



## A genealogy of command

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### review of

Agamben, G. (2019) *Creation and anarchy: The work of art and the religion of capitalism*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. (HB, pp. 84, \$16.00, ISBN 978-1-503-60836-8)

### Introduction

Giorgio Agamben is a household name in management theory (Ek et al., 2007; Banerjee, 2008; Cunha et al., 2010; O’Doherty et al., 2013; Beltramini, 2020). Agamben’s (2011) recent book, *The kingdom and the glory* (henceforth *The kingdom*), has received praise and criticism from management theorists, yet its impact cannot be underestimated. Agamben’s theoretical work has broad historical philosophical ambitions, is unapologetically controversial, and attempts to diagnose and show the origins of the malaise that is affecting liberal democracies today. As far as management scholarship is concerned, *The kingdom* is effective in bringing theory back into the midst of discussions concerning organization and government. Alongside the classical paradigms of authoritarian political theories, Agamben also senses an ‘economic’ paradigm in which the governmental work of the sovereign (the authority, the king) is carried out by an almost autonomous and self-legitimizing bureaucracy.

The book under review, *Creation and anarchy: The work of art and the religion of capitalism* (henceforth, *Creation and anarchy*), although published later than *The kingdom*, is in terms of content a prologue to *The kingdom*. In the latter, Agamben works in the dominion of theology to offer, as the title of his book claims, a theological genealogy of economy and government. The key passage is the semantic shift of the term ‘economy’ from the being of God to His activity. In Christianity, three divine persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – constitute a single and unique God. This is, of course, the doctrine of the Trinity. The ‘economy’ is initially the intrapersonal activity within the triune God. Then ‘economy’ is a term used to mean the divine action, that is, the way in which a metaphysical being could causally influence the unfolding of history. Divine action, divine government, divine economy, salvation history, history of salvation, providence – all are synonyms for the notion that God is constantly at work governing the world; if He stops for a single instance, the world (His creation) would collapse. Once secularized, the notion of divine action, or providence, is reframed in terms of the ‘invisible hand’ of the market.

### **On the problem of reading Agamben**

Agamben may be a household name in management theory, yet readers of management scholarship often show symptoms of exasperation, or at least frustration, when dealing with his texts. The same reaction occurs with the texts of his commentators and interpreters, in the sense that they both attempt to provide readers possessing little or no familiarity with Agamben's writings some point of entry for exploring them, or in that they offer a critical analysis of his works for those already well acquainted with Agamben's thought. What troubles some of management readership about Agamben is his apparent propensity to indulge in long linguistic analyses, provide innovative meaning to words that seems to have one already, and coin new terms that might be too complex for some readers (i.e., ‘potential-of-not’—see below). The final result is a dense, undeniably erudite style that requires a decent knowledge of Greek and Latin, substantial philological skills, and familiarity with philosophical complexities. Not your regular cup of tea, for sure. Despite the appearances, however, the difficulty of Agamben has little

to do with the complexity of his language. He is a precise and gifted author in Italian, something that translation often fails to deliver. He is a poet turned philosopher and has maintained a poet's love and respect for language. As a philosopher, he shares with another philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, the idea that the scope of philosophical work is to frame problems related to the meaning of words in terms of questions. Thus, his linguistic analyses of the terms are not, as someone may think, digressions into detail; his inclination for coining new terms is not an unnecessary mastery; both reveal a degree of granularity in Agamben's thought that perfectly matches his method of analysis.

His method of analysis is that of genealogies, that is, history of concepts. His work consists in a series of genealogical essays in which a key concept is investigated historically. In the book under review, the concept in consideration is 'command' seen through the lens of the relationship between potential and action in the domain of power. The book deals with the relationship of power and powerlessness (with is not absence of power but rather inoperative power). According to Agamben, a hidden but fundamental relationship exists between operative power and inoperative power. It is a void—a blank—and this empty space is constitutive of power. I will return to this later. Back to Agamben's method: for Agamben, a genealogy is not simply the carrying over of, for example, a political concept (i.e., command) within the realm of politics. Oh, no. He loves to include in his analysis fields of studies that are usually neglected and to move into different, distant, apparently unrelated areas of interest: from classical philology to modern jurisprudence, from ancient Greek to modern German, from theology to art history to poetics and ontology. This massive, and honestly intimidating, display of erudition is functional to his project. Agamben's project is a subversive one: to change political theory (or at least some elements of the liberal political theory), not from within, i.e., changing the theory, but through a return to the philosophical and theological sources of that political theory, and start over. Agamben aims to change political theory by returning to its (philosophical and theological) fundamentals and, via a critical analysis of these fundamentals, develop another theory that better matches today's challenges. He thinks that political thought and political theory are derivatives

