

# POTENTIALITY, FREEDOM AND BARE LIFE: THE NOTION OF FREEDOM IN THE WORK OF GIORGIO AGAMBEN

[Potansiyel, Özgürlük ve Çıplak Yaşam: Giorgio Agamben'in Eserlerinde Özgürlük Kavramı]

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will argue the layout of the notion of freedom in Giorgio Agamben's political thought by relying on his account of potentiality which is put in his two essays *On Potentiality* and *Homo Sacer*. It is claimed that while Agamben, in his earlier essay *On Potentiality*, associates freedom to his peculiar notion of im-potentiality, he later revises his thought and considers im-potentiality with sovereign biopower in which there is no possible way out. Against this reading, by looking into Agamben's conceptualizing of freedom and im-potentiality in his both essays, I will be discussing that im-potentiality continues to play an important role in Agamben's political thought which is, always, considered a way out from biopower.

**Keywords:** Potentiality, actuality, freedom, sovereignty, biopolitics.

## ÖZET

Bu makalede, Giorgio Agamben'in politik düşüncesinde özgürlük teriminin yerleşimi, yazarın *On Potentiality* and *Homo Sacer* başlıklı eserlerindeki potansiyel kavramsallaştırmasına dayanılarak ele alınacaktır. Önceki dönem eserlerinden olan *On Potentiality*'de Agamben'in özgürlük kavramını potensiyelsizlik ile ilişkilendirdiği fakat sonraki eseri olan *Homo Sacer*'de düşünürün bu

yaklaşımını gözden geçirerek potansiyelsizlik ile içinden çıkış imkanının olmadığı biyopolitik egemenliği birlikte ele aldığı savunulmuştur. Bu yoruma karşı, Agamben'in her iki eserindeki özgürlük ve potansiyelsizlik kavramsallaştırması odağa alınarak, potansiyelsizliğin, biyoiktidardan çıkış için imkân sunmaya devam ettiği işaret edilmeye çalışılmıştır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Potansiyel, aktualite, özgürlük, egemenlik, biyopolitika.

## Introduction

In this paper, I will discuss the notion of freedom in Giorgio Agamben's political thought, mainly relying on his account of potentiality. For Agamben, as it is put in one of his earlier essays *On Potentiality*, to be free does not mean to do something or to have a will to do that thing. It also does not mean to have power to refuse to do something else. Rather, to be free is to relate to one's own capacity of not doing something. As Agamben states in *On Potentiality*, to be free is to be "capable of one's own im-potentiality, to be in relation to one's own privation" (P, s. 182-183). Here freedom should not be deemed as it is commonly defined in relation to a dualism of positivity and negativity of the will. What Agamben has his mind in *On Potentiality* is reflecting on freedom beyond this duality. For him freedom is not associated with an ability to do or make something which could have not been done or made simply since one had not that ability. Nor does it refer one's ability of refusing or avoiding doing or making something because of one has been forced into making or doing. Freedom in either case is reduced to the amount of options that one has (Ugilt, 2014, s. 35) but what Agamben carries out is to ponder freedom beyond the options that are available, to relate freedom to that potentiality from which various options emerge. In this case he is departing from the thinkers such as Martha Nussbaum or Amartya Sen who consider freedom in the context that is opened up by a dialog between capabilities and functions (actualisations) since these authors put emphasis on functionings which are considered constitutive of a person's being (Robeyns, 2016).

From this point of view, it is claimed that the focus on im-potentiality sheds a new light on the way in which democracies form their subjects. While totalitarian systems restrict subject's "positive potentiality" i.e, freedom of speech and right of assembly etc, contemporary democracies operate, he argues, on this "positive potentiality" and try to encourage subjects to act. In doing so, democracies separate subjects from their potentiality to not to do something (Prozorov, 2014, s. 37), and in this sense limit their freedom.

