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Bare Life on Strike: Notes on the
Biopolitics of Race and Gender

One of the most important contributions of Giorgio Agamben's work to contemporary political philosophy is his concept of "bare life," which allows us not only to revise the Foucauldian theory of biopower but also to rethink the political contradictions of modernity. Despite its importance, Agamben's theory of bare life does not, however, sufficiently address two crucial questions: the problem of resistance and the negative differentiation of bare life with respect to racial and gender differences. It is these questions, I argue, that are at the center of any critical feminist engagement with his work. Thanks to Agamben's revision of biopolitics, it becomes clear that resistance cannot be limited to the contestation of the law or of power structures; in fact, one of the most pressing political questions raised by *Homo Sacer* is whether bare life itself can be mobilized by emancipatory movements.¹ The second issue we need to reconsider is the way bare life is implicated in the gendered, sexist, colonial, and racist configurations of the political and, because of this implication, how it suffers different forms of violence.² The central paradox bare life presents for political analysis is not only the erasure of political distinctions

but also the negative differentiation, or privation, such erasure produces with respect to differences that used to characterize a *form of life* that was destroyed. In order to develop the possibilities of resistance and the negative determinations of bare life, I will supplement Agamben's genealogies of bare life with two political cases—the first one represented by Orlando Patterson's discussions of premodern and modern forms of slavery,³ and the second one by the hunger strikes of militant British suffragettes at the beginning of the twentieth century.

To develop the paradoxes of bare life, let us begin with Agamben's definition of this concept. Reworking Aristotle's⁴ and Hannah Arendt's⁵ distinctions between biological existence (*zoē*) and the political life of speech and action (*bios*), between mere life and a good life, Agamben introduces in *Homo Sacer* his own interpretation and his own necessarily selective genealogy of bare life from antiquity to modernity. Stripped of political significance and exposed to murderous violence, bare life is both the counterpart to and the target of sovereign violence. To avoid misunderstanding, I would like to stress the point that is made sometimes only implicitly in Agamben's work and not always sufficiently stressed by his commentators: namely, the fact that bare life—wounded, expendable, and endangered—is not the same as biological *zoē*, but rather it is the remainder of the destroyed political *bios*. As Agamben puts it in his critique of Thomas Hobbes's state of nature, mere life “is not simply natural reproductive life, the *zoē* of the Greeks, nor *bios*” but rather “a zone of indistinction and continuous transition between man and beast” (*HS*, 109). More emphatically, in the conclusion of *Homo Sacer*, Agamben stresses that “every attempt to rethink the political space of the West must begin with the clear awareness that we no longer know anything of the classical distinction between *zoē* and *bios*” (*HS*, 187). To evoke Theodor Adorno, we could say that bare life, not only the referent but also the effect of sovereign violence, is damaged life, stripped of its political significance, of its specific form of life.

For Agamben, bare life constitutes the original but “concealed nucleus” of Western biopolitics insofar as its exclusion founds the political realm. Bare life is captured by the political in a double way: first, in the form of the exclusion from the *polis*—it is included in the political in the form of exclusion—and, second, in the form of the unlimited exposure to violation, which does not count as a crime. Thus, the most fundamental categories of Western politics are not the social contract or the friend and the enemy, but bare life and sovereign power (*HS*, 7–8). As Agamben's broad outline

of political genealogy suggests, the position and political function of bare life change historically. This genealogy begins with the most distant memory and the first figuration of bare life expressed in ancient Roman law by the obscure notion of *homo sacer*—that is, the notion of the banned man, who can be killed with impunity by all but is unworthy of either juridical punishment or religious sacrifice. Neither the condemned criminal nor the sacrificial scapegoat and thus outside both human and divine law, *homo sacer* is the target of sovereign violence exceeding the force of law and yet anticipated and authorized by that law. Banished from collectivity, he is the referent of the sovereign decision on the state of exception, which both confirms and suspends the normal operation of the law. In Agamben's genealogy, the major shift in the politicization of bare life occurs in modernity. With the mutation of sovereignty into biopower, bare life ceases to be the excluded outside of the political but in fact becomes its inner hidden norm: bare life "gradually begins to coincide with the political realm" (HS, 130). However, this inclusion and distribution of bare life *within* the political does not mean its integration with political existence; rather, it is a disjunctive inclusion of the inassimilable remnant, which still remains the target of sovereign violence. As Agamben argues, "Western politics has not succeeded in constructing the link between *zoē* and *bios*" (HS, 11).