of much greater conversations. That is why in his books he engages only with the founders of the philosophical discourse itself, the Scripture, and the giants of Christian theology. In sum, Agamben's project is, simply and plainly, to rebuild politics upon a new foundation. In a 2004 interview conducted by Ulrich Raulff in Rome, Agamben explained that he works with paradigms. And he added: 'this kind of analysis should not be confused with a sociological investigation' (Raulff, 2004). With 'paradigms,' therefore, the reader should not think of the sociological paradigms of Burrell and Morgan (1979), in which management scholars trained in social science studied the implicit assumptions of sociologists' organization theories. In Agamben, the topics under investigation are the implicit assumptions of the political sphere of Western civilization. The magnitude of Agamben's vision is so different that, I believe, Burrell and Morgan's sociological paradigms for him would be considered nothing more than variants of the same paradigm. Agamben's strategy may explain the sense of estrangement experienced by certain readers of management scholarship in addressing his works. Trained in social sciences, management scholars are used to deal with other disciplines in terms of assimilation; they are skilled professionals in the realm of sociological investigations and like to integrate insights from other disciplines into their own. Contrary to this, Agamben is disinterested in expanding his discipline; he does not engage in a work of edification of theories. He studies the foundations of the edifices (i.e., the roots of paradigms).

So, what to do with Agamben in management? It depends on how readers answer this question: do they believe in the notion that ontological assumptions are intimately related to economic ones? To put it differently, can they see a *fil rouge*, an intrinsic logic, between management, a modern phenomenon, and its ancient philosophical and theological roots? If one answers 'yes' to this question, then the study of management becomes the analysis of the concept of management in world philosophical and theological history. In this context, reading Agamben can be highly beneficial. In sum, Agamben is a helpful read for those who feel exhorted to rethink their notion of what management is for the reason that their current notion is not working. Agamben is helpful also for those who are not urged by a compelling impetus

to come up with an immediate remedy or replacement, but prefer to build from scratch. In fact, Agamben is a natural companion to those who believe that the edifice of management needs not just to change but to fall. Then one can start over and build a new edifice. That said, I now move to the review of *Creation and anarchy*.

### **Coexistence of creation and potential of creation**

*Creation and anarchy* is a collection of essays; together, these essays contribute significantly to Agamben's body of work on 'creation' and present the readers with the demonstration of his commitment to reframing this crucial concept. The book is the English translation of Agamben's (2017) *Creazione e anarchia: L'opera nell'età della religione capitalista* from Neri Pozza press. The Italian manuscript is actually a compilation of the reviewed versions of five lectures, originally delivered at the Mendrisio Academy of Architecture (Switzerland) between October 2012 and April 2013. Parts of the Italian manuscript had already been translated into English and included (with some variations) in Agamben's other writings, such as *The fire and the tale*, *The use of bodies*, and *The end of the poem*. The English translation, I assume, received approval from Agamben himself. Adam Kotsko translated the original Italian term *potenza* as 'potential' and *potere* as 'power;' he also translates *essere-in-opera* as 'being-at-work.' I will return to the issues of translation at the end of this review.

The book maintains the original structure of the lectures from Mendrisio: five short but intense chapters, each focusing on a single subject. Chapter one is about what constitutes a work of art or, the relationship between the artist and the work of art. Here Agamben proposes an archeology of the work of art (this is the title of the chapter), in which he explains that a transformation occurred in art from it being a practice to being a creative activity, and in the artist, from a craftsman to more of a contemplative. For the Greeks, the more elevated act is that which has its own goal within itself. According to Aristotle, the *ergon* (the work) somehow expropriates the agent of its *energeia* (being-at-work). With medieval theology, the situation is reversed: Thomas Aquinas, in fact, compares the creative action of God, who creates according to the

ideas that exist in his mind, to the creation of the architect: the artist is now configured as a creative individual and thus subtracts the primacy at work, which therefore presents itself as a residue of the architect's activity.