However, while Agamben in his essay *On Potentiality* uses potentiality, or to be more precise im-potentiality, as a paradigm for freedom, in his later book *Homo Sacer* which is a part of a larger project, he instead connects potentiality to the sovereign ban. So, what at first glance has been announced as human being's freedom is now declared as a trap of which there is no way out. Human beings are reduced to their bare lives that can be killable with impunity by the sovereign power. Thus, if we follow David Bleeden (2010) one might argue that there is a tension with these

two conceptualizing of potentiality; one gives way to freedom the other is leading to a sovereign trap which captures life. In this last case, Agamben suggests that democracy, from the beginning, tries to present itself as the liberator and protector of biological life (*zoe*) which forms the foundation of political life (*bios*), in other words tries to find *zoe*'s *bios*. Thus, modern democracy searches for people's freedom and happiness in a place in which people essentially display their dependency and subjection. Agamben, in his examination of modernity's rendering of biological life, calls this place "bare life".

Accordingly, for Agamben, modernity's account of freedom has two aspects. While it is understood as having been won by individuals fighting against political power, it simultaneously involves the appropriation of individual's bare life. While aiming to be free from sovereign power, they themselves partake in the foundation of another power- that which rules over biological life. Crucially, Agamben claims that this foundation is shared by both democracies and totalitarianism and from this ground the swift transformation of democracies to totalitarian states and back becomes conceivable. He writes,

"In both cases, these transformations were produced in a context in which for quite some time politics had already turned into biopolitics, and in which the only real question to be decided was which form of organization would be best suited to the task of assuring the care, control, and use of bare life" (HS, s. 121).

Considering these two accounts of freedom based on two different *prima facie* readings of potentiality, I will first try to present the relation between im-potentiality and freedom as is put in Agamben's text *On Potentiality*, second I will assess the connection between sovereign power and potentiality as he asserts in *Homo Sacer*. Agamben's arguments are based on Aristotle's conceptualizing of potentiality but what interests me in this paper is how we can understand the idea of freedom and its connection with potentiality in Agamben's works so, I will only mention Aristotle within Agamben's references. I am not going to try to show if his account is accurate or not<sup>1</sup>.

At the end of this paper I hope we can come a conclusion whether there is a tension between Agamben's definition of freedom as the capability of one's own im-potentiality and freedom as

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<sup>1</sup>David Bleeden's (2010) article in this regard gives a detailed account of different translations of passages that Agamben heavily relies on.

understood within the frame of bare life. This will, also, help us to grasp what freedom means for Agamben. But before beginning this inquiry, I will briefly touch on Agamben's methodology which, I believe, will help us to understand, firstly, why potentiality is important for the author and secondly his arguments related to sovereignty and bare life.

### Remarks on Methodology

The relation between potentiality and actuality which is discussed by Aristotle is important because it is also a paradigm for how sovereign power operates. For Agamben: "a principle of potentiality is inherent in every definition of sovereignty" (HS, s. 44). Similarly, he articulates in his *Remnants of Auschwitz* that: "The modal categories — possibility, impossibility, contingency, necessity — are not innocuous logical or epistemological categories that concern the structure of propositions or the relation of something to our faculty of knowledge. They are ontological operators, that is, the devastating weapons used in the biopolitical struggle for Being, in which a decision is made each time on the human and the inhuman, on 'making live' or 'letting die'" (RA, s. 146-147). Therefore, it is important for Agamben to reveal how the metaphysical and sovereign machine work, and also how they correlate with each other. The parallelism that is founded between sovereign and the metaphysical machine can be understood if we look at Agamben's methodological approach and in this context, his understanding of paradigm which is crucial for his methodology that he names as "archaeological philosophy". Paradigm, for him, makes "intelligible a broader historical-problematic context" (SAT, s. 9).

What is important for Agamben is the intelligibility of present, so he takes out paradigms from their historical positions and uses them to the evaluations of now (Durantaye 2009, s. 245). So, for Agamben it is not the case how Aristotle defines sovereignty – if such a definition exists - but how the sovereign power works now. "Paradigms, then, are less about understanding the circumstances of the past than they are about bringing into the open the intelligibility of the present" (DeCaroli, 2011, s. 147). As Agamben puts:

"1. A paradigm is a form of knowledge that is neither inductive nor deductive but analogical. It moves from singularity to singularity. 2. By neutralising the dichotomy between the general rule

and the particular, it replaces a dichotomous logic with a bipolar analogical model. 3. The paradigmatic case becomes such by suspending and, at the same time, exposing its belonging to the group, so that it is never possible to separate its exemplarity from its singularity. 4. The paradigmatic group is never presupposed by the paradigms; rather, it is immanent in them. 5. In the paradigm, there is no origin or *archê*; every phenomenon is the origin, every image is archaic. 6. The historicity of the paradigm lies neither in diachronic nor in synchrony but in a crossing of the two” (SAT, s. 31).

