

**Topic: Agamben's reconceptualization of the term 'Contemporary'**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines Giorgio Agamben as a contemporary Italian philosopher, whose works critically engage with questions of time, politics, subjectivity and the conditions of modern life, particularly through his reflection on what it means to be contemporary. It aims to analyze how Agamben reconceptualizes contemporaneity as a critical relationship with one's own time rather than mere chronological presence within it. The study explores that being contemporary does not mean simply living in the present time. Instead, it means having a critical distance from one's own age. A contemporary person is able to see the darkness, gaps and contradictions of the present rather than being blinded by its surface brightness. The paper concludes contemporaneity as an active mode of thinking process that connects past, present and future through critical interruption rather than linear succession. Agamben's intervention demands and challenges conventional understanding of modern time and proposes contemporaneity as a form of resistance, an alertness to what remains unthought and unfulfilled in the present moment.

**Keywords:** Giorgio Agamben, Contemporary, Reconceptualization, Critical, Darkness.

**Introduction:**

Giorgio Agamben is an influential Italian philosopher best known for his work in political philosophy, aesthetics, and critical theory. Born on 22 April 1942 in Rome, Italy, he completed studies in Law and Philosophy at the University of Rome with a doctoral thesis on the political thought of Simone Weil under the supervision of the renowned philosopher José Ortega y Gasset. He also participated in Martin Heidegger's seminars on Hegel and Heraclitus as a postdoctoral scholar. He taught at various Italian and European universities including the Universities of Macerate and Verona, held visiting positions abroad and was Director of Programs at the Paris International College contributing significantly to contemporary debates on sovereignty, law, and power. He gained international recognition through his engagement with Martin Heidegger, whose seminars he attended in the 1960s at Le Thor, France. Heidegger's reflections on being, language, and time had a lasting impact on Agamben's philosophical method. Walter Benjamin's ideas on history, law, and

messianism also put a strong impact on Agamben's thought. He developed a distinctive philosophical voice from the 1970s onwards that blends classical philosophy, Roman law, theology, and modern political theory.

#### **Influences on Agamben's thought:**

Agamben's indebtedness and engagement with Aristotle, Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Hegel, Carl Schmitt and Sigmund Freud show that his roots and influences are expansive and include many canonical figures of Western philosophy. He has also critically engaged with religious and legal texts from Torah to Greek and Roman law, as well as with some of the most important literary figures and poets in Western culture, including Franz Kafka, Dante Alighieri and Giorgio Caproni. Most of Agamben's work is an elaborate and recursive engagement with the issues introduced into Western philosophy by the enigmatic work of Benjamin. He edited Benjamin's collected works in Italian translation until 1996, and called Benjamin's thought "the antidote that allowed me to survive *Heidegger*". (*Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* p.53) . In 1981, He discovered several important lost manuscripts by Benjamin in the archives of the National Library of France. He has engaged since the nineties in a debate with the political writings of the German jurist Carl Schmitt, most extensively in the study 'State of Exception'(2003). His recent writings also elaborate on the concepts of Michel Foucault, whom he calls "a scholar from whom I have learned a great deal in recent years."(*The Signature of All Things: On Method* p.7) Agamben's political thought was founded on his readings of Aristotle's Politics, Nicomachean Ethics, and treatise On the Soul, as well as the exegetical traditions concerning these texts in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. As Sergei Prozorov observes, "Any assessment of Agamben's critical studies of historical or contemporary politics would therefore be incomplete without the consideration of his engagement with the ostensibly non-political subject matter as the source for a new political affirmation"(Agamben and Politics: A Critical Introduction p.109).

#### **Agamben's main works:**

Agamben's writings are marked by an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on literature, theology, linguistics, and philosophy. Agamben is most widely known for his Homo Sacer project which properly begins with the book 'Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare life', (1998) a multi-volume series that examines the relationship between sovereign power and bare life . In this series of works, Agamben responds to Hannah Arendt's and Foucault's studies of totalitarianism and biopolitics. In this work, he analyzes an obscure figure of Roman law that poses fundamental questions about the nature of law and power in general. Under the laws of the Roman Empire, a man who committed a certain kind of crime was banned from society and all of his rights as a citizen were revoked. He thus became a *homo sacer* (sacred man). In consequences, he could be killed by anybody, while his life on the other hand was deemed sacred so he could not be sacrificed in a ritual ceremony. Agamben identifies that there is an essential distinction between *zoe*, or biological life, and *bios*, the form or way of living proper to an individual or community. According to Agamben, "Sovereignty, then, is conceived from ancient times as the power which determines what or who is to be incorporated into the political body by means of the more originary exclusion

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of what is to remain outside the political body- which is at the same time the source of that body's composition." (*Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare life*, p.107)' . The reduction of life to biopolitics is one of the main threads in Agamben's work, in his critical conception of a homo sacer, reduced to bare life, and thus deprived of any rights.