After classic philosophy and medieval theology, the third moment of archeology is the twentieth century. In chapter two, already published in 2013 as *Il fuoco e il racconto* (English translation: *The fire and the tale*), Agamben investigates the act of creation or, the relationship between having a faculty and bringing it to expression. In his view, an act of creation has little to do with knowledge or habit [22] and more to do with the dialectic between creation and creation-of-not (my words), that is, the potential (of creation) that does not become an act (creation). Similarly, the potential is the result of a dialectic between potential and potential-of-not. The potential-of-not is a suspension of the potential, which nevertheless remains intact [23]; in his words, 'there is a form or presence of what is not in action, and this privative presence is potential' [17]. What Agamben is trying to do here is to articulate a concept of 'power' that is both action and potential of action. Power is at once operative and inoperative and always potentially operative. The operative/inoperative question innervates, like a hidden red line, many of the pages of this chapter: power is defined by both its exercise and non-exercise and every instance of power is therefore also the impotence of the power itself (in relation to itself). In brief, for Agamben the inoperative exists, and this means that creation cannot be thought only from the point of view of the operative (the potential actualized, the potential becoming creation), but also from the point of view of the inoperative (the potential-not-to, i.e., the potential that is not turned into creation). In Agamben's words: 'If every potential is both potential to be and potential not to be, the passage to the act can take place only by transferring [also] one's own potential-not-to into action' [19].

Chapter three, a short and summarized version of a chapter included in *The use of bodies*, is about poverty or, the relationship between humans and ownership. In the previous chapter, Agamben sketches the character of the inoperative human being, the being who frees him/herself from 'biological and social destiny and from any predetermined task' [27] or, 'a living being without work' [25]. In chapter three, he discusses a variant of this character,

the living being without ownership. If the artist is defined in relation to the inoperative, for Agamben poverty should be addressed in terms of the inappropriable (this last word is the title of the chapter). Here is Agamben:

I would therefore like to propose this definition of poverty: poverty is the relation with an inappropriable: to be poor means: to maintain oneself in relation with an innappropriable good. [37]

In brief, poverty is seen in relation with inappropriable goods; goods that cannot be appropriated, such as the landscape. Thus, being unable to appropriate is an exhibition of the potential to appropriate, which is not only transferred to the act, but turns in on itself. To put it differently, being able not to appropriate is a resistance internal to appropriation, which prevents the latter from being exhausted in the act and directs it to turn in on itself, to become capable of its own inappropriateness, that is, poverty.

Chapter four, 'What is a command', is focused on the relationship between 'beginning' and 'command.' Agamben is interested in the etymology of the Greek term *archè*, which is the word with which the ancient Greeks indicated both 'origin' and 'command'. This dual meaning is, for Agamben, revealing. He argues: 'In our culture the *archè*, the origin, is always already the command; the beginning is always also the principle that governs and commands' [52]. Here Agamben presents not one but two points: first, the beginning is the command; second, the development of the command:

the origin is what commands and governs not only the birth, but also the growth, development (...). In a word: the history of that to which it has given origins. [52]

It means that the command perpetuates itself as government throughout the history of that to which it has given origins. To put it differently, it means that creation and management are closely entwined. This is the prelude to *The kingdom*.

Chapter five is about capitalism as religion (the title of this chapter). Here Agamben recovers a contribution made in *The kingdom*, that is, Father and Son (two persons of the Trinity) are not a hierarchical relationship to each other; they are equal. When placed in the realm of political theory, this

internal relationship between the persons of the Trinity sets the relationship between sovereignty and government: sovereignty (Father) and government (Son) do not depend on each other, but they are two polarities in a dynamic, economic relationship. The Son, the government, does not depend on the Father, but He is anarchic himself, that is, He has neither origin nor foundation in the Father. In Greek, in fact, *anarchos* stands for ‘without *archè*.’ It is the ‘economic’ paradigm in which the governmental work of the sovereign is carried out by the relatively independent and self-referencing bureaucracy, a concept I mentioned at the beginning of this review. To this previous contribution, Agamben adds a discussion of the religious background that provides meaning to the economic structures of capitalist society. The first of these structures is that of ‘credit,’ which Agamben rightly traces back to Latin, as a past participle of the verb ‘to believe’. Credit is precisely a belief, therefore a faith, which has been behind the idea of credit: ‘Businesses, to be able to continue to produce, must in essence mortgage in advance ever greater quantities of labor and future production’ [71]. In brief, capitalism is a religion. Agamben ends the book with this contribution.