From this angle, one can say that, the paradigmatic relation between sovereignty and potentiality is an analogical relation. The potentiality paradigm is not a historical substance that came to its completion in modernity. But this paradigm helps us to understand how sovereign power functions. Furthermore, it is through the prism of the potentiality paradigm we look at our world, with its categories we define, order our relation with ourselves and world. In a nutshell with a paradigm which makes our current political constellation intelligible Agamben tries to show the indifference between certain dualities which then brings the social practice into the inquiry in order to suspend the operation of certain *dispositives* which operate between these dualities. For instance, as we shall briefly see later, the conceptualizing of *homo sacer* as paradigm renders intelligible the indifference between the politics and life which then makes possible to escape from this political frame-up. Nevertheless, it should be noted that this methodological approach is not evident in *On Potentiality*. Agamben has developed this approach later when he started his *Homo Sacer* project. Thus, David Bleeden claims that the tension between the two accounts of freedom in relation to potentiality is associated to Agamben’s methodological turn. I will discuss Bleeden’s interpretation in my conclusion after I put forth Agamben’s own account of freedom and potentiality. Therefore, I now pursue my inquiry by focusing on Agamben’s lengthy treatise *On Potentiality*.

### **Potentiality, Im-potentiality and Freedom**

For Agamben, the notion of potentiality has gained a central position in Western metaphysics after Aristotle. According to him, Aristotle distinguished potentiality from actuality and with this opposition he opened the path which science and philosophy afterwards followed. Agamben claims that the best way to investigate potentiality is to understand the meaning of “I can”. “Can” which means *potere* in Italian is also used as a nominative form for “power”. If we follow Agamben: “For

everyone a moment comes in which she or he must utter this ‘I can,’ which does not refer to any certainty or specific capacity but is, nevertheless, absolutely demanding. Beyond all faculties, this ‘I can’ does not mean anything-yet it marks what is, for each of us, perhaps the hardest and bitterest experience possible: the experience of potentiality” (P, s. 178). Despite that the phrase “I can” is empty or put differently as it is well known that “can” is a modal verb and if it is not followed by another verb like “walk, study etc” it is empty, “I can” can only have a meaning when we say for example “I can walk”, thus, for Agamben with this phrase – I can – we come a limit. Therefore, the crucial question is what kind of faculty do we have when we say “I can”? or put it in a simpler way what is the meaning of having a faculty? (P, s. 178).

In order to grasp potentiality, Agamben starts his investigation with faculty of sensation and turns to Aristotle. Aristotle wonders why we cannot sense our sensation, why there is no sense for sensations. When an object isn’t present why do not senses give sensations? The answer for these questions is that sensation has to be considered as potential, sensation is a faculty or potential and it is actualized when an external object is given. Once again, the problem is potentiality. When we say that human being is that being who has the faculty of vision, faculty of speech we are dealing with potentiality. And Agamben claims that the logic that draws on sensation in Aristotle’s work is the first time the problem of faculty and potentiality is introduced to Western tradition (P, s. 179).

Agamben asserts that potentiality is not simply a non-being. Potentiality is neither a privation, an absence of ability nor its negation rather it is the existence of non-being. Then “‘to have a faculty’ means to have a privation. And potentiality is nor a logical hypostasis but the mode of existence of this privation” (P, 179; Bleeden 2010, s. 70). According to Agamben, what this proves that potentiality exists. Nonetheless here another question arises: how can a privation exist or if put in Aristotle’s words how without an external object can we say sensation is possible, while we can only perceive sensation only when, for instance, we touch, or we see an object? (P, s. 179).