In contrast to the ancient ban, or the inclusive *exclusion* from the political, the new form of disjunctive *inclusion* of bare life within the *polis* emerges with modern democracies. In democratic regimes, this hidden incorporation of bare life into both the political realm and the structure of citizenship manifests itself, according to Agamben, as the inscription of "birth" within human rights—an inscription that establishes dangerous links among citizenship, nation, and biological kinship. As the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen proclaims, men do not become equal by virtue of their political association but are "born and remain" equal. Democratic citizens are thus bearers of both bare life and human rights; at the same time, they are the targets of disciplinary power and free democratic subjects. In a political revision of Michel Foucault's formulation of modern subjectivity as an "empirico-transcendental" doublet,⁶ Agamben argues that the modern citizen is "a two-faced being, the bearer both of subjection to sovereign power and of individual liberties" (HS, 125). The democratic subject of rights is thus characterized by the aporia between political freedom and the subjection of mere life, without a clear distinction, mediation, or reconciliation between them.

Since bare life is included within Western democracies as their hidden inner ground (*HS*, 9) and as such cannot mark their borders, modern politics is about the search for the new racialized and gendered targets of exclusion, for the new living dead (*HS*, 130). In our own times, such targets multiply with astonishing speed and infiltrate bodies down to the cellular level: from refugees, illegal immigrants, inmates on death row subject to suicide watch, comatose patients on life support, to organ transplants and fetal stem cells. For Agamben, this inclusion of bare life within each citizen's body becomes catastrophically apparent with the reversal of democratic states into totalitarian regimes at the beginning of the twentieth century. As the disasters of fascism and Soviet totalitarianism demonstrate and as the continuous histories of genocide reveal, by suspending a human, political form of life, totalitarian regimes can reduce whole populations to disposable bare life that can be destroyed with impunity. According to Agamben, this is what constitutes the unprecedented horror of the Nazi concentration camps: the extreme destitution and degradation of human life to bare life subject to mass extermination. "Insofar as its inhabitants were stripped of every political status and wholly reduced to bare life, the camp was also the most absolute biopolitical space ever to have been realized, in which power confronts nothing but pure life, without any mediation" (*HS*, 171). If Agamben controversially claims that the concentration camp is not just the extreme aberration of modernity but its "fundamental biopolitical paradigm" (*HS*, 181), which shows the "thanatopolitical face" of power (*HS*, 142, 150), it is because concentration camps for the first time actualize the danger implicit in Western politics, namely, total genocide made possible by the reversal of the exception signified by *homo sacer* into a new thanatopolitical norm. Such a collapse of the distinction between exception and norm, together with the "absolute" and unmediated subjection of life to death, constitutes the "supreme" political principle of genocide (*HS*, 142).

The most compelling force of Agamben's work is his diagnosis of the ways the aporia of bare life and form of life in Western politics gives rise to new forms of domination and to the catastrophic turns of history, which culminates in the thanatopolitics of fascism. Nonetheless, Agamben's analysis of this aporia from antiquity to modernity misses two crucial issues: the question of resistance and the negative differentiation of bare life along racial, ethnic, and gender lines. First of all, as argued by several commentators and critics, most notably Ernesto Laclau, what is lacking in Agamben's

work is the theory of “emancipatory possibilities” of modernity.⁷ Yet, if we were to reconstruct such a theory in terms of Agamben’s philosophy, then the task of conceptualizing resistance could not be limited to the contestation of the law or power structures; in fact, one of the most important political questions is whether bare life itself can be mobilized by oppositional movements. By focusing on the way bare life functions as the referent of the sovereign decision, Agamben, unfortunately, answers this question in the negative: “The ‘body’ is always already a biopolitical body and bare life, and *nothing in it . . .* seems to allow us to find solid ground on which *to oppose the demands of sovereign power*” (*HS*, 187; emphasis added). The second problem Agamben ignores is the way bare life is implicated in the gendered, sexist, colonial, and racist configurations of biopolitics. If we argue that bare life emerges as the aftereffect of the destruction of the symbolic differences of gender, ethnicity, race, or class—differences that constitute political forms of life—this means that bare life is still negatively determined by the destruction of a *historically specific* way of life. Thus another paradox of bare life is a simultaneous erasure of the political distinctions and negative differentiation retrospectively produced by such erasure.

