to the formidable resilience of the 'secret' spatial ontology upon which the original ambiguity of modern politics is founded.

Modern cartographic reason (see Olsson 1992, 1998) is, in other words, the preeminent expression of a regime of truth that overcomes its contradictions by straddling a threshold between the translation of the world into an 'organic' series of objects - and the arbitrary power of the sovereign to think himself, strategically, 'outside' of that series of objects, claiming all the while that an 'outside' *does not exist*. It relies upon the arbitrary power of the sovereign to inhabit the threshold between map and *credo*, between geometry and poetry, between State and nation - and upon the power to make the disappearance of this threshold from view its very *raison d'être*, *mettendo al bando*, banning, any one who dares to expose, with their words or body, its inherent contradictions.

If the space of exception is, in its brutal materiality, the point of encounter between the juridical-political order and its transgression, between the norm and its (dis)application, it is within that very encounter, within that very place that biopolitics takes form, to then insidiously insinuate itself into our daily lives – invisibly, for it is the product of a space of indistinction, a space that is neither inside nor outside, a space, precisely, *of exception*. Today’s new spatialisation of politics that aims to define the realm of the possible with and within its own coordinates aims precisely at this: the realization of a spatial structure of power able to function on the basis of the unlimited faculty of the suspension of the norm on the part of the ‘sovereign’ – thanks to this latter’s positioning within a zone of indistinction – and the concurrent localization of all other subjects within the juridical-political order (that is, within a certain social-political order rendered rule and norm). As Agamben (1995: 12; 1998a: 9) suggests, the decisive fact is that

“together with the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule, the [space] of bare life – which is originally situated at the margins of the [juridical-political] order – gradually begins to coincide with the political [space] and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoé*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction.”

The point of encounter between the state conceived as a ‘territorial container’ and the nation, between the geometrical spaces of the map and the realms of human passions and desires, lies precisely within this convergence, within this zone of indistinction. And it is the existence of a series of spaces (and states) of exception that renders this

convergence possible, that allows it to function. It is precisely on the basis of the intimate relation that, within the space of exception, the sovereign invents and invokes between geometry and emotional life that the nation-state is able, at once, to mobilize hearts and minds and to translate citizens into statistics, into 'population', into a *biopolitical residual*.

Modern geographical thought has long served precisely to reproduce this residual. What other discipline, after all, has made its supreme task that of reconciling two worlds - the human and the natural - while contributing (with its structure of knowledge) to keep them rigorously separated? What other discipline has dedicated itself so passionately to the exploration of the *polis* (and thus, by extension, to the exploration of the immanent relations between *nomos* and *physis*)? The definitive separation between human and physical geography and the concurrent pretense to scientificity (without memory) of both 'branches' of the discipline represent, in this sense, the definitive abandonment on the part of bourgeois geographical 'science' of the critical function that it had initially professed (see Minca 2006b). But is it possible - as Giuseppe Dematteis appears to suggest in his influential *Le Metafore della Terra* (1985) - that it is precisely *because* of its genesis as a form of knowledge inherently compromised with power that geography can offer the theoretical tools able to unveil the sovereign structure of exception upon which it had built its very own fortunes in years past? Can geography, precisely by virtue of its historical role (a role recognized also by Agamben (2003: 48) himself), provide a new language, a new spatial theory able to imagine a politics that transcends the relational *mythologeme* of the city, and

all the conceptualizations that derive from it, such as the principles of territorial 'belonging' or 'identity'? Can geography, in other words, imagine a new *polis* able to transcend the sovereign violence that is the (inescapable) product of the permanent geographies of exception?

BETWEEN NOMOS AND PHYSIS

In order to abandon the idea(l) of the social contract as the original, foundational, spatialization, it is necessary to re-write the spatial ontologies that govern, in modernity, every localization and every territorialisation. To do so, Giorgio Agamben suggests that we begin by examining the original gesture that lies at the foundation of the modern nation-state: the inclusion of bare life as the basis of the state's legitimacy and its principle of sovereignty. Indeed, with the birth of Western democracies, every individual becomes a subject endowed with 'rights' but, at the same time, his/her body becomes progressively incorporated into the greater 'organic' whole of the state. The bourgeois nation-state comes to conceive 'the people' precisely as a body, and 'the nation' as its spatialisation. The citizens become members of this body-nation, members to be managed, organized, contained, geographed and 'identified': both in the sense of identifying the principle that renders them 'identical', but also in the sense of reducing their subjectivity to a unit of measure. 'The people' thus progressively becomes 'the population', that is, a pure spatial-political abstraction (Cavalletti 2005).

