

Bare Life and Political Fiction: Nietzsche, Agamben, and Biopolitics

In *On the Genealogy of Morals* II.17,¹ Nietzsche describes the creation of the State by “a pack of blond beasts of prey” that violently imposes order on a group of unsuspecting animal-men. This account of the state’s origin in an aggressive act that turned human beings into passive matter resonates with Giorgio Agamben’s account of bare life at the heart of modern politics.² Nietzsche’s account implies that a bare life is present at the inception of politics, but the direction of his genealogy following this event reveals a distance between origins and effects not present in Agamben’s genealogy. In this paper, I will focus on the methodology that leads to this distance and propose that this feature of Nietzsche’s genealogy might offer a critical revision for Agamben’s genealogy of modern politics.

I

In II.16 of the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche locates the origins of the bad conscience in an event he calls “the internalization of man.” The internalization of man is a reversal of the human being’s instincts, in which he discharges instincts that he once discharged outwardly against himself. In turning his instincts against himself, the animal-man creates an internal space, which, Nietzsche explains, will eventually house what is called the soul. With this re-direction of the instincts, then, the human being becomes a radically different creature.

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. (New York: Vintage, 1989). *GM* hereafter.

² Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

Nietzsche says that this reconstitution of the human being occurs when the walls of society begin to close around us. But this closing-in does not occur gradually. Rather, the walls of society are imposed abruptly in a forceful action that brings the State into existence. Nietzsche describes the state as:

some pack of blond beasts of prey, a conqueror and master race which, organized for war and with the ability to organize, unhesitatingly lays its terrible claws upon a populace perhaps tremendously superior in numbers but still formless and nomad (GM II.17).

Political arrangements therefore neither originate in nor resemble social contracts, but rather, are the way some populace embodies the order envisioned by an external commanding will. This means, first of all, that an external imposition and constraint leads the human animal to turn against itself, and secondly, that the event that turns him against himself is the initiation of politics.

This genealogy in which the imposition of the state redirects the animal's drives against itself carries with it the interesting implication that the animals on whom the state is imposed are not the beings who will live in it. Furthermore, these transformed beings are not transformed gradually or because of the state's healthful effects. Nor is it the case, à la Rousseau, that the moral character of the people is changed by willingly subordinating itself in an act that shifts its moral potential into actuality. Instead, these bundles of aggressive, outwardly discharged instincts are subjected to an ordering political will, despite the fact that (and partially because) they are thoroughly ill-suited to the order imposed. These animal-humans were by no means selected by the blond beasts of prey because they seemed like the kind of folks who would do well in their state. Rather, Nietzsche describes these human beings as "formless," "raw material of people" (GM II.16). They are simply there and, being unorganized into a single force of opposition, cannot put up resistance to the "disaster" of form imposed upon them.

The function of politics for these blond beasts of prey, then, is simply to give form to the unformed matter they find before them. Yet the human animals that receive their ordering force are not raw material, pure and simple. Nietzsche describes a definite shape to the animal-men's instinctive life, in that prior to their life in the walls of society, they enjoyed the outward expressions of "hostility, cruelty, joy in persecuting, in attacking, in change, in destruction" (GM II.16). This means that their formlessness was perhaps created and cultivated as much as it was discovered. The ability to cultivate formlessness in these creatures no doubt involves a manipulation of their mortality. Faced with the force of the blond beasts of prey and unable to resist it, they may either become material for the political experiment or die. They are thus twice stripped of their form of life: reduced to their ability to be killed, they allow themselves to be reduced to formless matter.

This analysis of Nietzsche's genealogy of the state reveals an element of what Giorgio Agamben calls bare life at the heart of politics. For Agamben, sovereign power produces bare life as the originary political element by founding itself as a state of exception. Following Schmitt, Agamben says that sovereignty establishes itself in a zone that is at once inside the law (in declaring the bounds of the juridical) and outside the law, in its ability to suspend the law. Sovereignty is thus "the originary structure in which law refers to life and includes it in itself by suspending it."³ Because of this paradox of sovereignty, life is subjected to law in an arbitrary and thus absolute way, making bare life the foundation for Western politics. Western politics is, according to Agamben, a biopolitics because of its foundation in this sovereign logic. The foundation in bare life

³ Agamben, 28.

thus follows Western politics throughout its history, making all citizens of Western states essentially bare life.