*Creation and anarchy* is a small but extremely complex book raising several and important arguments. I will limit my comment to three distinct points: (1) creation and management; (2) the implication for management scholarship; and, (3) translation.

### *Creation and management*

In *The kingdom*, Agamben links the economic character of the divine action (i.e., providence, divine government, salvation history) to the economic character of the intrapersonal activity within the triune God. In *Creation and anarchy*, this link between providence and Trinity is replaced by another link, this time between providence and creation. This replacement clarifies and solidifies both arguments, i.e. (1) the general argument that modern government is a derivative of Christian theology, and (2) the more specific point that modern government finds its *raison d'être* in a specific theology of creation. In modern times, one typically thinks of creation—of the Bible—as a moment. In the beginning, God created it all. Modern minds have lost the original sense of the creation in the Greek and Semitic sense, that is, creation

is always creation to bring order. And if order is lost or even challenged, God re-creates the world. Creation is not a moment, but a never-ending activity of creation and order building. Creation is a beginning that never remains in the past because it maintains control, i.e., government, over the destiny of its creation. In the *Book of genesis*, God creates twice in the first two chapters, then recreates humanity after the Fall, then offers the Cosmic Covenant after the Deluge; then He reorganizes creation after the episode of the Tower of Babel, calls Abraham to a new covenant, and so on. God does not create and leave His creation to itself. This line of thought allows Agamben to make his point stronger and clearer: modern government is a byproduct of Christian theology, more specifically of the Christian theology of creation.

### *Implication for management scholarship*

In *Creation and anarchy* the central contribution, as far as management scholarship is concerned, is the relationship between command and reason. By reconstructing the archeology of command, Agamben shows how western ontology presents a dual face from the beginning. On the one hand, it is *logos*, that is, logical and assertive speech; on the other, it reflects the nature of the command. In Agamben's words, there are (1) the 'ontologies of the apophantic assertion' [59], i.e., those logical and linguistic structures that are based on the true and/or false alternative, and (2) the 'ontology of the command' [59]. Religion and law belong to the latter, while philosophy resorts above all to *logos*. While *logos* is persuasive argument, that is, reason, which limits the chaos and ungovernability of the world, the command is expressed in true power.

In *Creation and anarchy*, Agamben points out that (1) the ontology of command has supplanted the ontology of *logos* and (2) that 'the ontological relationship between language and world here is not asserted (...) but commanded' [59]. Order is delivered by command, not by assertion. In a nutshell, management is power, not logic. In *The kingdom*, Agamben links the anarchic character of the Son to the anarchic nature of government. In *Creation and anarchy*, he connects creation to management, not in the sense of persuasion but power: the one who begins or who originates creation also governs it by command. It is in this sense that the reference of the book's title

to creation and anarchy should be understood: the Agambenian anarchy is to be understood as an absence of principle (founder) in connection with a will of command. It is possible at this point to see through Agamben's dense prose the audacious and subversive picture of modern society that he paints in this and in previous books. Agamben, in fact, sees anarchy, understood as the absence of foundation, in relationship with power, so that power is anarchic, because it bases its justification on itself; it needs no external basis.

It is another way to proclaim the existence of autonomous and self-legitimizing government. In *The kingdom*, that government was seen in terms of bureaucracy; in *Creation and anarchy*, that bureaucracy is characterized as power. Is it possible to free creativity, the act of creation, from the constraint of command? How can one escape this bureaucracy? If I understand correctly *Creation and anarchy's* first four chapters, one can escape through a lack of correspondence to ownership (chapter three) and to the command (chapter four). In fact, refusing ownership in practice means claiming the possibility of a human existence completely outside the law [30], and refusing command in reality means claiming the possibility of a human existence completely outside power. Once government is unrelated to ownership and command, the ontological structures of the system itself begin to falter. As Agamben puts it, 'a power ceases to exist (...) when it leaves off giving orders' [55]. To put it differently, one is really free when he/she has no legal right and does not correspond to command.

Finally, a note about the translation: I believe the term 'potency' for *potenza* would have served the English translation better than 'potential,' particularly in the context of *potenza* that is both potential and potential-of-not. I think potency-of-not (to do or be) better recovers the original meaning of *potenza* (from Latin: *potentia*, derived from *potens -entis* 'powerful') in the sense of 'potenza-di-non'.

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