In order to answer this question Aristotle pursues his enquiry of potentiality by dividing it into generic and existing potentiality, and again Agamben follows Aristotle. The first one, generic potentiality can be elaborated in relation to a child’s potentiality. A child can have this or another profession by education, however achieving a profession by a child entails an alteration. A child needs education for instance to learn how to write beyond this she also has to use her finger in a particular way to hold a pen therefore she needs to modify, so to say, her body. However, in the second potentiality, namely in existing potentiality, there is no alteration takes place. For example,

an architect has a knowledge, so she does not need to ‘suffer from an alteration’, she does not have to modify her body such as the case of the child. She simply has that knowledge, she has potentiality of architect. Aristotle and Agamben concentrate on this potentiality. Moreover, what is important in existing potentiality is that while an architect is building something, she is actualizing her potential but while not building she does not lose her potential, she has a potential not to do. “To be potential means: To be one’s own lack, to be in relation to one’s own incapacity.” (P, s. 182). Therefore, having a potential does not simple mean to have a capability to do something but it is above all means that potentiality not to pass into actuality (P, s. 180) – Agamben assigns this as im-potentiality. In this sense, having a potentiality means that one has a relation with her im-potentiality. A poet, for example, is a person when she is not writing a poem, she does not cease to be a poet, when she is not writing she continues to be a poet. Hence, something can have a potentiality only it contains its own im-potentiality. The relation between potentiality and im-potentiality, Agamben believes, is the originary structure of potentiality (Bleeden 2010, s. 71). From this perspective Agamben quotes Aristotle:

“Im-potentiality is a privation contrary to potentiality. Thus, all potentiality is im-potentiality of the same and with respect to the same” (Aristotle in P, s. 182).

Agamben has first pointed to that potentiality as an existence of non-being and now he highlights that potentiality has to be understood from the perspective of im-potentiality. To elucidate this last argument, we have to again recourse to another enigmatic passage from Aristotle:

“What is potential is capable of not being in actuality. What is potential can both be and not be, for the same is potential both to be and not to be” (Aristotle in P, s. 183).

What we can conceive from this passage is that we can name something potential when it is both can be done or cannot be done. Potentiality hosts its im-potentiality and this hosting, Agamben claims, is the potentiality or to put it differently potentiality is this radical passivity. It is a passive potentiality, but this potentiality only bears or suffers its own non-Being (P, s. 182). Agamben infers from Aristotle’s passage that the original form of potentiality is im-potentiality.

At this point we have another controversial problem when we do something, our potentiality becomes actual but if every potentiality is im-potentiality then how can we understand the actuality of im-potentiality? What will happen when im-potentiality turns to actuality? To put it differently; a writer’s potentiality is actualized when she starts to write but how can we apprehend the



actualization of writer's potentiality to not to write, namely im-potentiality? "The actuality of the potentiality to think is the thinking of this or that thought; but what is the actuality of the potentiality to not-think?" (P, s. 183).

Agamben continues his survey with Aristotle in order to address these questions. He cites Aristotle: "A thing is said to be potential if, when the act of which it is said to be potential is realized, there will be nothing im-potential" (Aristotle in P, s. 183). For Agamben, what Aristotle articulates in this sentence can be understood as following: as potentiality is also im-potentiality or consists im-potentiality then true potentiality is welcomed into actuality and "passes truly into actuality as such" (P, s. 183; Bleeden 2010, s. 71). This does not mean that im-potentiality vanishes in actuality, rather im-potentiality preserves itself in actuality. Therefore, what is truly potential is that which exhausts "all its impotentiality in bringing it wholly into the act as such" (P, 183). So, for instance when a poet writes a poem, her potentiality not to write passes fully into the writing and preserves itself inside the actualization of writing (Bleeden 2010, s. 72). Agamben concludes: "Contrary to the traditional idea of potentiality that is annulled in actuality, here we are confronted with a potentiality that conserves itself and saves itself in actuality. Here potentiality, so to speak, survives actuality and, in this way, gives itself to itself" (P, s. 184).

