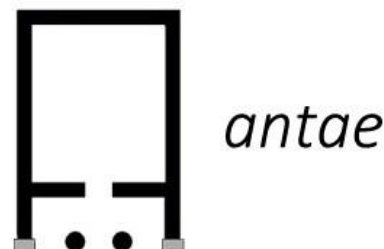


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Engaging the Contemporary: Seminar on Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Rancière: Conference Review

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The first ‘Engaging the Contemporary’ seminar took place last year, marking the thirtieth and tenth anniversaries of the deaths of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida respectively. Following in the spirit of this effort, a second seminar took place on the 20th of November 2015, with the aim of exposing its audience to, and dealing with, several elements in the philosophical oeuvre of Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Rancière. Like the previous year, this joint effort of the Departments of Philosophy and English from the Faculty of Arts, in collaboration with the Department of Educational Studies from the Faculty of Education, provided a stimulating discussion of contemporaneous themes, as will be evidenced by the short gloss of the proceedings that follows. Contributors hailed from the universities of Malta, Kingston, Ghent, Roma Tre, and Azad.

The introductory address, ‘Now Then: Agamben, Ranciere and Contemporaneity’, was delivered by Dr James Corby. Seeking to firmly locate the material at hand within a clearly recognisable contemporary, and speaking a few short days after the attacks that shook Paris, Corby’s introductory address referred explicitly to our age as one of terror and injustice. Envisioning the task of being contemporary as a *responsibility*, where most of us would consider it to be the default state of our existence—how can one not be living in the contemporary, if one is living now?—Corby spoke of our time as one of fantasy, estranged from the truly contemporaneous moment. The call of the contemporary draws us back towards itself, demanding nothing less of our imagining than to address the unjust contemporaneity as unimaginable, our witnessing of the ideal of consensual dissensus. This dissensus, our ability to be together whilst remaining different, is not actual, but neither should it be seen as ineffable or ethereal; rather, our responsibility is to consider it properly and thoroughly immanent in our time as the practical means by which it may be made to come about. Using Rancière and Agamben both diagnostically and remedially, he defined the contemporary as a ‘flow’ from the ‘this-here-now’ to the ‘next’ or to come, describing our time as time ‘out of joint’ and attempting to investigate potential ways in which our return to the contemporary has been theorised as a return to a gazing towards the future.

The first paper following the initial address was delivered by Prof. Kenneth Wain, entitled ‘Standing on the Shores of Politics with Rancière: Reflections’. Dealing with themes that chiefly belong to Rancière’s text *On the Shores of Politics*, Wain spoke with much of the same urgency as Corby. Our modern-day hatred of ideology, and the popular apprehension that political theory is stilted, dry, and obsolete, is setting aside Plato’s imperative for philosophy to contain politics within its borders; what goes by the name of politics today is for the most part nothing but a politics of administration, of the sort that takes its beginnings and ends for granted. According to Wain, this has resulted in a politics that does not concern itself with(in) the properly present, but only with what has been and what will be: the errors wrought in the name of past ideology and the changes that the future will somehow magically bring about. Time is somehow ‘finished’ – the present is powerless to change it, and should not even make the attempt. Such an approach to politics is one that takes liberal democracy for granted,

ignoring that it, too, is an ideology with its own currents, and ignoring that it is not the only narrative in play. Rancière's engagement with liberal democracy as the self-entitled 'end of history' is fundamentally framed by his desire to undo the exclusion of the radical left, and of its vocabulary of the class struggle, from political discourse. Fittingly, Wain ended his contribution by attempting to apply the theoretical apparatus developed by Rancière for this purpose to the narrative of the rise of Syriza in Greece, and that of Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of British Labour—is this truly a narrative of the return of what are ostensibly technical questions to the fold of politics?

