

Agamben on Covid: Between State of Exception and the Limits of Knowledge



by [Jayme Mitsche](#) (March 2022)

Confronted are we are by a global pandemic that keeps claiming millions of lives, claiming the public health and wellbeing, inexorably varying, and spreading, whose end cannot be foreseen nor predicted, and whose origin nobody up to now knows as a certainty, let us see what the world looks like when it failed by what in German philosophy has been called “calculative thinking.” Under this epistemic concept philosophy comprehends the natural sciences and the technologies and managerial structures and organizations of the research and medical solutions and factual applications on the world. But the concept also comprehends the political entities, as are the states, governments and the dedicated international organizations that set the policies,

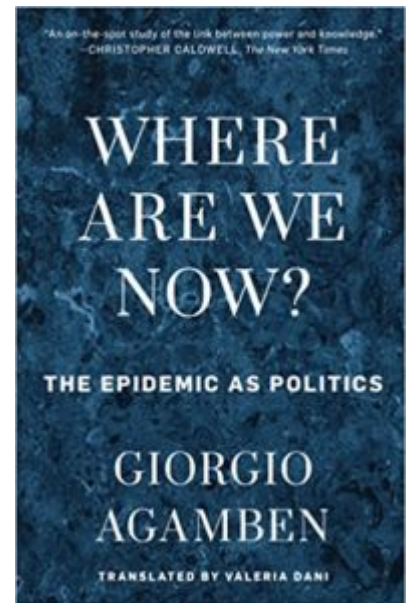
concentrate, organize, coordinate, distribute and administer the resources that go into conceiving, planning, analyzing, and researching into the destructive potentialities of a budding threat before it has taken grave dimensions, as the ongoing pandemic has done. Taken all together, then what philosophically confronts us in the pandemic are the indicators of what the limits of knowledge on a given phenomenon can lead to when knowledge expresses itself or when it is taken to be only calculative thinking. It was Heidegger who, in his 1959 Discourse on Thinking introduced the concept of calculative thinking (p-43-57).

That kind of thinking is what goes into the processes of planning, researching, and organizing within a specific field of knowledge, toward assessing and understanding problems that arise one way or another, and do so with an aim at finding adequate solutions thereof. Since this is so, and since this is as it must be, calculative thinking focuses all its energies under conditions that are *given to it* for it to exert itself into. And this is the real problem. Calculative thinking, i.e., the sciences, technologies, and politics, cannot but proceed calculatingly. That is because every task that requires organizing, planning, and research is necessarily calculative as it seeks solutions to problems which our being-in-the-world confronts us with, calculative thinking is, Heidegger recognizes, greatly indispensable. But it is precisely in its usefulness where the limitations of the knowledge that attains thereof resides. For it always already stands ready-at-hand to be calculatingly deployed everywhere and at any time to some given purpose that has always already been also calculatingly determined. Thus, the purpose which it is useful for, marks the limits of this mode of thinking. Since calculative thinking can only go to action, and therefore reach self-fulfillment where there is a purpose on which it can be put to productive use, it always remains dependent upon purposefulness, and consequently it carries within itself the potential for missing everything else.

Because of this, Heidegger suggests, calculative thinking implicitly presupposes a fly from thinking. And, we can add, that is necessarily the case because only the experts and specialists in the field where a purpose is to be counteracted upon, are called to think up solutions. Thus, the common individual, but also experts and specialists from other fields, do not receive the call to think up solutions for a given problem. Ironically, it is often philosophy, whose Being can only be grasped in thinking and as modes of thinking, is precisely what is egregiously singled out *not* to receive the call to thinking up solutions.