Let us consider these two issues—the differentiation of bare life and its role in emancipatory movements—in turn. Although Agamben’s heterogeneous examples of bare life—for instance, the father-son relation in antiquity, Nazi euthanasia programs for the mentally ill, the destruction of the Romany, ethnic rape camps in the former Yugoslavia, Karen Quinlan’s comatose body, and especially the most important case of the *Muselmann*—are always diversified along racial, gender, and ethnic and historical lines, his conceptual analysis does not follow the implications of such heterogeneity. Consider, for instance, his brief comment about the difference between ethnic rape camps and Nazi camps: “If the Nazis never thought of effecting the Final Solution by making Jewish women pregnant, it is because the principle of birth that assured the inscription of life in the order of the nation-state was still—if in a profoundly transformed sense—in operation. This principle has now entered into a process of decay” (*HS*, 176). Needless to say, the sexually and racially marked difference between these two forms of sovereign violence—genocide and rape—cannot be reduced to the principle of birth alone. Agamben refrains from any further explorations of rape as sexual political violence because such an analysis would complicate his very concept of bare life, always defined in relation to death and not to sexual violation.

To demonstrate the need to supplement Agamben's conceptualization of bare life, I would like to consider briefly two historical cases—the first represented by Aristotle's and Patterson's discussions of slavery, the second by the British militant suffragettes' writings on the hunger strike. In terms of Agamben's genealogy of bare life, slavery is an important case to consider because its racialized ancient and modern forms represent instances of bare life coextensive with both the Greek *polis* and modern democracy and yet irreducible to the category of either *homo sacer* or the camp. Let us begin the exploration of bare life and slavery with the text that is foundational to Agamben's political theory, Aristotle's *Politics*.⁸ As soon as Aristotle introduces the crucial distinctions between *zoē* and *bios*, *oikos* (home) and *polis*, he is confronted with the localization and legitimation of enslaved life, which does not seem to fit easily into these classifications. Thus, not only is it the case that, as Thomas Carl Wall argues, in the Greek *polis* bare life “was abandoned to the home, the *oikos*,”⁹ but a more fundamental problem is that Aristotle's defense of slavery creates a conceptual *aporia* that undermines his definition of slavery as an “animate instrument” belonging to the household.¹⁰ Implicated in the network of differences fundamental to the differentiation of the public space of the city—such as the differences between the body and the soul, the male and the female, the human and the animal, passion and reason—enslaved life, defined by Aristotle as property, does not have a “proper” place. In his apologia, Aristotle writes: “The soul rules the body with the authority of a master: reason rules the appetite with the authority of a statesman. . . . The same principle is true of the relation of man to other animals. . . . Again, the relation of male to female is naturally that of the superior to the inferior. . . . We may thus conclude that all men who differ from others as much as the body differs from the soul, or an animal from a man, . . . are by nature slaves.”¹¹ As these multiple analogies show, the political subjection and exclusion of femininity and slavery are “like” the subjection of the body to reason and animality to humanity. Perhaps bearing witness to the threat of enslavement in war, this analogy potentially makes the body of the Greek citizen “like” the enslaved or inhuman body. Conversely, the enslaved body blurs the distinction between the human and the animal, the household and the city. Because of its in-between position on the “threshold” (to deploy Agamben's frequently used term in *Homo Sacer*), slavery in Aristotle's text begins to haunt the Greek *polis* from within and from without, making the Greek citizen, prior

to its modern counterpart, already “*a two-faced being, the bearer*” of enslavement to reason and a political being among equals (*HS*, 125).

Although subjected to the violence of the master rather than to sovereign banishment, enslaved life in Aristotle’s *Politics*, like the obscure figure of *homo sacer* in Roman law, blurs the boundaries between the inside and outside of the political. It is Patterson’s influential study of slavery from antiquity to modernity that gives a full account of the liminality of the slave’s paradoxical position in the social order. In *Slavery and Social Death*, Patterson argues that the enigma of slavery exceeds both the juridical and the economic categories of law, production, exchange, or property. What all these categories fail to explicate is both “total” domination of the enslaved life and the liminality of the slaves’ position. Like the indistinction, or the threshold, between inside and outside marked by *homo sacer*, a slave’s liminality collapses both the political and the ontological differences between human and inhuman, monstrosity and normality, anomaly and norm, life and death, cosmos and chaos, being and “nonbeing” (*SSD*, 42, 44). In one of the most suggestive passages, which is devoted to the interpretation of the Anglo-Saxon representation of slavery and servitude in *Beowulf*, Patterson writes, “It was precisely because he was marginal, neither human nor inhuman, neither man nor beast, neither dead nor alive, the enemy within who was neither member nor true alien, that the slave could lead Beowulf and his men across the deadly margin that separated the social order above from the terror and chaos of the underground” (*SSD*, 48).