In The 'Coming Community' (1993), Agamben develops the idea of *coming politics* and argues that modern politics is trapped in a politics that is always arriving, never fixed, never institutionalized. In this work, Agamben describes the social and political manifestation of his philosophical thought. He says, "Whatever singularity, which wants to appropriate belonging itself, its own being-in-language, and this rejects all identity and every condition of belonging, is the principal enemy of the State." (*Giorgio Agamben, The coming Community* p.86) . Giorgio Agamben envisions a new form of community that is not based on identity, nationality, class, or any fixed belonging. Instead, Agamben introduces the idea of whatever singularity, a mode of being in which individuals exist beyond categories and properties, neither included nor excluded by political or social classifications. This community does not unite people through shared essence or common goals, but through a shared exposure to existence itself, where belonging is no longer defined by law, sovereignty, or exclusion. Therefore, the coming politics , a politics of pure means, is a politics where politics is the sphere neither of an end in itself nor of means subordinated rather , it is the sphere of an end intended as the field of human action and of human thought.

Agamben's text 'State of Exception'(2005) which is a part of the Homo sacer project, investigates the increase of power by government which they employ in supposed times of crisis. Within a state of emergency, Agamben refers to the states of exception, where constitutional rights can be diminished, superseded and rejected in the process of claiming this extension of power by a government. In the state of exception, individuals can be reduced to bare life (zoe)—lives that can be controlled, detained, or excluded without legal protection. Through this work, Agamben warns that modern democracies increasingly govern through exception, making emergency powers a normal technique of rule which can threaten freedom, rights, and the very idea of constitutional law. As Jacques Rancier observes, "Agamben identifies the state of exception with the power of decision over life."(*Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?* p.297). He argues that modern politics increasingly operates through states of exception, where legal norms are suspended and individuals can be reduced to mere biological existence.

'What is an Apparatus and Other Essays'(2009) by Agamben, offers a succinct introduction to Agamben's work through an investigation of Foucault notion of the apparatus . For Foucault, an apparatus is a network of institutions, practices, discourses, laws, and technologies designed to manage, control, and guide behavior. Agamben radicalizes this idea and defines an apparatus as anything that has the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions or discourse of living

beings. He says, "It is a heterogeneous set that includes virtually anything, linguistic and nonlinguistic, under the same heading. Discourses, institutions, buildings, laws, police measures, philosophical propositions and so on. The apparatus itself is the network that is established between these elements." (*What is an Apparatus and other essays p.51*). Agamben does not call for destroying apparatuses. Instead, he proposes profanation which means returning what is captured to common use, deactivating the apparatus without abolishing it.

'The Kingdom and the Glory' (2011) by Giorgio Agamben examines the theological foundations of modern political power by tracing how Christian doctrines of oikonomia (divine governance or administration) shaped contemporary ideas of government and bureaucracy. Agamben argues that while sovereignty represents the kingdom as transcendent authority, real power operates through the glory of administration, rituals, and acclamations that legitimize rule without exercising direct force.