In a post-Kantian context, subjectivity has become tied up with the notion of historical time. In 'Subjectivity and History in Agamben and Rancière', Jussi Palmusaari described Agamben's attempt to tackle this 'entrapment' in time, a concept which is also tackled by Rancière, who formulates it as a concern with anachronism that defines and restricts the subject as one that is conscious of its place in a history that is not of its own making, and that is headed to a destination which is beyond its control. Such a view of the subject, Agamben claims, came to a peak with Hegel; Palmusaari would have it that our tendency to follow Hegel in imagining a linear model of time makes us all avoiders of the present, defectors to the past of our history and the future of our trajectory as explanations for why things are as they are. Palmusaari characterises the work of Agamben and Rancière as attempts to free the subject from its confinement to a linear model of history, and to define what such an 'emancipatory' subject would be like. Whilst Agamben tries to think through an alternative logic of temporality in order to do so, Rancière goes further by thinking a *spatial* logic for the subject, one that is more about the co-existence of its different states than any linear succession in time. For Palmusaari, however, both attempts are fundamentally unsuccessful. Agamben remains trapped in the temporality that he sought to escape by means of his reconceptualised temporal subject, a subject that lives in a time which is wholly present; the actualisation of historical change is contradictory to the notion of a subject with no past or future. Rancière's subject is likewise trapped in a present that, because it has no precondition in the past or destination in the future, is unable to allow for a political plan or movement.

Departing from the concept of the "negative community" that is invoked by Blanchot, Bataille, and others, Dr Thierry Tremblay's paper—'Whatever Singularity, Negative Community, and Literature (Perhaps)'—delved into the expansion of this concept undertaken by Agamben through, among other things, his reading of Melville's well-known short story *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*. Bartleby, a scrivener, is paid to copy out documents and does so proficiently, but he eventually ceases to work, replying to requests with a simple 'I would prefer not to'. In Tremblay's reading, such a character is typical of the Agambenian conception of subjectivity as characterised by the absence of quality; the 'whatever singularity' or '*singularità qualunque*' that is the subject without imposition. Such a subject is devoid of 'quality' or attribute, as there is no ontological truth to be revealed by its presence, but it remains (perhaps quite precariously) a subject nonetheless, its inner minorities resisting totalisation, and relatable only to this *singularità qualunque*. Brought together as they are by virtue of belonging to the subject that they assert, one could see them not as properties of a distinct and defined existent, but as moments of a subject that is not yet here, but that is perpetually coming about. This ties in very strongly to Tremblay's elaboration of the (similarly Agambenian) concept of the open community as the *coming* community, made up of individuals whose belonging is their only tie to one another, and who are able to stay together whilst remaining at a(n) (ontological) distance; neither the subject and the community can thus be given an *essence*, but they can only be defined as the *ground* and the *emergent* of the diversity that participates in them, perpetually threatening to

unravel and to fall back into this diversity.

Very much in the vein of the previous elocution, Prof. Claude Mangion continued to discuss Agamben's explorations of community in his paper 'Agamben on Community, Communication, and the Self'. Mangion focuses his attention on Agamben's *The Coming Community*. As we have already seen, Agamben is very much after a definition of community that does not exclude; it is 'coming' because although it is never final, and although it has no essential definition, it is perpetually aiming towards its own completion and finality. Mangion follows Agamben in arguing that prior attempts to offer and/or actuate any such definition based on individual *identity*—what its members have in common, based on a common nation, class, ethnicity, or belief—have always failed to be completely open to *all* human beings, dependent as they are on some form of exclusion or violence to maintain their integrity in the face of the 'others'. Mangion argues that the contemporary community can only be defined as the community that is aware of its own voice, that speaks in unison; such a community would found itself on open and free communication, on individuals' awareness of their speech as a contribution to the formation of a coming, but perpetually deferred, synthesis.

Prof. Ivan Callus, in his paper 'Agamben, Prayer, and Worship' took a somewhat different tack in his analysis of the interrelation of difference and community in Agamben. Prefacing his paper with a short discussion of the livery companies of the City of London, each styled as the "Worshipful Company of...", he proceeded to discuss the unique relationship between the terms 'worship' and 'prayer' that exists within the English language. Worship, Callus argues, is an act of congregation, of coming together in order to celebrate. However, worship entails the possibility of prayer, away from the congregation; to worship is to bring one's personal, authentic relationship with God into communion with that of others. The theorisation of such a space, a space such as that left for prayer within the context of a congregative worshipfulness, is what may serve to settle the 'Different' without excluding it from what is common. Furthermore, such theorisation is characteristic of philosophy, which questions even in the face of a demand to be still and to stop thought. Callus investigated the support for and presence of such accounts of worship, prayer, and the space for the Different in Agamben and continental thought more generally.