What is, then, the relation between these two expressions of subjugation and liminality, represented by *homo sacer*, on the one hand, and by enslaved life, on the other? The concept that links bare life and sovereignty with the master/slave dialectic is the substitutability of slavery for death: either for the death of the external enemy or the death of the internal “fallen” member of the community. According to Patterson, this substitution of enslavement for death is echoed in the “archetypal” meaning of slavery as social death (*SSD*, 26). Such a substitution does not give pardon but, on the contrary, creates the anomaly of the socially dead but biologically alive and economically exploited being. Because the expropriation of a slave’s life constitutes him or her as a nonperson or a socially dead person, it produces another instance of bare life, violently stripped of genealogy, cultural memory, social distinction, name, and native language, that is, of all the elements of Aristotle’s *bios*. Akin to secular excommunication, slavery in

all its different historical formations was institutionalized as the extreme destruction of the sociosymbolic formation of subjectivity. This extreme mode of deracination and exclusion from symbolization, the *polis*, and kinship reconstituted enslaved life as a nameless, invisible nonbeing, “as *pro nullo*” (*SSD*, 40).

The notion of slavery as a substitute for death complicates Agamben’s central thesis that sovereign decision/bare life constitutes the foundational political paradigm in the West. First, although the extreme delegitimation and the nullity of enslaved life make it another instantiation of bare life, the very fact that such life undergoes substitutions of one form of destruction for another undermines from the start the centrality of *just one* paradigm of politics. Second, slavery raises the question of whether the destruction of the historically specific form of life is a “condition” of exchangeability as such. As Patterson argues, the destruction of the political forms of life turned human beings into “the ideal human tool . . . perfectly flexible, unattached, and deracinated” (*SSD*, 337). Because of its fungibility, such a “disposable,” “ultimate human tool” (*SSD*, 7) is also a perfect commodity, and indeed, Patterson notes instances in which slavery functioned as money. We can argue, therefore, that the violent production of social death functions as a hidden territory not only of politics but also of commodity exchange. Consequently, the substitution of social death for biological death indicates a possible transformation of the sovereign ban into ownership and exchange. As Patterson’s discussion of the ancient Roman doctrine of *dominium* suggests, absolute power merges with the absolute ownership of *res* (*SSD*, 30–32).

What both slavery and *homo sacer* have in common is the production of bare life stripped of its historically specific form of life, and yet what distinguishes them is the contrast between the sovereign ban and the marginal inclusion of enslaved life. If the sovereign decision on the state of exception captures bare life in order to exclude it, the biopolitics of slavery is confronted with the profitable inclusion of socially dead beings. Hence, Patterson argues that after the stage of violent depersonalization the next stage of enslavement introduces “the slave into the community of his master, but it involves the paradox of introducing him as a nonbeing” (*SSD*, 38). Since, unlike *homo sacer*, the socially dead being has to be included within and made profitable, this second stage of the biopolitics of slavery poses the dilemma of “liminal incorporation” (*SSD*, 45). The paradox of liminal incorporation is the opposite of the sovereign exclusion, even though it cre-

ates similar effects of indistinction. In place of a sovereign decision on the state of exception, we have institutionalized containment within the law of a permanent anomaly, which confounds the differences between life and death, destruction and profit.

In a reversal of the slaveholder's absolute domination into parasitical dependence, Patterson rewrites the Hegelian master/slave dialectic—which explains such dependence in terms of the desire for recognition—as “human parasitism” (*SSD*, 334–39). This reversal has another crucial consequence that is downplayed in Agamben's theory of sovereignty: parasitical dependence provides a new ground on which to theorize the possibility of resistance and emancipation. The emphasis on resistance, which negates a prior destruction of forms of life and calls for the creation of new forms, culminates in Patterson's claim that the most important political discovery of enslaved peoples is that of freedom: “The first men and women to struggle for freedom, the first to think of themselves as free . . . were freedmen. And without slavery there would have been no freedmen” (*SSD*, 342). Although Patterson is deeply troubled by making enslavement even a contingent condition of freedom, his insistence on the ongoing struggle for liberation by dominated people points to another legacy of modernity sidestepped by Agamben: the legacy of revolutionary and emancipatory movements.