Two figures in the modern world expose this biopolitical structure of Western politics: the refugee and the victim concentration camp victim. These figures of extreme deprivation appear in their wretched condition to be unfortunate accidents caught in a state of exception, but Agamben's analysis of sovereignty reveals these states of exception as the rule. The extremity of the bare life in these situations is therefore not best understood as a result of an unanticipated political event, but rather merely as a complete manifestation of what it means to live in a world where politics is a biopolitics. These extreme figures emerge as the unfolding of the logic founding Western politics from its inception.

Agamben says that refugees reveal the predicament of modern states "because by breaking the continuity between man and citizen, nativity and nationality, they put the originary fiction of modern sovereignty in crisis."⁴ The fiction of the citizen is established by merging birth and nation, and the refugee emerges as "the first real appearance of rights outside the fiction of the citizen that always covers them over."⁵ These figures are thus able to make the modern political situation manifest by being the truth of politics that uncovers the fiction of the nation-state. This fiction is, for Agamben, inevitably the enabling force for the extreme figures of bare life developing beneath its cover. This means that citizens enjoying rights enjoy them merely as a fiction, while in reality they remain essentially the same bare life as those extreme figures. As Agamben writes, "If today there is no longer any clear figure of the sacred man, it is perhaps

⁴ Ibid., 131.

⁵ Ibid., 131.

because we are all virtually *homines sacri*.”⁶ Agamben is not simply suggesting that we have sympathy with others who suffer because it could be us. Such a claim would get its force by appealing to an essential, natural humanity of all of us that exposes us all to the possibility of suffering. Instead, he is making a specifically political claim about the nature of modern citizens. We are bare life not because we are by nature bodily and thus able to be killed, but rather because we are members of biopolitical societies, whose very function is to constantly rearticulate what lies inside and outside of the law. This means that the sovereign state of exception is an initiating act of politics that in the same stroke creates the political reality of bare life and the political fiction of the rights of man and citizen to cover it over.

II

It has been noted that Agamben’s conclusion concerning the state of politics today is a hyperbolic one.⁷ This hyperbole seems to have its origins in an unacknowledged conceptual distinction between reality and fiction operating in his conception of biopolitics. Comparing Agamben’s conclusions with the trajectory of Nietzsche’s animal-man turned political will allow us to consider a different way to think about political fictions that might better illuminate our political situation today. Like Agamben, Nietzsche exchanges a political fiction rooted in the discourse of rights for a narrative of politics as force. “That is after all how the ‘state’ began on earth: I think that sentimentalism which would have it begin with a contract has been disposed of” (GM II.17). And just as Agamben finds definite figures in our world--those of the camp and

⁶ Ibid., 115.

⁷ See, for instance, Ernesto Laclau. “Bare Life or Social Indeterminacy?” *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*, ed. Matthew Calarco and Steven DeCaroli. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 11-23). Laclau suggests that Agamben has given a distorted history “by unifying the whole process of modern political construction around the extreme and absurd paradigm of the concentration camp” (23).

the refugee--bearing the truth of the origin, Nietzsche also finds in the bad conscience a figure bearing the trace of our political origins. However, these figures bear witness to their origins in significantly different ways, and in these disparities we will also find opposing ways of thinking about origins and fictions.

As we have seen, the creators of the state reduce the animal-men to formless matter in order to make them pliable material for the form they want to impose. These human animals are that raw material for a moment, but immediately after the political event befalls them, they begin to become something else as their internalized instincts give birth to reflective souls. The significant development from this event in which the human animal is reduced to bare life is thus not an intensified manifestation of that reduction, but is instead a radically new form of human being, unanticipated in the event itself. The bad conscience is a path out of a moment of reduction, and is therefore not a moment in the logic of the political event, but simply an effect.

Of course, the distance between the initiation of the state and the multiple effects played out within the space of the state is a result of the nature of the event befalling the animal-man. Nietzsche describes the blond beats of prey as “the most involuntary, unconscious artists,” who, with an artist’s egoism, find themselves justified only in their work (GM II.17). We see, then, that the imposition of form that puts human beings in a state is unprecedented, arbitrary, and born of contingency. The genealogy stops before an event of will to power that breaks with all previous developments, and the will to power operating at this break creates as an artist, imposing upon the world a powerful new fiction.