Simon Marijsse began by placing his paper—'Giorgio Agamben and the Promise of a Post-Aristotelian Ethical Life'—within an approach to Agamben that emphasises a continuity within his work that many have neglected. Namely, the link between the philosopher's earlier works on potentiality and his later works on ethics, politics, and the politico-ethical. Marijsse sought to approach Agamben's ethical writings through his earlier conceptions of 'pure potentiality', specifically asking what kind of ethics Agamben has in mind when he speaks of this potentiality as the departure of ethics. He explored this Agambenian concept of potential in tension with the Aristotelian legacy of this same concept. In Aristotle, one finds a potentiality that exceeds the actual; for instance, what I *can* do will exceed what I actually do, for *can do* includes what I do not actually do. Marijsse outlined how Agamben expands the notion of *potential* to properly account for the 'impotential', the potential of not acting, thereby splitting potential off from its teleological account as a lack of actuality. Indeed, potential should be read instead as that insistent but indistinct force that persists within and through the actual; potential has this uncanny characteristic of being not-being. As Marijsse points out, Agamben makes use of this newly emphasised impotentiality in his discussion of the human being as a linguistic being, and the implications posed by this possession of language for human ethical life. To speak is to assume that one can speak, to assume that within the context of one's speech, there is a place for speech; language, like potential, is defined by its being but not-being,

emerging from a silence into which it perpetually threatens to return. It is also defined by its selection of specific words in lieu of others. Marijsse argued that the ethical space within human beings dwell is a space that is opened by the potential to speak, but that is likewise threatened by the impotentiality of speech, the negative ground from whence it emerges. Developing this concept further, in order to liberate ethos from prescriptive and normative ethics, Marijsse introduces a post-Aristotelian concept of the happy life, *eudaimonia*, as an ethical stance that goes beyond the potential to act and embraces also the potential to not-act. Much like the faculty of speech, the faculty of ethical life concerns both of these aspects, and involves an appreciation of the poetic dimension of human action and non-action.

'A Claim to Universality of Rights: Rancière's Examples of Emancipation', presented by Giovanni Campailla, was the first to return focus to Rancière after a selection of papers that mainly dealt with the various aspects of Agamben's writings. He began by positioning Rancière within the latter's reading of the tradition of the revolutionary historical account and of various historical examples of emancipation which deal with universal rights. Analysing three critiques of such examples put forth by Rancière, as well as his critique of Agamben, Campailla proceeded to elaborate Rancière's account of the political as the encounter between policy (represented by such institutions as universal rights) and emancipation. The history of such political acts of emancipation has been a history of acts of *subjectivation*, of making inroads into an existing institution; Olympe de Gouges's 1791 *Declaration of the Rights of Woman*, Jeanne Deroin's 1849 attempt to contest an election which she could not, as a woman, contest, and Rosa Park's 1955 defiance of racial segregation on public transport, were all instances of claiming for oneself the status of subject of an institution that does not extend to oneself. Such acts of subjectivation act to create a space for themselves within a universal that excludes them. Campailla interpreted Rancière's analysis and ensuing critique as an attempt to apprehend the insistence of those who have no part in institutions to be given a part; in his reading of Rancière, emancipation does not concern a theory of a political subject that is political *per se*, and that seeks to establish itself in terms of a program that it sets out for itself, but of the insistence on inclusion for those who are excluded. Furthermore, Campailla gave a brief account of Rancière's confrontation with Agamben on the issue of the latter's account of the institutional separation of *zoe* (bare life) from *bios* (political/ethical life). Rather than take such an approach, Rancière attempts to present a notion of rights that sites the subject in a constant insistence on the rights that it sees itself as having but does not have. In other words, the subject is engaged in a constant (political) act of self-establishment in the face of the (policing) social. To conclude, Campailla gave his own critique of the separation between the political and the social, and attempted to demonstrate how a continuity between the two would only strengthen Rancière's position.