Agamben is right that the praxis of liberation calls for the ontology of potentiality. Yet he never considers potentiality from the perspective of bare life—that is, from the perspective of the impossible—focusing instead on the often obliterated difference between potentiality and sovereign power. What makes it especially difficult for him to theorize emancipation in any greater detail are the parallels he establishes all too quickly between potentiality, event, the excess of the constituting power, and sovereign exception. In his polemic, Agamben claims that there are in fact no grounds to distinguish between revolutionary praxis and sovereign exception: “The problem of the difference between constituting power and sovereign power is, certainly, essential. Yet the fact that constituting power neither derives from the constituted order nor limits itself to instituting it—being, rather free praxis—still says nothing as to constituting power's alterity with respect to sovereign power” (*HS*, 43). Perhaps Agamben does not see any criterion by which to distinguish transformative praxis from sovereign violence because he is primarily concerned with the topological excess of sovereign violence vis-à-vis the political order. As he admits, “The question ‘Where?’ is the

essential one once neither the constituting power nor the sovereign can be situated wholly inside or altogether outside the constituted order” (*HS*, 42). However, if we switch the terms of the analysis from “where” to “how”—that is, from Agamben’s topology to the most important Foucauldian lesson about techniques of power—then the difference between transformative praxis and sovereign violence becomes more apparent. Although both types of power exceed the constituted order, their mode of operation is different. The excess of sovereign power manifests itself as a suspension of the law, as the exclusion of bare life, as a state of exception that either confirms the norm or, in extreme cases, collapses the distinction between the exception and the norm. The mode of operation of the transformative power, however, is not the decision on the exception but the negation of existing exclusions from the political followed by the unpredictable and open-ended process of creating new forms of collective life—a process that in certain respects more closely resembles an aesthetic experiment rather than an instrumental action.

As I have suggested, another reason Agamben does not consider the practice of liberation in any greater depth is that his ontology of potentiality is developed to undermine sovereign will and not to transform bare life—the configuration of the impossible—into a site of contestation and political possibility. To theorize the notion of bare life as a contested terrain, I would like to turn now to another political case—to the British suffragettes’ use of the hunger strike at the beginning of the twentieth century. This case reveals once again three interrelated aspects of bare life: its negative differentiation with respect to the politics of race and gender; its subjection to different forms of violence; and its role in multiple emancipatory movements. Let me begin with the facts that tend to be all too easily taken for granted. At the turn of the twentieth century, racialized and gendered subjectivities still occupied liminal positions in Western democracies and as such were associated in the political imaginary with the inclusive exclusion of bare life. Yet these subjectivities were also the “bearers” and the creators of a very different legacy of modernity, that of multiple liberation movements. In this context, the suffragettes’ hunger strikes can be regarded as an invention of a mode of political contestation, which mobilizes bare life for emancipatory struggle. Consequently, this case allows us to supplement Agamben’s analysis in a crucial way: a hunger strike not only reveals the hidden aporia of democracy—the aporia between the politicization of bare life as the object of biopower and political freedom guaranteed by

human rights—but it also shows how this aporia can enable revolutionary transformation.

Although the history of hunger strikes is often obscure, they were practiced in ancient Rome, medieval Ireland, and India as a means of protest, frequently to exert moral pressure or to force a debtor to return his debt.¹² After the Easter Rising of 1916 in Ireland, the hunger strike was adopted in the Irish struggle for independence in 1917,¹³ and it was most famously employed by Mohandas Gandhi, who fasted at least fourteen times in British-occupied India.¹⁴ Nonetheless, it was militant British suffragettes who in 1909 revived and redefined the hunger strike as a modern political weapon of an organized movement by linking it for the first time with the discourse of human rights. The political practice of hunger striking in suffrage agitation was initiated by suffrage militant, painter, and artist Marion Wallace Dunlop, who was arrested and sentenced to one month of imprisonment for having written on the wall of Parliament an extract from the English Bill of Rights.¹⁵ Dunlop began a hunger strike to protest the denial of the status of the political offender, and after ninety-one hours of fasting, she was released because prison officials, ignorant about the effects of the hunger strike, were afraid she would become a martyr for suffragettes. By the time other suffragette prisoners were released before the expiration of their sentences, the hunger strike had been adopted by members of the suffrage movement as an effective political weapon both to terminate prison sentences and to create new possibilities of revolt within the disciplinary apparatus of the prison. In response to this unprecedented act of protest, after King Edward VII's personal intervention in August 1909, Home Secretary Herbert Gladstone ordered the striking suffragettes to be force-fed—a brutal punitive retaliation, which up to that point had been practiced primarily in insane asylums.¹⁶