The ways and procedurals of the sciences, technologies, and politics as they operate in the world today are then responsible for a state of things in the world characterized by a globalized inability to answer questions like: Why could the pandemic not be foreseen, in the first place, and therefore be prevented, and the adequate steps preventively taken suit up the world for the imminent threats? To these questions, Heidegger would have most probably answered that it is precisely in situations like the present pandemic when calculative thinking discloses to us what is most essential to its character. That is, calculative thinking never thinks out of itself; because it requires something for it to exert itself on as calculation, it only goes to work when what_is to be calculated is given to it. So, the conditions under which the calculation will take place must *first* be created or must emerge as problems that require the intervention of a given field of knowledge. The foreseeability and unpreparedness with which the spreading of the virus has been met, and cluster of misguided political responses which in its wake, with very few exceptions, have been enforced by governments everywhere, are expressions of the failures of calculative thinking as it discloses epistemological limits.

Apart from all the human misery brought up by the emergence of the pandemic, or rather, precisely because of this misery, philosophical thought has been presented with a rare opportunity to gauge the dangers to which the world is exposed when knowledge reaches its limits, provisionally as that might be. That's why it's a tad disappointing that this opportunity is passed over in Where Are We Now? (2021), Giorgio Agamben's reflections on the ongoing epidemy, him being one of Europe's most brilliant contemporary philosophers, from whom illumination is expected in times of darkness. In his comments on the virus, he neglects to develop an approach that could help to explain the failure at once of science, health technologies, and of various political structures and organizations to prevent the virus to emerge, spread, and mutate to the ongoing levels. Such neglect is thus a missed opportunity of contemporary philosophy to recognize that we are currently confronted with an époque-making crisis that is as much epistemological as it is legal and political. That is, the ongoing crisis, and the way the scientific community and the political institutions both national and international have responded to it, forces critical discursive practice in general to pose pertinent questions concerning the reasons the world has been failed by the type of knowledge embodied in them.



Instead, Agamben makes his effort exclusively dependent on the biopolitical and bio-security character of the political response to the pandemic. And what is worse, he somewhat dogmatically proceeds from the theoretical framework he takes over from Foucault, which he had more aptly already adopted in his Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (1995).

Although initially of two minds concerning the truth of the

news brought by the media at a break-neck speed about the virus, Agamben sees the policies introduced by the international governments— lockdowns, sheltering-in-place, social distancing, mask-wearing— as bio-security policies through which the government exerts authority over human life, and very specifically, over the human body. So that, he regards those policies as emanations of the same biopolitical ideology that in Nazi Germany led to the suppression of political freedoms, setting up concentration camps, and exerting political control over the whole population. This process, Agamben argues, is the immediate consequence of the establishing of extrajudicial State of Exceptions, which now as then has led to or is points toward the reduction of biological human life to what he terms “bare life”, by which he means life experienced only biologically and from which the social dimensions of existence get politically suppressed. Where Are We Now? (P. 7).

But true as that may be, and if it is, we might just be witnessing what comes politically into play when societies, under the exclusive guidance of calculative thinking, are led to a situation in which they must deal with a limitation in the available knowledge needed to solve life-or-death problems. Thus, what Agamben sees in the biosecurity policies put in place in the wake of the pandemic is not necessarily or primarily the expression of a political will for legitimation of governments on the brink of failure, as he sees them, but rather a crisis of available knowledge expressing itself globally as, and at once taking itself on, a political character. But, because such character is not the same everywhere the virus is present, we would therefore not say that, as Agamben does, the peoples of the world have been caught up in a nefarious conspiracy implemented by a diversity of governments that have not much in common with each other as they attempt to survive in a world that could no longer continue to exist. Where Are We Now? (Ps.95/96).

Allowing the scientific crisis of available knowledge pass him by unnoticed, Agamben also fails to see how unconceivable it is that governments in China, Russia, North Korea, or Iran would have convened with the United States and its European and Asian allies to either release a virus onto the world or to pretend that a virus was spreading across the world as a ruse to presumably solve their respective home-grown problems of political legitimacy.