The genesis of the bad conscience following this imposition is yet another expression of artist's cruelty, and the bad conscience itself is a cruel fiction. Nietzsche describes the creation of the bad conscience as "secret self-ravishment, artists' cruelty. . . , delight in imposing a form on oneself" (GM II.18). But Nietzsche himself engages in the fiction of interpreting the bad conscience, and the genealogy traced out from this fiction contains multiple branches. On the one hand, Nietzsche links several manifestations of the bad conscience in a genealogy of the deterioration of human instincts, identifying the Christian God as the most severe creation of the bad conscience. But Nietzsche's claim that the bad conscience is an illness as pregnancy is an illness (GM II.19) represents an alternative genealogy of the bad conscience. Rather than understanding this as a more positive element within a single story about the bad conscience, we should instead understand Nietzsche's genealogy of the phenomenon to be divided into more than one narrative. The narratives are plural because the outcome of the pregnancy is so uncertain, and the outcome will determine what kinds of genealogies can be told in the future. The bad conscience shows no swollen belly, and thus the only way to confirm its pregnancy will be through a birth. Whether that birth occurs and what kind of birth it is will inform future possibilities for understanding the bad conscience. In the event of a birth that takes human beings beyond the guilt and exhaustion of the bad conscience, the meaning of even the Christian God will find itself transformed in a new genealogy focused on self-overcoming rather than decadence. But if there is no birth, the fiction of pregnancy will become mere fiction.

Nietzsche gives the alternative of pregnancy in an effort to help create that pregnancy and initiate offspring that are better for life. In doing so, he creates a

genealogy that is aware of the contingencies surrounding the effects and instantiations of forms such as the bad conscience. The bad conscience might give way to mere decadence, but it might give way to something else, and that will depend upon two major factors. The first factor is simply what happens to the bad conscience's most prominent creations. Nietzsche notes that the Christian God has begun to weaken, and this has resulted in a weakening of the feeling of guilt (GM II.20). The second factor is whether new creation takes place, and creative spirits are always some combination of the culture in which they are living and something new--a will to power that wants to impose form in a way that breaks with the trajectories of existing fictions. This is why Nietzsche is calling upon new creators at the end of his reflections on the bad conscience in Book II. Both of these factors are questions of how fictions emerge, operate, and interact with other fictions.

Thus, we see that Nietzschean genealogy traces the multiplication of fictions and evaluates the usefulness of fictions for life. Each fiction must be evaluated individually because there is no single trajectory for a given fiction. In other words, the fiction's reality is in its effects and not in an internal logic destined to unfold from it. Nietzsche makes this clear in his analysis of punishment:

But purposes and utilities are only *signs* that a will to power has become master of something less powerful and imposed upon it the character of a function; and the entire history of a "thing," an organ, a custom, can in this way be a continuous sign-chain of ever new interpretations and adaptations whose causes do not even have to be related to one another but, on the contrary, in some cases succeed and alternate with one another in a purely chance fashion. The 'evolution' of a thing, a custom, an organ is thus by no means its *progressus* toward a goal, even less a logical *progressus* by the shortest route and with the smallest expenditure of force—but a succession of more or less profound, more or less mutually independent processes of subduing, plus the resistances they encounter, the attempts at transformation for the purpose of defense and reaction, and the results of successful counteractions. The form is fluid, but the "meaning" is even more so (GM II.12).

This passage indicates that all human creations are radically detached from their origins. Rather than enjoying an independent existence with an internal course of development, things and institutions are always liable to be reclaimed by a force like that from which they originated. In the case of the political event befalling the animal-man, we have seen that the origin of the state in a human being reduced to bare material has resulted in the effects of a new form of human being that is at once more decadent and more interesting and whose future is as yet undecided. Nietzsche's genealogy traces the effects of an initiating fiction in a way that tries to promote the production of fictions that will be better for life.

But how might Nietzschean genealogy be relevant for Agamben's genealogy of biopolitics? While Nietzsche is beginning with an instance of human beings reduced to bare life, the problem of bare life is hardly his concern. Is it not then unfair to offer Nietzsche's genealogy as a serious alternative to Agamben's? Indeed, it would be ridiculous to suggest that we find in Nietzsche a more plausible story concerning what happens to life laid bare in a politics of exception. We are not concerned here with which path out of bare life seems more accurate, but rather with genealogical method.