#### **Reconceptualization of the term 'Contemporary':**

Contemporary refers to something that belongs to the present time or the modern period. It is used to describe ideas, events, issues, art, or people that are related to what is happening now, rather than to the past. Giorgio Agamben's essay 'What Is the Contemporary?' published in English in 2009 in the collection 'What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays' offers a distinctive understanding of contemporaneity that goes beyond the simple idea of living in the present time. Agamben has divided his essay on the contemporary into seven points. Agamben begins his essay with two questions, "Of whom and of what are we contemporaries?" (Agamben, Giorgio. *Nudities*. p.10) and the next question is "what does it mean to be contemporary?" (Agamben, Giorgio. *Nudities*. p.10) Giorgio Agamben raises the fundamental question of what it means to be "contemporary." He asks not only what the contemporary is, but also of whom and of what we are contemporaries. Agamben defines contemporariness as, "a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. It is that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism." (Agamben, Giorgio. *Nudities*. p.11 ). He argues that contemporary is not someone who fully belongs to his age or who is perfectly tied to it in every respect, but rather someone who maintains a critical distance from it. This distance allows the contemporary individual to perceive aspects of his time that remain invisible to others. To be contemporary is to take a position towards the present that is not fully aligned with it, allowing one to perceive and think critically about it. The contemporary does not simply adapt to prevailing trends but questions them, exposing the hidden structures of power and exclusion that shape modern life. Friedrich Nietzsche in his work 'Untimely Meditations' says, "This meditation is itself untimely." (Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Untimely Meditations* p.60). Drawing from Nietzsche, Agamben suggests that to be contemporary, one must be both connected to and detached from one's era. This temporal disjunction enables a deeper understanding of the present. He suggests that true contemporariness involves a certain distance or disjunction from one's own time. Agamben argues that being

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contemporary is not simply a matter of living in the same chronological time. To be contemporary is not only to belong to one's own time, but also to engage critically with the past and future that exists within it, making sense of both through the urgency of the now.

Agamben explains that those who try to think about what it means to be contemporary often do so by breaking time apart rather than seeing it as a smooth, continuous flow. The contemporary person introduces a disruption or fracture in linear time and perceives a special relationship between different times past, present, and future within the present itself. Because of this mismatch, he notices what others ignore especially the darkness, problems, and contradictions of the present. For Agamben, anachronism means being slightly out of step with your own time, which allows you to truly understand it. Due to this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving their own time. He connects contemporariness to messianic time, drawing on ideas from Paul. Messianic time is not the end of time, but the time of the now—a moment that is urgent, charged, and transformative. It is a time that shortens or compresses chronological time and gives each moment a special intensity. In this sense, the contemporary lives in a time that is both inside history and yet capable of interrupting it. According to Agamben, this involves a tension and paradox which means being contemporary requires belonging to and at the same time, being somewhat distanced from, one's time. Agamben's contemporary exists within a fracture, a caesura, that breaks up the inert homogeneity of linear time. This enables him to perceive and grasp his time better than his contemporaries. Agamben says, "He is able to read history in unforeseen ways, to "cite it", according to a necessity that does not arise in any way from his will, but from an exigency to which he cannot respond." (Agamben, Giorgio. *Nudities*. p.18). As a result, he is able to cite history differently, to create his own temporal relations with time. The contemporary is capable of activating forgotten or suppressed elements of history in order to illuminate current realities. By bringing the past into dialogue with the present, the contemporary disrupts linear notions of time and reveals how unresolved historical issues continue to influence the modern world.

Agamben stresses the importance of the reader's relation to texts. Agamben demands that readers should be contemporary with the texts and writers under discussion. He says, "It is on our ability to be contemporaries not only of our century and the "now," but also of its figures in the texts and documents of the past, that the success or failure of our seminar depends." (*What is an apparatus and other essays* p.54). The contemporary text itself would be a type of caesura, a time and space of pause, rupture and meeting, which brings together and also holds apart, its own temporalities, which it takes to represent, and those of the reader as well. In Agamben's contemporary text, caesura refers to a break within time itself, a moment where the present is split, not smooth or continuous and a gap that allows critical perception. The contemporary person creates a pause in the flow of the present. This pause, caesura makes it possible to see the present clearly. A contemporary text through its modes of representation and the intimate obscurity it creates with its reader takes

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up the paradoxical task of shattering and welding time. It checks and impede time and create discontinuity within homogenous, linear time .

Agamben contends that the poet is the one who is truly contemporary because it is he who must firmly lock his gaze onto the eyes of his century. A Contemporary text would be one that does not straightforwardly coincide with its own historical time or adjust itself to its demands, but rather its singular relationship with its time would be marked by non-coincidence and dys-chrony. This noncoincidence, and dys-chrony, does not mean that the contemporary is someone who lives in another time instead, it means having the ability to recognize the archaic or original elements that still operate within the present. The archaic is not something that belongs only to the distant past, it continues to work actively inside modern life, just as childhood remains within adulthood or an embryo remains active in a mature organism. Rather, it requires a critical relationship with texts and authors, whether ancient or recent, such that we are able to engage with them as if they speak to our present.