Having placed the *nascita* (birth) at the very heart of the political community, the *nazione* (nation) – which, again, derives etymologically from *nascere*, to be born – ‘biologically’ inherits sovereign power and inscribes bare life into the corpus of the political (Agamben 1996). In other words, the *nascita* – bare life itself – becomes the direct bearer of sovereignty. However, as Agamben points out, “the fiction implicit here is that the *nascita* immediately becomes *nazione* such that there can be no *scarto* [no gap, no residual] between the two terms” (1996: 25). What this signifies is not only that from the *nascita* everyone becomes inescapably part of the *nazione*, but also that the *ius soli* is presented as the foundational element in the production of citizenship, while the definition of belonging (also biological belonging) to the national community becomes the state’s guiding political preoccupation. But law is unable to capture and convey completely the ambiguity of this national ‘fiction’; it will, rather, be geography’s task to reproduce the mimesis of the coincidence between *nascita*, *nazione* and territory – that which Agamben terms the ‘trinity’ of modern politics. The protection and care of the body of the nation thus become the supreme task of politics; medicine and geography are the two fields where this task appears to be fulfilled in the most explicit – and yet mimetic – fashion. Sovereign power will exercise itself in the constant vigilance over the confines of this body, defining, through an incessant process of exclusive inclusion, the ‘killability’ of those who, on this ever mobile confine, are *abandoned* by the norm. It is within this exclusive inclusion, spatialised within the foundational principle of the nation, that the very principle of citizenship and the idea(l) of belonging are born, *genuine spatial expressions of the structure of the ban*.

When the nation-state begins to systematically isolate a bare life, a life with no political value (and thus *entirely* political), citizenship becomes definable only in geographical terms, while bare life becomes purely biopolitical. The confine between the two forms of life thus becomes the central terrain of contemporary politics, while its necessary fluidity – the fact that it must be constantly reproduced through a series of spatial practices – renders all of the state’s citizens potential *homines sacri*. With the definitive dissolution of the *nomos* of the Earth that had previously allowed the *ius publicum Europaeum* (Schmitt 1998) to ‘export’ the tensions produced by this original ambiguity into a space outside of Europe – a breaking point that both Schmitt and Agamben trace to the First World War – the *arcanum* of this structure of sovereign power is tragically revealed, revealing also the violence inherent to the fiction that had long sustained the myth of the coincidence of *nascita* and *nazione*.

Having reached the still-unaccomplished (though perhaps un-accomplishable) limits of its historical mission, the nation-state will end up mistaking a special effect – that is, the compromise between *physis* and *nomos*, between *nascita* and *nazione*, upon which the bourgeois nation-state project was founded – for its essential (bio) political task. Deprived of a grand spatial theory able to grant meaning to its conquest of the world – deprived of a *nomos* of the Earth – the nation-state, in the post-European-*nomos* age, definitively severs the relationship between juridico-political order and territory, and reveals its spatial ontology. The spatio-temporal confines of a space ‘free of law’ (i.e. outside the norm) – that Schmitt had, in somewhat essentialist

fashion, seen as co-terminus with the extra-European space and reflected in the regime of exception that had long governed the seas – are thus broken and end up coinciding with the ‘normal’ order. In this ‘empty’ space that comes to penetrate the very heart of the Europe that had, in origin, produced it, everything becomes, literally, possible.

With the demise of the old *nomos* of the Earth, Agamben (1995: 146) argues, the forgotten *scarto*, the forgotten ‘residual’ between *nascita* and *nazione* is revealed, losing its mythical and self-regulating power. It is thus that Fascism and Nazism emerge, truly biopolitical regimes that render bare life the ultimate task of the state, that transform it into its historical mission. It is here that geo-politics is transgressed into pure bio-politics, allowing for the violent re-emergence of what Agamben identifies as the constitutive foundation of sovereign power: the threshold of indistinction between *bios* and *zoé*. Bare life thus becomes a ‘no-man’s-land’ between the home and the city, between bio-geography and geo-geography, life and cartography.