The conclusion Agamben comes up with is that the relation between potentiality and im-potentiality which is limitless and violent is the origin of human power and other creatures don't have im-potentiality. In this regard for Agamben the root of being free lies here, in im-potentiality. "Other living beings are capable only of their specific potentiality; they can only do this or that. But human beings are the animals who are capable of their own im-potentiality (P, s. 182). According to Agamben being free is not related to do this or refuse to do something, or to follow one's own will. Being free is to be capable of one's own im-potentiality. This is the reason why human beings have capacity for good and evil, we choose to act in a certain way or not choose. "The greatness of human potentiality is measured by the abyss of human im-potentiality." (P, s. 183). Agamben's example for the freedom which is provided by the notion of im-potentiality is Hermann Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener"<sup>2</sup>. As it is well known in the novella, Bartleby is hired by a lawyer and working as a scrivener one day stops coping the document with his famous response for the coping

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<sup>2</sup>Also he gives another example referring the pianist Glenn Gould in *Coming Community*: "“Every pianist necessarily has the potential [potenza] to play and to not-play, Glenn Gould is, however, is the only one who cannot not-play, and directing his potentiality [potenza] not only to the act but also to his own impotence [impotenza], he plays, so to speak, with his potentiality to not-play” (CC, s. 36).

requests “I will prefer not to”. Bartleby is not an example for civil disobedience or refusal, he is not saying “I will not do” also he is not leaving his workplace. Since for Agamben, “will not” and the “cannot” are traditional modal conjunctions and will re-inscribe Bartleby within that tradition, Melville’s protagonist opens a way out (Brown 2013, s. 180). While he has a potentiality to write Bartleby ceases to write and endures only his potentiality not to write. So, if we delimited our enquiry in this framework, we could easily say that for Agamben freedom can be understood in terms of im-potentiality and exemplified in Melville’s novella. But if we consider Bleeden’s argument that Agamben’s concept of freedom changes dramatically in *Homo Sacer*, it seems that starting with *Homo Sacer*, one of his later works, Agamben begins to connect potentiality, im-potentiality and actuality with the biopolitical paradigm of the sovereign principle. Subsequently, in order to assess whether there is a change in Agamben perspective I will now turn to *Homo Sacer*.

### **Potentiality, Sovereignty and Biopolitics**

In *Homo Sacer* the definition of potentiality does not change: the existing potentiality which is a capability that cannot pass over into actuality is defined as the same. In this book im-potentiality is, however, characterized in the form of suspension. The im-potentiality is suspended and therefore an actualization can take place. However, in this definition Agamben also inserts sovereignty: “it [potentiality] is sovereignly capable of its own im-potentiality” (HS, s. 32). This means that now for Agamben potentiality can not only be defined as an “I can” but also, we have to consider it as a sovereign capability (Bleeden, 2010, s. 74).

“In thus describing the most authentic nature of potentiality, Aristotle actually bequeathed the paradigm of sovereignty to Western philosophy. ... Potentiality (in its double appearance as potentiality to and as potentiality not to) is that through which Being founds itself sovereignly, which is to say, without anything preceding or determining it (*superiorem non recognoscens*) other than its own ability to be. And an act is sovereign when it realizes itself by simply taking away its own potentiality to not be, letting itself be, giving itself to itself” (HS, s. 32, italics are in the original text).

Treating Aristotle’s conceptualizing of potentiality as a paradigm is immediately ontological and political. Here, Agamben’s concern is not historiographical, these categories are important because while human beings impose their power onto the whole world these concepts accompany them

when they are shaping the world. As briefly mentioned before, this relation is the outcome of the methodological approach, for Agamben, now, ontology and sovereignty are analogically connected<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, the argument about potentiality and im-potentiality leads us to the question of sovereignty.