Agamben concludes that we in the modern world are all essentially like the camp victim or the refugee because the logic of sovereignty upon which modern politics is based creates bare life by its very logic. Where there is sovereignty, there is the production of this life that, despite any fictions applied to it, will always be bare, sacred life. As Paul Patton notes, his analysis "relies on a conceptual fundamentalism according to which the meaning of concepts is irrevocably determined by their origin."⁸ What his

⁸ Paul Patton. "Agamben and Foucault on Biopower and Biopolitics." *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007, pp. 203-218 (218). Patton notes that this fundamentalism

account misses, then, is the contingency at the origin that continues throughout the life of any given fiction in the multiplicity of its effects.

This is precisely what Nietzschean genealogy contributes to the discussion of biopolitics.⁹ While Agamben is rightly concerned with the way that the fiction of man and citizen breaks down in the figure of the refugee and the camp, to suppose that these figures unravel a fiction once and for all to expose the truth beneath it is to commit this error of origin. Rather than understanding these figures as conclusive destinations of a concept, Nietzschean genealogy allows us to understand them as events born of a multiplicity of factors, and thus also allows us to distance the figures from the fictions in their lineage, without denying the lineage.

If we were to approach the disasters of 20th and 21st century politics with a Nietzschean analysis, we would no doubt find dangerous fictions with long histories, but we would find them combined with a multiplicity of factors, including something as unprecedented as the action of Nietzsche's blond beasts of prey. Indeed, we would find a variety of dangerous fictions springing from the same logic, but operating in disparate ways. Ressentiment, for example, would have reached a certain kind of height in Nazi politics, but for Nietzsche, the peak achievement of ressentiment is the birth of Christian values. Thus, ressentiment achieves monumental expressions both in Nazi politics and in the values of a figure like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose devotion to Christianity led him to a heroic resistance to Hitler. Here we have layers of fiction, but clearly the political

requires "nothing less than a conceptual revolution," which might not be required by a more subtle analysis.

⁹ Clearly, Michel Foucault's very Nietzschean genealogy is also relevant here, particularly because Agamben gets the idea of biopower from Foucault, and Foucault's notion of biopower differs from Agamben's precisely in its lack of a historical logic. For Foucault, biopower is a contingent development that lacks a totalizing force. See Michel Foucault. "*Society Must Be Defended:*" *Lectures at the College de France 1975-1976*, ed., Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana. (New York: Picador, 2003), Jeffrey Nealon. *Foucault Beyond Foucault*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), and Patton.

fiction of race and nation born of resentment becomes radically dangerous in this context in a way that the fiction of Christianity, also born of resentment for Nietzsche, does not.¹⁰

Conclusion

We can see, then, that the dangerous fictions traced by Nietzschean genealogy are dangerous, yet they are merely dangerous--that is to say, their dangers are undefined and are not destined to culminate in a single event or form. This is because fictions are not the protective coverings for the operations of essential truths. Fictions cover further fictions, and fictions interact with other fictions and multiply their forms. The failure of a fiction in one setting does not necessarily entail its failure in all settings.¹¹ The question for a Nietzschean genealogy, then, is not what truth the fiction covers, but whether the fiction operates in a way that is good for life. The significance of the fiction will be not in its origin, but in its effects, and these effects are always multiple. This is significant for Agamben's analysis because such a change in method would require analyses to take place at the local level, and there could be nothing like an essential sameness of form where effects were radically different. A destructive fiction in one place would warn of danger in another place, but as we have seen, these dangers would be contingent rather than inevitable, and an assessment of the danger will require an account of the other

¹⁰ Robert Solomon has described Nietzsche's mixed feelings about resentment, and those mixed feelings seem to come from this sense of the separation between origins and effects. Solomon writes: "The felt impotence of resentment should not be confused with its expression, which is a kind of arrogance, or with the practical results of resentment, which sometimes tend to be powerful and effective indeed." Robert Solomon. "One Hundred Years of *Ressentiment*: Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*." *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality: Essays on Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morals*, ed. Richard Schacht. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 95-126. (105).

¹¹ As Laclau suggests, Agamben's distorted history is particularly problematic because of the way it "blocks any possible exploration of the emancipatory possibilities opened by our modern heritage" (Laclau, 23). We can recognize dangers within modern political concepts such as the nation-state without for that reason abandoning them.

fictions involved in the destructive event. Nietzschean genealogy, then, reveals a multiplication of fictions that hide no essential truth beneath them: fictions whose value for life must be evaluated individually and locally.