Within a national body that must be endlessly purified, the cartographic translation of the nation thus becomes another expression of a spatial project that has as its ultimate aim this very purification, as though it were an ideal (though never attainable) political-territorial form, a *nomos* of the Earth. It is here that geography perilously approaches biography and contributes, with its cartographic fiction, to maintaining the fatal nexus between *nascita* and *nazione* that, now, enters a path of no-return that will take it to its extreme consequences. It is for this reason, Agamben

argues, that the *homo sacer* cannot dwell in the *polis*, for modern biopolitics must constantly redefine the threshold separating what is 'inside' from what is 'outside'. The inscription and signification of this threshold thus become decisive tasks. Traditionally collocating itself at the intersection between *nomos* and *physis*, geography has always not only contributed to marking out, narrating and recognising this threshold, but it exists precisely *as a theory of the threshold*. Geographical representations, as Dematteis (1985) reminds us, are metaphors that collocate themselves between that which exists and that which could exist, attempting to link what we are and what we would like to be, as Farinelli (1992) has suggested. It is for this reason that geographical metaphors have long served to map the inside and the outside, and that which determines – or could determine – the confine between the two. But if we conflate, as we have for long, these metaphors with geographical (i.e. geometrical) space, forgetting that they are nothing other than a 'open' description of the possible, we risk creating a veritable monster, the cartographer sovereign (or the sovereign cartographer) who, inhabiting a space of indistinction, situates himself neither inside nor outside the metaphor but, rather, excludes himself from the world it describes in order to decide, time after time, the principle of inclusive exclusion.

The 'regional geographies' that figured on school textbooks throughout the 20th century across Europe (see the critical discussion in Hakli 1998 and Paasi 1996), were simply a banal specification of a necessary (and thus hidden, to retain its 'innocence') political relation between *bios* and *zoé*, nature and culture, *silva* and *polis*. All

positivist geography – that is, all twentieth century ‘state geography’, according to Farinelli (2003) – attempted, in one fashion or another, to inscribe this zone of indistinction without ever mentioning it; attempted to render this zone at once constitutive of the nation-state (a state which must continually re-inscribe its boundaries, making them appear obvious and eternal) and *invisible*. Indeed, that strange point of contact and coincidence between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ upon which a great part of (essentially positivist) Vidalian-inspired human geography thrives throughout the 20th century (as do, to some extent, neo-positivist geographies), is the very same that marks the threshold between the life of the city, the ‘spirit’ of place, and the *rigor mortis* of the map; a threshold that has progressively colonized all our categories of the possible.

If a large part of 20th century geography ends up producing life-less containers all the while claiming, through them, to speak of/to the world, of/to life – if it speaks of ‘places’ but thinks of ‘spaces’ – by doing so it helps lay the ground for the translation of individuals into numbers, into the *corpus*; it helps lay the ground for the isolation of their bare life. As Farinelli (1992) forcibly argues, with the emergence and affirmation of the Vidalian *Geographie Humaine* (1903, 1992) and the German *Landschaftskunde* (Passarge 1919), the Subject of bourgeois geography definitively disappears from view and abandons himself/ourselves to the sovereign power of the State. For the post-Ratzelian geographies that will dominate the decades to follow, the Subject will come to coincide with the nation and its spaces – and his (sic) birth

and his death will come to inhabit the same linguistic/cognitive field as rivers and mountains (for a historical discussion see Minca 2006a, 2006b).

FOR A SPATIAL THEORY OF EXCEPTION

The 'militant geographies' that continue to populate mass media representations today – such as the interactive maps and dioramas adopted to explain the war in Iraq – are a strange remnant that, I would agree with Felix Driver (1999), academic geography should take much more seriously. They are not merely an iconic transfiguration of a set of representations, of a (geographical) project that is no more. They matter, still, because in speaking of a world that does not exist but appears real in its *fattività*, in its 'facticity', they open the door to the Schmittian foundational 'outside' (1998), that is, to the geographies of exception that make of the spatialisation of the secret threshold between *nomos* and *physis* the constitutive foundation of the new biopolitical *nomos*.