Following Carl Schmitt according to Agamben, the sovereign is the one who decides on the exception. “The exception appears in its absolute form when it is a question of creating a situation in which juridical rules can be valid ... There is no rule applicable to chaos ... – and therefore– a regular situation must be created, and the sovereign is he who definitely decides if this situation is actually effective ... [h]e has the monopoly over the final decision” (Carl Schmitt in HS, s. 19). Sovereign is the one who places itself outside the law by deciding on the state of exception whilst placing itself inside the law. To be a subject to a law means that the subject is not allowed to violate the laws. If she violates juridical order, she will be punished. But in case of sovereign power by announcing state of exception and by not obeying law, sovereign puts itself out of the order which is constituted by the law. But at the same time the sovereign declares that “I, the sovereign who am outside the law, declare that there is nothing outside the law” (HS, s. 17). Thus, we can see here a relation which is named inclusion-exclusion by Agamben. The sovereign by placing herself outside the law is excluded from herself but by an inclusion, the sovereign announces that law includes everything because there is nothing left outside the law. This is the topology of sovereign power (Bleeden 2010, s. 76). Sovereign’s topology is thus similar to the functioning of potentiality: potential as mentioned before is both what can and cannot be as sovereign who is included and excluded from the order. In Agamben’s words, the structure of sovereignty “corresponds to the structure of potentiality, which maintains itself in relation to actuality precisely through its ability not to be” (HS, s. 46).

The sovereign power is located in the indistinct sphere between inside and outside the law: by declaring the state of exception the sovereign is an exception to the law but by being outside the law she limits the law and also constitutes it (Brown, 2013, s. 171). The relation becomes blurry

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<sup>3</sup>In this case, Colebrook and Maxwell, states that Agamben’s endeavour is to show the political character of ontology and additionally, he aims to politicize the ontology (2016, s. 1). From Agamben’s perspective, when Aristotle sets forth his ontology in relation to potentiality this paves way to a distinction between *bios* and *zoe* in political thought. As we shall see briefly later this is pointed at as the inaugural moment of biopolitics in which *zoe* becomes main focus for political practice and thought.

because sovereign exception precedes the law, but the juridical order also has to precede the sovereign power in order that the sovereignty can be founded. This is the sovereign paradox: law is the origin of the exception and the exception is the origin of the law. Law defines and presupposes the sphere where the rules can be applied. “What is excluded remains included by negative relation within the space or membership of what is enacting the exclusion” (Brown, 2013, s. 171). Therefore, as can be seen, the rule depends on exception as exception depends on rule both constitute each other. Like the operation of potentiality, “in its suspension the rule gives rise to the exception while simultaneously maintaining itself in relation thereto, thus marking its first constitution as a rule. So, the key element in making a law a law is that it is potential precisely in the sense that Agamben understands Aristotle. Law’s unique ‘force’ he thus argues, is precisely that it potently maintains itself in relation to something outside of itself, e.g., the exception” (Bleeden, 2010, s. 76).

This is how sovereign becomes operative but also how sovereign applies its power on an operational objects and space<sup>4</sup>. The object of law, for Agamben, is life. In other words, life is the object on which sovereign’s decision can take place. But life is not implicitly included inside the law but only by way of exclusion. Agamben’s reference which makes understandable the connection between life and sovereignty is, first, the Ancient Greek concepts of *zoe* and *bios*. Recalling that the definition which is given by Aristotle of politics is based on that relation which divides life between natural life, *zoe*, that is common to all beings (animals, god and human) - and located in household, *oikos*, and related to reproductive activities and qualified life - and *bios*, “which indicated the form of way of living proper to an individual or a group” (HS, s. 1). Agamben suggests that politics from the beginning presuppose natural (bare) life. But the crucial moment is when sacredness was introduced to life by Roman Law with the figure of *homo sacer* that was never considered by Greeks. Agamben claims that by the inclusive-exclusive mechanism of sovereign power produces *homo sacer*<sup>5</sup> who can be killed with impunity. *Homo sacer* is excluded

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<sup>4</sup>Agamben claims that the biopolitical sovereign’s operational space is the camp. According to him the camp is the place where a sovereign power which has declared the state of exception can execute its power without being restraint by the juridical order but still enjoying the force of this order. This means that for Agamben the camp is the spatial becoming of the state of exception. In the camp we come across another paradigm; *Muselmann* a being whose relationship to the life is reduced to mere survival (HS, s. 166-180).