How can we understand this configuration of the hunger strike as a weapon of resistance and the sadistic brutality of forcible feedings? Although this was one of the most dramatic episodes in the struggle for women's suffrage,¹⁷ hunger strikes and the political reprisals of forcible feeding are still undertheorized means of democratic protest. In his study of nonviolent political action, Sharp classifies the hunger strike as a means of political intervention demanding a transformation of power relations and a redress for injustice.¹⁸ For Kyra Landzelius, the hunger strike is a “corporeal challenge” to the “discursive practices of power.”¹⁹ As suggested by Lady Constance Lytton's letter to the *Times*, written on behalf of her-

self and eleven other hunger-striking suffragettes on October 10, 1909, the hunger strike is both a protest and a demand for new freedoms, an appeal articulated through the double, sharply disjoined medium of a publicly circulating letter and the starving body secluded in prison and barred from public appearance. In her letter, Lytton claims that subjugated groups resort to violence against their bodies when rational law-based arguments fail—that is, when instituted political speech is deprived of its performative power: “We want to make it known that we shall carry on our protest in our prison cells. We shall put before the Government by means of the hunger-strike four alternatives: to release us in a few days; to inflict violence on our bodies; to add death to the champions of our cause by leaving us to starve; or, and this is the best and only wise alternative, to give women the vote. We appeal to the Government to yield, not to the violence of our protest, but to the reasonableness of our demand.”²⁰ Lytton’s emphasis on the “violence” of the hunger strike seems paradoxical: such violence, inflicted on the self as a substitute target for political power, acts by refusing to act; it collapses clear distinctions between passivity and activity, actuality and potentiality, victim and enemy. On the one hand, the hunger strike repeats, mimics, and exposes in public the hidden irrational violence of the sovereign state against women’s bodies. On the other hand, by usurping the state’s power over bare life, the “nonact” of self-starvation negates women’s exclusion and calls for the transformation of the law. By usurping sovereign power over bare life, hunger-striking women occupy both of these positions—the sovereign and *homo sacer*—at the same time, and this is what distinguishes their status from comatose patients, the inmates of concentration camps, that is, from all those beings that, in extreme destitution, are reduced to bare life alone. What is thus performed in the hunger strike is the collapse of the distinctions between sovereignty and bare life, will and passivity, potentiality and actuality, the struggle for freedom and the risk of self-annihilation. Maud Ellmann rightly calls such a performance a “gamble with mortality.”²¹ And as the word *gamble* implies, at stake here is a transformation of the central opposition between the sovereign decision and bare life into radical contingency in political life.

Although not analyzed by Agamben, the emphasis on the collective political struggle over bare life is an important element in Lytton’s January 31, 1910, speech, delivered at the Queen’s Hall, only a week after her release from prison. This address defines the hunger strike as a weapon against the political enemy:

People say, what does this hunger-strike mean? They will not realize that we are like an army, that we are deputed to fight for a cause, . . . and in any struggle or any fight, weapons must be used. The weapons for which we ask are simple, a fair hearing, but that is refused us. . . . Then we must have other weapons. What do other people choose when they are driven to the last extremity? . . . They have recourse to violence. . . . These women have chosen the weapon of self-hurt to make their protest.²²

In response to antisuffrage propaganda, Lytton argues that hunger strikes are not unreasonable attacks of hysteria but a calculated choice of the last resort by the “army” of the dispossessed. As acts of “warfare” by the paradoxical means of self-injury and refusal, hunger strikes allowed suffragettes to continue their revolutionary struggle without directly engaging in war. Furthermore, by extending the possibility of militancy from the public sphere to prison itself, the hunger strike changes imprisonment into a new means of “fighting for a cause,” transforms punishment into rebellion, turns subjection into the ambiguous political agency of self-hurt.

The most suggestive way Lytton’s speech evokes the notion of bare life as a new weapon of oppositional movements is through the figurative juxtaposition of feminine, animal, and divine bodies. Her speech begins with an analogy between a degraded female body, deprived of rights, and a deformed animal body, abused on its way to the slaughterhouse, and she ends by contrasting the tortured body of imprisoned suffragettes to Christ’s sacrificed body. Unlike the sacrificial lamb with which Christ is frequently compared, the deformed sheep, a powerless “creature” mistreated by “the crowd,” is the very opposite of either a human or a divine sacrifice.²³ Designating the passage between the animal and the human, the “old and misshapen”²⁴ sheep is the figure of damaged life, deprived of political or religious significance—a life whose biological survival is at risk. When in a sudden insight Lytton discovered this hidden analogy between femininity and the deformed animal life, she decided to join the militant suffrage movement—a decision that transformed her life and gave it political and collective meaning. We can plumb the depth of this transformation by contrasting the frightened isolated animal, powerless to protest its abuse, and the “army” of women forming a revolutionary movement in order to fight for access to the political.