The 'outside', Agamben (2001: 56) argues, is not simply an 'other' realm that lies beyond a determinate space; it is, rather, the *varco* (passage), the *esteriorità* (exteriority) that grants it access, its *volto* (visage). It is upon/within this *varco* that the metaphysics of power resides, producing the present proliferation of zones of indistinction and spaces of exception. The violent rendering explicit of this threshold manifests itself in a world in which nothing is fixed, nothing is clear, and where the spaces of exception constantly move and multiply (Gregory 2004a: 128), just as in the

world described by one Pentagon official following the attacks of September 11th: “everything is going to move everywhere [...] there is not going to be a place in the world where it’s going to be the same as it used to be” (2001 in Gregory 2004a: 252).

The constitution of a permanent state of exception aims, indeed, at the creation of conditions under which all legal concepts, all laws become indeterminate and transfer certainty and predictability outside of the norm. For instance, as Carl Schmitt (1998) observed already in 1950, the concept of the ‘state of emergency’, so often deployed in recent times, does not refer to a specific norm but, rather, *to a situation and to a decision*.

“Take now the opposition between norm and decision”, writes Agamben in *Stato di Eccezione* (2004b: 49; 2005c: 36): “Schmitt shows that they are irreducible, in the sense that the decision can never be derived from the content of the norm without a remainder (*resto*)”. The state of exception thus “separates the norm from its application in order to make its application possible” (ibid.). It introduces a zone of anomie into the legal order, so as to make possible the effective *normalization/normatisation* of the existent. In this sense, Agamben defines the state of exception as the site within which the opposition between the norm and its application reaches its utmost intensity, “as the opening of a fictitious lacuna in the order for the purpose of safeguarding the existence of the norm and its applicability to the normal situation”: all with the aim of creating “a zone in which application is suspended, but the law, as such remains in force” (2004b: 42-43; 2005c: 31). The state

of exception is, in this view, “an anomic space in which what is at stake is a force of law without law” (2004b: 52; 2005c: 39). It consists in a *varco* within which “application and norm reveal their separation and a pure force-of-law realizes – that is, applies by ceasing to apply (*dis-applicandosi*) – a norm whose application has been suspended” (ibid.). In such fashion, “the impossible task of welding norm and reality together, and thereby constituting the normal sphere, is carried out in the form of the exception, that is, by presupposing their nexus” (2004b: 54; 2005c: 40). The state of exception marks therefore a threshold “at which logic and praxis blur with each other and a pure violence without logos claims to realize an enunciation without any real reference” (ibid.).

If decision is, for Schmitt (1988), the nexus that unites sovereignty and state of exception, it then seems as though law requires an anomic zone of suspension in order to function, as though it requires a real place where this is possible, *in order to be able to refer to life*. In such a place, which is both metaphorical but also, tragically, concrete, not only *potenza* and action are kept separate as if they were mystical elements (2004b: 52), but the tension between a juridical vacuum and a “pure being, devoid of any determination or real predicate” appears to spin around an equally empty space (2004b: 78; 2005c: 60). The strategy of exception thus serves to assure the relation between anomic violence and the law, between the *homo sacer* and the norm. Violence is, indeed, the necessary residual of this game, the real stake in the struggle over the state of exception (on this point see also Neilson 2004).

It is this double matrix – Agamben notes – this game between *potestas* (the norm) and *autoritas* (anomy) that lies at the roots of the Western juridical-political order. It is here that we find the founding act of the city and it is only from here that we can begin to probe the functioning of that which Agamben describes as the originary spatialisation, the theory of space that ontologically regulates the nexus between juridical-political order and territory. The state/space of exception is, in this understanding, “the device that must [...] ultimately articulate and hold together the two aspects of the juridico-political machine by instituting a threshold of undecidability between anomie and nomos, between life and law, between *autoritas* and *potestas*” (2004b: 110; 2005c: 86). Now – and this, to my mind, is a crucial passage in Agamben’s elaboration of a spatial theory of exception – as long as the two elements remain correlated but conceptually, temporally and spatially distinct, their dialectic – founded as it is on a ‘fiction’ – can somehow continue to function. But when the state of exception within which they come together and are “blurred together, becomes the rule, then the juridico-political system transforms itself into a killing machine” (2004b: 110; 2005c: 86). It is here that we witness the emergence of the camp, and its affirmation as the ‘paradigm’³ of the political space of the modern. The camp is, as Agamben notes, “the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule” (1995: 188; 1998a: 168-9) and acquires a permanent spatial form; when the *scarto*, the residual between *nascita* and *nazione*, between *bios* and *zoé*, between *physis* and *nomos*, emerges in all its inescapable ambiguity (1996: 25).