<sup>5</sup>Agamben takes this figure from Roman social order as a paradigmatic form of life which is captured by sovereign decision. *Homo sacer* who is found guilty from committing a crime can be killable with impunity by anyone despite the law against homicide. While sacrificing is devoting someone to gods with religious intentions accompanying with rituals and does not count as homicide, in the case of *Homo sacer* she is not devoted to the gods with ritual practice also she is put outside juridical order. So, she is excluded both juridical and divine order (see, HS part two).

both from the realm of divine and juridical. “Just as the law, in the sovereign exception, applies to the exceptional case in no longer applying and in withdrawing from it, so *homo sacer* belongs to God in the form of unsacrificeability and is included in the community in the form of being able to be killed. Life that cannot be sacrificed and yet may be killed is sacred life.” (HM, s. 52). Roman *Homo sacer*, Antique Greek conceptualizing of life as *zoe* and *bios* - also other paradigms that are given by Agamben<sup>6</sup> – these are the paradigms by which Agamben, by moving away from deduction and induction, claims that our current situation can be rendered intelligible (Villamizar 2011, s. 94). *Homo sacer* is a “singular case that is isolated from its context only insofar as, by exhibiting its own singularity, it makes intelligible a new ensemble, whose homogeneity it itself constitutes” (SAT, s. 18).

What *Homo sacer* as a paradigm renders understandable is the indistinction between the *zoe* and *bios*, and a politics which seeks to find a good life based on bare life: biopolitics. Biopolitics, concisely, is described by Michel Foucault as that process in which the very biological existence of human beings is targeted by political power which tries to optimise productive forces of life itself (Heron, 2011, s. 36). As Foucault says regarding the contemporary politics: “For millennia man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question” (Foucault, 1978, s. 143). But using Foucault’s notion of biopolitics Agamben claims that the core of politics is always life and the original operation of sovereignty has always taken place on the caesura between political and natural life. Depending on the caesura, sovereign always refers to natural life, isolates it and tries to constitute an ‘good life’. However, for Agamben in our contemporary world what can be counted as a change is that the division between *zoe* and *bios* became indistinct and the politics is not seeking for an artificial life, it is immediately based on *zoe*. What it is searching for is this *zoe*’s *bios*.

Therefore, we can say that the sovereign founds the space where law can be applied. This juridical space which is founded by sovereign power is a space where juridical order functions on human life (Bleeden, 2010, s. 78). Life is captured by the law which remains in force without

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<sup>6</sup>One of the paradigms that Agamben considers important for modern democracy is the 1679 writ of *habeas corpus*. Agamben argues that with this writ the freedom of individuals is associated with the naked life, a life which is stripped of all of its qualities and is tied with its own bare existence. In this regard the individual became subject to biopolitical power. Therefore, for him if freedom is regarded as the freedom of bodily being then this will pave way to biopolitical sovereignty (HS, s. 123).

application<sup>7</sup> that has an analogical relation to the functioning of potentiality. “Biopolitics therefore, becomes the way in which life is caught in the sovereign ban, that is to say, a purely thanatopolitical function of state power” (Villamizar, 2014, s. 96).

## Conclusion

Comparing the argument between *On Potentiality* and *Homo Sacer*, Bleeden writes:

“*On Potentiality* is one in which this freedom of faculty that each of us has would ground a kind of political order which, while having the capability and perhaps even the propensity to violence, ethically limits that violence. I would go as far as saying, as I did above, that it would likely be some kind of liberalism in which freedom itself becomes a shared ground from which a polity could be formed to the end of quelling this capacity for violence. The conclusion drawn in *Homo Sacer* offers no possibility of such a ‘politic.’ All social order is produced by sovereignty and all sovereignty has as its object the production of bare life and politics is simply the management thereof: *politics is violence*” (Bleeden 2010, s. 80; italics are mine)<sup>8</sup>.

I think it can be claimed that a terminological shift took place between these two essays as long as freedom is built on bare life which Agamben argues with regard to writ of *habeas corpus* (HS, s. 123). Nevertheless, im-potentiality still plays a curial role. Agamben does not use the concept of freedom which is related to im-potentiality anymore, but he still continues to see that im-potentiality can provide a way out from the biopolitical grid.