The suffragettes’ usurpation of the sovereign decision over mere life in the struggle for political rights negates their exclusion and suspends the

current law, at least on the symbolic level. Yet this act does not constitute a state of exception, which, through the act of exclusion, establishes the normal frame of reference or, as in the case of fascism, turns exception into a new norm. Rather, suffrage militancy represents a revolutionary call for a law yet to come. As Landzelius argues, the hunger strike stages a political trial of the existing law and political authority. In this “meta-judicial trial,” the private act of starvation reverses the guilty verdict imposed on the militant suffragettes into a public condemnation of the government.²⁵ Thus, the hunger strike perverts juridical punishment into a means of interrogating the law itself and contesting the government’s authority. By reversing the roles of the defendants and the accusers, the hunger strike performs a double chiasmatic transfer between bare life and the law, between the present and the future. On the one hand, it transforms the private act of starvation into a collective contestation of the law; on the other hand, it summons the yet nonexistent authority of the new law by risking the physical life of the body. In a catachrestic movement, bare life anticipates what is unpredictable and beyond anticipation: a new law and a form of life of female bodies. In so doing, it transforms impossibility into potentiality.

As a counter to the sovereign decision, hunger-striking suffragettes seized hold of their bare life, wrested it away from sovereign decision, and transformed it into a site of the constitution of a new form of life. The suffragettes’ public redefinition of the female body so that it no longer bore the repressed signification of bare life and acquired instead a political form not only challenged the sovereign decision over bare life, but in so doing called for a new mediation of life and form outside the parameters of that decision. At stake here is a new type of link between bare life and political form that would be generated from below, as it were, rather than imposed by a sovereign decision. As Wall argues, it is the absence of the relation between bare life and its politically qualified ways of life that calls for sovereign decision: “Bare life is nonrelational and thus invites decision. It is the very space of decision . . . and, as such, is perpetually *au hasard*.”²⁶ By contesting a sovereign decision on bare life, the new link between bare life and forms of living cannot be confused with either a dialectical reconciliation or a celebration of prepolitical life. At the end of *Homo Sacer*, Agamben only hints at what this new form of mediation supplanting sovereign decision might look like: “This biopolitical body that is bare life must itself instead be transformed into the site for the constitution and installation of a form of life that is wholly exhausted in bare life and a *bios* that is only its own

zoē. . . . We give the name form-of-life to this being that is only its own bare existence and to that life, that, being its own form, remains inseparable from it" (*HS*, 188). The key point here is inseparability and yet nonidentity between form and life, which make both their severing and their unification equally impossible.²⁷

As this discussion of the biopolitics of race and gender shows, such reconsideration of bare life in the context of racial and sexual politics calls for some fundamental revisions of that concept. As we have seen, bare life cannot be regarded in complete isolation from all cultural and political characteristics. If bare life emerges as the remnant of a destroyed form of life, then, according to Agamben's own emphasis on its *inclusive exclusion* in the political, its formulation has to refer, in a negative way, to the racial, sexual, ethnic, and class differences that used to characterize its *form* of life. In other words, bare life has to be defined as the remnant of a specific form of life that it is not yet or is no longer. Furthermore, bare life cannot always be considered as the exclusive referent of the sovereign decision, but it has to be reconceptualized as a more complex, contested terrain in which new forms of domination, dependence, and emancipatory struggles can emerge. By analyzing bare life as the target of sovereign violence, Agamben allows us to diagnose new forms of domination and political dangers in modernity. Although any praxis of freedom is dependent on such a diagnosis, at the same time such praxis exceeds the constituted forms of power and requires reflection on the often occluded role of bare life in another paradigm of democratic modernity—that of the struggle for freedom. In doing so, it transforms impossibility into contingency in political life.