In the final section of this paper, I will thus reflect on how the emergence of the camp translates itself into the most brutal geo-writing, and how it is precisely the absence of a theory of space able to inscribe the spatialisation of exception that allows, today, such an enormous, unthinkable range of action to sovereign decision, a decision that occurs in what is essentially 'empty space', within which "a human action with no relation to law stands before a norm with no relation to life" (2004: 110; 2005c: 86).

THE CAMP AS THE SPATIAL PARADIGM OF MODERNITY

"Before extermination camps are reopened in Europe (something that is already starting to happen), it is necessary that the nation states find the courage to question the very principle of the inscription of nativity as well as the trinity of state-nation-territory that is founded on that principle" (Agamben 1996: 27; 2000: 24)

If, as Agamben (1996: 37) argues, the camp is the territorialisation that precedes the normalization of the state of exception, it presents itself as a potential fourth element within the old state-nation-territory triad, definitively rupturing this latter. Only thus can we begin to understand the ways in which the (dis)locating localization that produces the camp is slowly affirming itself as the new "global biopolitical nomos" (1996: 41). If the camp is, indeed, not simply an 'event' that indelibly marks the political space of modernity but, rather, the 'hidden matrix', the *nomos* of the political space within which we still live, it is important to note that it also represents a *concrete space of exception* whose juridical-political structure Agamben urges us to investigate. The camp, he argues, is certainly a portion of territory that is placed

'outside' of the normal juridical-political order; nonetheless, it is not simply an 'external' space (1996: 37). It is, rather, a

"hybrid of law and fact in which the two terms have become indistinguishable. [...] Only because the camps constitute a space of exception [...] in which not only is law completely suspended but fact and law are completely confused - is everything in the camps truly possible (Agamben 1995: 190; 1998a: 169-170)".

Life and death in the camp become pure political devices, veritable biopolitical frontiers, determined by sovereign decision over bare life, for the first time fully controlled by a human subject. For this reason, according to Agamben, the concentration camp represents the extreme and absolute verification of the National Socialist project (2004b: 71), a 'direct effect' of the National Socialist revolution (1995: 189; 1998a: 169). It is indeed the product of a permanent state of exception, a "preventative police measure" as sometimes described by Nazi legal theorists, an unfortunate necessity in order to protect the security of the state, a measure that allows individuals to be "taken into custody" (1995: 186; 1998a: 167) in order to assure the well-being and reproduction of the biological corpus of the nation (see also Corni 2005).

The camp is thus the place within which "an unprecedented absolutization of the biopower *di far vivere* ['to make live'] intersects with an equally absolute generalization of the sovereign power *di far morire* ['to make die'], such that

biopolitics coincides immediately with thanatopolitics" (1998b: 78; 2002: 83). But how is it possible, Agamben asks (ibid. 2002: 84), "that a power whose aim is essentially *di far vivere* ['to make live'] instead exerts an unconditional power of death?" Agamben finds the answer in the pages dedicated by Michel Foucault to the question of racism, identifying in this latter the seed that consents biopower to mark a series of *caesurae* in the biological continuum of the human species, thus reintroducing a principle of war into the system of the *far vivere* – into 'the making/maintenance of life' (1998b: 78-79, 2002: 84; see also Cavalletti 2005). As Agamben suggests, the fundamental *caesura* that divides the biopolitical domain is that between *popolo* (people) and *popolazione* (population), reflecting the spatial-political ontology described in the previous sections. This *caesura* consists, in fact, "in bringing to light a population in the very bosom of a people, that is, in transforming an essentially political body into an essentially biological body, whose birth and death, health and illness must then be regulated" (ibid.) (on this point, see also Vogt 2004 and Wall 2004).

It is, Agamben argues, "as if what we call 'people' were in reality not a unitary subject but a dialectical oscillation between two opposite poles: on the one hand, the set of the People as a whole political body, and on the other, the subset of the people as a fragmentary multiplicity of needy and excluded bodies; [on the one hand, then] an inclusion that claims to be total, [on the other], an exclusion that is clearly hopeless" (1995: 199; 1998a: 177; 1996). In other words, as the Italian philosopher suggests elsewhere, the concept of *popolo*, of 'the people', always already carries within it a *fundamental biopolitical fracture* (1996: 32).