And then, Agamben takes no notice that not every world power has an illegitimacy problem to solve, to which end a pandemic can be put to good use (Ibid. p.10). Obviously, Agamben does not take into consideration that, even if only in theory, there might be countries in the world in which declaring a State of Exception in the face of general danger to the population might already be contemplated by their laws, in which case, claiming extra-juridic authority would remain within the frame of legality. As Agamben surely knows, this juridical theory is contemplated in the foundation of the corpus of laws on which the Roman Republic was built. As a matter of course, nations in general are originally birthed by the exceptional powers that then become its laws. The Lawgivers of nations about-to-be-born are not of necessity, nor can they formally be appointed to legislate on not-yet existing laws. Simple observations of this sort represent grave dangers to any political theory of extra-judicial powers.

And yet, the need to acquire political legitimacy as a matter of course does not always lead to the ruling classes to exploit the health crisis to increment their quota of power. Here, Sweden offers itself as a pragmatic rebuttal to Agamben on this point. In Sweden, in our very days a health crisis has coincided with an époque-making political crisis at the heart of the entire political establishment with no direct or indirect link between them, with the political crisis per se constituting a classical example of loss legitimacy by the

government. And yet, the legitimacy problem has been duly dealt with within the existing legal frame, without the invocation or imposition of a State of Exception. Furthermore, the Nordic country at the same time, and up to the time of this writing, has managed to handle the pandemic as though exceptional powers had been imposed over against the laws. And, if it did it without lockdowns and mask-wearing, it could not but introduce social distancing, with admirable outcomes. Thus, the theory that posits a correlation between biopolitics, biosecurity, states of exception, and “bareness” of life, is not clear-cut.

Given the advanced technological stage of modern society, even from the remotest places on earth human communication and exchanges, when that presupposes the *free* exercise of human language, indicates that lockdowns and social distancing cannot lead to the imposition of sub-humanizing life conditions. In other words, in a technologically connected society that guarantees individual accessibility to communication technology, human life cannot be reduced to its *bare* biological state just because societal life is brought to a modern minimum. This suggests that however stern and restrictive the biosecurity policies imposed by the global powers on their citizens, and however extrajudicial, society cannot be forced into acquiring homo sacer status: it cannot be de-humanized into concentration camps after the Nazis’, as Agamben theorizes. (Where Are We Now? (Ps.7-9)).

It seems that co-opting Foucault’s understanding of the historical roots of biopolitics in modernity prevents Agamben acquiring a profound understanding of what is operative in the repressive and oppressive biosecurity policies governments across the globe have been putting in place. That is, Agamben fails to grasp that the limit in the knowledge in the field of biological and medical research and in the technologies applicable to the prevention and containment of the virus is what has given way to the political mishandling and

misguidance of societal life. He fails to see that these democratic governments are themselves confronted by the limitation of knowledge that led to the pandemic in the first place, which at the same time is the mode in which this very limitation, epistemological in nature, discloses itself. For philosophy this is the central phenomenon of our historical present. These are all central elements to the ongoing crisis which Agamben's loyalty to Foucault's philosophy on biopolitics forces him to ignore.

And yet, the problem with Foucault's theory on biopolitics and its relation to modernity is not that it is wrong but that it is false. (See Foucault, Introduction to The History of Sexuality I, (1978, ps.135-159).

As historians of Greece Antiquity know, biopolitics has been with us from the earliest beginnings of the Western world; it was the bedrock on which the Spartan state and the Spartan culture arose and prospered. Some expressions of Spartan biopolitics are with us even today as they project themselves toward the future. Thus, biopolitics might have been invented by Classical Greece, and even before that, by the Greek Minoan civilization. Thus, in the former biopolitics informed the separation of the genders and male homosexuality, which were deployed as technologies for population control, with male homosexuality functioning as the preferred tool in selecting the citizens of the state, the members of their military, the growth and control of their population, biopolitics in the earlier Minoan Civilization informed the grooming and sponsoring of male youths for homosexual roles, which with the separation of the sexes, served the purpose of food administration and rationing, and also as in Sparta, as a reliable means of population control. It is a well-known historical fact that among the Spartans biopolitics was also determinant of the orientation of the male libidinal drive: it was the State who decided and set the conditions for how and on whom this drive was to be exerted. That is most clear in

the role of homosexuality in the army, and consequently, of its place in society, which, for pragmatic reasons, became the official sexuality in Sparta. (Michael Grant, The Rise of The Greeks, (ps.90-100)).

