

# Giorgio Agamben: "Clarifications"

TUESDAY, MARCH 17, 2020 SATURDAY, APRIL 18, 2020 ~ ADAM KOTSKO

*Translator's Note: Giorgio Agamben asked me to translate this [brief essay \(https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-chiarimenti\)](https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-chiarimenti), which serves as an indirect response to the controversy surrounding his article about the response to coronavirus in Italy (see [here \(https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-l-invenzione-di-un-epidemia\)](https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-l-invenzione-di-un-epidemia) for the original Italian piece and [here \(http://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/\)](http://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/) for an English translation).*

Fear is a poor advisor, but it causes many things to appear that one pretended not to see. The problem is not to give opinions on the gravity of the disease, but to ask about the ethical and political consequences of the epidemic. The first thing that the wave of panic that has paralyzed the country obviously shows is that our society no longer believes in anything but bare life. It is obvious that Italians are disposed to sacrifice practically everything — the normal conditions of life, social relationships, work, even friendships, affections, and religious and political convictions — to the danger of getting sick. Bare life — and the danger of losing it — is not something that unites people, but blinds and separates them. Other human beings, as in the plague described in Alessandro Manzoni's novel, are now seen solely as possible spreaders of the plague whom one must avoid at all costs and from whom one needs to keep oneself at a distance of at least a meter. The dead — our dead — do not have a right to a funeral and it is not clear what will happen to the bodies of our loved ones. Our neighbor has been cancelled and it is curious that churches remain silent on the subject. What do human relationships become in a country that habituates itself to live in this way for who knows how long? And what is a society that has no value other than survival?

The other thing, no less disquieting than the first, that the epidemic has caused to appear with clarity is that the state of exception, to which governments have habituated us for some time, has truly become the normal condition. There have been more serious epidemics in the past, but no one ever thought for that reason to declare a state of emergency like the current one, which prevents us even from moving. People have been so habituated to live in conditions of perennial crisis and perennial emergency that they don't seem to notice that their life has been reduced to a purely biological condition and has not only every social and political dimension, but also human and affective. A society that lives in a perennial state of emergency cannot be a free society. We in fact live in a society that has sacrificed freedom to so-called "reasons of security" and has therefore condemned itself to live in a perennial state of fear and insecurity.

It is not surprising that for the virus one speaks of war. The emergency measures obligate us in fact to live in conditions of curfew. But a war with an invisible enemy that can lurk in every other person is the most absurd of wars. It is, in reality, a civil war. The enemy is not outside, it is within us.

What is worrisome is not so much or not only the present, but what comes after. Just as wars have left as a legacy to peace a series of inauspicious technologies, from barbed wire to nuclear power plants, so it is also very likely that one will seek to continue even after the health emergency experiments that governments did not manage to bring to reality before: closing universities and schools and doing lessons only online, putting a stop once and for all to meeting together and speaking for political or cultural reasons and exchanging only digital messages with each other, wherever possible substituting machines for every contact — every contagion — between human beings.

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POSTED IN [AGAMBEN](#), [TRANSLATION](#)

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