With the affirmation of biopower, therefore, “every ‘people’ is doubled by a ‘population’; every *democratic* people is, at the same time, a *demographic* people” (Agamben 1998b: 79; 2002: 84, emphasis in the original). But since these biopolitical *caesurae* are essentially mobile, “in each case they isolate a further zone in the continuum [of life], a zone which corresponds to a process of increasing [...] degradation” until, in the camp, as Agamben (1998b: 79; 2002: 84-85) suggests, the biopolitical *caesurae* reach their ultimate limit. This limit is embodied in the figure of the *Muselmann* (see Agamben 1998b: 37-43; 2002: 41-48): the non-human, the threshold figure between bare life and political life, between life and death. At the point at which the deportee in the camp becomes a *Muselmann*, “the biopolitics of racism so to speak transcends race, penetrating into the threshold in which it is no longer possible to establish *caesurae*”. Here, Agamben writes, “the wavering link between people and population is definitively broken, and we witness the emergence of [...] an absolute biopolitical substance”, unspecifiable and unassignable, that can no longer be partitioned (Agamben 1998b: 79; 2002: 85). It is here that the camp becomes the very ‘paradigm’ of modern political space – and it is here that politics becomes *biopolitics* and the *homo sacer* can be confounded with the citizen.⁴ We can thus understand “the decisive function of the camps in the system of Nazi biopolitics. They are not merely the place of death and extermination; they are also, and above all, the site of production of the *Muselmann*, the final biopolitical substance to be isolated in the biological continuum” (ibid.).

The (now-meaningless) scope of the 20th century's biopolitical machine is no longer that of *far morire* (to make die) or *far vivere* (to make live) but, rather, *far sopravvivere* (to allow to survive), a process of continuously dividing, within each individual, "animal life from organic life, the human from the inhuman [...] until a threshold is reached"; a threshold that, "like geopolitical borders", is "essentially mobile" (1998b: 145; 2002: 156). The ultimate aim, biopower's "final secret", becomes then that of producing an "absolute biopolitical substance that, in its isolation, allows for the attribution of [every and all] demographic, ethnic, national and political identity (1998b: 146; 2002: 156)".

Agamben concludes his argument here with an observation that fully reveals the genuinely geopolitical matrix of the Nazi biopolitical caesura. During a secret meeting in 1937, he recalls, Hitler

"formulates an extreme biopolitical concept for the first time, one well worth considering. Referring to Central-Eastern Europe, he claims to need a *volkloser Raum*, a space empty of people. How is one to understand this singular expression? It is not simply a matter of something like a desert, a geographical space empty of inhabitants [...]. Hitler's 'peopleless space' instead designates a fundamental biopolitical intensity, an intensity that can persist in every space and through which peoples pass into populations and populations pass into *Muselmanner*. *Volkloser Raum*, in other words, names the driving force of the camp understood as a biopolitical machine that, once established in a determinate geographical space, transforms it into an absolute biopolitical space [...], in which human life transcends every assignable biopolitical identity" (1998b: 80; 2002: 85-86).

This is why in the camp – Agamben (1998b: 146; 2002: 156) suggests – the Muselmann “not only shows the efficacy of biopower, but also reveals its secret cipher, [...] its *arcanum*.” This *arcanum imperii*, embodied precisely within the figure of the Muselmann, is “invisible in its very exposure”, at once hidden and unrevealable; it is “nothing other than the *volkloser Raum*, the space empty of people at the centre of the camp that, in separating all life from itself, marks the point in which the citizen passes into [...] the Muselmann”, step after step, in a series of biopolitical caesurae; passes into “a bare, unassignable and unwitnessable life” (ibid.).

PEOPLELESS SPACES

On December 9th, 2005 *Le Monde* publishes a map showing the supposed locations of a network of secret prisons created by the CIA in its ongoing war on terror, and the trajectories of the equally ‘secret’ flights carrying prisoners suspected of terrorist activities, captured in order to be interrogated in one of these infamous ‘black sites’, the black holes on the map (Leser et al. 2005: 24-25). The new biopolitical *nomos* thus presents itself through a strategy of (dis)locating localization which, in the network of ‘ghost’ prisons and the spatial laboratory of Guantanamo, reveals the most immediate and ambiguous form of its original spatialisation (see Mirzoeff 2002). These spaces of exception represent nothing other than the confine between the inside and the outside of the norm which, to be effective, must translate itself into geography, must become, necessarily, territorialized. These spaces produce, incessantly, an ‘extratemporal and extraterritorial threshold’, to use Agamben’s

terms, a no-man's land within which politics is no longer subject to mediation, where power (again) can afford to affirm and exhibit itself.