Notes

- 1 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).
- 2 Catherine Mills is one of the very few Agamben interpreters to raise the question of sexuality and sexual embodiment but in the context of Agamben's theory of testimony rather than his theory of bare life. Mills, "Linguistic Survival and Ethicality," in *Politics, Metaphysics, and Death: Essays on Giorgio Agamben's "Homo Sacer"*, ed. Andrew Norris (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 215–8. Even though Sidi Mohammed Barkat does not directly engage Agamben, his analysis of "le corps d'exception" of the colonized can be read as an illuminating "postcolonial" critique of Agamben's philosophy. Barkat, *Le corps d'exception: Les artifices du pouvoir colonial et la destruction de la vie* (Paris: Editions Amsterdam, 2005). Diane Enns's careful analysis of the ambiguities of revolt of the occupied bodies reduced to bare life is another crucial extension of Agamben's work

- in the colonial context. Enns, "Bare Life and the Occupied Body," *Theory and Event* 7.3 (2004), http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/toc/archive.html#7.3 (accessed November 23, 2006).
- 3 Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number as *SSD*.
 - 4 In *Politics*, Aristotle makes a famous distinction between mere life and a good life to define the function of *polis*: "While it comes into existence for the sake of mere life, it exists for the sake of a good life." Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Ernest Barker, ed. R. F. Stalley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), book 1, ch. 2, p. 10.
 - 5 Hannah Arendt follows the Aristotelian distinction between *zōē* and *bios* in a number of her texts, most notably in *The Human Condition*, where she identifies the political life not only with speech and action but most importantly with the condition of human plurality. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 7.
 - 6 See Michel Foucault's discussion of "the empirical and the transcendental" in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 318–21.
 - 7 According to Ernesto Laclau, the absence of the theory of resistance is intertwined with the lack of the theory of hegemony. Laclau argues that Agamben fails to distinguish between totalitarian and democratic sovereignty, emerging from the hegemony of democratic movements. Laclau, "Bare Life or Social Indeterminacy?" in *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*, ed. Matthew Calarco and Steven DeCaroli (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 11–22. For a different critique of the lack of attention to resistance in the context of the body and the contingency of political struggles, see also Andreas Kalyvas, "The Sovereign Weaver," in *Politics, Metaphysics, and Death*, 112–3.
 - 8 I am grateful to my colleague Kalliopi Nikolopoulou for discussing with me Aristotle's notion of slavery. For her excellent discussion of the relation between Agamben and Plato, see "Between Art and *Polis*: Between Agamben and Plato" (unpublished, Buffalo, NY, 2006).
 - 9 Thomas Carl Wall, "Au Hasard," in *Politics, Metaphysics, and Death*, 39.
 - 10 Aristotle, *Politics*, book 1, ch. 4, p. 13.
 - 11 Aristotle, *Politics*, book 1, ch. 5, p. 16.
 - 12 For a brief discussion of the history of the hunger strike, see Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973), 363–67.
 - 13 Maud Ellmann argues that the Irish nationalists might have been inspired by suffrage, but in order to conceal this, they appealed to the medieval practice of fasting against debtors to compel them to repay their debts. Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 11–12.
 - 14 Sharp, *Politics of Nonviolent Action*, 637.
 - 15 Midge Mackenzie, *Shoulder to Shoulder: A Documentary* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), 110.
 - 16 Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign, 1907–1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 104.
 - 17 According to Jane Marcus, it is "perhaps the primary image in the public imagination regarding the 'meaning' of the suffrage movement." Marcus, "Introduction: Re-reading the Pankhursts and Women's Suffrage," in *Suffrage and the Pankhursts*, ed. Marcus (London: Routledge, 1987), 2.

- 18 Sharp, *Politics of Nonviolent Action*, 359.
- 19 Kyra Marie Landzelius, "Hunger Strikes: The Dramaturgy of Starvation Politics," in *Einstein Meets Magritte: Science, Nature, Human Action, and Society*, vol. 3, *Man and Nature: A World in Transition*, ed. Diederik Aerts (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999), 83.
- 20 Mackenzie, *Shoulder to Shoulder*, 135.
- 21 Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists*, 21.
- 22 Cheryl R. Jorgensen-Earp, *Speeches and Trials of the Militant Suffragettes* (London: Associated University Presses, 1999), 108–9.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 108.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 107.
- 25 Kyra Marie Landzelius, "Hunger Strikes," in *Encyclopedia of Food and Culture*, vol. 2, ed. Solomon H. Katz (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2003), 220.
- 26 Wall, "Au Hasard," 39.
- 27 Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999). In his discussion of the survivors' testimonies in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben defines such a link as the aporetic task of witnessing. For my discussion of the ethical structure of the survivors' testimony in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, see "Evil and Testimony: Ethics 'after' Postmodernism," *Hypatia* 18 (2003): 201–3.

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