

Call For Papers: Giorgio Agamben - Bodies Without Words: Against the Biopolitical Tatoo

Editorial Note: We find this provocative and thoughtful editorial by the Italian Philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, originally published in German in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on 10/11 January 2004, to raise issues of central importance for the current jurisprudential debate over the impact of the "War on Terror" on rights and civil liberties in contemporary democracies. We are reprinting Professor Agamben's text in English with the aim of stirring a diverse and global scholarly response to the important issues he raises. In this context, we invite philosophers, lawyers, political scientists, social theorists and lawyers to submit contributions to a forthcoming

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to the Editors by 1 April 2004: Zumbansen@jur.uni-frankfurt.de; ramiller@uidaho.edu. We gratefully acknowledge the permission of Giorgio Agamben and Ulrich Raulff, from the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, to publish the editorial as part of this call for papers. The English translation was prepared by Peer Zumbansen. With the publication of Professor Agamben's article and our Call for Papers, we are continuing the *German Law Journal's* comprehensive discussion of "Law and Politics after September 11" as documented by the *German Law Journal* Special Issues of 1 October 2001, of 1 September 2002, of 1 September 2003 (originating from the first German Law Journal International Symposium - on Robert Kagan's *Of Power and Weakness*) as well as by subsequent contributions by Craig Scott (1 December 2002) and Jürgen Habermas (1 July 2003). All contributions are available at <http://www.germanlawjournal.com>. We are looking forward to your comments and your submissions - *The Editors*.

Bodies Without Words: Against the Biopolitical Tatoo

By Giorgio Agamben*

I have read in the newspapers that foreign citizens, when travelling to the United States on a Visa, will undergo a data registration and have their fingerprints taken. Not willing to submit myself to this treatment, I decided therefore to cancel my guest lectures at New York University for March 2004. At this time, I would like to provide reasons for my decision – a decision that I find necessary and unavoidable in spite of my sympathies for American students and professors with whom I have for many years felt connected both in friendship and professional life. This is a decision that I would hope to be adopted also by other European Intellectuals and Teachers.

In fact, we are not concerned here solely with the sensitivity of an individual in the face of a procedure that for many years was imposed upon those who found themselves under suspicion for an alleged crime or who were suffering political persecution. If it were only that, one could even imagine facing these degrading conditions, if only out of solidarity with those that find themselves otherwise subjected to them. But, the problem before us goes far beyond individual sensitivity. This problem concerns nothing less than the normal, legal-political (better: biopolitical) status of citizens in the so-called democratic states in which we live.

For many years now, at first only occasionally and barely perceptibly, then increasingly more openly and persistently, there has been an attempt to accustom citizens to supposedly normal and humane procedures and practices that had always been considered to be exceptional and inhumane. Today's electronically enhanced possibilities of the state to exercise control over its citizens through credit cards or cellular phones were unimaginable in the past. But there is one threshold

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in the control and manipulation of bodies, the transgression of which would signify a new global political condition. It would equal a next step towards what Foucault has referred to as the progressive animalization of man through extremely refined techniques. The electronic registration of finger prints, the subcutaneous tatoo and other such practices must be located on that threshold.

We ought not to be confused by the security reasons that are being put forward as their justification. Experience has taught us that practices, at first only applied to foreigners, were gradually applied to everyone. The question we are concerned with concerns this new “normal” biopolitical relationship between the citizen and the state. What we are witnessing is no longer the free and active participation on the political level, but the appropriation and registration of the most private and unsheltered element, that is the biological life of bodies. Media installations controlling and manipulating public speech equal those technological instruments that identify and appropriate bare life.

In between these two extremes – a word without body and a body without word – the room that was referred to as politics is increasingly becoming scarce and narrow. Paradoxically, the citizen is thus rendered a suspect all along, a suspect against which all those techniques and installations need to be mounted that had originally been conceived of only for the most dangerous individuals. *Per definitionem*, mankind has been declared the most dangerous of all classes.

A few years ago, I wrote that the city had ceased to be the founding political image of the West and that it had been replaced by the concentration camp – not Athens, but Auschwitz. Certainly, this was a philosophical, not a historical thesis. We are not concerned with the amalgam of phenomena that need to be kept separate. Yet, I want to call to memory that the practice of tattooing the inmates in Auschwitz was possibly regarded as a “normal” and economical form of regulating the incorporation of the deported ones into the camp. The biopolitical tatoo imposed upon us today when we want to travel into the United States is the baton of what we might accept tomorrow as the normal way of registering into the mechanism and the transmission of the state if we want to be identified as good citizens.