The state of exception has today attained its widest global reach, Agamben argues: "the normative aspect of law can thus be obliterated and contradicted with impunity by a governmental violence that [...] by producing a permanent state of exception, nevertheless still claims to be applying the law" (2004b: 111; 2005c: 87). It is therefore urgent that we turn our attention to the *arcanum imperii* that governs our times and our spaces; that we unmask the superb fiction that contains at its centre the state of exception which is nothing but an *empty* space, a void – in Agamben's words, "the place of maximum tension between two opposite forces, one that institutes the norm, and another that deactivates and deposes it" (2004b: 111).

Living within a state of exception signifies being subject to both these possibilities. And it is only by keeping them apart when they attempt to become indivisible and indiscernible that we will be able to interrupt the functioning of the brutal biopolitical machine that is leading the West towards a "global civil war" (2004b: 111). If it is true, as Agamben (2004b: 34) suggests, that the problem of exception "presupposes a correct determination of its localization", then the struggle over the state of exception "presents itself essentially as a dispute over its proper locus" (2004b: 34; 2005c: 24); as a struggle over the spatial ontologies that determine it. Thus the urgency of a new spatial theory of politics able to engage with these uncertain realms, able to question the original function of modern sovereignty; a theory able to

sever, once and for all, the biopolitical nexus between *natività* (nativity) and *nazionalità* (nationality).

We should also perhaps admit, as Agamben (1995: 210) intimates, to no longer knowing anything about the city and the home, of the distinction between *zoé* and *bios*, and should ask ourselves, rather, what sort of geographical *nomos* would be able to disrupt the structure of the ban, transcending the non-relational nature of the city and the nation-state of our times. Can geography help theorise a politics that does not need to except bare life, a politics able to discard the spatial devices of 'belonging' and 'population', able to render the indistinct threshold of modernity its explicit terrain of struggle?

If, as Agamben (2005b: 404) suggests, it is true that "a *vita beata* (a blessed life) now lies on the same terrain where the biopolitical body of the West takes life", then perhaps it can be useful to conclude these reflections by recalling, again, the very potent image of the camp as "a series of concentric circles that, like waves, incessantly wash up against a central non-place" (1998b: 46; 2002: 51-52), a central void inhabited by the threshold figure, by the non-human. That empty centre is the (concrete) space of indistinction within which the death of a human being can be considered no longer a death. The entire population of the camp is thus transformed into "an immense whirlpool obsessively spinning around a centre with no face" (1998b: 47; 2002: 52). But that anonymous vortex, Agamben suggests citing Dante's *Paradiso*, is after all "painted in our image; it bears the true likeness of man" (1998b:

45; 2002: 52), a likeness within which we all dread to recognize ourselves. Just like Borges' famous character in *The Aleph* who, after having spent his life tracing the map of the world realizes, right before his death, that he had simply sketched out the contours of his own face (see Borges 1984: 1267 as well as Farinelli 1992: 253), so too we, perhaps, should begin to recognise that the ante/post-mortem human objects of the California labs and the invisible victims of the Iraqi war resemble in a sinister way the subjects that modern *geo-graphies* have for far too long contributed to producing.

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¹ A brief note on Agamben's texts here cited. Although I have tried to make use of existing English-language translations whenever possible, the way in which some terms/concepts and theoretical passages are rendered is, in my opinion, problematic. In those instances, I have made recourse to the original Italian texts and have provided my own translations.

² Agamben's somewhat formalistic understanding of the State and the privileged place it is afforded in his reflection on the exercise of sovereign power is certainly disputable, although it is perfectly consistent with the (legal-judicial) Schmittian formulations on which the author draws.

³ 'Paradigm' here should not be intended in its literal Kuhnian meaning, but rather in its more metaphorical Italian usage.

⁴ It should be noted, however, that many critics have accused Agamben of failing to properly distinguish the different extent to which different subjects of sovereign power can be potentially transformed into *homines sacri*.