Agamben says the contemporary is he , “who firmly holds his gaze on his own his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness.”(Agamben, Giorgio. *Nudities*. p.13) .Most people are dazzled by the lights of their age such as progress, technology, trends. Instead of being dazzled by the apparent progress, achievements, or dominant narratives of the present, the contemporary person focuses on its obscurities, contradictions, and unfulfilled promises. This darkness does not signify ignorance or pessimism; rather, it represents those areas of social, political, and cultural life that demand attention and critical reflection. The contemporary is one who can see the darkness of their own time. This darkness refer to hidden violence, exclusions, crises and silences of an age and what history tries to conceal. Thus, being contemporary is an ethical and intellectual responsibility. “Contemporary are only those who do not allow themselves to be blinded by the lights of the century, and so manage to get a glimpse of the shadows in those lights, of their intimate obscurity”. (Agamben, Giorgio. *Nudities*. p.14). He insists contemporary is the person who perceives the darkness of his time . The contemporary’s eyes are struck by the beam of darkness that comes from his own time and this darkness is something that concerns him, something that never ceases to engage him .

The contemporary person perceives this darkness not as absence of light, but as something active and meaningful like a light that cannot reach us yet. This ability allows them to read history in a new way, not as a fixed sequence of events but as something that can be reinterpreted and transformed from the present. He uses the sense of sight as a guiding metaphor. Exploring the realms of biology and astrophysics, he explains that the darkness we see when we close our eyes, and the darkness we see in the sky, are forms of presence. He says that our own off-cells produce the darkness when we close our eyes, and the darkness we see in the sky is light from galaxies that will never reach us. Through these prisms, Agamben suspends the determinations of presence and absence, activity and

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passivity, and light and darkness . The contemporary, he proposes, is the one who sees darkness and light in one another. To be contemporary is therefore to perceive the darkness of one's time and to recognize within that darkness a light that moves toward us but never fully arrives.

The contemporary person experiences both distance and closeness to their own time. Agamben argues that the modern world can only be understood by turning toward what has been forgotten, prehistoric, or un-lived. This does not mean returning to the historical past, but uncovering what remains un-lived within the present itself. He suggests that the present casts a shadow on the past, just as the past casts a shadow on the present. Contemporariness is something that does not simply takes place in chronological time but works within chronological time, urges, presses , and transforms it. The contemporary puts to work a special relationship between the different times. Using fashion as an example, Agamben shows how contemporariness works- fashion always exists between a “not yet” and a “no longer.” The moment one claims to be in fashion, one is already out of it. Fashion exists in a space between now and no longer now. Thus, being in fashion like being contemporary requires a slight out of phase relation with time, where relevance always contains a trace of obsolescence.

Agamben means by this that a truly contemporary person does not completely merge with his own time. Instead, they maintain a certain distance from it, which allows them to see not only its brightness such as progress, trends but also its darkness the problems and blind spots of the present. “It is the contemporary who has broken the vertebrae of his time, then he also makes of this fracture a meeting place, or an encounter between times and generations.”(Agamben, Giorgio. *Nudities*. p.18) .The contemporary is not only one who can divide and interpolate time but is also capable of transforming it and putting it in relation with other time. He further argues that fashion establishes a unique relationship with past and future, allowing elements from earlier times to reappear as new. In this way, contemporariness is not simple presence in the present but an anachronistic engagement with time that transforms chronological time from within. Ultimately, to be contemporary requires courage the ability to face the broken present, recognize its obscurity, and discern the hidden light that continues to travel toward us.

### **Conclusion:**

Giorgio Agamben redefined contemporaneity as a critical, untimely engagement with the present by challenging the conventional understanding of time and modernity. Rather than aligning comfortably, the contemporary subject maintains a reflective distance with the dominant rhythms of one's age, that makes visible the obscurities, silences and unresolved tensions of the present moment. Through attentiveness to darkness, untimeliness, and historical resonance the contemporary individual questions established narratives and power structures which helps to develop a deeper ethical and political awareness, making Agamben's theory especially relevant in times of crisis and uncertainty. In this way we can

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say that Agamben's reconceptualization of the term 'Contemporary' presents contemporaneity as an active mode of thought-one that illuminates what remains unfulfilled within the present and open possibilities for alternative ways of thinking and being.

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