Agamben tries to find a way out of the trap of the economy between actuality and potentiality as well as the duality between unfreedom and freedom. What he defines in his work on potentiality,

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<sup>7</sup>This means that while the sovereign suspends the rule of law that is founded by it to preserve the rule of law, the sovereign’s acts in this case still have the force of law, but they cannot be placed inside that juridical order. These acts have the force of the law which depends the juridical order that has been previously established by sovereign decision, but in the state of exception by suspending present juridical order, sovereign practices are now not bounded by any law still they have, so to speak, legitimacy like laws (For further reading, see Agamben’s *State of Exception*).

<sup>8</sup> David Bleeden believes that this shift in Agamben conceptualizing of freedom, took place after Agamben set his methodology. Bleeden claims that Agamben’s emphasis on paradigm within his methodology paves the way to put side by side the im-potentiality and sovereignty. For him with this methodological approach which becomes significant in *Homo Sacer* leads Agamben away from considering potentiality with freedom. Bleeden is not alone in this argument, William Watkin (2013) also discusses that Agamben’s main concern is to put forward indifference between the dual concepts for instance potentiality and actuality. He is not trying to articulate im-potentiality as freedom. However, this should be discussed widely, as far as I am concerned Agamben targets certain dual concepts in order to show the im-potentiality that lays in the dualism, as I show in this paper.

im-potentiality as can be understood as freedom now changes to “make inoperative” the economy between potentiality and actuality but im-potentiality doesn’t cease to shed light to go beyond this duality. Making something inoperative means to change the relation, it does not refer to the changing existing situations or overcome, but these situations simply lose their validity (Snoek, 2012). “What is rendered inoperative is an activity directed towards a goal, in order to open it to a new use. This does not abolish the old activity, but rather exposes and exhibits it. The essential connection between potentiality and inoperativity means that the sabbatical suspension, which, by rendering inoperative the specific functions of the living being, transforms them into possibilities, is the proper human praxis” (Salzani, 2011, s. 107-108).

So, what is important for Agamben is to reappropriate our im-potentiality from confinement of im-potentiality within the ‘sacred’ sphere of the sovereignty in which this confinement takes place with inclusion-exclusion mechanism of law. “Thus, potentiality without relation to the law is nothing other than inoperative praxis that neither sustains nor institutes a form of order but rather deactivates it, dissolving the relation between law and life, norm and fact, established in the state of exception” (Prozorov, 2014, s. 119). Thereby Bartleby promises a way out by his refusal of work through using “I prefer not to” and circumcises sovereign power. His refusal is that what can be thought beyond the freedom and unfreedom relation. “What is at stake, then, is a life in which the single ways, acts, and processes of living are never simply facts, but always and above all possibilities of life, always and above all caused potentiality [*potenza*]” (WDP, s. 73), and im-potentiality is “freeing the living being from every biological or social destiny and from every predetermined task (WDP, s. 74).

Therefore, on the one hand we can say that Agamben no longer uses freedom as he did when referring to Bartleby, but this does not mean that he gives up thinking im-potentiality as a way out from biopower. “Nothing makes us more impoverished and less free than this estrangement from im-potentiality. Those who are separated from what they can do, can, however, still resist; they can still not do. Those who are separated from their own im-potentiality lose, on the other hand, first of all the capacity to resist. And just as it is only the burning awareness of what we cannot be that guarantees the truth of what we are, so it is only the lucid vision of what we cannot, or cannot, do that gives consistency to our actions” (N, s. 45). On the other hand, what kind of political option that can be built upon im-potentiality is still not so clear. In his books *The Highest Poverty* (2011) and *Use of Bodies* (2016) Agamben tries to give a glimpse for a political alternative with his

peculiar notions of *use* and *form-of-life*. While this requires a broad engagement with Agamben's further arguments, if we limit our scope with *On Potentiality* and *Homo Sacer* it is still hard to imagine how Bartleby can open a way out. At the end of the novella he eventually dies from refusing even eating. Above all it should be noted that an important aspect of political thought is, somehow, to show the alternatives in given circumstances whereas death only implies the end of all alternatives.

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