Dr Kathrin Schödel's paper, "'Voice" or "Speech"? Discourses of Migration and Jacques Rancière's Reflections of Human Rights, Politics, and Language', returns to the contemporary narrative that was given centre stage in the respective interventions of Corby and Wain. Schödel introduces her contribution as aiming to investigate two main issues: the applicability of the conceptual apparatus developed by Rancière in his various reflections on language to contemporary discourses surrounding the issue of migration, and (thus) the wider issue of the relevance of linguistic reflections in the fields of political theory and politics of emancipation more generally. In her brief outline of Rancière's linguistic thought, Schödel introduces the distinction he makes between voice and speech when it comes to speaking in the public realm, elaborating the first, within the discourse of migration, as a mere expression of suffering that is not recognised, and the second as an expression of a similar nature but that achieves some measure of political attention or significance. Thus, taken within the context

of Rancière's view of politics as a subjectivising and unveiling force, this illustrates one of the means by which such a force is active, as an agency that makes speech out of voice. Indeed, Rancière uses the distinction between speech and voice in order to critique dominant humanitarian discourses that reduce speech—the political critique of the hard border and arbitrary detention—to voice, transforming statements with potential political efficacy into mere expressions of suffering. Schödel concludes by using influential political campaigns aimed at raising the profile of migrants in public perception as examples of the potential success of the approach that seeks to elevate voice to speech.

Dr Manuel Vella's 'Exceptional Objects' was the first during the proceedings to focus explicitly on the intersection that lies between Agambenian theory and aesthetics, using Agamben's distinction between bare life (*zoe*) and political life (*bios*) to explore Marcel Duchamp's readymade art-objects. Exploring how the placement of everyday objects into an artistic setting is able to re-politicise these 'remarkable objects of indifference', Vella charted the territory of such re-politicisation between the poles of condemnation and edification. In such an event, the object is reduced to 'bare life', and is seen-through to the sacred object that it profanely stands in for. Removed from the everyday relations of consumption that characterise it, the readymade exemplifies how the art-object is possible not because of anything to do with the object in isolation, or even in the main, but due to a coincidence of life (the spectator) and law (the object itself, in a context of artistic significance). Indeed, the readymade demonstrates how its placement in a museum leads to its sacrifice as a real object, functioning only as a representation of the sacred art-object much like, in Vella's view, social media serves as the museum of everyday life by reducing it from its vibrant and real existence to a profane, *zoe*-ic stand-in for something else.

As the final speaker to deliver a paper before the proceedings came to an end, Arsalan Reihanzadeh, in 'Jacques Rancière and the Problematic of Art and Non-Art', developed the aesthetic applications of the theoretical body of Jacques Rancière in relation to the latter's conceptualisation of aesthetics and politics. Elaborating Rancière's approach to the traditions of art for art's sake and engaged, political art, which respectively presuppose unified aesthetic or political realms, Reihanzadeh explored how the French theorist shifted the dividing line from between art and politics to within the respective disciplines themselves, in an effort which Reihanzadeh termed 'detotalisation'. In such an approach, art and politics themselves include part of the other within themselves, and inextricably so. Indeed, the approach that totalises the artwork into a framework of 'art for art's sake' leads to what Rancière calls the 'aesthetic regime of art': art is alienated from the political world from whence it has emerged, and it is viewed as standing alone. This and other such distributions of the sensible into various totalising categories are the mark of the repressive social realm and the tradition of aesthetic orthodoxy.

The conference came to an end following Dr Duncan Mercieca's concluding remarks.

Seminars such as this continue to provide a forum for healthy debate between local and international researchers that does much to bring vibrancy and camaraderie to a small but growing community of scholarship at the University of Malta. In the main, the papers presented throughout were interesting and engaging, even though it was evident that the speakers were not addressing their work towards the same imagined audience. As a result, whilst some papers gave a great deal of context to the arguments that were put forth, others expected a higher level of familiarity with the philosophers in question, and thus it was not always easy for everyone to engage with what was being said.

Perhaps a future effort might more effectively delineate papers intended for new readers of the bodies of work in consideration from those intended for more advanced audiences. Such an effort, perhaps with the proceedings spread out over two days instead of one, might lead to better audience engagement, greater ease for those of minimal familiarity with the subject of discussion, and a more fruitful space for debate. This spread would also benefit the organisers, allowing them to not fall victim to extremely tight schedules. This way, perhaps, the organisers would be better able to provide much-needed breaks for everyone present, which have the twofold advantage of both providing a mental break as well as allowing for more informal interaction between the audience and presenters. Nonetheless, all of the papers presented managed to channel the audacity and vibrancy of the two thinkers in a way that encourages a more personal and direct dialogue with their work.