Thus, it turns out that biopolitics, the touchstone of Foucault's political thought, is pretty old, with nothing modern about it. One wonders how Foucault's biopolitics theory that emerged in modernity with the ascend of capitalism, has been left to go unchallenged up now.

In his *Discourse on Thinking*, alongside the concept of calculative thinking, Heidegger also introduces the concept of meditative thinking, which he opposes to the former. Philosophy, which establishes the distinction between these two modes of thinking and for this reason also distinguishes among all other modes of knowledge, is meditative in a special way. This does not mean, however, that a given philosophical discourse cannot at times behave calculatingly, or rather, that the calculating aspects that are necessarily present in meditative thinking cannot prevail in a discourse. That can happen for instance if such discourse places itself at the service of pre-conceived notions or conceptualizations which it seeks to justify or to embolden. As already noted, that is the case with Agamben's Where Are We Now? Agamben therein errs as he regards as historically and politically equivalent situations and processes different in character, significance, and origins. While it is true that the pandemic has led to extra-judicial policies by some governments, the governments that have gone the farther in this direction have stayed away from becoming the Covid edition of Nazi Germany. Furthermore, the governments that have gone farther on the way to suppressing democratic freedoms are precisely the ones that have counted with the staunchest legitimacy, i.e., New Zealand, Australia, France, Britain, and worse of all, Canada, etc., etc. It should be noticed that these are all left-leaning, "woke" or "wokish" governments, self-assumed to be

more respectful of the liberal-democratic freedoms.

The *illuminating irony* here is that the most powerful country, most denounced by the international Left and the national media as having Neo-Nazi proclivities (the U.S government under Trump), was precise the one most vocal against mandating social-distancing, mask-wearing, and lockdowns and the breakdown on democratic freedoms and liberties. Trump had to be forced by the opposition and the media to do otherwise. So much for Agamben's theory of the Homo Sacer.

In truth, Where We Are Now? entirely misses the historicity of *this* now. It lamentably fails to understand what the pandemic has made possible for us to have an up-close look at. Namely, it has managed to expose the limits of calculative thinking. In its efforts to acquire knowledge and intervene into the reality of the world, calculative thinking does not dwell in knowing but restlessly moves from one task to another; since it can only react to what is given to it to calculate with a view to finding solutions, it arrives always too late, or it is never in time enough. That is its limitation. In that, Heidegger is entirely correct. Because of the failures in adequately containing it, the pandemic also lets us see what awaits the future world if for instance, and as it could be, it would be facing a more serious threat than a virus. That would be horrifyingly the case should a threat arise through the intervention into nature, humanity, or the environment of calculative thinking itself as represented in nuclear physics, Artificial Intelligence, or even social media.

Incidentally, it was from reflecting on that possible scenario that Heidegger hit upon the distinction between the scientific and philosophic modes of thinking. Agamben also fails to come to the realization that not only the origin of the virus, but the excessive, extra-juridical measures and policies imposed by some governments as they try to contain it, are the result of a systematic global failure in the present world,

consisting in privileging the calculative thinking over the meditative, that is, of shunning philosophy as if though it had nothing to offer to humanity. And that is more tragic than Covid's been.

[TABLE OF CONTENTS](#)

Jayme S. Mitsche holds M.A. and MPhil. degrees from New York University (NYU), and a Ph.D. from The City University of New York (CUNY). He is a writer of fiction and non-fiction and currently writes [3Some](#), a newsletter on Sexuality, Race, and Politics, on [Substack](#). Mitsche's academic specialty is European Enlightened Thought in France and Spain. He is a former Adjunct Professor of Spanish and Philosophy at Rutgers University in New Jersey, and at Brooklyn College, NY. He lives in Brooklyn.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)